

“How We See Each Other”
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of South County
Rev Denis Paul with Penny Hall
October 6, 2024

Blurb

We can't always trust what we see. Just ask a rare individual living with prosopometamorphopsia

Order of Service

Sounding the Chime

Welcome and Announcements Penny Hall

Opening Hymn *52 In Sweet Fields of Autumn*

Chalice Lighting Rev. Denis Paul
“Listen,” by Jessica Purple Rodela

Opening Words

Reciting the Covenant Together

*Love is the spirit of this congregation,
And service is its prayer.
This is our great covenant:
To dwell together in peace,
To seek the truth in love,
And to help one another.*

Story for All Ages “The True Story of the Three Pigs,” By Jon Scieszka

Joys and Concerns

Responsive Prayer

“A Litany of Atonement,” by Rev. Rob Eller-Isaacs

Hymn *1012 When I Am Frightened*

Offering

Today's offering will be split with habitat for Humanity South County. All plate cash will go towards the total to be shared. If you wish to contribute by check, please make check payable to UUCSC and put "Shared Collection" in the memo line.

Offertory Waltz in Db, Op. 64, No. 1, "Minute", Frédéric Chopin

Sermon "How We see Each Other," Rev. Denis Paul

Hymn 131 *Love Will Guide Us*

Closing Words By Lauralyn Bellamy

Extinguishing the Chalice

We extinguish this chalice, but not its light that we take with us, out into the world, sharing it with those we encounter on our journey.

Closing Song

Carry the flame of peace and love, until we meet again (3x)

Script

Sounding the Chime

Welcome and Announcements Penny Hall

Welcome to the worship service of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of South County. I am Penny Hall, and

Before we begin, I'm required to point out in the event of an emergency you should exit quickly. You can go out the way you came in, behind the pulpit or down the hall and to the left.

In an effort to keep everyone healthy, we are mask friendly. We ask that if you see someone wearing a mask, you give them a little extra space, and if you aren't feeling well, please stay home and join us by Zoom.

This is a sacred time in the week. A time to slow down, to break from the distractions fighting for our attention so that we may just be together celebrating our blessings and naming our challenges. So, let's all take a moment now to turn off or silence our cell phones.

[Pause. Breathe a second]

Whether you're with us here in the sanctuary, or you're joining us via Zoom, thank you for being in this congregation of like-hearted individuals, dedicated to welcoming, loving, growing spiritually, and seeking justice.

Together, we celebrate joys and sit in sadness in our fullness of being. However you express your values, your identity and your affections, you are welcome to journey with us.

I'd like to invite this morning's congregational greeters to rise so that everyone can see who you are.

If there are newcomers in the sanctuary this morning, please fill out the yellow Welcome Card in your hymnal, and put it in the collection basket during the offering. Or, you may want to give it to one of these wonderful greeters before you leave. They can answer any questions you have.

If you're so inclined, feel free to introduce yourself during the part of the service we call Joys and Concerns.

Newcomers on Zoom, I'd like to invite you to introduce yourself to other participants, especially our wonderful virtual usher, Mary Fulton.

Before we get started, I have these announcements.

The Women of Wisdom will be gathering tomorrow for lunch at the Mariner Grill at **12:30**. All Women are welcome.

Rev Denis will be offering the last of his "What We Do" class on Tuesday at 7pm, looking at our UU Holidays and Celebrations. If you're curious about Chalice Days, the Water Communion, or Flower Communion, even if you haven't been to the preceding classes, you're free to join us in the sanctuary or by Zoom.

Please rise now, in body or in spirit, for our opening hymn, #52 in the gray hymnal, In Sweet Fields of Autumn.

Opening Hymn *52 In Sweet Fields of Autumn*

In sweet fields of autumn the gold grain is falling
the white clouds drift lonely, the wild swan is calling.
Alas for the daises, the tall fern and grasses,
When wind-sweep and rainfall fill low-lands and passes.

The snows of December shall fill windy hollow;
The bleak rain trails after, and March wind shall follow.
The deer through the valleys leave print of their going;

And diamonds of sleet mark the ridges of snowing.

The stillness of death shall stoop over the water,
The plover sweep low where the pale streamlets falter;
But deep in the earth clod the black seed is living;
When spring sounds her bugles for rousing and giving.

Chalice Lighting Rev. Denis Paul

The Chalice symbolizes the covenant we renew each time we gather. The Flame symbolizes our shared search for truth, reason and meaning. Bringing them together in this weekly ritual helps us mark this time as cherished and special.

_____, would you light the flame in the chalice for us? As I share a prayer called "Listen," by Jessica Purple Rodela

Listen. Listen to silence. Listen to the wind. Listen to the stars.
Hear trees.
Dance.
Dance to the beat of your neighbor's heart.
Dance to the rhythm of your childhood dreams.
Sing.
Sing and hum a wordless song to the tune of your rushing blood.
And Pray.
Pray with a fever that makes you sweat through February snow;
Pray with a fervor that gives you chills in July.
Shout your prayer like a howl—
Howl 'til the sound of your soul touches clouds
And haunts the moon—
Come, let us howl our hallelujahs,
Come, let us pray and sing and celebrate.
Come, let us worship together.

Opening Words Rev Denis

On the surface, shouting prayers and howling hallelujahs doesn't sound very Unitarian Universalist, does it?

But prayer doesn't have to be directed to a deity. At their core, prayers are expressions of our deepest hopes, dreams, fears and plans. Speaking them — aloud or silently — is the beginning of the process of bringing them to life or finding the tools to deal with or accept them.

And Hallelujah is an expression of joy, gratitude, or even praise for what is. Shouting it is a way to energetically let remind ourselves and let our neighbors know the power in our positivity.

We all do that, every time we gather, so actually shouting prayers and howling hallelujahs is VERY UU, even if you choose to use different words.

This morning we gather in the midst of the Jewish High Holy Days, 30 days from elections, to be mindful of the way we see ourselves, our family and friends, our neighbors, and even ourselves. The ways in which we see ourselves individually and collectively at all levels, including the national level.

Our artwork for this month, whose theme is “the practice of deep listening,” was completed by Parbara Pagh, Linda Whyte Burrell, and Cathy Solomon, as a reminder that our values as a nation are woven into the fabric of our lives and our congregation.

And those same values are also the core of our congregational covenant, the promise we make to each other and renew each Sunday.

Reciting the Covenant Together Rev Denis

Please rise now, as you are willing and able, to recite together the covenant, which you can find printed in the order of service.

*Love is the spirit of this congregation,
And service is its prayer.
This is our great covenant:
To dwell together in peace,
To seek the truth in love,
And to help one another.*

Story for All Ages “The True Story of the Three Pigs,” By Jon Scieszka

Everybody knows the story of the Three Little pigs. Or at least they think they do. But I’ll let you in on a little secret. Nobody knows the real story because nobody has ever heard my side of the story.

I’m the Wolf. Alexander T. Wolf. You can call me Al. I don’t know how this whole big, bad wolf thing got started, but it’s all wrong.

Maybe it’s because of our diet. Hey, it’s not my fault wolves eat cute little animals like bunnies and sheep and pigs. That’s just the way we are. If cheeseburgers were cute, folks would probably think you were Big and Bad, too.

But, like I was saying, the whole big bad wolf thing is all wrong. The real story is about a sneeze and a cup of sugar.

Way back in Once Upon A Time time, I was making a birthday cake for my dear old granny. I had a terrible cold. I ran out of sugar.

So I walked down the street to ask my neighbor for a cup of sugar. Now this neighbor was a pig. And he wasn't too bright, either. He had built his whole house out of straw. Can you believe it? I mean, who would build a whole house out of straw?

So, of course the minute I knocked on the door, it feel right in. I didn't want the just walk into someone else's house, so I called, "Little pig, little pig, are you in?"

No answer. I was just about to go home without a cup of sugar for my dear old granny's birthday cake, and that's when my nose started to itch. I felt a sneeze coming on. Well, I huffed. And I snuffed. And sneezed a great sneeze. And you know what? That whole straw house fell down. And right in the middle of the pile of straw was the first little pig – dead as a doornail. He had been home the whole time.

It seemed like a shame to leave a perfectly good ham dinner lying there in the straw. So I ate it up. Think of it as a big cheeseburger just lying there.

I was feeling a little better, But I still didn't have my cup of sugar. So I went to the next neighbor's house. This neighbor was the first little pig's brother. He was a little smarter, but not much. He built his house of sticks.

I rang the bell on the stick house. Nobody answered. I called "Mr. Pig, Mr Pig, are you in?"

He yelled back, "Go away, wolf. You can't come in. I'm shaving the hairs on my chinny chin chin."

I had just grabbed the doorknob when I felt another sneeze coming on. I huffed. And I snuffed, and I tried to cover my mouth, but I sneezed a great sneeze. And you're not going to believe it, but this guy's house fell down, just like his brother's. When the dust had cleared, there was the second little pig – dead as a doornail.

Wolf's honor.

Now, you know, food will spoil if you just leave it out in the open. So I did the only thing there was to do. I had dinner. Think of it as helping. I was getting awfully full, and I still didn't have that cup of sugar for my dear old granny's birthday cake. So, I went to the next house. This guy was the first and second pig's brother. He must have been the brains of the family. He had built his house of bricks.

I knocked on the brick house. No answer. I called, "Mr. Pig, Mr. Pig, are you in?" And do you know how that rude little porker answered?

“Get out of here, wolf. Don’t bother me again.”

He probably had a whole sack full of sugar, but he wouldn’t give me one cup for my granny’s birthday cake. I was just about to go home and maybe make a nice card instead of a cake, when I huffed. And I snuffed. And I sneezed again.

The pig yelled “Your granny can go sit on a pin.”

No, I’m usually pretty calm, but when somebody talks about my granny like that I go crazy. When the cops drove up, I was trying to break down the pig’s door, the whole time huffing and snuffing and making a big scene.

The news reporters found out about the two pigs I had for dinner. They figured a sick guy trying to borrow sugar wasn’t very exciting, so they jazzed up the story with all that “Huff and puff and blow your house down” stuff.

I was framed.

But maybe you could loan me a cup of sugar.

Joys and Concerns Rev Denis

[Move Camera to altar]

Our covenant is a serious commitment. After we renew that covenant, we make good on our promise to dwell together in peace and to help one another by listening to one another’s joys and concerns, the important milestones in our lives. We honor one another by sharing briefly, honoring the privacy of others, and refraining from making announcements.

Folks in the sanctuary, please come up to our altar to the elements, tell us your name, and share using a clear, audible voice. If you cannot come up, raise your hand so I can bring you the microphone.

Folks on zoom, please share using the chat function so I can read it to everyone.

Who would like to begin?

[J+C. Offer Mic. Read Chat]

On Thursday, Lee and her family lost a dear friend to cancer. Kate was in her early 40s and leaves behind twin daughters, Amaranta and Amouk, age 5.

Tomorrow will mark one year since the terrorist attack by Hamas on Israel. We remember the hostages are still being held by Hamas, the 42,511 dead Gazans, and 1,139 Israelis as the conflict spreads into Lebanon where the death toll is now over 2,000.

I place this stone in the water for everyone who has been affected by hurricane Helene. For the 228 dead so far, those whose remains have not been found, and tens of thousands of people who have had their homes or businesses destroyed by the epic storm.

In the week ending Friday, there were only mass shootings in the United States, resulting in 17 injuries and 5 deaths, including:

Dee Monte Pernell Chase, 27

Ammorrion R. Harris, 21

2 adult men, whose names have not yet been released

and one teenager, about whom no information is known

In the two years I have been tracking events and names, this is the first time we've gone four consecutive days without a mass shooting. May we have the fortitude to create the change that ends gun violence.

This final stone is for all the joys and concerns that remain unshared, and for those among us who are — for countless valid reasons — disinclined to speak aloud.

[Return camera to pulpit]

Responsive Prayer Penny Hall

Rather than sharing a prayer now with the expectation that you all will be passive consumers, I'd like to invite you into a radical act of collective consciousness, by engaging in a responsive prayer, written by UU minister, the late Rob Eller-Isaacs.

After each line I speak, please respond with the words "We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love."

For remaining silent when a single voice would have made a difference

We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

For each time that our fears have made us rigid and inaccessible

We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

For each time that we have struck out in anger without just cause

We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

For each time that our greed has blinded us to the needs of others
We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

For the selfishness which sets us apart and alone
We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

For falling short of the admonitions of the spirit
We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

For losing sight of our unity
We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

For those and for so many acts both evident and subtle which have fueled the illusion of
separateness
We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

Please rise now, as you are able, for #1020 in the hymnal, When I Am Frightened.

Hymn 1012 *When I Am Frightened*

When I am frightened, will you reassure me?
When I am certain, will you hold my hand?
Will you be strong for me? Song to me Quietly?
Will you share some of your stories with me?
If you will show me compassion,
Then I may learn to care as you do
Then I may learn to care.

When I am angry, will you still embrace me?
When I am thoughtless, will you understand?
Will you believe in me? Stand by me willingly?
Will you share some of your questions with me?
If you will show me acceptance,
Then I may learn to give as you do
Then I may learn to give.

When I am troubled, will you listen to me?
When I am lonely, will you be my friend?
Will you be there for me? Comfort me tenderly?
Will you share some of your feelings with me?
If you will show me commitment,
Then I may learn to love as you do

Then I may learn to love.

Offering Rev Denis

Once again, we'll be sharing this morning's offering with the Womxn Project.

To build a more just and equitable Rhode Island and amplifying important issues, they've used what they call "artivism."

Art is their tool for expression as they combine the creativity and emotional impact of the arts with strategies of activism. They seek to empower feminists of all genders through their events and programming.

The Womxn Project has put up billboards and projected images onto the state house and historical landmarks. They distributed lawn signs reading "hate has no place here," to act as beacons of safety and acceptance throughout our communities for those who need protection.

This past Spring, they created the "Empowered to Advocate" series, teaching participants to promote public policies supportive of trans, nonbinary, and gender diverse people in their local communities, and at the state level.

On June 1st they launched a new campaign called "Bodily Freedom Forever," running through the November election. The campaign has two goals: to empower people to make their own choices free of judgment of harassment, and to report on the voting records of candidates regarding reproductive freedom.

The Womxn Project is nothing less than a band of super heroes.

Today's offering will be split with The Womxn Project's Education Fund. All plate cash will go towards the total to be shared. If you wish to contribute by check, please make your check payable to UUCSC and put "Shared Collection" in the memo line.

Offertory Waltz in Db, Op. 64, No. 1, "Minute", Frédéric Chopin

Gratitude Rev Denis

Thank you for listening. Deeply and actively.

Thank you for sharing your vulnerability, your hopes and fears. Deeply and actively.

And thank you for giving these hard-earned financial resources. Deeply and actively.

You, your presence and your gracious abundance are all appreciated by your board, your finance committee and your staff.

Sermon "How We see Each Other," Rev. Denis Paul

A couple months ago I read an article by science journalist Shayla Love called “How a Rare Disorder Makes People See Monsters.”

It's estimated that as much as 2% of humans have difficulty distinguishing faces, to varying degrees. Scientists call the condition prosopagnosia. At one end of the spectrum maybe all people with dark hair, or people of the same height all look alike. At the other end of the spectrum, people are completely indistinguishable, so that a person with prosopagnosia can't tell the difference between a random stranger and their own mother. They could be completely different from each other. Different shapes and sizes, different skin or hair color. Everyone's indistinguishable.

There's a rare variation of the condition called prosopometamorphopsia, PMO for ease.

PMO is usually caused by a traumatic brain injury, which can take years to manifest. When a person with PMO first looks at someone, they see reality. They see what most of the rest of us see.

But after a couple minutes, or even a couple seconds in extreme cases, their brains change what they think they see. Usually only one side of the face will morph visually into something distorted, even monstrous. Some of the interviewees in the article talked about how shocking it was the first time it happened to them, watching the faces of loved ones appear to slowly melt on one side.

There is no cure, no treatment. Most deal with the condition by not looking directly at people.

Many people living with the condition talk about how easy it would be to mistake PMO for some kind of religious vision. In history, when many believed that monsters and shape-shifters roamed among us, perpetrating evil, a person with PMO could have mistaken their neurological condition for special *insight* into the true nature of people. A horrible gift.

With an understanding of the workings of the human nervous system, and the extreme rarity of the condition, it makes sense someone might have such a delusion. We all want to see people as they truly are.

Especially when they aren't very nice.

Do you remember what happened in Charlottesville, Virginia in August of 2017?

In a rally they called “Unite the Right,” bearing guns, torches, confederate flags and Nazi gear, white nationalists descended on the campus of the University of Virginia, chanting horrible things like

You will not replace us

Blood and Soil
Russia is our friend
Hail Trump

They beat pro-democracy protestors with batons, and one of them gunned his muscle car into the crowd, killing 32 year old Heather Heyer.

People were shocked by the incident. It seemed like it came out of left field for a lot of folks.

But what shocked me was the number of people I heard say things along the lines of “those men all looked so clean cut and handsome. I wouldn’t expect them to behave like that.” And I heard that a lot!

Phew.

There is so much there to unpack I can’t even begin to get to it all.

But making that observation says a lot about the advantages we afford to attractive people. It’s weird. And weirder still, I think we sometimes kind of expect pretty people to be able to recognize the privileges that come with being attractive.

Weirder still is that somehow we expect “bad” people to LOOK bad. It’s like we believe the hatred that lives in a person’s heart to be embodied in their faces. Like, a guy chanting Nazi hate slogans is supposed to look like an evil cartoon character with a big warty crooked noses, permanent scowls, maybe even horns or forked tails. At the very least, the bad people should be covered with scary tattoos, especially on their faces, and dressed in black.

It’s like they’re not supposed to have neat haircuts. They’re not supposed to be wearing crisp khakis and pressed white dress shirts. We forget that SS soldiers looked and dressed like that.

We want people who behave badly to look like pointy-headed cretins. Because that would make it so much easier. It puts all of the blame of our social ills on them, and removes responsibility from ourselves.

And the reality is that when we hear about behavior we find abhorrent, we tend to rely on old stereotypes. We imagine people looking menacing, with tats, broken teeth, dirty clothes. The problem with that is that it “otherizes” people. It makes them something other than “us”. In extreme cases, it makes them something other than human.

There’s a lot of that going around.

The right sees the left as agents of Satan, working against the laws of God for their own good. I have been called, directly and indirectly, a baby-killer, a sex trafficker, a satan worshiper, and a perpetrator trying to turn boys into girls.

And the left sees the right as hate-filled, unable to abide anyone or anything different from themselves, willfully ignorant, threatened by the very existence of human diversity of identity and need. They're called narcissists, monsters, and of course perpetrators against women, queer people, immigrants and the poor.

Most of our perceptions are born out of fear. What if THEY win? What if THEY have control? The stakes these days are high.

No wonder so many people were surprised that the Unite the Right guys were so clean cut.

So we *all* tend to see "others" — especially when we don't like their beliefs — as a kind of monster. I know when I see a lawn filled with political signs that are the opposite of my beliefs, I'm surprised when I see a grandmotherly type outside tending to her flowers. Even though I know better.

It wasn't always like that.

Jimmy Carter, the 39th President of the United States, turned 100 on Tuesday, making him the longest-lived President in US history. I heard and read a few news stories about him and the occasion. While everyone was singing his praises, what stood out to me is that he was universally loved and respected. People talked about his humility, compassion, reliability. Even people who didn't vote for him then. And people who identify as conservatives now.

Everyone agrees that as president he had a monumental job, with record breaking inflation, especially fuel prices (which makes our current situation look minor). While Vietnam was falling apart in the aftermath of our war, conflict escalated in the Middle East. American hostages were taken in Iran. We were still adjusting to the aftermath of Watergate. It was the beginning of the downward spiral of confidence in the presidency and our government in general.

Jimmy Carter feels unique among the politicians of today, who seem eager to lie to get their way or to simply "make a point." He is different from politicians who share anecdotes from their own lives in order to deflect attention away from the issues that affect their "relatability." He is different from politicians who treat each other like monsters.

What makes Jimmy Carter stand out still is his capacity for self reflection. Even when it hurt his electability, he was honest about his shortcomings, his prejudices, and even his self-doubt. He had a capacity for public atonement.

This week, Jews here and around the world celebrated the new year 5785, during the High Holy days, which began Wednesday night with Rosh Hashanah, continuing through Yom Kippur and Sukkot, ending with Simchat Torah.

The High Holy Days aren't about celebrating so much as they are about atoning. Traditionally the focus of the time is on acknowledging one's own shortcomings, failures or sins, and repenting

for them. More liberal or progressive denominations of Judaism focus on setting intentions for the new year ahead with the hopes of doing better. My feeling — and this is JUST a feeling — is that most Jews to varying degrees probably do a little of both: atoning and looking ahead. After all, how can anyone set meaningful intentions without looking back and determining what could have been done differently? And if we just atone without setting an intention to do better, then repenting can be an empty, symbolic gesture.

Like the wolf in the story I told earlier.

You know, the first time I told that story was way back in 2014. I told it to a group of children as part of a service about the death penalty and the industrial prison complex. The lessons that I got from it then were different: There are two sides to every story, and nobody should ever be judged solely on the worst thing they've ever done, because there is good in all of us. Even when it's hard to find.

That seems so naive now. The wolf doesn't seem like a regular guy without the skills of self reflection. He seems like a metaphor for all the despotic leaders of the world, people against each other the people he's supposed to be leading, dehumanizing those he considers his enemies, dragging his country into a war they don't want to fight, while claiming to be the victim himself.

Let me be really clear about this: Vladimir Putin, Benjamin Netanyahu and Donald Trump and other leaders ALL have a lot of blood on their hands, and no apparent ability for self-reflection or atonement for their sins against humanity in the name of their political agendas. They don't represent their people, as we all hold ourselves and each other accountable for ordinary sins, the regular shortcomings that are the result of human frailty. We atone while they continue as they are.

But there are two lessons from that story that I still take away from the story of the wolf.

First, it's too easy to see others as bad, inexcusable monsters; while we justify our own bad behaviors as unavoidable, natural, or outside of our own control.

The second lesson is that explaining our behaviors without acknowledging our own failures and making a concerted effort to change them, is just a bunch of empty words. And exactly the thing that makes others see US as monsters.

You know, all of the interviewees in that article about PMO said the same thing in different words. They all WISH they could see people as they are. Not as distortions. There's nothing they or their doctors can do to change their neurology. But for most of us, our perceptions are mutable. We have the power to change them. And most of the time, it starts by looking within ourselves. Honestly.

As we move closer to the election that promises to affect the future of not only our nation but Democracy itself, may we all engage in a little self reflection honesty, and use our experience to set our intentions for moving forward toward the global community we want to live in.

Our honesty with ourselves, our desire to see one another as we are is what will save us in the long run. Even when our leaders fail us.

Please rise now, and remain standing if you can, through the end of the service. And open your hearts to #131, Love Will Guide Us.

Hymn 131 *Love Will Guide Us*

Love will guide us, peace has tried us,
Hope inside us, will lead the way,
On the road from greed to giving,
Love will guide us, through the hard night.

If you cannot sing like angels,
If you cannot speak before thousands,
You can give from deep within you,
You can change the world with your love.

Love will guide us, peace has tried us,
Hope inside us, will lead the way,
On the road from greed to giving,
Love will guide us, through the hard night.

Closing Words Penny Hall

Our closing words this morning are by Lauralyn Bellamy
If, here, you have found freedom,
Take it with you into the world.

If you have found comfort,
Go and share it with others.

If you have dreamed dreams,
Help one another,
That they may come true.

If you have known love,
Give some back
To a bruised and hurting world.

Go in peace.

Extinguishing the Chalice Rev Denis

We extinguish this chalice, but not its light that we take with us, out into the world, sharing it with those we encounter on our journey.

Closing Song Rev Denis

Carry the flame of peace and love, until we meet again (3x)