

Enter, Rejoice, and Come In

By Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD September 15, 2024

Enter, Rejoice and Come in¹, dear ones. Enter, rejoice, and come in. Enter this space, for “you are beloved, and you are welcome here.”² Rejoice, for you have found a community of joy and love and compassion and faith. Come into my heart, my soul, my deepest being. Come in, come in and know unconditional, sacred love. I welcome you into a life of joy, compassion, faith, and peace. For today we are offered this: the sacred act of invitation.

A deeply personal spiritual practice - this holy, faithful, and ancient art of invitation. Welcoming another into community, into our individual lives and hearts and spirits. It is universal, offered to those of whom we know intimately spanning all the way to those of whom we will never even meet. Ancient religions which have thrived through millennia serve to teach us this. The practice of welcome is an intentional act; not necessarily innate. It buds and blossoms from the faith, love, acceptance and wonder that we intentionally create and treasure within our very beings as we commit to being a people of faith, commit to being a people of prayer and meditation and worship and justice and spirituality. For it is these aspects of a faithful life – love and acceptance – that we strive to offer all. We draw our circle wide and wider still, rippling out through the entirety of sacred souls traversing this wild and precious life. To all: you are a beautiful, kindred soul, and I cherish you. This is derived in part from having faith in a greater entity or spirit of mystery and life that unites all living beings in intimate ways– each are divinely made and divinely loved and as such sacred. So may we unite with each other blessed being and flourish. We are each beautiful, may we celebrate and love and welcome each and every sacred being into our lives and minds, for this is an intentional way of living that fosters beauty, wonder, acceptance, and awe of the human spirit.

¹ #361 Singing the Living Tradition

² Rev. Joan Javier-Duval

I wonder of opening my mailbox. Inside there is always an array of colorful and shiny advertisements, magazines, requests for this or that, potential scams – all of which I simply ignore and throw away. And yet the occasional handwritten note of a treasured companion arrives. Save the date! Join us at our wedding, our baby shower, our birthday party, our bar mitzvah! This lights up my day, expecting the mundane and the unnecessary and receiving, instead, an offering of joy and celebration. Even in this most elementary of experiences, we see how this simple act illuminates our lives. Join me, these notes offer, as we traverse the joys of life together. I love you and I welcome you and desire your presence at this most precious moment of my life. This creates something holy in the midst of monotony. And yet, what happens when these invitations are not received?

May we enter this space of joy and wonder by first lamenting on a life where this did not reside. “I pray for you, world, to come and find me,” wrote poet David Whyte, “to see me and recognize me and beckon me out.”³ How would it feel not to be seen, not recognized, not acknowledged? To not be found? What isolation would this foster, what experiences and emotions of insignificance and sorrow and lament? What do we lack when seemingly secluded from that sacred web of life of which we are each but a piece? I pray to be found, the poet elaborated, I pray. To be recognized, beckoned. For that stranger who resides within to emerge and accept that gift of invitation. That gift of invitation. Can we be the one to initiate, to welcome that hidden, buried stranger into life and love and faith? Welcoming the true soul within – the soul of anyone – to a life of beauty and wonder and awe? May we be those who overlook no one, beloveds. No one.

No one, offers ancient Buddhist teachings. What of that sacred art, that precious act, of Loving Kindness meditation? The holy practice of genuinely desiring that all of those who inhabit this planet know wellbeing and happiness and peace. This sacred practice serves as a concentric circle, a circle of compassion that begins with self and expands to loved ones to strangers to enemies or those one disagrees with, rippling all the way towards the entire cosmos and every

³ “Prayer for an Invitation” by David Whyte

being in this blessed realm. Through this practice Buddhists offer an intimate desire and sacred prayer that every being knows happiness, love, kindness, and compassion. This is radical because it is offered to all. It serves as a chance for Buddhists to pause, to think of someone who they know personally or even one in power, who has done wrong, and to offer that sacred gift of a desire for genuine wellbeing and inner peace. This is a unique and highly sacred practice that offers us a profound lesson – a Buddhist invites, into the depths of their heart, both those of whom they disagree, as well as those of whom they will never even meet – that they may know peace, love, and joy.

In this ancient religion, deeply personal, spiritual practices are dedicated towards the “welfare, happiness, and awakening for all.”⁴ It’s about merit – that fundamental Buddhist belief that they accumulate good or bad karma through deeds, actions, and thoughts. When they meditate, when they pause and center their minds, when they connect with inner peace and their own wellbeing and their own happiness, they are ultimately doing this for the well-being of all. After each meditation session, Buddhists make a statement of dedication, expressing that the merit they receive is directed to another chosen being or entity, or, often, to the wellbeing of all living beings. The wellbeing of all. Again, it is the deeply faithful invitation to happiness and awakening, which, I stress here, is fostered in oneself and one’s own practice, with the faith and conviction that the merit be received by other beings as well. It begins within and slowly and intentionally ripples without as a sacred act of invitation to a full and blessed life for all.

There is, too, a teaching of kindness that stems from the Buddhist belief in past lives. I learned this while sitting barefoot in a temple, words spoken from a humble nun, head shaved, dressed in simple orange robes. Buddhists have cycled through eons of bodies and lives and experiences, she offered. She taught that Buddhists strive to be kind to everyone for each being a Buddhist encounters has lived countless lives, and as such each person on this earth has treated them with kindness and compassion in this life or in a previous life. Treat others with

⁴ *Mindfulness* by Joseph Goldstein pg. 254

kindness and compassion, the teaching offers, no matter what another's current transgressions may be, for, at some point, others have, and will, offer kindness towards you in return.⁵ What can Unitarian Universalists learn from Buddhists here? No matter your transgressions, you are welcome here.

Let us pause for a moment to reflect upon the role of invitation in Christianity. From the birth of this ancient faith, love and acceptance and radical, universal welcome have been both foundational and fundamental. Jesus termed the phrase “the least of these,” referring to those on the outskirts, on the periphery, rejected by society, ignored, condemned, and ostracized. Lepers, the impoverished, the ill. Jesus served as a healer to the deep emotional, mental, and physical wounds of the mind, body, and spirit suffered by these rejected souls. To this prophet among many prophets, those who were deemed unclean and thrown into the margins to waste away became the most sacred and the most holy – an unheard-of paradox. It was these – the least of these – who entered the Kingdom of Heaven – the most sacred and holy of places to those of the Christian faith. Those who were ostracized were introduced to a life and an afterlife of unconditional love and care and compassion that those steeped in privilege never have and never will know. Jesus spread the word so these would not remain the acts of a prophet but become acts of every individual inhabiting this earthly realm. Invite into one’s home the ostracized, I paraphrase from a verse in the book of Luke, for if one does this, then one will be blessed. Blessed is the life of one who welcomes the condemned.

The above faith traditions are part of two of the six sources that inspire and helped to create our ever-evolving faith tradition, one that has recently proclaimed love to be at the center of our faith from which all other values emerge. How can this, as defined by Unitarian Universalists, lead to the value of invitation? Before any modern interpretations can be pursued, I remind us of our roots. Universal salvation. At a time when Universalists still believed in a ruling, Christian idea of God, what set them apart from traditional Christianity was that belief in universal forgiveness, universal salvation. Universalists believed that every aching

⁵ Gen Chogden

soul who left this realm would reside forever in Heaven. No matter what their transgressions, wrongdoings, or sins, God, if no one else, could forgive them and invite them to eternal goodness, salvation, and peace. This is from where our modern faith of love emerged – a God who cherished and saved and forgave all.

So, what kind of note can we write and place in the mailbox of another? I pull from a Unitarian Universalist publication the words of author Marianne Williamson. “Until we see love as the meaning of life, life seems to have no meaning at all. The sense of meaninglessness produces chaos, and the chaos produces fear. There is only one way out of this, and that is to see every moment and every situation as an invitation to love.”⁶ Love is the meaning of life; love is the meaning of our faith. We are blessed with the gift of life to love all of that which we hold sacred, to love the natural world that all that she has offered us, budding flowers and setting sun; colors and scents and textures; We are blessed to love each being in this finite realm no matter their transgressions, no matter whether or not we will ever even meet them. We are blessed to love and hold compassion for our always imperfect selves, and for all of this to foster gratitude and joy for this one wild and precious life. We are provided an opportunity to worship and offer devotion for all that is holy as we connect to what is sacred and faithful. We are offered, from moment to sacred moment, an opportunity to celebrate intimate companionship with one’s cherished companions. What could offer us meaning if not for this love? May we ask God, Great Mystery, Spirit of Life, why are we here, together, on this imperfect, messy, beautiful earth? We are here simply to love, and to be loved in return. To welcome each blessed being fully into our lives. That is our purpose. No to love easily, but deeply, as we traverse, together, the inevitable joys and sorrows of life. So may we write on that card, simply, “I love you. Join me. Come be a part of my life.”

Love is a practice, an intentional way of being. Let me return to teachings of the nun clad in simple, orange robes. In the Buddhist faith love and spiritual teachings are intertwined in each mundane action and each irritating experience of daily life. We find these in traffic as we are

⁶ From *Soul Matters Worship Resources 2024-2025*

the first one stopped at a red light we were anxious to get through, offering gratitude and thanks that the car ahead of us was able to pass through. If we find ourselves in a long, slow line and are simultaneously in a hurry, while we anxiously grasp our bag of groceries, we can use the experience as a blessed opportunity to engage in the sacred practice of patience.⁷ May love infiltrate each moment of each of our days. With love comes welcome. Deep, unconditional, sacred welcome.

Invitation is the spoken word poised on our lips stemming from our very hearts: You are welcome here; you are a blessed and holy being. May I welcome you into my life, my family, my place of worship. It is centered in our Unitarian Universalist faith: above all else, you are invited to a life of love – of love and beauty and compassion. And so, we work to cultivate this practice in each of our days. For deep within, the meaning of life is simply and profoundly this: to love, and as such, to welcome. So may we love and may we be loved in return. Each blessed being, each blessed day. May each being know: you are beautiful and beloved, and you are welcome here.

May it be so, and Amen

⁷ Gen Chogden