On such a Sunday as this, it is a little hard to know where to begin, and with that confession, I turn to a poem, a centering meditation, that for me has long been an anchor. It is by Mark Van Doren (a renowned, Pulitzer Prize winning Columbia University professor of English from 1920 to 1959).

O world, my friend, my foe
My deep, dark stranger, doubtless
Unthinkable to know;
My many and my one,
Created when I was and doomed to go
Back into the same sun;
O world, my thought's despair,
My heart's companion, made by love
so intimate, so fair.
Stay with me till I die....
O Air,
O stillness, o great sky.

Those lines for me are Life-affirming with their blend of nature mysticism, Life’s blessing, challenge, despair, rationality’s limits, life’s mystery and tragedy, reverence, humility, courage, evolutionary change, love, beauty, and wonder.

Be here now... “Left foot, right foot, left foot... breathe....” (Anne Lamott)

In such a curious home as this, one reality is that “we tell stories in order to live” (Joan Didion), knowing as author Isak Dinesen reported, “all sorrows can be borne if we put them into a story.”

One such story is that captured by Ernest Hemingway in *The Old Man and the Sea*. In my first sermon here in 1979 when called to serve this congregation with Dr. Harrington, I retold part of that story. If you know it, you recall it is about an old man who had come to an understanding of his life.

Hemingway describes him this way, "Everything about him was old except his eyes and they were the same color as the sea and were cheerful and undefeated."
He had wrestled with life's mystery, beauty, and cruelty in the sea, and he had a kinship with it. He struggled with Life, and mystery, and not only survived but also in the end enjoyed – even thrilled in – this kinship with Life: "his eyes... were the same color as the sea and were cheerful and undefeated."

I arrived here in ministry with a faith in this kinship, a faith that we are co-creators with mystery and beauty, and a faith that out of the graciousness of creation, we shape our lives of hope and courage, giving and receiving blessings. In that story of struggle, there is also the power of human interconnection. We are not saved by grace, yet can be open to the healing graciousness of friendships we create. We need each other and bless one another.

For me, there is also the biggest story … of Original Blessing, our inherent worth and dignity, as we find ourselves part of a cosmic story… some of which we write, as we participate in bringing the universe to consciousness and conscience.

We can become ever more fully alive and ever more bold servants of Beauty, Grace, and New Life. We do this best together, and so we gather… for mutual support, inspiration, comfort, and hope.

Another story is that of a man who resisted injustice and was imprisoned for 27 years for his struggle for freedom for his people in South Africa: Nelson Mandela visited our church (one of only two) in June, 1990 during his first visit to NYC, not long after his release from detention, most of it at the prison on Robben Island.

We at Community embraced the anti-apartheid struggle in 1952 with the formation here of the American Committee on Africa that ultimately led the economic sanctions campaign in the 1980s that had decisive impact against apartheid. Members joined in that coalition’s work, with organizing, marches, and civil disobedience at the South Africa consulate in 1985 (when some of us were arrested), as well as our providing office space for that work and later for the African National Congress as well.

In 1990, a few months after Nelson Mandela had been released, I joined a small group of dominantly black clergy on a trip to South Africa to see life under apartheid at first-hand. Our message upon returning was that although Mandela was free, black South Africans were not. It was on that trip that we were invited to Mandela’s home in Soweto (and somewhere in my files is a picture of the two of us – of my standing next to this powerful soul-force in his backyard….) It was a couple of months later that he came to Community to speak to anti-apartheid activists from across the country. In 1994, I had the privilege of serving as an election observer in Soweto.
Another story, reported as a dream, goes like this: A woman dreamed she walked into a brand new shop in the marketplace, and to her surprise, she found God behind the counter. “What do you sell here?” she asked.

“Everything your heart desires,” said God.

Hardly daring to believe what she was hearing, the woman decided to ask for the best things a human being could wish for: “I want peace of mind, and love, and happiness, and wisdom, and freedom from fear,” she said. Then just as quickly added, “Not just for me. For everyone on earth.”

God smiled, and then she awoke from her dream with God’s words in her soul, “Oh, I’m sorry…. I realize that the signage in all my shops isn’t always very clear. I think you’ve got me wrong,” God said. “We don’t sell fruit here, only seeds.” (With thanks to Rev. Richard Gilbert)

And so like our forebears, that is the work of religious community: we are growing fruit – fruits of the spirit, tending to the seeds of love and justice.

Over the past six months, I have offered four sermons on our congregational history dating back to 1825, noting the continuity in our liberal faith that affirms:

- the worth and dignity of every person;
- the Principle of the Free Mind;
- Individual Freedom of Belief;
- the use of Democratic process, and
- deeds not creeds (and salvation by character).

I also noted the changes in members, buildings, ministers and Mission… the most significant our becoming the Community Church in 1919 with a transformation from being a chapel for the rich to a broader inclusion of Universal Religion, radical hospitality, and economic and racial diversity – radically distinctive in our liberal tradition.

One touchstone that has expanded in my time with you is the essential commitment, from 1919: “knowing not sect, class, nation, or race welcoming each to the service of all.” Our Unison Affirmation for more than 30 plus years, and our vision statement now, today, invite and challenge us to be vigilant to build the Beloved Community.

Counter-cultural pursuits…
We have taken ever more seriously the issues of whiteness and its privileges, white supremacy, and the oppression of racism.

And, Marge Piercy’s questions have helped sharpen our justice-making, with the challenge, “Who gets and who loses?”

I would also highlight that in response to our homophobic stumbling in the mid-1980s, we spurred ourselves and the Unitarian Universalist Association to welcome GLBTQ members.

We have sought, not only to plant seeds, but also to have a prophetic role in response to the issues of our days in our witness and deeds on matters such as socially responsible investing, environmental justice, accessibility, homelessness, immigration, economic justice, same-sex marriage, militarism, materialism, police violence and improved training, and so much more.

In addition to looking at systemic change, for nearly 35 years, volunteers have sustained a nightly shelter for homeless men, which is astounding, and thus my shout-out to all who have helped with time and treasure.

More of that prophetic history is in my sermon on “Radical Hospitality and Building Bridges” (April 30, 2017) from a month ago.

One other shout-out has to do with our being a teaching congregation for aspiring Unitarian Universalist Ministers and denominational lay leaders; a sparkling array has blessed us.

I single out the Rev. Dr. Hope Johnson and Dr. Janice Marie Johnson who for their service to our Association received, a few years back, the President’s Award from Rev. William Sinkford. And two others who are also members here are Rev. Rosemary Bray McNatt, President of Starr King School for the Ministry, our seminary in Berkeley, and Rev. Cheryl Walker, President of the UU Minister’s Association. Your gifts of nurture to each of them are part of their daily work, which they are always quick to lift up.

I am proud that in all these things, and many other deeds, we – together – have been deeply engaged in the issues of our times… always more to be done… but taking seriously our Mission to grow …

o to grow as a spiritual community…

o to grow as a diverse spiritual community…

o to grow as a caring, diverse spiritual community…
o to grow as a caring, justice-making, anti-racist, diverse spiritual community.

And I have no doubt, that whatever changes come in the years ahead.... Members, Ministers, buildings, or particular language of Vision and Mission, that our/your fundamental commitments to spiritual freedom and prophetic engagement will sustain, guide, and nurture this congregation.

My take on this special community is that when facing challenges from society at large, or internally from eruptions of anti-democratic, individualistic, narcissistic needs, fears, or goals – a special danger in our liberal faith – almost a pandemic in congregations across the country some years ago... I again report and applaud the work of the hands and hearts of so many who helped us to re-center... and to find new ways to flourish on various occasions in our 192 years. And with our excellent Board leaders, and so many of you, Community is poised for exciting new chapters.

We tell stories in order to live.

Two other stories about our liberal religious approach and seeds we plant... The first parable, which I have told for a long time, speaks ever more deeply as years unfold.

Once upon a time, a young child went into a candy store with a nickel in hand; I should say this was many, many years ago. There were bowls of penny candies, gumdrops, and jawbreakers; strands of licorice, bowls of bubblegum, peppermints, and rum balls; toffee, lollipops, big all-day suckers, and fireballs.

The child chose carefully, methodically amidst these treasures, and when she was about ready to pay for these exquisite selections, she stopped. She thought more deeply. She asked the clerk to start all over again – one of this instead... two of that; how many of these can I now add?

This happened three or four times – selections, changes, decisions, more questions... then all to be redone until finally, when the intense girl began all over again one more time, the clerk in exasperation cried out, "What do you want? The whole world on a stick?"

And then.... then.... The child’s eyes grew wide, and she asked, "Can I see it?"

Theologically, spiritually this is a matter of mindfulness and appreciative awareness of all Life’s possibilities... the blessings of curiosity and wonder....
One other child’s efforts at freedom are instructive: I think of the boy who lived with his family next to a lake. As a young child, his parents always told him not to go to the lake alone. One day, they could not find him, and after searching everywhere, they walked up their driveway to find him standing next to the mailbox and holding a suitcase.

The relieved parents ran up to him, hugged him, and asked what he was doing. He responded, “I’m running away.” “Why are you running away?” they asked. He said, “Because you will not let me go near the lake.”

To which they asked, “But why are you standing here by the mailbox?” His answer: “Because you won’t let me cross the road.”

It is hard to break all the chains that family, friends, or society may place on us or that we place upon ourselves. Sometimes, you want to flee and just don’t know how. Or you are torn up and don’t know what to do. The House of Pain may make us forget how deeply Spirit, Life, Creativity infuse us and surround us.

Such forgetfulness is Islam’s description of our deepest challenge… forgetting our connection to Life/Sacred Creativity and to one another…. possibly also forgetting our strength and freedom.

Even so, I am confident in the midst of changes to come that there will be the core commitments: stories of kinship with Life and its mystery and with others; stories of freedom and justice and allies in the struggle. Stories of wonder, stories of seeking freedom and of discovery of new paths… of becoming fully human and fully alive.

Stories of community, religious community, shared dreams, planting seeds, harvesting through deeds and commitment over the years, just as we have shared together for these good years.

Reflecting on these years, I need to acknowledge that I have been blessed by so many, and I have learned much:

- that people are, sometimes flawed, yet precious; and we need each other;
- that congregations as institutions are irascible and inspiring;
- that congregations are expensive to maintain and such institutions are essential for the growth of the soul and humanizing society;
- that life is just a chance to grow a soul, to honor our potentials;
- that the call to do justice is difficult, often frustrating, and ultimately it is the work of love in serving matters greater than ourselves;
that the call to love kindness heals those who honor it, and caring counts ultimately, and
that the call to walk humbly is necessary for those who would make bold for spiritual growth and social transformation.

In wrestling with mystery, the world, its challenges and opportunities... in kinship with one another and Life’s gifts.... Planting such seeds makes all the difference.

A final story from 9/11: On September 11th, 2001, very late in the afternoon, after being at church, in mid-September’s late summer, on my way home, so sad, so bewildered, I walked by St. Vartan Park at Second Avenue and 35th Street. (And earlier I had greeted a shelter volunteer at the church bringing food for guests that evening and the week ahead... on such a day, knowing she was still needed.)

No more ghostly, ash-covered women and men were walking home as they had been in the morning and early afternoon. At the park, there were some young children playing with their parents at-hand – some parents watching, some joining in – children of all backgrounds running, laughing, filled with joy... as they should be – filled with innocence of youth; the parents filled with love to make things normal for them on a tragic day... parents no doubt forever changed, and wounded, yet doing a healing thing.

After the grieving, and sometimes in the middle of some great grief, even amidst the most tragic of days, we realize that Life goes on. Love continues. The hope for the future remains in our children and in all we give them. And in us....

On that tragic, wounded day, at the playground, I had again a powerful glimpse of something sacred and trustworthy. God, perhaps. At least Spirit. Life. Something trustworthy showing up. Good news....

Good news, simple, trustworthy, daily, holy... as we do our parts.... Planting, tending, harvesting.

We gather again this day... to share and receive comfort, courage, and hope. To be radically inclusive, to help build the Beloved Community. To embrace rational spirituality and compassion’s depths, together.

And about changes, at different seasons of our lives, we grow our souls in different ways, sometimes planting, sometimes harvesting.... Occasionally we perhaps feel a bit lost, but as the poet declares, we live through many lives, some of them our own, and we are not done with our changes. (Kunitz) And all of us can serve.
For nearly 38 years, I have had the privilege of weaving stories of faith and weaving my life with yours and so many others. I thank you for that blessing. So much done; so much more awaits in new chapters; and for that blessing too, I am grateful.

These years of ministry, a deeply shared ministry…. It seems like only yesterday, in innocence and awe, I began. It also seems like a long time ago, yet the adventure is lively and fresh, with a new chapter for this beloved congregation.

“Life is just a chance to grow a soul.” And I am grateful to so many of you for all you have taught me, and I am equally grateful for the personal, pastoral dimensions within congregational life: the tears of joy, struggle, and heartache, of humans fully alive in weakness and in strength, deeply grateful for the privilege of being invited into the lives of so many members these many years.

It is so good to look around here and to see so many, of varying ages, with “eyes the color of the sea, cheerful and undefeated”. So many, “prisoners of hope” (Zechariah), making bold for new life! Planting and harvesting…. And, it really is ok for us, in exploring our lives, to be bold… to cross the road and to walk by the lake. “Left foot… right foot….left foot… Breathe.”

For all these blessings, known and unknown, remembered and forgotten, and for so many more to come, in so many ways, I am truly grateful. Thank you….

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Meditation/Prayer: “Prayer does not change things. Prayer changes people, and people change things.” (Rev. Lon Ray Call). Let us enter into the spirit of meditation and prayer with gratitude for the Spirit of Life:

Life is a gift. Our days are brief. Give thanks. 
People are precious. Caring counts ultimately. 
Be bold in your living and your loving and in your giving and your forgiving. 
We need each other. And the world needs us…. Amen.

Readings:

1. "Life is just a chance to grow a soul." (Rev. A. Powell Davies, 1902-1957)

2. “Tell the truth, have you ever found God in Church? I never did. I just found a bunch of folks hoping for… (God) to show. Any God I ever felt in Church I
brought in with me. And I think all the other folks did too. They came to church to share God, not find God.” (Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*)

3. “I seek change for the beauty of itself. Everything will change. The only question is growing up or decaying. We who are human have a great opportunity to grow up and perhaps beyond that. Our grasp is not limited to our reach.” (Nikki Giovanni)

4. "The meaning of life is fulfilled only by those who enter into the struggle for justice in history and community.” (Rev. Dr. James Luther Adam, 1901-1995)

5. Stanley Kunitz:
   
   I have walked through many lives,
   Some of them my own,
   And I am not who I was,
   Though some principle of being
   Abides....
   I am not done with my changes.

6. “Everybody can be great because everybody can serve.” (Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.)

Dialogue Reading – Kay S. Xanthakos & Rev. Bruce Southworth (*Time, 9/25/78*)

She: Did you see that two Sociologists have just proved that men interrupt women all the time? They...

He: Who says?

She: Candace West of Florida State and Don Zimmerman of the University of California at Santa Barbara. They taped a bunch of private conversations and guess what they found? When two men, or two women, are talking, interruptions are about equal. But when a man and a woman are talking, he makes 96% of the interruptions. They think it's a dominance trick men aren't even aware of. But...

He: These people have nothing better to do than eavesdrop on interruptions?

She: … but women make "retrievals" about one third of the time. You know, they pick up where they left off after the man...

He: Surely not all men are like that.
She: ... cuts in on what they were saying. Doesn't that...

He: Speaking as a staunch supporter of feminism, I deplore it.

She: I know.

[He: For this morning's music....

She: I hate to interrupt, but don't forget the responsive reading.]