

Barely Managing: Living Religion in Challenging Times

<https://uuma.zoom.us/j/93676535079?pwd=QUJFRjNVTWpnTW03YVdSWU1SVlJkZz09>

Order of Service

Welcome Kay

Welcome Jim (00:01:00)

My name is Jim Fisher, I'm a member of this church, the ninth to which I have belonged, give or take. I'm delighted to be with you again this beautiful summer morning in this most temperate of places in the world. The theme today, barely managing, may be all-too-present as I attempt the technological feat that is a multimedia online service.

We will begin with a short musical clip performed by the Ostrander Violin Trio, performed entirely by my niece Allison Ostrander, concertmaster of the Minneapolis Opera Orchestra. In this case, her preferred pronoun might be they. She/They are performing Dona Nobis Pacem.



<https://mixcord.co/acapella/p/2s3Ny-f5ym3vcjDriiNnw/>

Call to Worship – Jim (00:01:30)

The words of Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Rūmī (1207 – 1273) Balkh, Afghanistan

Come, come, whoever you are.
Wanderer, worshiper, lover of leaving.
It doesn't matter. Ours is not a caravan of despair.
Come, even if you have broken your vows a thousand times.
Come, yet again, come, come.

I have lived on the lip of insanity,
wanting to know reasons,
knocking on a door. It opens.
I've been knocking from the inside.



Start a huge, foolish project, like Noah...
it makes absolutely no difference what people think of you.

Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing there is a field. I'll meet you there.
When the soul lies down in that grass the world is too full to talk about.

Opening Hymn Come, Come Whoever You Are (00:02:30)

Recorded 2015 by the Orange Coast Unitarian Universalist Choir, Costa Mesa, CA

Chalice Lighting – Kay (00:02:00)

Affirmation of Covenant – Kay (00:00:30)

Words by James Vila Blake (1842 - 1925)

Love is the spirit of this church,
and service is its law.

This is our great covenant:

To dwell together in peace,

To seek the truth in love,

And to help one another.

Time for All Ages – Jim (00:08:00)

Dr. Sueess I Had Trouble in Getting to Solla Sollew

Offering – Kay (00:02:00)

For this, and all gifts we are grateful.

Joys and Sorrows – Kay (00:03:30)

Jim Play Amazing Grace

Prayer – Jim (00:01:00)

We lift our hearts this morning for our families and our neighbors.

We pray for the families of fallen civil rights leaders and
the safety of a new generation that have joined the struggle.

We pray for the victims of violence, pandemics, a planet that
has again set new records for temperature.

We pray for the strength and resolution to act on our convictions.

We pray for the wisdom to apply our theology,
to seek the truth in love and the tools of science
to improve this world and to improve ourselves.

Musical Interlude Tribute to John Robert Lewis (Georgia's Fifth Congregational District for 17 terms)- Joshua Campbell '16 and Harvard friends Sing Out, March On
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mKNRXQemxWQ&feature=youtu.be>



Alternate

We Shall Be Known by MaMuse Unitarian Universalist Association (00:03:00)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ft2reFzQtOI>

Readings – Kay (00:02:00)

#1) Alfred North Whitehead, “Religion is the vision of something which stands beyond, behind and within the passing flux of immediate things; something which is real, and yet waiting to be realized; something which is a remote possibility, and yet the greatest of present facts; something that gives meaning to all that passes, and yet eludes apprehension; something whose possession is the final good, and yet is beyond all reach; something which is the ultimate ideal, and the hopeless quest. “ (Science and the Modern World (1925))

#2) Joseph Fisher, “Religion, though, is more than the distilled essence of life’s experiences. It has a more active role. Unless it moves men and women to new thought and stronger action, it is no more than passive philosophizing. At its best, religious reflection leads to action to improve living—for individuals, for those whose lives they touch, for humankind. The effort of a person to make religion out of life, to define a role in the immediate community and in the cosmos, to discover and release our best, is a very human effort. It is also as divine as anything we shall ever know. (Living Religion (1993))

Sermon: Barely Managing: Living Religion in Challenging Times (00:22:00)

[How does religion speak to managing a seemingly chaotic environment? Join us to explore the intersection of skills and faith as we navigate life’s challenges.]

How many of us long for Solla Sollew, where there never are problems, at least very few? How many of us feel as though we are barely managing, individually, as a community, nationally or globally?

What does chaos look like in your life?

- Harried parent feeding kids on the road between ballet and soccer practice, clinching a real-estate sale on your hands-free phone and worrying about your pending divorce and your parent’s precarious health?
- Thought-you’d-be retiree serving on a dozen committees, watching the value of your fixed income slide from comfortable to austere as you defer maintenance on your home.
- Young adult working in an “essential” yet underpaid job, worried about the alternatives of bringing home the CoronaVirus or being fired, with your partner already laid off and rent overdue?
- A student, overwhelmed by expectations from parents, teachers, coaches and peers.
- A nation rocked by protests over racial, gender and class inequality, violence and insecurity.
- A world facing rising sea levels, massive population displacement and the rise of drug resistant pandemic diseases.
- Maybe life is going pretty well, but little bits of chaos - the noisy co-worker, the perpetual pile of laundry, the mold under the sink, or just about every biting bug standing between you and paradise.

There are times when you are plunged, or perhaps you plunge, into a situation that is

overwhelming, and in getting through it you gain some small insights about your purpose and your limitations.

As a Peace Corps Volunteer in a small village in Ecuador in 1980 I heard an anguished cry from a neighbor's backyard. As people assembled I learned that an infant girl had fallen into a basin of water and was not breathing. I was given permission to attempt CPR (cardio-pulmonary resuscitation), a process nobody had seen in this village that had no television and precious little print material.

In CPR classes you are surrounded by others each working on their own patient (typically an adult size rubber manikin), the atmosphere is quiet, focused and supportive.

It was anything but that in my Ecuadorian village. I held the infant in my lap, applying minute chest compressions and providing mouth-to-mouth respiration. As neighbors crowded into the small courtyard people began to argue about the best course of action. Factions formed among those who thought it was too late and the infant was dead, others that thought CPR might be helping, others attempting alternative interventions including rubbing the infant's body with candles from the church and praying. In panic, I locked into the instruction that CPR should be maintained until a medical authority arrives, which in this village was anything but assured. Eventually someone with medical training arrived on the back of a motorcycle, declared the infant to be dead and the scene transitioned to an observance of sorrow and eventually a wake.

My memory of this event, from 40 years ago has faded, but my personal anguish over what happened has not. This village was my home for two years. I wanted to be a part of it and to help these families achieve their goals for a better future, but I knew that I would be returning to a very different life in the United States. I knew that my efforts would have very modest consequences, some that were intended and others that were never anticipated.

A sudden, unexpected death, dramatically compresses time from an emotional and cultural process that we expect will take months or years to a moment. The crisis of this infant dying and my unsuccessful efforts to save her, my holding that infant in death as her mother wailed and neighbors shouted at me and each other, as others looked for traditional cures, as we all waited for someone with greater ability or authority to arrive, compressed my awareness of the many forces of culture, society, technology and chance that affect our lives.

What does chaos feel like?

- Loss of control when a situation moves too quickly, a river in flood.
- The stress and anxiety we feel when we cannot understand or control our world.
- Anomie, or the sense that our norms and morals have broken down.
- Exhilaration when we are challenged to adapt and to innovate in an unfamiliar environment,
- Excitement of collective behavior, where we are swept into a new group with new norms,

possibly a mob or a riot.

Fortunately, I think, chaos visits us in many small ways. Lost car keys, spilled coffee, mice in the cupboard. After rapidly crossing several stages of grief, “good grief” as Charlie Brown would say, we find the keys and mop up the coffee, rid our cupboard of mice. These small setbacks help us to build resilience, as a training ground for chaos to follow. Our resilience may be informed by faith, in ourselves, our mentors, in the possibility that this too shall pass, or in the power of prayer.

We also learn to cope, to solve problems, to pray and to grieve from others. Learning is a sort of iterative process between observation and imitation on the one hand, and contemplation and innovation on the other. We reach out and we reach in and we reach out and we reach in, back and forth as we put things in our unique order.

Our solution set, the options we believe exist, are shaped profoundly by our environment. While conducting research on maternal and child health in Cochabamba, Bolivia, we found a significant iron deficiency among women that worked in the open air markets. I recall the health educators proposed a series of posters and outreach messages about spinach, liver, and other high-iron foods, cooking classes and demonstrations. The medical practitioners proposed a campaign for distributing iron rich vitamin tablets using local pharmacies or health outreach workers. It was a mild disagreement and I fear in the end that no action resulted for their benefit. Our solution sets were informed by our training and our conceptual models of how the world is ordered.

The key is not so much the solution to a given problem, but the process by which we manage the problem. Our resilience is a measure of how we cope with stress. Similarly, I think the essence of our faith is not so much an immutable religious doctrine as a process for finding our place in the world, or in some sense managing our spiritual lives. Process theology follows this line of thinking.

As a newly minted student at Bowdoin I jumped into unknown waters taking Philosophy 101. The waters were deep, but I latched onto a few salient ideas as life preservers, one of which was the pre-Socratic debate over the essence of the universe, the flux. I’m not sure how other students reacted, but I was immediately attracted to the essential arguments of Heraclitus son of Bloson of the city of Ephesus born in 540 bcd. You have heard his words repeated a thousand times



“No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he's not the same man.”
“There is nothing permanent except change.”

These words fit well with my liberal Unitarian-Universalist upbringing. Underlying his words is

the belief that “the process is the principle” I have since learned that “Due to the oracular and paradoxical nature of his philosophy, and his fondness for word play, Heraclitus was called "The Obscure" even in antiquity.” (Wikipedia)

I’m sure his writing were challenging, and I only recall the quotes. The notion of a theology based on process, our effort to seek the divine, our path to meaning, our process for making this world a better place is much more difficult to describe than the notion of an un-moved mover, or a set of unchanging commandments. Our relationships become organic as we create our world through our interactions.

Alfred North Whitehead, an English mathematician and Harvard professor of Philosophy further developed the school of Process Theology in a series of lectures and writings that would make Heraclitus seem succinct and transparent. It would be an understatement to say that his work is challenging to read. But out of his intense analysis of the philosophy of science, ranging from subatomic particles to the universe, he is credited creating a substantial body of works on process philosophy and process theology.

His words “Religion is the vision of something that stands beyond, behind, and within the passing flux of immediate things; something which is real, and yet waiting to be realized... something that gives meaning to all that passes, and yet eludes apprehension... something which is the ultimate ideal, and the hopeless quest.” Are a bold step away from a creedal religion.



The role of a higher power may seem diminished. God is not omnipotent, all knowing, all seeing all commanding nor unchanging. Rather, God is the changing environment, the evolving conditions within which we are given choices. The choices are ours, for better or worse. The consequence of these choices are “prehended” or immediately seized by God, or the environment, and our God, our environment, our world is thereby altered. I think that this theology is empowering, but also carries with it the heavy burden of responsibility.

As Kay read earlier, Joseph Fisher, in his book Living Religion wrote “Religion, though, is more than the distilled essence of life’s experiences. It has a more active role. Unless it moves men and women to new thought and stronger action, it is no more than passive philosophizing. At its best, religious reflection leads to action to improve living—for individuals, for those whose lives they touch, for humankind. The effort of a person to make religion out of life, to define a role in the immediate community and in the cosmos, to discover and release our best, is a very human effort. It is also as divine as anything we shall ever know. (Living Religion (1993))

As we create this world through our exercise of choice, the world, the environment, our God prehends the consequences of our choices and is changed. Some choices, the destruction of human dignity through racism, sexism or other prejudices, the ruin of our global environment, the concentration of wealth among a small class of the ultra rich, wreak havoc on our environment and threaten the sustainability of our world. Other choices, to embrace diversity, to

build sustainable energy systems and to assure that all are given the opportunity to a secure life are precluded and I hope may be our process of salvation.

I'll take you on one more journey into chaos on a larger scale, one that I think illustrates the important role that religion as a theological process can play in shaping the world. In 1977, as a sophomore at Bowdoin College, I joined an India Studies program that took me to Pune, India, a city of about 2 1/2 million located in the hills a few hours east of Bombay (or Mumbai). I was, as I am now, interested in the intersection of social science, regional planning and art. I undertook a project in ethno-musicology as my independent term paper in Pune. In particular I was interested in how the folk and devotional music of the Mahar untouchable sub-caste changed as they embarked on religious conversion from Hinduism to Buddhism from 1956 to present.

The Caste System of Hinduism as it was historically practiced in India was an archetype of ascribed cultural status. You are born to a caste and sub-caste and as tradition has it you will remain in that place in the cultural hierarchy during your current lifetime. I say current because you may change your ascribed status only through death and re-birth. Your vertical mobility within Hinduism in your next life depends upon your behavior in your current life. Historically there have been few other routes to vertical mobility in your current lifetime, most having to do with leaving Hinduism for another religion or moving to urban areas where you are not easily identified by caste and where status mobility can be achieved through education, occupation, and by other means. Hinduism is a rich and complex religion which deserves more time and better expertise than I have now. Also, note that practices of discrimination based on Caste were outlawed in India in 1948 and subsequently outlawed in the Indian Constitution.

The leader of this movement was a remarkable man named Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, also called Babasaheb or simply Bhim. Raised in poverty as a Mahar "untouchable", he demonstrated great intelligence and against all odds received scholarships advancing to earning three masters degrees and two doctorates in economics and law from the London School of Economics and Columbia University as well as two honorary doctorates. His most notable accomplishment was being the chief architect of the Indian Constitution. Even then, as India became an independent country and separated from Pakistan, this national leader was denied the use of water fountains and other public infrastructure.



In the 1950s Dr. Ambedkar began his search for a new religion. Even as he wrote the ban on Caste discrimination into the Indian constitution, he concluded that he could not longer be a part of a religion that forced 1/4 of the population to be in the bottom most castes (shudra) and beneath the caste system (dalit or untouchable).

Brahmins :	8.1%
Kshatriyas:	7%
Vaishya :	58.4%
Shudras :	26.5%
(Including ST's)	

Bhimrao Ambedkar wrote, "I tell you, religion is for man and not man for religion. If you want to organise, consolidate and be successful in this world, change this religion. The religion that does not recognise you as a human being, or give you water to drink, or allow you to enter in temples is not worthy to be called a religion. The religion that forbids you to receive education and comes in the

way of your material advancement is not worthy of the appellation 'religion'. The religion that does not teach its followers to show humanity in dealing with its co-religionists is nothing but a display of a force. The religion that teaches its followers to suffer the touch of animals but not the touch of human beings is not a religion but a mockery. The religion that compels the ignorant to be ignorant and the poor to be poor is not a religion but a visitation. The basic idea underlying religion is to create an atmosphere for the spiritual development of the individual.”

<http://www.ambedkar.org/Babasaheb/quotations.htm>

Dr. Ambedkar converted to Buddhism just months before he passed away of natural causes. On the day he converted I believe 300,000 people mostly Mahar's also converted. More than 500,000 people converted to Buddhism within a few years. Conversion, like all religious practice, is a process. We are presented choices in our environment, and as we make these choices we thereby alter the environment. Some choices are easy and some take years of practice. The Mahars conversion to Buddhism faced and faces external barriers of acceptance as well as internal challenges of tradition, identification and ritual practice. As you can imagine, conversion to Buddhism, a complex and philosophical religion if ever their was, will take time. The choice of one-half million people to make a difficult, even perilous journey in practicing their theology has changed the world. May it be so in our lives. Amen. Jai Bhim.

Benediction and Postlude (00:02:00)

Thank you again for joining me this morning. Thank you Kay and Lisa for your wise council. Thank you to the Ostrander String Trio and the Ostrander Trombone Quintet for your music this morning.

I will conclude this service with an unusual musical selection. As part of my 1977 study of the music of the Mahar Buddhist movement I recorded an elderly street musician singing songs about the movement. These are new words to old Hindu devotional songs. The musician is playing a one string Ektar that provides a base tone and rhythmic accompaniment. The words are about a great locomotive (mail) bringing Ambedkar's movement across India. The phrase you will here repeated is “Ali, Ali Bhimaci mail” – come come Ambedkar's Mail Train” I will share a rough translation.

Coffee Hour

The service has ended, but you are welcome stay to chat, share some virtual coffee and snacks. We will open up the airwaves allowing you to unmute. You can enjoy a couple minutes of free-for-all and those that have stayed will be randomly assigned to small groups.