



Unitarian Universalist Congregation of York

"Safe Harbor: A Service of Ingathering"

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The wheel of the year turns again. We return - or we come for the first time - or we arrive here uncertain of where we have been or what led us here - or we have been here so long we don't quite remember what brought us together in the first place - and yet, we gather. As the days move towards the equilibrium of day and night, as the harvest ripens on the vine, as we return to school or work or those things we might have set aside in the summer months, we gather. We come to this place to nourish our souls, to share our joys, to shoulder our sorrows with others who know their weight.

We welcome you. Be it your first time, or your five-hundredth, or wherever in-between, you are welcome here. We welcome you whoever you love, whatever story led you here. If you came here to escape hurt, we hope you will find healing. If you came here to seek community, we hope to provide that in abundance. If you are not sure why you came here, we will hold those questions with you, for questions are sacred here. Uncertainty and mystery are things we try not to fear but rather to live into, to open to, and to explore.

Our [reading](#) this morning speaks of returning, of healing, of the ways we might bring ourselves here, together. Let's revisit part of it:

"When you find your way to the circle, to the fire kept burning by the keepers of your soul, you will be welcomed.

You must clean yourself with cedar, sage, or other healing plant.

Cut the ties you have to failure and shame.

Let go the pain you are holding in your mind, your shoulders, your heart, all the way to your feet. Let go the pain of your ancestors to make way for those who are heading in our direction.

Ask for forgiveness.

Call upon the help of those who love you. These helpers take many forms: animal, element, bird, angel, saint, stone, or ancestor.

Call your spirit back. It may be caught in corners and creases of shame, judgment, and human abuse.

You must call in a way that your spirit will want to return.”

Your spirit must want to return. You must want to maintain and grow your relationship with your spirit, with your soul, with your deepest self, your highest self - your most true self.

We call this celebration Ingathering, and in some places Homecoming, because we want to call our spirits back together, collectively. We each are left to the tending of our own souls, to the nourishing of our own spirits, and it is humbling to me how many of you have come here because you find it nourishing.

Even if this place doesn't feel like home to you right now, we hope it will. And we hope as you do the work of healing, that you will find a sense of home here and cultivate a sense of home within yourself. If that sense has trouble taking hold here, we wish you strength for the journey around the next bend, beyond which very few of us are given the gift to see. We encourage the exploration of mystery and doubt here, and we celebrate the discovery of traveling companions.

On this day when we hold our ritual of Water Communion - the ritual of summer, the element of water, that binding common element without which we could not survive - I really wanted to find a reading that was more specifically about water. But I kept coming back to this Joy Harjo poem again and again - it's a longtime favorite of mine, you see. And it's not the first time I've preached on it, not even the thousandth time I've reflected on it, cried while reading it - more water, more sustenance even within those tears. All the elements are present within this poem and it speaks so powerfully to gathering, to coming home, and to healing that it became clear. We return to rituals to ground ourselves as we move through the year, and through our lives. We return to the same sacred texts again and again to learn from them anew.

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Let go the pain you are holding in your mind, your shoulders, your heart, all the way to your feet. Let go the pain of your ancestors to make way for those who are heading in our direction.

Ask for forgiveness.

Call upon the help of those who love you.”

Let go of failure and shame. Let go of pain. Ask for forgiveness. And ask for help.

These are sacred tasks. And they are hard.

In the spirit of water I'll use a metaphor that I'm sure many of you have heard me use before: This faith community is like an island with sunny, warm, inviting beaches. When people land here, they often come from stormy seas - they are shipwrecked, lost, adrift, and when they find the relative safety of our shores they cast themselves upon them with a deep sense of relief. At first the

rest is enough. The relief is enough. But when the sacred act of rest has allowed for the renewal of the self, well. If one is really shipwrecked, one does eventually have to get up off the beach, yeah? Of course. There's food to find, signal fires to build, shelter to create. And when people arrive here after being tossed on the stormy seas of their own spiritual journeys, coming from places perhaps where they experienced harm, or were judged for their questions, or were judged or shamed simply for being who they are - we want them to feel that sense of rest and relief. And we want them to feel welcomed home.

A sense of home is more than a sense of safety, though. It is a sense of belonging. So let's imagine ourselves on that warm sunny beach, we're rested now and we know we're safe. Maybe we get up and take a walk. We meet others who were tossed here by the same storm or by different ones. But we also meet people who have been here a lot longer than we have. They've already created a shelter, they've already gathered food, they already know which plants are safe and which are to be avoided.

The task of gathering-in, the task of home-coming and home-finding and home-making, that task is a little different depending how you got here. Maybe you were born on the island, maybe you piloted yourself here on a nice little boat, maybe you were towed here by someone else, or maybe you too were tossed upon our shores by a storm. But it takes all of us, no matter where we are in our journeys, to make this place a home. To make this a place not just of safety but of rising to meet challenges, of doing the hard work of letting go, of asking for forgiveness, of asking for help. The hard work of building.

This morning's prophet and wise woman, Joy Harjo, three-term poet laureate of the United States and member of the Muscogee Creek Nation, has already spelled this out for us (and taken fewer words to do so - the magic of the poet!).

"Welcome your spirit back from its wandering. It may return in pieces, in tatters. Gather them together. They will be happy to be found after being lost for so long.

Your spirit will need to sleep awhile after it is bathed and given clean clothes.

Now you can have a party. Invite everyone you know who loves and supports you. Keep room for those who have no place else to go.

Make a giveaway, and remember, keep the speeches short.

Then, you must do this: help the next person find their way through the dark.”

We are called to this. We are called to be breakers of cycles, forgivers, welcomers. We are called to be those who own their mistakes, who strive to make repairs, those who build a place of welcome in their own hearts to echo the place of welcome we build together in community. In a world of hurt people hurting people we are called to be healing people healing people. We are called to make a home, to invite those we love and those with no place else to go. We are called to be that welcoming shore. We are called to help the next person find their way.

I am glad and grateful for everyone who has made their way here today. Let us give thanks for one another and let us remain mindful of what we build together, for all those who will come after us. This is our holy work.

So may it be.