

## Here I Am

Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship ~ [www.buf.org](http://www.buf.org)

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Rev. Paul Beckel

### WELCOME

For the first couple of centuries of our liberal religious movement, in critique of the dogmatism of the church from which we were evolving, Unitarians gravitated toward a rather analytical, indirect approach to religion. We tended to compare and contrast, and keep our distance. More recently our attention has been called back to “direct experience of that transcendent mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life.”

So in recent decades we have found ourselves augmenting our big-picture intellectualism with a more engaged, experiential, embodied, and even enthusiastic approach to our lives’ journeys. To the discomfort of some of our bold 20<sup>th</sup> century rational Humanists, we’ve gotten rather “touchy-feely.” At least that’s how I first took it when I heard someone say, “*Wherever you go, there you are.*”

And yet, here I am, now, diving into the unfamiliar territory which is right here in front of me: not my thoughts, but my experience. Throughout this coming program year we’re going to continue to explore, from a variety of angles, the practice of mindfulness. Today we will focus on the “here” part of here and now — grounding ourselves in the principles that guide us, and the truth about our strengths and our limits. So that in times of calm and even in times of distress, we can courageously assert, “Here I Am.”

### CHALICE LIGHTING / COVENANT

**GATHERING SONG**      *There is More Love Somewhere* (hope, peace, joy)

### CHILDREN’S FOCUS

When I was about your age I went fishing sometimes with my grandma in a river near my house. We got in our boat and drove it up the river to the best fishing spots. Drove it really slow, I should say, ‘cause each time, when we had been in the boat for a few minutes I would say, “Are we almost there?” and grandma would say, “It’ll be about 20 minutes.” And I would say, “20 minutes?! That’s going to take an hour!”

All that waiting was hard. So one time I brought my friend Jada with me. And this bag, in which I had some paper and crayons so we’d have something to do ... and my favorite toy car too. Well, about half way up the river, I got kind of bored so I told Jada about my new toy car that I had in my bag. “Oh let me see it,” she said.

I didn’t know if I could trust her but, I took it out and held it back like this she said, “No, I mean can I touch-it-see-it?” And I couldn’t decide and then my grandma shouts, “Look over here a fish

jumped out of the water.” I turned fast and (!) dropped the car in the water. And I glared at Jada like it was her fault and she said, “Quick, just look up at the trees and rocks on shore and remember where it fell, then you can find it later. But I had a better idea, because the water was kind of deep there, I grabbed a crayon out of my bag and I marked the spot on the boat; I drew a big arrow on the side of the boat in the exact spot where my toy car fell in.

Then a few minutes later we stopped at our sandy shallow fishing spot and I jumped right out of the boat and I checked right below where I made the mark, but my car wasn’t there. I said, “Jada get in here and help me!” But she just looked at me and she shook her head.

So then we caught a few fish, and that was fun, but I never did find my toy car. I guess it’s still out there somewhere. I bought this one for my little boy, but he got big, and he left it at home when he moved away. I wonder if he’ll come back some day to find it. I think he’ll know where to look. He’s pretty smart about that kind of thing.

[adapted from an ancient Chinese tale]

**ERACISM MINUTE**          Hilde Festerling

### **MEDITATION**

If self-awareness comes in stages, perhaps, sometimes, it could unfold like this: I begin in denial. I am not receptive to the sights and sounds around me or the feelings within. Until a little voice calls out: [voice 1] *I know this rose will open.*

And that’s pretty scary: a call? from who knows where, to who knows what? I’m not going to listen. And then: [2 voices] *I know this rose will open, I know my fear will burn away.*

Overcome my fear? Hmmm, no, I don’t even have the energy to try. Where would I ever get the strength? [3 voices] *I know this rose will open, I know my fear will burn away. I know my soul will unfurl its wings.*

Do I really have to? [4 voices] *I know this rose will open.*

Let it open. [whole choir one time thru... then break into round, congregation joins]

### **MESSAGE**

On my first trip to Bellingham, a few months before I met most of you here, I came to meet with the ministerial search committee. They were an amiable enough group, I suppose, but their job, of course, was to evaluate my character, demeanor, judgment, and abilities. One way that search committees do this with ministerial candidates is to invite us to preach at what is called a “neutral pulpit.” That is, someplace they can observe their candidate in action, without the distraction of 200 other people whispering in their ears: [SHRILL] “He ended that sentence with

a preposition,” or [GROOVY] “Hey man, pick this dude, ya gotta dig the way he talks about social justice” or [SUSPICIOUS] “Did he just use the word God?”

That kind of stuff would have made it hard to focus, so the committee arranged for me to preach in Mt. Vernon, at the Skagit UU fellowship, on an icy winter weekend. Frankly I was eager to get out of the brutally icy Midwest, so I was checking out a few different congregations. But above all I wanted to be here. And my wife Jane was pretty adamant too: “Don’t screw this up!” she said ... or at least implied. So I was focused. My strategy was to *not* let *them* focus with their laser-like analysis, comparisons, and algorithms.

I did not want them to judge me at all, pro or con, but rather to be so caught up in the experience, so present in that moment we shared that their hearts would simply be singing, “Yes.”

Well, Todd Jones drove me down Chuckanut Drive as the sun was rising. The sun rose pretty late in February, but Chuckanut took my breath away. I said to Todd: “If someday I get to live here, *I hope I would never take this for granted.*”

We arrived at Skagit UU well ahead of time. I hung up my long wool dress coat and got comfortable. Members and friends arrived, shivering and laughing. I greeted them all, giving no more and no less attention to six visitors who arrived separately but coincidentally happened to be visiting from Bellingham.

Before and during the service I was so present. I was on fire, in the zone. Afterward, I felt a little off-kilter — because I was used to hanging out at church till the last person would leave. But the search committee was slipping out, and they had told me that, before I zipped back to the airport, I could meet them for lunch a few blocks from there. So I quickly grabbed my coat, stepped outside and stuck my cold hands in my pockets, where I found some crumpled Kleenex, which was odd, since I generally use a handkerchief. But Jane sometimes shoves her used Kleenex in my pockets so I didn’t give it another thought. Besides, my nose had been running like a faucet that weekend; it was certainly plausible that I’d grabbed some Kleenex along the way.

So I hustled down the sidewalk fumbling with my binder trying to get my coat fastened. But it was like the buttons weren’t lining up. Whatever, I needed to stay focused on something more important. I needed to impress that committee one more time. And everything played out swimmingly. I came out of that interview feeling so warm and fuzzy that I didn’t even bother to pull on the coat till I walked out onto the tarmac in little old, arctic cold, Wausau, Wisconsin.

*There* buttoning your coat wasn’t optional. Now it still seemed awkward but *I got it* just as Jane was pulling up to the curb. Her look of anticipation connecting with my desire to share ... and

then she frowned. And the first thing she said to me was, “Why are you wearing a woman’s coat?”

So I had to call Todd and tell him I’d taken someone else’s coat and would he please help me arrange an exchange. I never asked whether he told the others on the search committee, but apparently it turned out okay.

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Last week we started talking about mindfulness, which is simply the practice of noticing and attending to what is immediately at hand — rather than worrying about the past or planning for the future. Neither *imagining* that our present reality is *different* from what it is ... nor stressing about how it *should be different* from what it is.

Of course it’s *ok* to look back and to look forward. Thinking abstractly, imagining, conspiring, and even worrying ... are important skills. They’re all part of a healthy, balanced, joyful and productive existence. Still, in the midst of all that cerebral churning, mindfulness can be like a sabbath. But let’s be honest: sabbath can seem like a quaint idea in our 24/7 socially networked world.

The miracle of mindfulness is that we don’t have to just sit still in order to take a break. There are a lot of things we can *do* even while we’re mindfully observing where and what we are, here and now. And I wouldn’t call this multi-tasking. When we eat we can also notice that we are eating. And really taste our food. When we sing we can also notice that we are singing. Simply hearing our blended voices without trying to figure out who is off key.

I don’t know if it’s possible to do calculus while only paying attention to the here and now. But that’s ok. I have heard that juggling, and parenting, and even arguing can be done mindfully.

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We began this series last week looking at mindfulness as a *mental* state: a state of attention as opposed to distraction. But maybe there is a parallel physical state of being present — an *embodied* mindfulness. A way of being in the world such that we are fully present not only with our *consciousness*, but also with *who we are* and what we *do* with that.

In the Hebrew scriptures, the phrase “Here I am,” is used in stories of the prophets Isaiah and Samuel. In both, they are answering a call from God, humbly offering themselves to serve. It’s kind of ironic. If we think of Old Testament prophets condemning injustice, and calling on people to stop being hypocrites, we may think of them as brash, or at least self-assured. A little cantankerous or even domineering at their worst. But at their best, humble, receptive ... offering a simple acknowledgement of both their self and their location, in answer to a call: “Here I am.”

Feel free to interpret “the voice of God” as a metaphor if that works for you. But don’t miss the point: to be prepared, receptive to, and ready for the work at hand, to be mindful in the flesh ... is obviously not a sleepy state of passivity. Nor is it about aggressively placing ourselves — MISplacing ourselves — in someone else’s life or location instead of our own. “Here I am,” is a

simple powerful statement from someone who is grounded and balanced. Prepared, receptive to, and ready for the work at hand. Neither more nor less than their authentic self.

So, for example, if in any given moment, I recognize that I am called to resist oppression, then I do no more and no less. I don't exaggerate the power of the oppressor or the depths of their depravity. I enter the fray wielding all of the strength of my principles even while acknowledging the limits of my understanding.

And if, in any given moment, I am called to celebrate the birth of a child, then I do no more and no less. Maybe I don't like babies. That's ok. I convey my respect for the inherent worth and dignity of this new person, then race home to take a nap, because I have to work the night shift, repairing the power lines that serve the neonatal intensive care unit where that child may live or die.

And if, in any given moment, I am called to pull weeds, or tell a story, or grieve an unspeakable loss, then I do no more and no less. I am present to myself, to others, to the all of it all, then and there.

I keep saying, "in any given moment," because any time I say, "Here I am," I'm speaking in the *present* tense — so I'm talking about a who and a where, but also about a *when*. If I find *myself* standing *here* at the pulpit on a Sunday morning, then I know what I'm called to do: preach on what is true and beautiful and good. But if I find myself in this very same place tonight at midnight, then my role is to get the hell out of here. Nothing more and nothing less.

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I used the word "humble" earlier. An equally appropriate word would be "assertive."

Don't mistake these words for opposites. They are two sides of the same coin. Way over there we have passive. And way over there we have aggressive. And centered in the here and now we have this spinning coin: humble/assertive/humble/assertive. These words refer to the same thing: being no more and no less than we are.

That's also how I understand mindfulness in the physical sense, present here and now. Ready. Not tense, not sluggish. Not necessarily sitting still. If we're juggling, we are ready both to throw and to catch. If we are parenting, we are swinging from one moment to the next marveling and redirecting, and marveling and redirecting. If we are arguing, we are attending to the other person's perspective, and the merits of their case, not simply biding our time until we get to pummel them with our righteousness.

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Finally, there will be times when, if we're paying attention, we will find that we are called to resist injustices that *we* are in the midst of perpetrating. Our role then will not be to manufacture

an illusion that we are somewhere else, at some other time, in some other body, such that our behavior is justifiable on some level of abstraction.

When I took that coat I was given plenty of opportunities to stop and hear reality calling out to me: “Something is amiss...and you know it. Wait. You are not a woman from Mt. Vernon. You are not even from Washington, not yet.”

When we have the courage to recognize who we are, where we are, when we are, the power of all of this reality rises through us even as we simply assert: Here I am.

As we acknowledge our limits, and acknowledge the strength we join through our principles, and our community, and awareness of our history ... then we say these words with integrity: Here I am.

Which means, in the end, not just that we are true to ourselves. No, this integrity of self is what makes it possible for us to understand and appreciate *others when they say for themselves*, “Here I am.” Because even though there are boundaries (I cannot replace you; you cannot replace me) ... even though there are boundaries, there are even more powerful connections between us.

I know that you too may struggle, and celebrate, and marvel, and taste, and sing. So I can know and respect you as a human being, no more, and no less.

**SHARING OUR GIFTS**     intro by Kaitlin Davis

**CHALICE CHOIR**             *Guantanamera*

*Translation: I am a truthful man from this land of palm trees  
Before dying I want to share these poems of my soul.*

*My verses are light green but they are also flaming red  
My verses are like a wounded deer seeking refuge in the forest.*

*With the poor people of this earth, I want to share my fate  
The little streams of the mountains please me more than the sea.*

## **RESPONSIVE READING**

When I am called upon as a person of faith, how will I answer?  
May I echo the ancient refrain: **HERE I AM**

When violence tears into this community, may I be a source of deep calm. Lest fear rob me of courage, I declare: **HERE I AM.**

When disease breaks body and heart, may I know unbroken spirit. Lest fatigue stop my eternal witness, I declare **HERE I AM.**

When healing is needed, may compassion pour from my words and acts. Lest self-centeredness block my giving of myself, I declare HERE I AM

When the world would choose not to remember my history, may I recall those who came before me. Lest denial allow my existence to be forgotten, I declare HERE I AM

When it seems that reconciliation cannot be found, may I speak the truth in love. Lest anger cause me to forget I am connected to all, I declare HERE I AM

When it is time for celebration, may I dance with joy.  
Lest despair cause me to forget each person's divine spark, I declare: HERE I AM

When people cry out for liberation, may I stand among them.  
Let my voice cry out in echo of the ancient refrain: HERE I AM.

Source: Human Rights Campaign

### **BENEDICTION**

As we extinguish the chalice may we find that we are neither sluggish, nor afraid, nor aloof, but simply ready to lead *these lives* of love.

### **CIRCLE 'ROUND**