

“Les Oubliettes”
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of South County
Rev Denis Paul
October 13, 2024

Blurb

The little things we forget can say as much about us as the big things we remember.

Order of Service

Sounding the Chime

Welcome and Announcements Rev Denis Paul

Opening Hymn 331 Life is the Greatest Gift of All

Chalice Lighting

The words of John Welwood.

Opening Words

“Forgetfulness,” by Billy Collins

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.

Joys and Concerns

Prayer

From *Unfolding Light*, by Steve Garnaas-Holmes

Offering

Offertory Let the River Run, Carly Simon, arr. Craig Johnson

Story “Souvenir”

Hymn 191 Now I Recall My Childhood

Sermon “Les Oubliettes,” Rev. Denis Paul

Hymn 1028 The Fire of Commitment

Closing Words

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

Welcome to the worship service of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of South County. I am....

Before we begin, we're 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.

Do we have any newcomers in the sanctuary this morning?
[If there are newcomers]

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 fabulous virtual usher, _____.

Before we get started, I have a few announcements.

On November 10, the Religious Education Program will host Wunder Days, a mini version of the Wunder Academy of Metamorphosis, with food, games and activities. If you haven't been involved, this will be a chance to get a glimpse at the program you've heard so much about, and to experience its culture of awe and transformation.

Chalice Days are just around the corner. During the first week of December we celebrate the values represented by our chalice. On November 24 we'll build a big lighted seven-pointed star for the sanctuary, and on other Sundays we'll have other activities like making chalices and paper flowers to celebrate. This is the time to start nurturing narcissus so that they will be blooming for the festivities. During that week, we'll have a congregational dinner on Tuesday, December 6. So get ready for the fun and sharing traditions.

Russell re: fire drill at end of service

Opening Hymn 331 Life is the Greatest Gift of All

Life is the greatest gift of all the riches on this earth;

Life and its creatures, great and small, of high and lowly birth:

So treasure it and measure it with deeds of shining worth.

Mind is the brightest gift of all, its thought no barrier mars;
It seeks creation's hidden plan, its quest surmounts all bars;
It reins the wind, it chains the storm, it weighs the outmost stars.

We are of life, its shining gift, the measure of all things;
Up from the dust our temples lift, our visions soars on wings;
For seed and root, for flower and fruit, our grateful spirit sings.

Chalice Lighting

_____, would you do us the honor of lighting our chalice,
our sacred symbol commitment and promise? As you light, I will share the words of John
Welwood.

Forget about enlightenment.
Sit down wherever you are
And listen to the wind singing in your veins.
Feel the love, the longing, the fear in your bones.
Open your heart to who you are, right now,
Not who you would like to be,
Not the saint you are striving to become,
But the being right here before you, inside you, around you.

All of you is holy.

You are already more and less
Than whatever you can know.
Breathe out,
Touch in,
Let go.

Opening Words (Rev Denis)

I'd like to share with you now a poem by Billy Collins, who has been called the most popular
Poet Laureate of the United States. Ever. I can't even imagine how many people he has
introduced to poetry as a new love.

This is called "Forgetfulness."

The name of the author is the first to go
followed obediently by the title, the plot,
the heartbreaking conclusion, the entire novel
which suddenly becomes one you have never read, never even heard of,

as if, one by one, the memories you used to harbor
decided to retire to the southern hemisphere of the brain,
to a little fishing village where there are no phones.

Long ago you kissed the names of the nine muses goodbye
and watched the quadratic equation pack its bag,
and even now as you memorize the order of the planets,

something else is slipping away, a state flower perhaps,
the address of an uncle, the capital of Paraguay.

Whatever it is you are struggling to remember,
it is not poised on the tip of your tongue
or even lurking in some obscure corner of your spleen.

It has floated away down a dark mythological river
whose name begins with an L as far as you can recall
well on your own way to oblivion where you will join those
who have even forgotten how to swim and how to ride a bicycle.

No wonder you rise in the middle of the night
to look up the date of a famous battle in a book on war.
No wonder the moon in the window seems to have drifted
out of a love poem that you used to know by heart.

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.

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]

I place this stone in the water for everyone who has been affected by hurricanes Helene and Milton and the tornadoes that hit St. Lucie, Florida in the aftermath, as the death toll rises and millions are homeless or without power.

Last week, I announced my amazement at having only five mass shootings in the United States. This week, there were only THREE, resulting in 14 injuries and only one death:
18-year old Joseph Steven Padilla

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.

Prayer

Yom Kippur, the Jewish day of atonement has just passed, and tomorrow is Indigenous People's Day, so I would like to share this prayer from a book called *Unfolding Light*, by Steve Garnaas-Holmes

Creator of the Many and the One:
we are all here, we and our siblings,
and we ask your blessing on us all,
especially the ones we have tried to dominate,
the ones whose land we have taken,
the Wabanaki, the Cherokee, the Shoshone....
We have tried to eliminate them,
the Pawnee, the Assiniboine, the Salish....
but they are here;

we are here together in the land.
Our siblings have not rebelled against us,
but they are with us in peace,
the Tlingit, the Inupiat, the Hopi....
They have stewarded the land for ages,
the Maya, the Tekoha, the Massai...
and they are here, teaching us.
They have honored their wisdom
and passed it on for generations,
the Cree, the Lakota, the Seminole...
and we would learn from them.
Bless our siblings of the earth,
the Wiradjuri, the Maori, the Sami...
and move us toward humility and reconciliation,
to learn, to make reparations, to work together.
Move us toward mutual respect,
and restore among us the harmony
of siblings in one beautiful home.
[May our] Manyness and make us One.

May it be so.

[Return camera to pulpit]

Offering

The strongman at a circus squeezed the juice from a lemon between his hands. He then said to the audience, "I have \$200 for anyone who can squeeze another drop from this lemon."

Mary Alice stepped forward, picked up the lemon, strained hard and managed to get one last drop.

The strongman was amazed.

He paid Mary Alice and asked, "What's your secret?"

"Practice," I've been the treasurer of my congregation for years."

Okay, that didn't really happen. But. Mary Alice and I share the belief that everything we need to consume our mission is right here among us, and even though we can count on you for support, we still do everything we can to make the most of what we have.

So this morning, please be strong, and offer what you can so that we can make the most of it.

Offertory Let the River Run, Carly Simon, arr. Craig Johnson

Gratitude

For remembering what is important, even when there is so much on your minds, thank you.

Your gifts — all of your gifts — will be used with care to support the mission of this community of faith in humanity.

Story "Souvenir" (Rev Denis)

A two sentence interaction between two characters in a Pedro Almodvar film from 25 years ago called *All About My Mother* has stuck with me all these years. I wrote this story based on those two lines.

They loved their Bichon Frisé.

George, a retired truck driver, never thought he'd be the kind of guy to fall in love with a little white dog that looked like it had been fluffed up by a blow dryer. But Souvenir wasn't fragile at all. She had a solid build. She was no German Shepherd of course, but she wasn't a shivering, yappy teacup dog, either. She was big for her breed, a muscular 13 pounds. And feisty.

The Bichon is a French breed, so he and Michelle wanted to give her a French name. They found her on vacation eight years earlier, while staying in an airbnb on the outskirts of Nashville. She'd been abandoned, her hair matted, one eye clamped shut from an infection. She timidly approached the porch of their little guest cottage to beg food, and after a few scraps of steak, she let George pick her up. Her ribs and spine stood out prominently.

George and Michelle were legally required to make an effort to find her home, but figured if the owners couldn't be bothered to keep her safe, they didn't deserve her. So the couple took her home, a memento of their vacation, more valuable and certainly more lovable than any trinket.

Souvenir loved her daily walks. As George fixed his coffee and put on his shoes, she'd sit by the door, trembling with anticipation. When he'd approach with the leash she'd start jumping, then become as still as a statue as he clipped it on.

Everyday they walked the grid of streets a little differently, always passing the cafe on the corner called “Les Oubliettes,” where the manager would be setting out tables and chairs on the sidewalk. He always had a treat for Souvenir.

Michelle liked to joke that the dog and cafe complemented one another. In French, souvenir means “to remember,” and “les oubliettes” are little things forgotten. If one ceased to exist, the other would just ... disappear.

This morning, George was enjoying the weather, marveling at the beauty of the occasional aspen, golden among the dominant oaks, their leaves brown and brittle under his feet. He smiled to himself as he took in the familiar smell of wood burning nearby, the smoke and chill bracing his lungs. Fall had always been his favorite time of year, but he knew winter was coming too fast, and might kill some of his shrubs.

Souvenir, not surprisingly, was smelling everything, even though she knew she wouldn't be allowed to stop.

This morning, they went further than usual. She always knew exactly where they were because of the smell. Even when George walked ten miles from home, even if she didn't know the neighborhood from memory, she would pick up a scent a mile or so away, in the direction of home, and from there she'd pick up another scent. She always knew which direction home was located.

George just wandered amiably, glad in the moment.

They turned the corner onto their street and Souvenir began tugging. As they approached home, Michelle and Jeanette were waiting. Jeanette removed her hands from her hips to hug George.

“I'm sorry,” he said with as much charm as he could muster. He didn't want to offend the young woman. She was quite pretty, and reminded him of someone. “Have we met?”

“Of course we have, Dad! I'm your daughter,” she reminded him, as she did every time she saw him in the last few months.

He smiled in kind — but patronizing — disbelief, as if she were the only one not to know she had lost her mind. He went inside to inside to feed the dog.

“Mom, how could you let them wander off like that? They could get lost.”

Michelle sighed. “Your father may not remember where he lives, but Souvenir always brings him home.”

Hymn 191 Now I Recall My Childhood

Now I recall my childhood when the sun
burst to my bedside with the day's surprise;
faith in the marvelous bloomed anew each dawn,
flowers bursting fresh within my heart each day.

Then looking on the world with simple joy,
on insects, birds, and beasts, and common weeds,
the grass and clouds had fullest wealth of awe;
my mother's voice gave meaning to the stars.

Now when I turn to think of coming death,
I find life's song in starsongs of the night,
in rise of curtains and new morning light,
in life reborn in fresh surprise of love.

Sermon "Les Oubliettes," Rev. Denis Paul

Sermon "Les Oubliettes" Rev. Denis Letourneau Paul

This really did happen.

A few years ago, Joe, my uncle Luc and I were riding through Montreal on electric scooters, and passed a bistro called "Les Oubliettes."

I know the verb oublier means "to forget." And I know that any noun ending with "-ette" conveys that the thing is small or diminutive. It's often used as a term of endearment. It's kind of like ending a noun with "-ita" or "-ito" Spanish.

So, oubliettes is a verb with a noun ending, which made it really interesting to me. Kind of poetic, maybe even a bit romantic. I figured it had to do with the precious little things that we forget, the things that may not be in our conscious minds, but still with us in our lives, in our beings, in our cells.

Then I thought, maybe it's slang for something else that I'm not getting.

Even though my uncle is 20 years older than I, and very formal in his speech, as a local he's got to be more connected to slang than I am, so, in my curiosity, I pulled up alongside Luc and asked "Mon Oncle, qu'est-que ces, les oubliettes?"

He did the most French thing I've ever seen him do. [shrug. Make that face]

He stared at me blankly. "I don't know what you mean."

I described to him the bistro we passed. He talked through the etymological process I'd just gone through mentally and confirmed my rationale.

"So, they made up the word?" I asked. "That's very poetic."

He responded "no, I suppose it's a real word, just not one I've ever heard. It sounded funny when you asked."

That evening, Joe showed me an internet meme, a 1980's picture of a kid holding a 16" square sheet of metal with the words "hall pass" painted on it.

We'd both forgotten about hall passes completely, and suddenly I remembered a teacher in junior high who used a tree stump as a hall pass. It was so large you'd occasionally see some poor tiny 7th grade girl sitting on it, exhausted. I laughed out loud.

It was a precious little memory that brought me joy in that moment. *Une oubliette*, I thought.

There are many little things we remember for decades.

A first kiss.

The name of a favorite teacher.

The name of the street you grew up on.

Your first car.

The pet names your parents had for each other.

The best meal, or bottle of wine, or chocolate lava cake you ever had.

These are the kinds of memories that never stop giving pleasure.

But there's something really poetic about the little things we forget, then remember again.

We never really worry about missing them because we don't know we've forgotten them, so when they come back to us, like the memory of a girl sitting on a log in a school corridor, they are somehow better than they were in the moment they happened.

They're wistful.

Poignant.

Even romantic.

Probably the best kind of oubliette is a smell, because our most intense memories are olfactory. Like, a few weeks ago I saw a painting of a PlayDoh can, and even though I hadn't thought about that stuff in forever, the scent — that wasn't even present — came back to me so strongly I could taste it. And I was transported to kindergarten and Miss Chamberlain who returned from the holidays with a new hairstyle and a new last name. A name I can't for the life of me remember. I didn't want to remember it then.

Some things, of course, we try to forget. Maybe we even convince ourselves we have forgotten. Bad break ups.

Ugly fights at work.
Acts of violence perpetrated against us or people we love.
Military battle.
Illness.
The pain of giving birth.
The endless stream of mass shootings.

Lies told by people we should be able to trust. Which bring up the real meaning of the word oubliette. It turns out that les oubliettes aren't precious little forgotten things at all. I looked it up shortly after Joe showed me the hall pass picture.

It's a prison cell. A very specific kind of prison cell actually, a dark subterranean dungeon meant for solitary confinement. In the medieval period oubliettes were just basements in the castles of Europe, but during the Renaissance they were used for torture, the kind of torture usually reserved for religious heretics.

Cartographer, physician, theologian and Unitarian martyr Michael Servetus probably lived in an oubliette before he was burned alive atop a pile of his own books in 1553.

Not quite so romantic an idea now, is it? Or, maybe it is, depending how you feel about our Christian roots.

If I look back on everything I've re-remembered and everything I've tried to forget, I'd say that probably the worst of the lost memories are the little ways in which I forgot who I was, and betrayed myself.

You know what I mean. All those times, in order to preserve the peace, to just get along, or worse, to get ahead, we all betray ourselves. We sell ourselves to the highest (or the lowest) bidders in the hopes that some good will come to us or the principles we're espousing. It usually isn't until much later that we discover how high the cost actually was.

That has got to be the worst feeling. Here's an example. It probably sounds overly dramatic, but I've never eaten at Chick-fil-A because of their politics. I have no interest in spending my money at a business that will turn around and use that money to preserve their rights to discriminate against me and people like me. And IF I ever ate there, that would be the kind of selling myself out that I'd want to forget. Trading in my sense of self worth for what I am sure isn't much different from a chicken sandwich I can get anywhere.

Shame lives in the little things we try to forget. The things we want to remain in the dark, never to be seen by anyone. Those memories live in oubliettes we build in ourselves.

The most heartbreaking kind of forgetting, I think, must be dementia.

Years ago I would regularly visit a congregant, a World War Two veteran approaching 100 years old. Each time, I'd have to introduce myself as if it were the first time we were meeting. Early on, he had great memories of the congregation of people he loved, but as happens with Alzheimer's, he lost his memory backward. First he forgot the most recent events, then he forgot his retirement, then his grandchildren, his children, his wife, finally his childhood.

Each time I left he'd say "It was lovely to visit. Would you remind me how we are related?" It was charming. But heartbreaking to see his life — his very identity — slip away from him little by little. And when he forgot his mother, he died within days. There was nothing left to him.

But while he still had some memories, and friends around to keep him engaged in conversation and activities, it was okay. He was happy. Because like George, who managed to walk his little Bichon Frisé every day, the repetitive activities continued to give his life purpose and meaning — joy, belonging, comfort and security — for the rest of his life.

That's why it's so important to pay attention to the little things we do everyday, the things that connect us to our loved ones and the world around us. They are the "habits of the heart" that theologian James KA Smith calls "Everyday liturgies." Those are the actions that will keep our minds engaged, rather than locked away in the dungeon of lost memories. It takes paying attention to each moment.

The rituals of everyday life are never really forgotten. They are stored in our muscle memory, and ultimately, they give our lives meaning. They form who we are, make manifest what we value, and ultimately stay with us long after everything else is forgotten. The 100 year old veteran never forgot how to be a friend, even after he forgot who his friends were.

Because being a friend ... that was his daily practice, and it formed the rituals that in turn formed him.

For Christians, the rituals that define a community are important because they are constant reminders of who they are. The most important daily ritual of an active Christian is prayer. The intention of prayers of gratitude, petition and praise is that they become so deeply embedded in every action of everyday life that even after they have forgotten everything, including the people who belong to them, they never forget who they belong to. And that's God. And God never forgets them.

That is one of the primary comforts of Christian Faith. No matter what, you never stop belonging. And you know you belong because of the rituals you engage in together.

For Buddhists, the ritual is a little different, but no less significant. The daily act of meditation, the practice of simply being in the moment is one of paying close attention to posture and breath. The goal is to suspend regret and rumination about the past, to resist worrying about the future, and to make mental space for truth to find its way into the mind. Every moment matters, especially this moment.

Right now.

For us Unitarian Universalists who believe that we humans are co-creators of the universe along with all other beings, the moment — this very moment — is of ultimate importance.

This moment, if we bring into it everything that has made us who we are, has the potential to become anything in the future. The more we carry with us from the past, the more we learn from it. Even if we've forgotten we ever knew it, everything we've learned is still part of us, because it changed us, even if only imperceptibly. Like how to be a good friend.

But for those practices to become the habits of the heart that form our identities, they have to actually be practices.

Not things that we do perfectly, but things that we do regularly, with attention and intention.

We UUs don't necessarily engage in prayers that ask for help from God — most of us, after all, don't believe in that God. But we do, or at least should, engage in the kind of being in the moment that cultivates gratitude for the abundance in our lives, activates reverent awe for the world around us, and seeks to be reflective so that it generates insight. And maybe even a bit of humility.

We have to make a regular practice of letting go of regret and worry, so that we can make honest assessments of ourselves, and take the first steps in becoming the better people we want to be, better co-creators of the universe.

That's what I think is cool about being part of a faith community like this one. We can practice being together, being in the world, being better co-creators. We don't always get it right. God knows we don't. We aren't perfect. But. We're going for good enough. Good enough to show that we care and have made an effort.

May our efforts become our identities, and may those identities stay with us as precious memories that live in the habits of our hearts, long after they have become the precious little things we have forgotten.

May it be so.

Hymn 1028 The Fire of Commitment

From the light of days remembered burns a beacon bright and clear

Guiding hands and hearts and spirits into faith set free from fear

When the fire of commitment sets our mind and soul ablaze

When our hunger and our passion meet to call us on our way

When we live with deep assurance of the flame that burns within

Then our promise finds fulfillment and our future can begin

From the stories of our living rings a song both brave and free
Calling pilgrims still to witness to the life of liberty
When the fire of commitment sets our mind and soul ablaze
When our hunger and our passion meet to call us on our way
When we live with deep assurance of the flame that burns within
Then our promise finds fulfillment and our future can begin

From the dreams of youthful vision comes anew, prophetic voice
Which demands a deeper justice built by our courageous choice
When the fire of commitment sets our mind and soul ablaze
When our hunger and our passion meet to call us on our way
When we live with deep assurance of the flame that burns within
Then our promise finds fulfillment and our future can begin

Closing Words (mine)

May you lead this place...

Remembering...

Remembering...

Remembering...

Go in Peace.

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)

Fire Drill

from Russell

I will announce procedure for safe exiting building during announcements at beginning of service.

At end of service I will announce start of fire drill.

Bethany will alert RE staff to evacuate classrooms to outdoor parking lot where they can reunite with parents.

Will should monitor adults with walkers and mobility concerns as they exit via Oneto room and outdoor ramp. They should congregate to parking area to right of our building as they exit facing street.

Elise will assist and monitor those exiting the main entrance.

Michael should monitor rear hall exit to rear of building.

Rev. D, please monitor choir exit to rear of building.

I will keep time and announce the building all clear and then those who need to return to their seats may enter to retrieve any items left behind.