



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Our Blue Boat Home: Earth Sunday

Rev. Lissa Anne Gundlach, Senior Minister

April 24, 2016

301 N. Orange Grove Blvd. Pasadena, CA 91103 (626) 449-3470 information@neighborhooduu.org

Rev. Lissa's Homily

Dearly beloved we are here to get through this thing called life... Electric word life...

These words open the iconic film *Purple Rain*, starring Prince in a semi-autobiographical role as the Kid, the front man for the band *Revolution*. In this scene, he stands before the audience, his congregation, and extols the wonders of the afterlife. But fans don't need to wait to enjoy it— heaven can be now-- "Let's go crazy, let's get nuts," he sings.

Much like the loss of David Bowie just a few months ago, Prince's death still seems unbelievable, like Prince could somehow transcend death. Perhaps like Bowie, Prince has quietly ascending to some musical heaven while we are left to make sense of his life and sudden death.

Friends and collaborators have spoken publically both of his musical genius and his humble humanitarianism. In an emotional CNN interview, environmentalist and social entrepreneur Van Jones revealed that although Prince's Jehovah's Witness religious beliefs prohibited him from sharing his accomplishments, he would. As it turns out, Prince was the underwriter behind several joint environmental and social projects, including the installation of solar panels in many Oakland homes and #Yes We Code, which teaches tech skills to empower black youth.

As the nation mourns, the grief of many found common expression in the deep and sumptuous shades of a color as remarkable and vibrant as Prince's life:

The color purple

Mayor Garcetti has bathed Los Angeles City Hall in purple, as is the Super Dome in New Orleans and the Eiffel Tower. LACMA's rain room glowed a somber and ethereal shade at the artists' request.

Even NASA paid tribute by posting a composite image from the Hubble Space Telescope and Herschel Space Observatory—the electric purple Crab Nebula, a supernova remnant of another kind of star that similarly burned bright and died young, this one 6,500 light-years from Earth.

Just hours after the news of Prince's death broke, a tribute video made the rounds on Facebook from the Broadway production with the same name as his signature hue: the Color Purple. Prince had apparently reached out to the cast over the years and praised the production. To keep his memory and music alive, Jennifer Hudson and Cynthia Erivo led the cast in a moving encore performance of "Purple Rain," while the audience harmonized. Will you sing with me?

Purple rain, Purple rain

The tale of two purples goes back in time over thirty years. Alice Walker published her Pulitzer Prize winning novel *The Color Purple* in 1982 and accompanying film in 1985. The film *Purple Rain*, released in 1984, catapulted the soundtrack up the charts with Prince's most well-known hits. On the surface, the two purples could not be more different.

Alice Walker's groundbreaking novel is set in the expansive fields of rural Georgia in the 1930s. Abused by men throughout her young life, Walker's protagonist Celie looked to the Christian God of her heritage to find solace, writing letter after letter pleading for God to listen and change her circumstances.

When God remains silent and unwilling to come to her aid, Celie gets frustrated and begins to explore her spirituality through her relationships with the women in her life, her sister and her love interest, a glamorous independent woman named Shug Avery. Celie asks questions about how Shug understands God, to which Shug confesses that she finds God everywhere, and sees God's work most alive in the natural world: "I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it."

Have you ever had this experience in nature, when you experience the astounding beauty of the earth you can't help but notice?

For me, the color purple does it every time. At this time of year I remember the parade of flowers of the East Coast spring—first yellow daffodils, then pink cherry blossoms, then the rich purples of the lilacs. I remember walking down the Brooklyn streets, caught up in my own thoughts, then the fragrance and color of the lavender lilacs commanding me to pause, to marvel, and to delight. Here in Pasadena, it's the jacaranda trees . . . aren't they outrageous?

In these moments, the earth invites me into a moment of communion. I feel the holy at work in the universe in these as much as I do in any religious text. It's a part of our transcendentalist heritage—the direct experience of the awe and mystery of our universe—that I know this congregation holds up as central to our religious practice—a congregation full of astronomers, scientists, environmentalists and naturalists.

The spirituality Celie describes is a way of understanding our seventh principle—respect for the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part. In the novel, Celie begins to see a new understanding of God in everything—in the harmony and beauty of nature and in her own body as she discovers the gift of pleasure. With her new understanding of God, Celie addresses her letters to the God she finds in the world: "Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear everything. Dear God." Doesn't this sound like a Unitarian Universalist prayer?

Through our interdependence with all existence, we are compelled not only to notice, but to praise, offer gratitude and from our gratitude kindle a sense of responsibility to protect all life. We are on this planet not to despair but to rejoice in the beauty that abounds, and to save the world as we have been saved, again and again, by the exquisite delight of our existence.

I think of one of our Unitarian Universalist holy texts, the Mary Oliver poem *The Summer Day*.

Who made the world?

Who made the swan, and the black bear?

Who made the grasshopper?

This grasshopper, I mean- the one who has flung herself out of the grass, the one who is eating sugar out of my hand, who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down, who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.

Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face. Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.

I don't know exactly what a prayer is.

I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down into the grass,

how to kneel down in the grass, how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields, which is what I have been doing all day.

Tell me, what else should I have done?

Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?

Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?

As for Prince's color purple, many have tried to interpret the meaning behind his mysterious affinity for the shade, and the famous tune many of us can't get out of our heads. In the film, the song is performed at the end of a long struggle to be freed from an abusive family, to give and receive love freely. The audience is quiet, riveted by his emotion and passion. The Kid discovers, as does Celie, that his pain can also be a source of communion with others, in fact it has become his strength.

One of Prince's bandmates Lisa Coleman has said that the song represents "a new beginning. Purple, the sky at dawn; rain, the cleansing factor."

Sung: Purple rain Purple rain

Redemptive and renewing, the color purple calls us to pay attention to both the beauty and the brokenness within us and around us, to call no part unholy.

Let us let the color purple kindle in us both our gratitude and our responsibility for the care of all living creatures and our planet, offering praise and thanks for what is good and beautiful, grief and lament for what is lost and broken, and compassionate action when we can make a difference.

May it be so, and Amen.