

“Many Retailers, One Wholesaler”

Rev. Thomas Cary Kinder

United Church of Strafford, Vermont

in the Universalist Society of Strafford Sanctuary

July 28, 2024, A United Service

Proverbs 8; Readings from Our Churches

Silent Prayer of Invocation The Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh said that the earth and all her children have Buddha nature. The spiritual teacher, Matthew Fox said that wisdom is one underground river flowing through all people, and all spiritual traditions are wells leading to it. We each have access to that flow of Buddha nature and wisdom within us, so let us become centered and open our hearts to receive its gifts for our lives and for the world today.

Welcome Welcome to this united service of the Universalist Society of Strafford and the United Church of Strafford, Vermont, in the beautiful sanctuary of the Unitarian Universalist congregation. Welcome to you who are in the sanctuary and welcome to you online.

We acknowledge that we are on the ancestral and unceded land of the traditional caretakers, the Western Abenaki people. We share the belief that the land and all life are gifts of the Spirit, and our role is to honor and protect the Spirit's creation, building a loving community that includes all.

Our two congregations have held many services together over the years, Thanksgiving and Easter sunrise and one on the climate crisis that we held outdoors in front of the Town House, but this is the first for no reason other than the joy of being together, as far as I know.

Early in our planning I asked John Freitag what he thought the theme of the service should be and he said without missing a beat, “Many Retailers, One Wholesaler.” We will explore that theme in various ways today, including after the service when we enact our oneness over refreshments together.

If we believe that all people and all creation are one, if we believe that the future of this planet depends on us living as one, then it is a meaningful step in that direction to overcome our shyness or reticence and greet a stranger as a long-lost friend, or, as Valerie Kaur puts it, as a part of our self we do not yet know.

So please linger after the service to be the beloved community together, extending your care and support and joyous welcome especially to those you do not know or do not know well.

Call to Worship I completely agree with the idea of many retailers from one wholesaler, or many wells down to one underground river, or many paths up one mountain, but I was raised in a fundamentalist, Biblical-literalist culture in Appalachian Ohio where the adults taught me that our kind of Christian church was the only true retailer, the only well, and all other paths were going down, not up.

I was lucky to have a grandfather who taught at a private school in New Hampshire where I arrived at age 14 and had my fundamentalist world view broken wide open by a course on the Hebrew scriptures that took what I thought was literal fact and examined it as cultural artifact and myth. I studied world religions my second semester and rapidly moved from a fundamentalist to a pluralistic world view.

It so easily could have been otherwise, because many I grew up with still are fundamentalists. Sometimes it takes enlightened teachers and institutions to help us grow to see oneness, and a crucial question for our time is where will future generations find those teachers, because the earth needs us to evolve toward ever more all-encompassing oneness.

Every person here today has made a journey through different stages of spiritual perspective, and if we are alive and open-minded, we are not done growing yet, and that is good, because life on earth certainly is not done changing, and we will need ever greater wisdom to meet what is coming.

So let us join our hearts and minds together as one as we seek the path of Wisdom, each of us shopping at the retailer of our choice, knowing we are united by one wholesaler.

“Many Retailers, One Wholesaler”

I look around the sanctuary in the Upper Hollow on Sunday mornings and know that every person there has a different idea of God or the Spirit or Jesus, from relatively conventional Christian views to Buddhist leanings to entrenched agnosticism (and at least one atheist).

One of the United Church's two denominations is the ABC, the American Baptist Church, a congregation that began within these walls. Our other denomination is the UCC. It stands for

the United Church of Christ, but UCC is sometimes translated as Unitarians Considering Christ, and that fits many in our congregation, so I feel completely at home here.

As for my own spiritual leanings, I've never met a religion I didn't love if it was grounded in love. I find within the Christian contemplative and peace and justice tradition much that is in accord with indigenous and Asian religions, and scientific and secular humanism as well.

But I do believe in a Spirit, so when I asked John Freitag what he thought the theme of this service should be and he answered without any time to think "Many Retailers, One Wholesaler," I took that as the Spirit talking through him.

The Spirit clearly has a sense of humor or we wouldn't have evolved to be creatures who laugh. I appreciate that "Many Retailers, One Wholesaler" sounds funny, but I have become convinced of the seriousness and urgency of the Spirit's message to us today.

What I call the Spirit is the One Wholesaler, or as someone who is more comfortable in the woods than in Walmart, I prefer the Meister Eckhart and Matthew Fox image of the One River. My idea of the Spirit is similar to the concept of the Tao or Sacred Way, or the Great Spirit of indigenous traditions. I have heard Buddhist and Sufi teachers talk of a similar dimension to reality. As the Hindu Rig Veda says, the sages have many different ways of talking about what is One.

I trace the Spirit from the first spark of life. I see it moving in the single cells that came into being already having the impulse to live and instinct to create more life. I see the same Spirit within the evolution to communities of cells, and on to complex creatures, and on to humans with our super-complex minds and a vast universe of interdependent, non-human microorganisms living within us each.

I see over the sweep of billions of years, through many mass extinctions, a Spirit of love and life that wants life to live and thrive, that brings wisdom and growth out of suffering, that brings new life out of death.

The Spirit clearly wants to create sustainable, harmonious conditions for life. Scientists document how the earth as a system works in that direction. That same yearning of the Spirit moves human society toward compassion, neighborliness and lovingkindness, toward universal rights and a global ethic, toward equality and democracy, toward justice and peace. How could the Spirit of life and love not lead in those directions that enable life to thrive?

The Spirit as I understand it is not the enforcer of a rigid set of rules but a living, responsive flow that seeks to move us to follow its natural laws through ever changing conditions. The Spirit is not primarily anthropomorphic to me, although people can embody its qualities, and I love Rumi's image of it as Friend, or the Song of Solomon's as Lover, or Jesus' as Abba meaning Papa, or Proverbs' as Wisdom or Sophia. Whether we think of it as the Tao or a being of higher power and intelligence, the important thing is to open wide to it and listen to it and be moved by it.

That is my hope for us today, because, as is all too painfully clear, the cause of the Spirit of life and love on earth is in crisis. Mass extinction has begun, the collapse of civilization is a real possibility, and humans living unwisely and straying from nature's sacred way are the cause.

So I believe that Matthew Fox is right, "the spiritual traditions of the world must combine their wisdom if the human race is to survive." We each need to bring forth from our well our particular waters in our particular vessels, or to honor John's metaphor, we each need to bring out the particular products and brands on our retail shelves to feed and equip us for the crisis we face. We need them all.

There are demand side and supply side reasons why this retail business is so urgent. On the demand side, we face global and national crises and new realities that require all the wisdom we can find from ancient and contemporary sources.

One of the biggest threats is our division, our separateness, because only by working together can we solve the problems we face. The fear and hate, rejection and attack are only worsening every other problem, whether division plays out as war or hard heartedness toward refugees or polarization along political lines even here in Strafford. We need to find a way to live as one, and that will take greater wisdom.

That's the demand side, and there is a supply side reason for all retailers to come together now, too, and that is that traditional spiritual retailers are losing customers and going out of business, and most in the younger generations do not have any interest in becoming storekeepers or clerks or even patrons.

The potential loss of Coburns is an existential threat to Strafford, and so is the potential loss of our churches. If we love Coburns or the churches we feel grief at the thought of losing

them, and we fear what the future could be like here without the comfort and joy and nurture of these institutions.

I am so grateful for the people who are working to find a way to keep a general store in Strafford, and I am so grateful to you here today who are doing your part to keep the churches going. We will need a strong general store for practical and spiritual reasons as we move farther into the time of crisis our nation and world are now in, and we are going to need strong churches or some kind of spiritual center in town for practical and spiritual reasons as well.

Churches provide psychological and emotional support. Every time any of the churches gathers we can be sure that some of us really need the words, music or silence or the loving community to help us celebrate our joys or endure our struggles.

Churches also provide practical life support. I don't know everything the UU church has done along these lines, but the UCS has a Deacons Fund that helps people cover the costs of essentials during financial hard times, and a Mission Fund to support the local Health Hub and Food Shelves and things like Noah Kahan's national mental health foundation. We have helped establish a community nurse and provided a home for the creative preschool nursery. We have helped start groups working on climate and antiracism and have declared ourselves a supportive place for all LGBTQ+ people and their families and friends.

We have done all that and more even as our numbers have diminished and our leaders have aged, but that cannot go on forever. In the 1960s over 80 percent of the children in Strafford were involved in activities in one church or another. Since covid we have only occasionally had any children or anyone under forty attend.

Yet the world that those children and young families face is going to put increasing strains on mental, emotional and spiritual well-being, and the people of the town of Strafford are likely to need more logistical support. It is possible that we will be making room for people fleeing from climate effects or social chaos who will have even greater needs. It is possible that global crises will force Strafford to be more self-sufficient.

And a changing, hurting world is going to need what a spiritually strong Strafford has to offer to it, too. It is going to need our Noah Kahans and our William Sloane Coffins, it is going to need our Melvin and Sue and Chrissy Coburns, it is going to need whatever sanity and love of earth and neighborly ways that we are able to maintain within this valley's sheltering hills.

We are going to need all the wisdom we can gather, of every spiritual tradition, from every spiritual person. So how can we draw that together going forward? How can the churches revive or evolve into something completely new in order to meet increasing needs in ways that work for generations to come?

Let us turn now to the One Wholesaler, the One River within us with these questions to see where the Spirit of life and love leads us. Let us open now in silent, wordless prayer or meditation and allow ourselves to be moved...

Call to Offering We are taking an offering in the basket on the table in the back that will go to the maintenance of this Universalist Society of Strafford church building.

Frances Wilson was a great Newton School teacher and was the mother of one of the writers of our Introit and the mentor of the other. Forty years ago I was blessed to be a Deacon with Frances before I was a pastor.

Once at a leadership retreat I heard her say how she loved driving around Vermont and seeing the steeples rising above their village trees because she knew that beneath every steeple people gathered who were trying to live lives of lovingkindness and find and shine their inner light and help people who were struggling.

The steeple of this church lifts our hopeful vision and points us toward our higher power day after day, so please give what you can to keep it doing that work.

Haiku by Mel. Goertz
I love to watch caterpillars.
They have their place
in the Universe.