

Opening Words

We are here
as winter slowly, slowly brightens ,
to worship, to celebrate that we are;
to say that morning sunlight on a gable,
and the moving clouds in the sky,
and a red cardinal in budding branches
are joys both singular and wondrous. So,

**As we move through this year of transition and joy, we remember with gratitude the power of our living heritage, which moves through time like a clear running creek;
refreshing us with the sweet draughts of courage, hope, justice-making, peaceful living, ever deeper honesty, and more truthful loving. And so we kindle this light in thanksgiving.**

Sequence

When the machetes of injustice tear apart the fabric of the nation and the world, I speak up.

When the sunset resembles purple and orange vines entwined like lovers, I sigh in silence.

When the mud of deceptions and trickery smear the mirror of public life, I speak up.

When the moon rests like a thin slice of lemon in the sparkling glass of morning, I smile in silence.

When the insecure bully me, or the greedy clutch at the common purse, I speak up.

When a song lifts my soul aloft like a lark, I swoon in silence.

When wars and rumors of wars destroy the hopes and lives of children, I speak up.

When I am overcome by sheer reality of a web of life connecting every woman, man and child on this one world earth, I give thanks in silence.

When I am restrained by systems of control, manipulation, denial and duplicity, I speak up.

When words cease on Sunday, the breath moves deep and slow, and the inner and the outer are as one, I wonder in deep, deep silence.

silence

When the sting of life and its joys move from the hearts of others into my own,
when my own memories rise up and invite me to deeper loving,

I pause to remember my own life, and all those whom I miss, love, long for, struggle with and turn to, that I might be the best me I can be. Then I name in my heart, or in the common air.

naming

When the web of life, the whole singular world of which we are all part, vibrates, struck by the rush of wind called spirit, called vitality, called love, it makes what we call music. It makes melody, and sigh and rest and sharp and flat. It calls to our depth, deep calling unto deep.

Readings

The First Reading is a poem, *Possibilities*, written by Wislawa Szymborska, clearly my favorite poet. She is on the cover of your orders so that you might associate face with name, and also because she is a single person.

I prefer movies.
I prefer cats.
I prefer the oaks along the river.
I prefer Dickens to Dostoyevski.
I prefer to like individual people
to loving humankind as a whole.
I prefer keeping needle and thread on hand, just in case.
I prefer the color green.
I prefer not to hold that there is some reason to blame for everything.
I prefer the color green.
I prefer to leave early.
I prefer exceptions.
I prefer talking to doctors about something else.
I prefer the old fine-lined illustrations.
I prefer the absurdity of writing poems to the absurdity of not writing poems.
I prefer, where love's concerned, nonspecific anniversaries that can be celebrated every day.
I prefer moralists who make no promises.
I prefer the artfully kind to the gullible.
I prefer the earth in civvies.
I prefer conquered nations to the conquering kind.
I prefer the hell of disorder to the hell of order.
I prefer Grimm's fairy tales to the newspapers' headlines.
I prefer leaves without flowers to flowers without leaves.
I prefer dogs with uncropped tails.
I prefer light eyes, since mine are dark.

I prefer desks with drawers.

I prefer many things I haven't mentioned here to many things I've left unsaid in the past.

I prefer zeros on the loose to those lined up behind one.

I prefer the music of the insects to the silence of the stars.

I prefer not to ask how much longer and when.

I prefer to consider the possibility that existence has its own reason for being.

The Second Reading comes from the moving and beautifully written memoir, *The Elusive Embrace*, written in 1999 by Daniel Mendel-sohn. Elul is the Hebrew month that falls around September, and the year 5683 in Hebrew translates to 1923. *The Song of Songs* is a book in the Hebrew Scriptures.

I went to the cemetery to visit the grave of a family member from long ago. There is a Hebrew inscription and an English inscription. The Hebrew inscription says: To the memory of an unmarried girl, Rachel, daughter of Elkana, died on the 22nd of Elul, in the year 5683. *Ha'betulah*, an "unmarried girl." The word rang in my head, reminding me of something, a word in a Hebrew text I have been studying, something I am to read at a wedding the following weekend. The wedding is for a young couple wanting me to read from the Song of Songs. The word in question is *habatselet*, "rose" which, with the exception of one Hebrew letter, looks nearly identical to *ha'bethulah*, an unmarried girl. At the wedding I will read "*ani habatselet ha-Sharon*" *I am the rose of Sharon*, which is an allegory about distinctness and difference. I thought of the rose which now grows out of Rachel's grave, signaling her difference, her specialness.

I will never get married. But because of this story, I will always be fascinated by weddings, the event that might not take place.

Sermon

I too, like Daniel Mendelsohn, have always been fascinated by weddings. This fascination began, I suppose, when I was about 5. I remember being held up in the air by someone...I don't remember whom---just so I could joyously scatter a bag of raw rice onto Nancy Bono who had just married Eddie Belletini. I thought this was a fun trick, to be sure. Others were simply throwing the rice. I got to dump it.

Italian weddings in those days lasted long, cost plenty and were incredibly elaborate. You had the ceremony in the morning, say, about ten. That lasted for an hour and a half, because of special rituals added to the Mass, like bringing a bouquet of roses to the Madonna. Then there was the wedding breakfast, with hundreds of people, often as much as 500, in attendance. Then, siesta, and a change into fancier clothes. Then an open bar at 5, a huge dinner at long tables, with tubs

of quill pasta and roast chicken, salads and potatoes and wine by the gallon. Ricotta cheese-stuffed sweet *canoli* for desert, then dancing, the cutting of the cake, bouquet throwing, garter-tossing and dozens of unsupervised kids running amok until two a.m.

I have a friend who chose to be single when she was a young woman. Oh, she dated some, certainly, but soon she realized that she really preferred being single. You can be sure that there wasn't so much as single *canolo* brought to her door in celebration. No bouquets, no wine, no ceremony with elaborate rites and 500 guests. Nothing.

And certainly no special songs. No crooning.

Just words.... behind her back. *Spinster* for one. *Old maid*. Or when she gets even older, *an old crone*.

Yeah. An old crone. Like Elizabeth the First, Queen of England, Scotland and Wales. Or Louisa May Alcott. Or Florence Nightingale. Or Jane Austen. Or Helen Keller. Spinsters. Old maids. Today, according to one delightful pundit on the subject, you can call such women "Quirkyalones," instead of spinsters or crones. But I am not really sure that the adjective "quirky" really helps all that much.

And then there is the *bachelor*, a word I hardly hear any more, except when attached to the word *pad*. And even that sounds like a joke from a 1960 spy movie. Still, there are not as many flippant names applied to unmarried men as there are to unmarried women.

But, those unmarried men must have something wrong with them, don't they? Like Johannes Brahms, the composer. Or Pascal the philosopher. Or Lewis Carroll who let Alice float down into Wonderland. Or Newton and his apple. And Bill Maher on the television screen, and Al Pacino on the movie screen must be covering something up, since they're not partnered either, right? Worse, a single Jesus of Galilee has been so upsetting to some people that they have squeezed the intellectual honesty out of historical study without mercy, until there is either some sort of shotgun marriage to Mary Magdalene, or a lingering romance on the couch with some guy whose parents couldn't find any better name for him than "the Beloved Disciple."

You might be able to tell I have some feelings about this!

You know, strangely, I didn't know I had these feelings until I got into preparing for this sermon, and starting to think of my own life in this regard. After all, I was

partnered for 16 years. Not a short time. And before that I was single. And since then I have been single. But what does that mean?

For instance, I live alone; but not every single person I know does. And I have not always lived alone. I have shared by digs with folks in between moves from one house to another, or friends down on their luck for a few months. Does sharing my home make me *not* single?

And was I single when I traveled to Europe back in 1984? I traveled alone. For well over a month. I even felt lonely at times, so lonely I once tried to “accidentally” touch elbows with a neighboring single diner in Venice just to have human contact. But that was five years into my relationship. My partner simply chose not to travel with me because of work schedules. Was I temporarily single? Of course, the United States government never recognized my partnership anyway. Not as a marriage. Not even as a relationship. Phil and I had no choice but to write “single” on our tax forms. And when the census came, no one came around to interview us. After all, we lived smack in the middle of the so-called ghetto in Oakland, and none of our neighbors had been part of the census either. We had to call three times to get someone to take seriously that we wanted to fill out the forms...the long forms mind you... so that we could underscore we were a couple. Someone eventually came out to interview us, but frankly, we always wondered if the information got to anyone. So were we a couple? Or were we two single people? Depends, I suppose, on whom you ask.

I know folks who are married but who live in different states. When I was on the Hymnbook Commission, there were only 8 of us on the committee, but two among us fit this particular arrangement. Were they single or partnered?

The funny thing is, right here in the United States of America, the number of people choosing to live single lives increases every day. The number of single people right now is at 45% of the adult population, which is almost half. (Although, considering what I said about the census a few minutes ago, you never know how accurate that figure is!) Some singles have even thrown parties for themselves, or come with ceremonies of promise and ethical commitment to lead an honest single life. One single person in this congregation told me that she once saw a cartoon about a woman who threw such a self-marriage, only to meet the love of her life at the reception. Such ironies of course exist now and always will exist.

And certainly, it's not news that a great number of single people have *not* **chosen** to be single. Over a fifth of all US citizens have been widowed or divorced into their single state. Their partners have died. Or their partners have gone out the door and left them, sometimes without even the courtesy of divorce. Some of these

single people do not even think of themselves as single people, but prefer widow or widower or describe themselves as abandoned, or sad or forlorn. Having no choice about this can be very depressing indeed.

Or some singles have really wanted to find a partner in life and have just not really been lucky in love, and count their single state as less than ideal. The insensitive...and how packed the world seems with insensitive people at times like this... sometimes accuse of them being “too picky.” Still, only 16% of all singles say they are looking for a partner. That is not a large percentage in my book. And, many singles are *in* committed relationships of some sort. Even if they are not living together.

Furthermore, some single people describe themselves as lonely; others as lovers of solitude. It gets kind of confusing after a while, doesn't it?

But still, some of the things that are true about singles who have not chosen their singleness are also true about singles who have chosen it. For instance, single people make 25% less at work than their married counterparts. And singles are promoted at work far, far less than those who are married.

Now immediately, someone might say “Well, of course this business about salary and promotion is true. It takes less money to take care of one person than it does two...or eight, if a couple happens to have six children. True. But the serious trouble with that assumption is imagining that single people do not have children. Millions of widowed and divorced people certainly do. And there are millions upon millions of single parents in this nation, especially single mothers who have been abandoned, or have even opted to adopt children on their own, which is possible in most states. And as far as I am concerned, taking care of several children while you yourself are working full time is undeniably a miracle. Not a metaphoric miracle, but an old fashioned one, on the stature say, of the parting of the Red Sea. Of course, no scholar I know even thinks that that any such thing ever happened. Single parenthood, however, happens every day. Its real and its often tough. And that's true even for those single people who joyously adopt.

And, beyond children of whatever origin, the assumption is often made that single people like, say, myself, have nothing but themselves to spend their livelihood on. Again, there is tremendous bigotry and ignorance in that assumption. The quite ordinary generosity of a godparent to his five godchildren left completely aside, there are many other people I have supported over the years, and far more than emotionally. I've helped pay tuitions. I've vouched at the car lot for barely working-class friends who have no other family to do so. I've financially supported people during difficult and tragic times in their lives. I've been real family to those who have none of their own, with all that entails. Why? Because I love them.

Because I care deeply for them. Because family is family. No better reason exists. I'm not terribly different from folks with children of whatever origin, married or unmarried. Oh, don't get me wrong. I do what I do gladly. I am not complaining or asking for anything. I have a pretty good life, according to most visible signs I can think of. But its important to assert that being single does not mean being a hermit in the desert, or worse, swinging from chandeliers every night in some sort of bachelor pad.

And it does not necessarily mean celibacy, although it does for some, I suppose. The poet Wislawa Szymborska was, for a while, like me, married, although in her case I suppose the Government of Poland at the time actually thought it was a legal coupling. But for most of her life, Szymborska has been single. A single person. She has had love affairs, clearly. She writes of them all the time. And her poem this morning describes a person with many preferences. She prefers cats to dogs, she tells us. And prefers writing poetry to not writing poetry. But the point is, she is a person with likes and dislikes, cultures and patterns, ways and means, just like every other person on earth. Whether they are single or married, partnered or unpartnered, gay or straight or part of any other category of human beings we like to create in order to assert some sort of artificial control over things...we all have dislikes, likes, preference and joys and sorrows. Every one of us. Isn't the worth and dignity of every person one of our basic assertions, throughout our long Unitarian and Universalist history? "Every person" means the worth and dignity of persons no matter the categories they're slung into. No matter their conditions, their bodies, their minds, their backgrounds, their arrangements, their choices, their suffering, their joy. Every one of them.

Daniel Mendelsohn in the second reading says he will never get married. Never have 500 or even 50 people at a reception, or hold an elaborate ceremony, and serve a five-tier cake. Perhaps. But how moved I was to read his story, about visiting the grave of a relative whose only description was "unmarried." She was not seen in relationship to herself, but only by her lack of relationship to someone else. She was not *habetsalet ha Sharon* "a rose of Sharon"... something beautiful, something as much a part of the erotic and lovely universe of persons as anyone else, but merely an "unmarried girl." Mendelsohn may not ever marry, but I am sure he has no intention of being remembered for that alone. There is so much more to him. He is not a father, per se. But he is a father figure to the young son of a single woman friend. He is gay; she is straight. They are not a couple. But he is with this boy and her mother every weekend. And I trust, after reading his moving memoir, that Mendelsohn's spirit is open and growing past the limiting tombstone description of his "unmarried" family member. Its clear that he sees that dignity and worth are intrinsic, and that all categories which twist or distort that intrinsic worth need to be questioned at all times, at all costs.

Children in our culture need to grow up knowing that there are many choices open to them, many ways of living good, honest, and yes, happy lives. Many ways their intrinsic worth may find expression and meaning.

When I was up in Toronto last Friday, preaching Debra Faulk's installation sermon, the choir of the Ottawa Unitarian Church came down to sing at her ceremony. One of the things I heard them sing was a song I have heard our own choir sing before, I don't remember how long ago.

But the words of the song, written by Fred Small, a Unitarian Universalist minister, and a singer of the quality of Pete Seeger by many lights, sums up exactly the point of this sermon, and the words I imagine Daniel Mendelsohn is even right now saying to the young boy he is helping to raise, the young boy who is not his son, but whom he loves with all his single man's heart. Here are the words to that amazing song, with which I will end this sermon. And I tell you truly, no one in the Ottawa choir could sing the words of this song without wet eyes. When you hear them, I think you'll know why. I've rearranged the words a bit to make them more the poem and less the song, but I have not changed their impact one whit:

We have cleared off the table, the leftovers saved; washed the dishes and put them away. I have told you a story, and tucked you in tight at the end of your knockabout day. As the moon sets its sails to carry you to sleep over the midnight sea, I will sing you a song...a song no one ever sang to me. May it keep you good company.

*You can be anybody you want to be.
You can love whomever you will.
You can travel any country where your heart leads, and know I will love you still
You can live by yourself, you can gather friends around, you can choose one special one.
And the only measure of your words and your deeds will be the love you leave behind when you're done.*

*There are girls who grow up strong and bold;
There are boys quiet and kind.
Some race on ahead, some follow behind.
Some go in their own way and time.
Some women love women, some men love men
Some raise children, some never do.
Don't be rattled by names, by taunts, by games.. You can dream all the day, never reaching the end of everything possible for you.
And know I will love you still.*

Offering

There is no one else to support us but ourselves.
There is no hidden resource, no great reserve.
We, and we alone, are this congregation, its
support and its power. Alone and together we make a future for ourselves by the
simple courtesy of generosity.

Ceremony of Installation

Wendy

In the life of a liberal religious congregation, we try to put people before beliefs,
and persons before ceremonies. Being present to each other in both joy and sorrow,
rejoicing and suffering is a mark of our religious practice.

The ordained ministers of this church including the minister emerita, and our
Commissioned Lay Leader Candidate, Dick Dawson, embrace among their
ministries the pastoral or caring services. In this we are supported and helped by
the Caring Committee and the Neighborhood Network, which helps people in time
of trouble with very tangible food, and rides to and from medical appointments
among many other things.

Mark

To these ministries, Wendy and I have added the Pastoral Team. The first team
was installed five years ago. Today, after receiving training, we hereby install the
new members of our team. Some members of the former 2 teams will continue to
serve in their present manner.

The work and names of the Pastoral Team are described in the insert in your orders
of celebration. Know that they each understand confidentiality, promising to keep
the sacred stories of every human life safe. They have been trained to do this work,
and Wendy, Dick and I hereby acknowledge them as persons of character,
compassion and commitment, worthy of trust.

Dick

With Wendy and Mark, and on behalf of the members of this congregation and its
leaders, I hereby install you within the Pastoral Team of First Unitarian
Universalist Church. Working with the ministers and the Caring Committee and
Neighborhood Network to live out our values of compassion and service one on
one, I commend you to the congregation as servants of the heart.