

Blessing Ways

Rites for the Yearly Round

by

John Vlahos

DEDICATION

To The Reverend Arnold Westwood
and The Reverend Edwin A. Lane.
Their belief and enthusiasm spurred
the writing of these services.

TO THE READER:

These rites for the yearly round were begun in 1964 with a Christmas service. It was written at the behest of The Reverend Arnold Westwood, then minister of the Unitarian Church in Westport, Connecticut. My husband was an award-winning dramatist whose works included theatrical plays, screen plays, and plays for television. Arnold thought John's talents could be turned to religious expression. So did Arnold's successor, The Reverend Edwin A. Lane, with whose enthusiastic encouragement John expanded the original services to celebrate the sacred in seasons and events all the year round.

What neither minister knew at the time was for how long and how deeply John had been a seeker of the sacred. By age ten he had visited on his own every church and synagogue in his home town of Springfield, Ohio. He was enabled to do so because the town's Greek Orthodox community did not yet have a church of its own and also because, in his ninth year, he went to work in his father's ice cream parlor/restaurant. He washed dishes weekends and after school, and, when business was slow, he could slip out for his religious visits. His parents thought he was going to the library (which he often did) and would have been shocked had they learned otherwise.

Perhaps it was this early exposure to worship in its many forms that gave the little boy a listening heart so that his older relatives and even perfect strangers in the store were moved to pour out to him their secret hopes, their fears, their woes.

Or perhaps it was his early experiences in public school. He arrived at first grade knowing not a word of English. Naturally he became the butt of much teasing and no little abuse. He may have learned empathy both from the bullying of thee many and the kindness of the few. But most of all he vowed to speak and write the English language better than anyone there. And he did.

Later he learned to love music, playing first violin in his school orchestra. He took well to public speaking and to acting and was later a graduate of Carnegie Mellon's Drama Department, earning his way by working in local restaurants. Still later came a stint in Hollywood writing Westerns. Then came World War II service in the Pacific commanding a Naval code-breaking unit. Still later came, marriage, family, and immersion in the new medium of live television. All his rich life experiences were poured into his dramas and still later and more poignantly into the *Blessing Ways* you have before you.

These have held meaning for members of and visitors to the Unitarian Church in Westport. They have been presented by other churches and are remembered still (and often recited) by the many young people who participated in them.

It is my hope and the hope of our children that you will find these *Blessing Ways* meaningful. That would be, I know, John's hope as well.

Olivia Vlahos

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Watch Night

by

John Vlahos

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The Watch Night

The service works best with a small group of 20-30 people. They are seated in a circle. If possible screens should enclose the entire circle. If that is not possible at least one side should be screened so the readers (who will need small flashlights to read the script) are out of sight. There is no light in the circle and the exterior lights should be dim.

You will need a small brazier in the center with candles or candelabras on either side of it. A very small candle (to last just a few minutes) is in the brazier. The slips of paper should be small (about 2 x 2 inches) so their burning does not create a large amount of smoke.

You will need a recording of loud, clanging cathedral bells and a metronome amplified (for changing volume) to simulate the loud ticking of a clock.

The service should be timed so that the cathedral bells at the end come as close to midnight as possible.

Having a non-participant handling the sound and house lights facilitates the flow of the service.

Music: Prelude

Several male and female readers out of sight from behind the screens:

Male Voice

Year's end is upon us!

Female Voice

Gone into memory
Is yet another springtime.

Male Voice

Gone are the burgeoning hopes,

Female Voice

Shattered
The chrysalis of our desirings

Male Voice

And that,
Which for a golden time
Found wing,
Has fallen to earth—

Male Voice

Unfinished,

Female Voice

Unresolved,

Male Voice

Unfulfilled.

Female Voice

Gone into memory
Is yet another springtime.

Male Voice

Year's end is upon us!

Music: Bridge

Female Voice

Summer has come,
Summer has gone.

Male Voice

Lost in time
Is yet another summer.

Male Voice

Lost are the blossoming joys,

Female Voice

Scattered the fragrant essences of love—

Male Voice

Of love given,

Female Voice

Love denied,

Male Voice

Love rejected,

Female Voice

Love lost.

Female Voice

Lost in time
Is yet another summer.

Male Voice

Year's end is upon us!

Music: Bridge

Male Voice

Autumn's great harvest is past.

Female Voice

The blessings of another year
Are spilled on barren ground,

Male Voice

And that which we have failed to sow—

Male Voice

All that which we shall never reap—

Female Voice

Lies fallow now,
In the gray and wintry fields
Of our uncultivated days,

Male Voice

Too late to gather in

Male Voice

Too late by one more year
To gather in.

Male Voice

For
Year's end is upon us!

Male Voice

Winter sits hard
On every side.

Female Voice

Snow and ice
Beset us.
The winds of winter
Chill our hearts.

Male Voice

For they are ancient winds—

Male Voice

Cruel winds—

Female Voice

Winds out of the hidden north
Without memories
Of summer's warmth
Or springtime's freshets.

Male Voice

Winter sits hard upon our souls.

Male Voice

Year's end is upon us!

The exterior lights go out.

Music: To a punctuating climax

The minister rises now and lights the candles/candelabras.

Minister

We have come here tonight
At year's end
To stand watch
Together.

Here,
In the vaulting comfort
Of this sanctuary

Where night holds no terrors.

We have gathered
In the unbroken solace
Of this magic round—

A family of friends
Joined as one
In the darkness
That surrounds us—

Come
For a final reckoning
With this departing year.

Together,
Bound thus
By our common mortality
Let us listen

In the fastnesses of this long night

To men and women of our kind

Speaking for us

Articulating
That which we have known
And they have known:

All the anguished yearnings,
The sightless gropings,
The hopes and pleadings,
The depths
Of our despairings,
The muted, blackest moments
Of fallible and struggling humanity
In search of meaning

In this,
Our life alone—

In this,
Our shared existence!

The minister sits.

Music: To a punctuating climax

If possible the readers have left and, using a microphone in another room, their voices emanating from the speakers in the sanctuary as the ticking of a metronome (simulating a ticking clock) precedes and separates each of their readings.

Metronome

Male Voice

Plagued by all recurrent
Miseries of manhood,
To bed I go, dreaming,

Dreaming nightmares of awareness—
To do battle with agonies of today
And regrets of yesteryear.

Night unto night, I roam
This frightful arena of my own undoing,
Shoring up the crumbling,
The weak and the sickened,
The self-seeking condition
Of my soul.

Away in despair, I turn
Away, away from the truth-telling
Image before me: that which I am
And cannot escape, even in sleep
Shuddering to behold
The absolute I am become.

So running on then, toward dawn
Running, I claw at eternity,
Luckless in my grasping, as in my fleeing
I go, go, go, down, a-stumble, down at last,
Prostrate, down at the feet of
Mine own, mine own, my very own deceiving.

Saved then, and be damned,
I awaken, gurgling, to the brash innocence
Of morning, rising by finger-tuggings
To the outrageous, sweetly-sweet forgiveness
Of another and another and another
Daybreak!

Metronome

Female Voice

I want only to be loved.
I care not how
Nor when, nor where,
Nor even why—
So long as I am loved.

I want only to be loved.
It need not be
In leafy, sunlit bower
Made sweet by birdsong—
So long as I am loved.

I want only to be loved.
And, being loved,
That love I would compound
Fourfold, and then again—
So long as I am loved.

I want only to be loved.
For I have need
Of love and love
And more love—

So long as I am loved.

I want only to be loved.

Metronome

Male Voice

To whom shall I turn today?

Wife and children follow their ordered paths,
Secure in home and hearth,
Whilst I am driven out
Into the uncertain workways beyond.

To whom shall I turn today?

Friends busy themselves
In their industrious pleasures.
I can only look in
And then move on.

To whom shall I turn today?

Business builds great walls
That daily must be scaled.
My footing grows precarious.
I cannot find a handhold.

To whom shall I turn today?

The church is shaken to its core,
Lost in grief and mourning.
Can a dead deity succor me?
In whose bosom, lamblike, shall I rest?

To whom shall I turn today?

Death will not be summoned
Before his time.
I lack the courage
To seek him sooner.

To whom shall I turn today?

Male Voice

My Father died and somehow I
Became the man he was—
His place to take
In some unspoken, curious way:
My Mother turning now to me
Now with new deference addressing
Her small wants and larger needs
So that, while I am son,
More than son now am I,
Some odd, illogical blend of
Son and sire, a man at last

In her eyes, more than a child
In which one prides and boasts
Extravagant Mother-claims.
And I, wanting to weep, to weep
At my delayed maturing,
Feeling not one bit ready
For this unwonted role
Yet, with a sigh, accepting it—
I, who have not yet with his
Unseemly passing made my peace.

So with my brother and my sister:
Siblings that I tended once,
And diapered and fed,
So, with them, am I once again
More than peer, more than elder,
Like unto him who is gone,
From us departed hence.

And by all others now in his name
Am I called, turning belatedly
With the shock of slow recognition,
Struck with the knowing that
It is I, not he, whom they address,
Thinking they must be mistaken
To hail me thus since he I am not,
Could never be—how shall I ever?

Yet, so it goes and, as it grows,
So does he grow in me with
Enduring strength, rooting
Himself within me deep,
Like some alter ego—
Alter yet idem, for
We are become the same,
He and I, Father and Son,
And thus will it be until
Mine own replaces me.

Metronome

Female Voice

I am trapped
In spaces where nothing exists.

Doors catch me
And hold me prisoner.

I fight off
The enveloping arms of windows.

All the world
Is a vessel.

I am stoppered
In its voids.

Is there no way out?

Metronome

Male Voice

Sitting on the banks of futility,
I watch my life eddy by.

Female Voice

Lying in the thickets of melancholy,
I endure the pinpricks of anguish.

Male Voice

Walking against the winds of my despairing,
I draw the cloak of self about me.

Female Voice

A darkness in the daytime
Is my mind of late.

Male Voice

Living imprisons me.

Female Voice

I am held captive
By the circumstances of being.

Male Voice

The chains of existence
Bind me.

Female Voice

I am weighted
By regrets.

Male Voice

Cares
Stifle me.

Female Voice

Breathing itself
Comes hard.

Male Voice

Yet, I go on.

Female Voice

Gaspings,
Gropings,
I go on.

Male Voice

Seeking
I know not what.

Female Voice

Reaching

For something
Not yet seen.

Male Voice

Looking for a home.

Female Voice

Somewhere ahead.

Male and Female Voices

In
The
Unknowable.

Metronome

Male Voice

That time when one must all his dreams revise,
When life's high hopes along the wayside fall,
When days are all devoid of sweet surprise:
That time of life now holds me in its thrall.
Far-reaching visions do not grip my soul,
My heart no longer pounds with love's demands,
Excesses of the body take their toll,
And artless are the products of my hands.
And yet—impoverished though I am—I would
The remnants of my substance freely spend
If, in the act of risking all, I could
The breadth and passion of my dreams extend.
I seek, I fear, no more than other men:
Somehow to make the old seem new again.

Female Voice

I am grown holy with age:
God draws near unto me,
And into His Presence—
With but one sweet song—
Would I swiftly go.

Male Voice

Ask not for quarter in this life!
Your soul do not lay bare!
Hold fast your heart
Within your breast!
'Twas not for naught
It was so well-enclosed
In intertwining gage
Of ribs and pectorals,
Of sinew and bone,
And anchored then against
The back-broad uprightness
Of Spine!

Your face keep turned
Toward enemy and friend!
Beware of lover and of kin!
Not once let your defences rest!

'Gainst all who do approach
With word or gift,
With thought or deed,
A steadfast watch maintain!
Let not your caution
Once be lulled if
In this your world you would
Survive!

To one and all present
Your stoutest mien!
Be wary of a smiling face!
Do guard against
The outstretched hand!
At every cost avoid
The promised sweet embrace!
All kisses fast forswear!
Deny the yearning touch!
At bay hold off the pleading tears
And you may yet live out
This day!

Keep near a cudgel!
Arm your soul!
Build walls
About your heart!
Tread softly
In the day!
By night,
Alarums set!
Look out
For one and all!

You are alone,
Poor fool

Female Voice

I want only to be loved!

Crossfade then, male and female, the other verses.

Male Voice

To whom shall I turn today?

Female Voice

I want only to be loved!

Male Voice

The chains of existence bind me!

Female Voice

I want only to be loved!

Male Voice

I am trapped in spaces where nothing exists!

Female Voice

I want only to be loved!

Male Voice

Too often have I been unkindly used!

Female Voice

I want only to be loved!

Male Voice

Artless are the products of my hands!

Female Voice

I want only to be loved!

Male Voice

Ask not for quarters in this life!

The voices interplay alternately in a rising crescendo to a chaotic jumble of agony and despair out of which there finally emerges in clear bell like tones:

Female Voice

I want only to be loved!

Then each of the others repeats it.

Female Voices (individually)

I want only to be loved!

Female Voices (in unison, all repeat it, again and again.)

I want only to be loved!

There is a moment's silence, and the female voice states it a final time.

Female Voice

I want only to be loved!

The metronome takes over, ticking out the moments to the new year.

Male and Female Voices

Year's end is upon us!

The minister rises to continue the service.

As the year dies,
As the darkness deepens,
Let us light this fire.

The minister goes to the brazier and lights the small candle in it.

Female Voice

Here is the everlasting warmth and safety,
The ancient campfire—

Male Voice
The hearth of humanity—

Male Voice
The ageless symbol
That marks the defeat
Of all the dark forces
Of existence!

The minister moves about the circle handing each person a small folded square of paper, then, looking down at his/her own square:

Minister
Now turn your eyes
Upon this blank sheet of paper.

Upon it
Invisibly imprint
All that
Which most heavily weighs
Upon your souls:

Male Voice
All the angers and frustrations—

Female Voice
The sorrows and regrets—

Male Voice
The bitterness and rancor.

Minister
Spell out upon it
Every hidden thing:

Female Voice
The envy you have felt—

Male Voice
The hate you have given way to—

Male Voice
The weakness of purpose—

Female Voice
All irresolutions—

Male Voice
Each failing,
Large and small.

Minister
Give it substance
In the handwriting of your minds.

Male and Female Voices
Exorcise its destructiveness!

Minister

Let it pour freely
From the vats of corrosive thought.

Male and Female Voices

Give vent to all that troubles you!

Minister

Let spew each thing
You have harbored in shame,
For
Year's end is upon us!

The minister goes to the brazier.

And the purifying fire awaits its leavings.

The minister drops his/her paper slip into the fire and invites others to do the same. All return to their seats

Minister

In these final moments now,
Let us be cleansed.

Together,
Take heart in the goodness
That remains.

For
This year has not been
All discontent,
All failure,
All frustration.

Male Voice

For
In discontent we have learned to prize the lesser joys of living—

Female Voice

In failure we have found meaning in newer goals—

Male Voice

In frustration we have discovered ways to live with what is!

Minister

For what we have lost
In days and hours and deeds,
We have gained in growth and maturity.

For time has no end,

It can be measured,
It can be labeled,
It exists only in the human mind.

In your minds then,

Grasp it,
Measure it,
Label it for what it is:

Male Voice

A period of growth!

Female Voice

Of becoming!

Male Voice

Of being!

Minister

To all the other years,
Add this year.

Bind them fast
With new resolution—

Find meaning
In their substance—

From their combining
Draw new strength for the year to come—

For
Year's end is upon us!

Male and Female Voices

The New Year is come!

Recording of loud-clanging cathedral bells. Gradually fade in the metronome, building to a climax. Over them, after a moment, the male and female voices join to sing "Auld Lang Syne."

Chimes and metronome out.

Minister

Together now,
Let us give welcome
To the New Year
That stands before us,
Promising an end
To winter's rigors

Female Voice

In the bustling freshness of another springtime—

Male Voice

In the warm and lazy days of summer—

Male Voice

In the glories of yet another autumn!

Minister

The hard, protective sheath
We have fashioned about us

Must soon fall off,
Unneeded.

Let us step out of it,
Young as this year
That is upon us!

Like children—all,
Let us nurture
The budding hopes
That shall emerge
Out of this night's resolves
For the coming twelvemonth.

Hold fast,
In the summer to come,
The flowering joys of love!

Male Voice

Of love refreshed—

Female Voice

Love sweetened—

Male Voice

Love freely given—

Male and Female Voices

Love shared!

Minister

And
In the autumnal mellowing
Of this rich and fertile year
That lies ahead,
Surround yourselves
With the sheaves
Of your heart's aspiring!

Female Voice

Lay up contentment!

Male Voice

Stockpile faith!

Male Voice

Kindle belief!

Female Voice

Be warmed
In the knowledge
That you are not alone!

Minister

For you are a child of Time
In the human mind.

And there is no end
In the ceaseless round
Of humanity's journeying.

The wax and wane
Of your spirit
But reflects
The continuity
Of earth and sea,
Sky and stars.

Therefore,
Cherish
What you are
And
May yet become.

Keep whole
Within this circle of friends—

Male Voice

Deep in this blessed house—

Male Voice

Cradled by the good earth—

Female Voice

Wrapped
In the bundling of the universe!

Minister

Together,
Let us sing.

House lights up

Hymn: Prayer for this House
159 in *Hymns for the Celebration of Life*
1 in *Singing the Living Tradition*

House lights off

Minister

Will you please join hands.
Now,
Hearts joined,
Hands clasped,
Let us be one
In this, our
Mutual affirmation:

Will you please repeat the affirmation after me:
Hear us when we speak,
For we are not ciphered groundlings
In our timeless yearnings
And our ageless dreamings!

Standing in this company of friends
Unfettered by creed, untouched by dogma,
We are the glorious sum of every person,
Reaching out in growing numbers
Toward the blessed infinity of love
And the steadfast comfort of unanswerable Eternity!

They release hands and the minister goes to the brazier.

The fire burns down—

But, overhead,
That ever-constant star,
True North,
Beckons brightly still!

The beacon of the heavens,
Unchanging Eternity,

Summons us
With its cold, clear light!

Together,
Let us go forth
Into the shining sweetness
Of this, the New Year!

Music: Trumpet Voluntary

House lights up. The congregation exits for a glass of champagne, toasting to “A Happy New Year!” with the minister.

The Service of St. Valentine's

*An Evening Service of Love Proposed, Love Fulfilled in
Marriage and Marriage Reaffirmed*

by

John Vlahos

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2006

The Service of St. Valentine's

*An Evening Service of Love Proposed, Love Fulfilled in
Marriage and Marriage Reaffirmed*

Quotations from:

“How Do I Love Thee?” by Elizabeth Barrett Browning

“Come Live With Me” by Christopher Marlowe

“Being Your Slave” by William Shakespeare

“The Taste of Your Kisses” by Amy Lowell

Music: Harpsichord Prelude

Minister:

Dearly beloved:
In this timeless moment,
Plucked out of the sweet eternity
That is the human heart,
And
In the face of this company,
Committed to earthly love
And bound by
The blessed ties of matrimony,
Are we gathered here today.

We are come to this place
As men and women,
Husbands and wives—
To sanctify,
To beautify,
To adorn anew
That mystical union
Of Body and psyche
Entered into be each of us
In another time.

Not unadvisedly or lightly,
But reverently,
Discreetly,
Advisedly,
Soberly,

In awe of the power of love,
In the expectation
Of its reviving strength,
And in need—
Yearly, in greater need
Of its cleansing spirit—
Have we entered into this sanctuary
That keeps safe and whole
Our most precious dreams.

We stand now,
Hand in hand,
That this estate—
Made holy by our joining

And given substance daily
In the freshness of each awakening—
May be celebrated
And given deeper meaning
In the presence of others of our persuasion
Who would,
Together,
Seek the enchantment of re-discovery
As they give solemn utterance again
To vows too softly echoing
In the joyless corridors of our existence.

The lights come up on the two young readers, male and female, as they contrapuntally alternate stanzas of their poems.

Female:

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.

Male:

Come live with me and be my love
And we will all the pleasures prove!

Female:

I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight
For the ends of Being and ideal Grace.

Male:

And we will sit upon the rocks
And see the shepherds feed their flocks
By shallow rivers to whose falls
Melodious birds sing madrigals.

Female:

I love thee to the level of every day's
Most quiet need, by sun and candlelight.

Male:

And I will make thee beds of roses,
And a thousand fragrant posies!

Female:

I love thee freely, as men strive for Right—

Male:

A cap of flowers, and a kirtle
Embroider'd all with leaves or myrtle.

Female:

I love thee purely, as they turn from Praise.

Male:

A gown made of the finest wool
Which from our pretty lambs we pull!

Female:

I love thee with the passion put to use
In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith.

Male:

Fur-lined slippers for the cold,
With buckles of the purest gold!

Female:

I love thee with a love I seemed to lose
With my lost saints—

Male:

A belt of straw and ivy buds
With coral clasps and amber studs!

Female:

I love thee with the breath, smiles, tears
Of all my life!

Male:

And if these pleasures may thee move,
Come live with me and be my Love!

Female:

And if God choose, I shall love thee better
After death!

Lights out and up on choir

Music: Madrigal

Lights out and up on minister

Minister:

And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam, and he slept: and he took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh thereof; and the rib, which the Lord God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man. And Adam said, this is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh.

Lights out and up on two readers in their twenties

Male:

Bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh art thou,
Thy fibre, marrow, sinew—thee entire;
Blood of my blood, and breath of my breath art thou
So much that, lacking thee, I would expire.

Female:

Heart of my heart, and soul of thy soul am I,
Whose form completed is thine own in mine;
Love of thy life, and life of thy life am I,
In whom no spark exists that is not thine.

Male:

Encysted thus, two selves divinely blended
Within one flesh, one corporate being housed,

We are but one till earthly days have ended
And sleep eternal hath us new-espoused.

Female:

And even then my dust with thine shall blend,
From which love's flow'rs will blossom without end!

Minister:

And the Lord God said, because she was taken out of Man, she shall be called Woman. Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh.

Male:

All else forsaking, unto thee I cleave,
For thou art (my wife, my flesh!) as much of me
As rib of Adam was to pristine Eve
Whom God created as helpmeet-to-be.
From father, mother, brother, sister, friend,
I part, in happy dereliction of
Old fettering bonds, by forfeiture to end
Allegiance thus, and reassign my love.

Female:

The world disposing, I my self commend
To thy devices, whims and pleasures sweet;
My strength, my life, my very soul expend
To gather fruit forbidden at thy feet.
And let them take their storied Edens hence—

Male:

Your paradise is my heart's preference!

Organ Music: "Wedding March"

Lights out and up on choir

Music: *Segue into folk song, lover's quarrel, one, two, or more voices*

Lights out and up on two readers in their thirties

Male reader's back is turned to the female reader as she begins

Female:

Being your love, what should I do but tend
Upon the hours and times of your desire?
I have no precious time at all to spend,
Nor services to do, till you require
Nor dare I chide the world-without-end hour
Whilst I, my sovereign, watch the clock for you,
Nor think the bitterness of absence sour,
When you have bid your servant once adieu.
Nor dare I question with my jealous thought
Where you may be, or your affairs suppose,
But, like a sad slave, stay and think of nought,
Save, where you are, how happy you make those.
So true a fool is love, that in your will
(Though you do anything) he thinks no ill.

He turns to her, only to have her turn her back to him

Male:

That thou has angered me, I'd not deny;
I ne'er did say my love for thee was cast
In such fresh purity, untarnished by
The baser metals of my youthful past.
Pure love, I find is but a pallid thing
If, with it, random faults cannot exist
Or it be robbed of minor wrongs that bring
Forgiving kisses we might else have missed.
What use hath age? To love, what doth it add
If, from old errors, one cannot be taught
New lessons and sweet pleasures myriad,
Without whose savor all would come to naught?
Look not upon my failings with such pique,
When I our lasting harmony do seek!

Relenting, she turns to go into his arms as...

Lights out and up on minister

Minister:

So God created humankind in his own image, male and female created he them. And God blessed them and said unto them, be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth. For, lo, as arrows in the hand of a mighty man are his children. Happy is the man that hath his quiver full of them.

Lights out and up on mature readers; the woman preferably pregnant

They stand apart, voicing their separate thoughts,

Female:

Great with child, our child, I am become!

Male:

Great with child, our child, she is become!

Female:

Child of our joining, and of our yearning, in me it grows!

Male:

Child of my loins, and of my yearning, in her it grows!

Female:

Great with child, our child, I am become!

Male:

Great with child, our child, is she become!

Female *A look at him:*

Straight as an arrow, like him may it be!

Male:

Straight as an arrow, like me may it—
Stopping short and amending it as he looks on her and then crosses to her
Slender as a cornstalk, like you may it be!

Female:

Great with child, your child, am I become!

Male shaking his head:

Great with child, our child, are you become!

Female:

Child of your loins, and of your yearning, in me it grows!

Male shaking his head once more:

Child of our joining and our yearning, in you it grows!

Female taking his hands in hers, exultantly:

Great with child, our child, am I become!

Lights out and up on minister

Minister:

Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities, all is vanity. Therefore live joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest all the days of the life of thy vanity, which he hath given thee under the sun: for that is thy portion in this life, and in thy labour which thou takest under the sun.

Lights out and up on mature readers

She is standing to one side as he studies her

Male:

Looking on thee this morn when thou didst wake,
No alteration found I in thy face;
The passing year no withering change could make
Nor of thy essence one small jot erase.
All that thou wast that first I loved in thee,
Unchanged shines as fairly as before;
Indeed, has grown with such intensity
That, yearly, I am smitten more and more.
Yet, were this somehow other than it seems—
Wert thou by chance to change, as change you may—
That image still would vivify my dreams
By night, and would my soul sustain by day.
All that thou art perennially blooms in me,
As all I am must ever flower through thee.

They shift now, into a reversal of positions

Female:

At the first, you were like red wine and honey,
And the taste of your kisses burnt my mouth with its sweetness.
Now they are like morning bread,
Smooth and pleasant,
I hardly taste them at all, for I know their savour;
But I am completely nourished.

Lights out and up on choir

Music: Liebeslied

Lights out and up on minister

Minister:

One more year
The love-song day is come!

Day of re-dedication,
Day of fresh avowals,
Day of St. Valentine's!

One more year
The love-song day is come!

Lights out and up on older readers

Male:

But one more year let me bewitched be!
Another twelvemonth work
Thine alchemies of love!

Female:

Lest I do languish empty,
Let me be thine—when e'er, where e'er you please,
But let me, one more year, full circle come:
In thy embracings round to take from thee
The life-sustaining energies all love in me!

Male:

I cannot live and dream—a man entire—
Alone, apart, all life in self contained;
With thee must I to every height aspire—

Female:

With thee find comfort in each dream attained!

Male and Female *turning to the congregation:*

Look not for other meaning 'twixt these lines
Save this: that all are one, this Valentine's!

Minister:

Therefore,
In this last, long, wintry month
Are we joined
To give festival
With hearts and with flowers.

Now are we gathered
To shake off
What winter weariness
Besets
Our married state.

Let us, then,
Each vow repeat
In tender presagement
Of love renewed—
Renewed
Toward yet another
Springtime:

Time of birdsong
And apple blossoms,
Soft words,
Warm sentiments,
Gentle glancings,
And the quiet holding of hands.

Music: *Husbands and wives sing “Drink to me Only With Thine Eyes”*

The minister (if married) is joined by his/her spouse

Minister:

Will each husband repeat after me:

I give thee this rose
As token of my heart,
Keep it with thine
That it may make us one.

Will each wife now repeat after me:

I give thee this rose
As token of my heart,
That you may hold it dear
As I hold thine.

By this exchange,
Be joined anew
As man and wife.

Guided each
By the other’s heart
Which
Sweetly now
In each abides.

Finding comfort
In its warmth—

Long life
In its strength—

Happiness
In its presence.

With a kiss then,
Let the bargain be sealed!

The couples kiss

Will you join hands—

And,
Hand in hand,
Walk forth in beauty now
To the sound of music
And
In the name of love!

Music: Trumpet Voluntary

Sanctuary lights up

The couples recess, led by the minister to where glasses of champagne await them and are led in a toast by the minister

Minister:

Together
On this fairest of all nights—
In remembrance of
Years past,
Found joys,
Sweet lessons learned—
Let us drink.

Let us drink
To one another

To lovers
Of all times

To the pleasures
And insights
Of love

And
The meaning of love
Yet to be tasted

In the years to come!

All drink in toast

Music: The Anniversary Waltz

May conclude with dancing

The Agape Feast

A Service in the Round

Including an optional section for the welcoming of new members

by

John Vlahos

The Agape Feast

A Service in the Round

Notes: *If your sanctuary has moveable chairs they should be cleared and tables set up in a large “circle” with chairs only on the outer circumference so people are facing each other.*

John Vlahos and Ed Lane had many discussions about the concept of agape. Ed’s synthesis of those discussions will be found at the end of the service along with his more detailed suggestions regarding the setting and the rubric for the service.

Shalom Havayreem (sung as a round)

160 in *Hymns for the Celebration of Life*

400 in *Singing the Living Tradition*

Prayer: Navaho Corn Meal Ritual

The minister sprinkles corn about the circumference of the circle.

Minister:

May it be delightful, this house.
From our heads, may it be delightful,
To our feet, may it be delightful,
All above us may it be delightful,
All around us may it be delightful.

May it be delightful for our children:
May all be well.

May it be delightful with our food:
May all be well.

All our possessions:
Well may they be made to increase.

May it be delightful, this house.
May all be well.

Reading from Zoroaster:

O Maker of the material world, thou holy one: What means the food that fills the religion of Mazda? Ahura Mazda answered: He who sows corn sows righteousness and life. He makes the religion of Mazda walk and breathe. From this food comes the strength to do good works of holiness. From this food comes the strength to beget children. From the feasting of the people comes righteousness and rebirth.

Reading from the Eleusinian Mystery Religions:

On the second day, the people went from Eleusis to the nearby shores, there to be cleansed—carrying with them the festival fare, for it too had to be sea-washed, to be made immaculate and purified of evil by the Mother-Sea before it could be eaten. Dressed in new clothes, the young ones, crowned with myrtle wreaths, all the families gathered for the sacred pageant, to hear the words spoken and the songs sung. To partake of new grain and the fruits of the season that they might experience the new life together in the yearly bounties of Demeter and the life-giving properties of the sacred grape.

Reading from the New Testament:

And when the hour was come, he sat down, and the twelve apostles with him. And he said unto them, "With desire have I desired to eat this passover with you." And he took the cup, and gave thanks, and said, "Take this and divide it among yourselves." And he took bread, and gave thanks, and brake it, and gave unto them saying, "This is my body which is given for you: this do in remembrance of me." Likewise also the cup, saying, "This cup is the new testament in my blood, which is shed for you."

From the table before him the minister indicates and lifts up each for all to see:

Minister:

Brown grain,
Red fruit,
Green and yellow vegetables—

These are the colors of earth.

We taste of them,
Are succored by them.

Calendars have been fashioned
Out of their sowing
And their harvesting.

Each day's span
Is broken and given meaning
By our pausing
To take food,
To be strengthened
And sustained
By this rainbow renewal
Of our lifelong need.

So central is this need,
So common to us all,
That people of all time
Have endowed its sharing
With special significance.

One's allies were "men of thy bread"
In biblical times.

In ancient Libya,
Each gave the other to drink
Out of his hand
In token of love.

The word for "family"
In Gaelic
Denotes those who eat together.

One who shares bread with another
Is the meaning of our own word
For companion.

In whatever place,
When a stranger comes
He is fed.

We welcome our kin
With festive boards.

For the prodigal,
There was the fatted calf.

Feast days follow periods of mourning.

Weddings, baptisms,
All the great and small occasions
Of our lifetime
Are consecrated at the board.

Testimonials are tendered
At banquet tables.

Goodies are a primary reward
For children.

All these:—

The love-feast of the early Christians,
Sharing agape with one another
In clandestine suppers
Shadowed by death.

Potluck and picnic.

Cookout and Diners Club.

All serve to fill a basic need
That is more than mere sustenance.

It is the gathering-together
To share in the psychic security
Of food and drink
That we cling to
From birth to death.

That makes of parents
Good breadwinners and bringers-home-of-bacon,
Presiding spirits of the family table.

That creates
Well-fed nations.

The gourmet status symbol.

The well-stocked freezer.

Fat babies.

And the happy harvest.

In this need,
This greater need
To establish ties of love and kinship—
Together,
To absorb a common substance
And find life-giving power
In its essence.

In this need,
We are one.

Through this sharing,
We shall become one.

Because of it,
We are gathered here tonight.

Waiting.

Waiting,
Through this age-old,
This utterly common,
This singularly universal ritual,
To become men of our bread,
True companions,
Family.

The following section is used when the Agape Feast includes welcoming new members of the church:

It is
Our particular rite
For the welcoming
Of the newcomers—
Those lately come into our midst
To partake with us
The fruit of our questing.

They have
Newly-come unto us
As strangers.

Let them stand now—

To be recognized
And to be welcomed.

The newcomers rise at their places.

Now,
Let all others rise:
Charter members,
Those others newly-come
In all the intervening years.

All others rise at their places.

As separate families,
We have come.

Members of this church family
We are gathered now.
In this surmounting kinship,
Let us all join hands
In common prayer.

All join hands to form an unbroken circle.

Prayer repeated after the minister by all:

Hand in hand, we stand together.
Hand in hand, our hearts are joined.
Blessed be this humble table.
Blessed be this circle of our love.

They release hands.

You are joined now!

Never to rise again
As newcomer,
As charter member,
As any other.

Be seated now.

Share now
In this family gathering,
The essence behind name and way of life,
Position, and place.

[End of section for welcoming new members.]

The minister lifts up a loaf of bread and breaks it as he speaks.

Let us first
Break bread,
And with this staff of life
(Preservatives to retard spoilage notwithstanding)
Let us partake
Of earth and seed,
Sun and rain,
And the substance of eternal human toil.

The minister passes the bread to those on either side. The others do likewise.

Let now
The fruit of the vine
Be poured:
The blood-red symbol
Of human mortality
And resurrection.

The minister pours the wine or fruit juice. The others do likewise.

For
At each year's warming,
It bursts forth anew,
Giving increase to earth
Even as we do
With our children
And our children's children.

For this is humankind's universal communion—

Whether in Jesus' name
Or Osiris',
Or an Aztec deity—

This sacramental breaking of bread
And pouring of wine,
Ritualized and celebrated
In all the many centuries
Of our being.

In cave and hut,
Tent or temple,
Apartment or split-level,
This is our eternal seeking
To crystallize,
To give form,
To celebrate the kinship of love and the family of the heart.

With joy and good cheer,
In the lightness of laughter
And the intimacy of good talk,
Let us eat together—

Passing the bread of life
To one another,

Holding the glasses
Filled with the sweet liquid of rebirth
To each other's lips.

Together,
In good appetite,
Let us celebrate!

The meal begins. When it is ended the minister continues.

The meal is finished.

With the sweetness
Of earth's fair bounty
Lingering on our lips,
Let us stand silently,
Hand in hand once more,
And reflect
On the eternal goodness
Of this planet's yield

And the enduring sweetness
Of love
Between woman and man,
Parent and child,
Brothers and friends.

All rise and join hands.

The hungerings
Of body and spirit
Fed,
Let us return
To our own family circles.

Bearing with us
The memory of this communal handclasp
And the fulfillment of this universal longing.

Knowing
That in this holding of hands
And this sharing of sustenance,
We have become
Indissolubly one.

Knowing
That no longer
Are we alone
And strangers.

Knowing
That we are indeed
Family!

Hymn: May Nothing Evil Cross This Door

159 in *Hymns for the Celebration of Life*

1 in *Singing the Living Tradition*

At the conclusion of the hymn, following the ancient custom of the early Agape Feasts, families will share with one another the kiss of peace as a token of our love for one another.

The History and Meaning of Agape

by Edwin A. Lane

Agape is one of three Greek words for “love” in the New Testament. Its earliest known use is in the Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Old Testament made in the third century B.C.E. It is used only twice in the Synoptics (Matthew 24:12 and Luke 11:42), often in John and the Pauline writings (including the ten references to “love” in I Corinthians 13) and in the Johannine epistles. The other Greek terms for love are *eros*, referring to sensual attraction and from which the word “erotic” is derived; and *philoque*, referring to a caring, ethical love and from which the word “Philadelphia,” the city of brotherly love, is derived. *Agape* is generally used in reference to the divine/human love relationship, but occasionally is used for the very special love relationship among human beings within the early Christian community. It is used in this context in I Corinthians 13.

Unfortunately, it was translated into Latin as *caritas*, the origin of our English word, “charity,” leading to that incorrect translation of I Corinthians 13 in the King James Version. But this error was not made in any of the other KJV references where it is correctly translated as “love.”

The Agape Feast was a love feast in the early church community in which men, women, and children, both slaves and masters, all took part. Although its origin is uncertain it was probably a simple and natural commemoration of the Last Supper of Jesus with his disciples which was a communal passover meal. The Agape Feast was a regular part of the Essene community and is described in one of the non-biblical Dead Sea Scrolls.

The early Agape Feasts culminated in the celebration of the Eucharist. It was a social symbol of the equality and solidarity among the members of the congregation and it ended with the exchange of the kiss of love. In 391 A.D. the Council of Carthage decreed that the Eucharist should be taken fasting which separated it from the agape communal meal. Later councils banned the Agape Feast from the church buildings altogether—perhaps because the word got around among the Roman soldiers about the kiss at the end and they—unaware of the difference between *agape* and *eros*—began coming to the Agape Feasts in order to kiss the Christian girls.

Our Agape Feast, in reuniting the bread and wine of the Eucharist with the communal meal of the Passover, restores that union of the original Agape, and in so doing also restores the linkage of the Passover meal of Judaism with the Eucharist of Christianity. Tonight we celebrate agape, not in its original form which is unknown, but in restoration of its original intent of symbolizing equality and solidarity within this community of faith. And I invite you, even if you are neither a Roman soldier nor a “Christian girl” to exchange a kiss of love and peace at the conclusion of the service.

The Setting of the Tables

Tables are set up in a square or rectangle so people are facing each other during the service and the meal. Take out any empty chairs so there are no gaps in the “circle.”

The table is covered with paper. All food is finger food so there are no plates or flatware. The chicken is served on paper plates and the wine and/or cranberry juice is served in paper cups. All other food is simply spread around the table directly on the paper table covering. You need an abundance of good quality napkins!

One beauty of this is that when the leftover food and beverages are removed from the table the paper covering, cups, napkins, chicken bones, peanut shells, etc. are just rolled up and thrown away. Cleanup is minimal!

The Food

Colors are important—note the text of the service. Food is spread around the table so everyone can reach it with little passing.

Chicken wings, thighs, and drumsticks.

Boiled shrimp.

Raw Vegetables: snow peas, broccoli spears, baby carrots, celery, cauliflower, green beans, cherry tomatoes, peanuts in the shell. (Green, yellow, and brown colors)

Raw Fruit: apples, grapes (different colors), bananas, pears, figs, dates, etc.

Cheese: a couple of varieties cut into bite-sized cubes

Bread: whole wheat, unsliced (baked on a flat surface, not in a loaf pan)

Beverages: red wine and/or cranberry juice (only red beverages)

Paper bowls of yellow corn meal around the table, about one every five places at the table

Paper finger bowls with water for clean up.

Rubrics

Introduce the service with comments on the background of agape.

People in the circle can be given the three readings to do.

The flow and ambiance of the service is enhanced if people can be given the following information at the beginning so the service and meal can proceed without announcements.

1. There are times in the service when the leader(s) of the service sprinkle corn meal on the table, break bread, and pour wine or cranberry juice. Those seated next to those items around the table should do likewise.

2. Most of the mealtime itself is devoted to conversation with one another. Please resist the urge to talk during or between segments of the ritual. If the leader has to call you back to worship to continue the service the ambiance is broken.

The Flower Communion

Including an optional section for child dedication

by

John Vlahos

The Flower Communion

Prelude

Opening Words—Call to the Congregation

Minister:

Now let the summer rains
Our wintry grime of soul
Cleanse full away!

Our spattered spirits
Let us hang
Upon some common clothesline—
There to dry—
Under a universal sun
To soak, to soak
In hot, galactic emanations.

Like flexing toes
In springtime ooze,
Release your minds
And stretch their span.

Reach out
For rainbow vistas
Soon to come.

Let blow
The winds of love
On strangers
Passing by.

And
Make your peace
With me.

For
I will not,
I cannot be
Denied!

Doxology:

Give praise for all the flowers that grow,
Praise every living thing you know,
Let earth resound with songs of praise,
With love let summer fill your days.

Young Reader:

In the beginning, awash with the amniotic fluid of the universe— humankind emerged from the dark, warm, womblike depths of the uterine sea, forever orphaned by our instinctual, upward striving.

We have walked—in countless centuries since—upon this good green earth, calling her “Mother” out of some ancient and persistent memory.

And now, in tentative yearning, we reach out again—this time toward the whirling infinity of space, toward the very spore-banks of Eternity—bravely seeking that which fathered us in the beginning. Yet, evermore, will earth remain our home, for we are bound to it by every atom and element of our being.

Long before scientists first told us that in our blood the saline content reflects the selfsame content of the sea, we knew from whence we came. Caught up each year in the washing sea-tides of summer, we have murmured in our hearts to her—again and again—we be of one blood, sister, thou and I!

And though we have been told that a single atom of iron in hemoglobin and one small atom of magnesium in chlorophyll are all that separate our lifestream from that of the trees of the wood, yet we have always known the truth. Since Time's beginning, walking under the green-leaved canopy of the sheltering forest, we have reached out to lay a hand upon the smooth flank of a beech, saying in our innermost selves—we be of one blood, thou and I. We be of one blood!

Round: "Sweet the Evening Air of May"

Reading

Donald Culross Peattie

Minister:

What we love, when on a summer day we step into the coolness of a wood, is that its boughs close up behind us. We are escaped, into another room of life. The wood does not live as we live, restless and running, panting after flesh, and even in sleep tossing with fears. It is aloof from thoughts and instincts; it responds, but only to the sun and wind, the rock and the stream—never, though you shout yourself hoarse, to propaganda, temptation, reproach, or promises. You cannot mount a rock and preach to a tree how it shall attain the kingdom of heaven. It is already closer to it, up there, than you will ever be.

Anthem "How Lovely Is Thy Dwelling Place"

Brahms

Responsive Reading

All: Walking in Woods,
I grow young again.

Minister: My step grows light
In the company of finches:

Cong: A barefoot path opens before me.

Minister: In dew-sweet expectation, I turn
My face with daffodils toward the sun:

Cong: Its mothering warmth suckles my spirit.

Minister: The season's first perfuming arises
Out of the loamy eternity of morning-moistened earth:

Cong: I am root-fed in innocence.

Minister: Chipmunks scurry underfoot;
They lead me through the underbrush of my desiring;

Cong: I relearn the wisdom of childhood.

Minister: Petal-light rain cleanses my being;
I am awash with Spring.

Cong: The years fall away from me.

All: Walking in the woods,
I grow young again.

Hymn 21 For the Beauty of the Earth
#21 *Singing the Living Tradition*
#12 *Hymns for the Celebration of Life*

Bringing of the Flowers

Minister:
Let the flowers be brought forward now.

Young people bring in flower baskets.

We have brought these flowers here today in a common cause—that, through them, we may come to know one another—take home some part of one another—touch the hearts of one another.

Female Chorus:
If we look deep into the heart of a flower,
The rose is more rose—
The violet more violet—
The buttercup a deeper yellow.
And if we look deep into the heart of those beside us,
More human they are than they seem—
More living than they themselves know.

Male Chorus:
Let these flowers of earth
Made ever more fragrant
By the touch of those who brought them,
Bridge our hearts this day
And fill our senses
With the brimming joys of life!

Hymn 63 Spring Has Now Unwrapped the Flowers
#63 *Singing the Living Tradition*
#321 *Hymns of the Spirit*

[The following section may be used when desired for a child naming ceremony.]

Minister:
“And out of the ground, the Lord God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them: and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof.”

Choral Voices:
In the beginning was not the word.

In the beginning,
Inarticulate folk danced.

They danced!

Invoking the gods of the wood and the cave.

Exorcising the spirit demons

Of sickness and of death.

In supplication and in protest,
They danced!

Seeking to give form
To nameless fears
And unutterable yearnings.

Calling them at last
By their names—

Secret names.

Terrible names.

Filling the caves
With the sound
Of their names.

Of their names!

Minister:

For that which is named is known,
And that which is known is possessed.
And being possessed, merges with those who call upon it,
And becomes one with them!

Choral Voices:

And they called themselves by name.

Shouting the name.

Singing the name

Dancing the name

Growing
In the echoing power
Of their names.

Of their names.

Minister:

For to have a name, is to come alive,
And in aliveness, we grow,
In growth, find strength,
In strength, aspire,
In aspiration, know love,
And in love, are fulfilled!

Choral Response

Minister:

Will you bring forward the child to be named.

Parents come forward with the child.

Minister:

We gather now to celebrate the naming of one of our young—those budlike flowers of man and woman—that we may, by the dear magic of (his/her) name summon (him/her) gently into our midst and make (him/her) one with us. We welcome (him/her) in the name of all people.

Female Chorus:

In the names of Clara Barton and Susan B. Anthony, of Abigail Adams and Eleanor Roosevelt.

Male Chorus:

In the names of Jesus Christ and Mohandas Gandhi, of Francis of Assisi—of Michael Servetus—and of Abraham Lincoln.

All:

Great men and women, common men and women. All join us here.

The minister turns to the child and its parents.

Minister:

You have brought unto us a child,
Born to you out of your joining,

In love and in aspiration—

Male and Female Chorus:

A child in which we look one day to find
The best of two good friends combined;
A fused perfection and a happy blend
Of all that does (his/her) parents recommend.

Minister:

You have brought this child to us now, to be named in the presence of this company of friends, that (he/she) may—by this naming become part of a larger family.

The minister turns to the congregation.

Will the congregation join me in the congregational pledge.

All:

As you have pledged yourselves to the blessings and uncertainties of this child's upbringing, so do we pledge ourselves—to cherish (his/her) sweet presence and to share with (him/her) that which we are and would become.

The minister turns to the parents again.

Minister:

Will you call out (his/her) name for all to hear.

The parents announce the child's name.

Minister:

In the name of this congregation, with the gift of this flower, plucked from the earth that is our home, and with this water from the sea—mother of us all—I welcome you, _____, into the fellowship of all humankind.

The minister presents the flower and anoints the child with the sea water.

Minister:

It has been said that an infant is like an empty book in which anything may be written. This, together, we would wish for (him/her). With these high hopes would we fill (his/her) waiting mind.

The minister turns again to the congregation.

Will you join me now in the congregational blessing.

All:

May you love only that which is good.
May you seek and attain that good.
May you learn to be gentle.
May you keep tame that which rages within us all.
May you respect yourself.
May you never once be used up.
May you wish for happiness for all people.
May you envy none.
May you win no victory that harms either yourself or another.
May you never fail your fellows.
May you know good men and women all the days of your life.
May you follow in their footsteps.
May you give sympathy to all and by your actions lessen the tides of sorrow.
May you add to the sum of human happiness.
May you come to know that which is eternal.
May it ever abide with you.

Choral Amen

Hymn A Blessing

*#263 in Hymns for the Celebration of Life
Not in Singing Our History*

[End of the Child Naming Ceremony]

The Passing of the Flowers

Female Chorus:

We enter now into the sweetness of summer:
The willow trails her golden skirts,
Clouds of blossoms are all about us,
The rose petal days are coming.

Minister:

Thus we gather
To celebrate the changing seasons—
With these tokens of ourselves
Heaped high before us.

They serve us now
In brotherly and sisterly communion.

Male and Female Chorus:

For we are all children of earth.
The soil sustains us all.
Each flower and stem,
Leaf and root,

Knows you and me.
And knows love—
Even as we do.

Minister:

Now let the flowers be passed
From hand to hand.

The flowers are passed through the pews to the congregation.

Minister:

Together now,
Let us join in prayer.

Unison Congregational Prayer

Francis of Assisi

Make me, I pray, a channel of peace,
That where there is hatred, I may bring love,
That where there is wrong I may bring the spirit of forgiveness,
That where there is discord, I may bring harmony,
That where there is error, I may bring truth,
That where there is doubt, I may bring faith,
That where there is despair, I may bring hope,
That where there are shadows, I may bring light,
That where there is sadness, I may bring joy.

Grant that I may seek rather
To comfort, than to be comforted,
To understand, than to be understood,
To love, than to be loved.
For it is by giving that we receive,
It is by self-forgetting that we find,
It is by forgiving that we are forgiven,
It is by dying that we awaken to eternal life.
Amen.

Hymn of Saint Francis

All: All creatures of the earth and sky,
Come, kindred, lift your voices high,
Alleluia, Alleluia!
Bright burning sun with golden beam,
Soft shining moon with silver gleam:
Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia!

Cong: Swift rushing wind so wild and strong,
Choir: White clouds that sail in heav'n along,
Cong: Alleluia,
Choir: Alleluia!
Cong: Fair rising morn in praise rejoice,
Choir: High stars of evening, find a voice:
Cong: Alleluia, Alleluia,
Choir: Alleluia, Alleluia,
All: Alleluia!

Cong: Cool flowing water, pure and clear,
Choir: Make music for all life to hear,

Cong: Alleluia,
Choir: Alleluia!
Cong: Dance, flame of fire, so strong and bright,
Choir and bless us with your warmth and light:
Cong: Alleluia, Alleluia,
Choir Alleluia, Alleluia,
All: Alleluia!

All: Embracing earth, you, day by day,
Bring forth your blessings on our way,
Alleluia, Alleluia!
All herbs and fruits that richly grow,
Let them the glory also show:
Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia!

All: All you of understanding heart,
Forgiving others, take your part,
Alleluia, Alleluia!
Let all things now the Holy bless,
And worship God in humbleness:
Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia!

Benediction

Minister:

The flowers have returned to us.
Like flowers
Let us now stand—
Rain cleansed and root proud—
To receive the goodness of earth
That is all about us.
Like flowers let us become.
Flowers among people.
People among flowers.
Thou in me,
And I in thee.

Choral Amen

Postlude

Simple Gifts

A Service for Mid Summer

by

John Vlahos

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2006

Simple Gifts

A Service for Mid-Summer

Prelude

Minister:

We enter, each year,
Into the womb of summer.
Looking ahead
To that needed re-birth
Of spirit,
Of being,
Of self.

The sun
In its daily course
Warms us
As in no other season.

Rains refresh us—

Nights enchant us—

Summer mornings
Come a-borning

Filled with birdsong
And rose-scent—

Moist-eyed with dew—

Fresher than daisies—

Soft as a sunrise—

As glorious as a tree!

And we gather here,
On a day such as this,
Caught up
In summer's flowering,
Green-growing magic—

To celebrate
Its eternal presence
Under this arching,
Wood-hewn roof.

For we are
In the very midst of summer
And,
As the dog days
Fill us with sweet lethargy,
We know it is

Summertime,
Summertime,
Summertime!

Vocal: "Summertime" Gershwin

Reader:

To every thing there is a season,
And a time to every purpose under heaven:
A time to be born, and a time to die;
A time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted;
A time to break down, and a time to build up;
A time to weep, and a time to laugh;
A time to mourn, and a time to dance;
A time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;
A time to get, and a time to lose;
A time to keep, and a time to cast away;
A time to keep silence, and a time to speak;
A time to love, and a time to hate;
A time of war, and a time of peace.

For, lo, the winter is past,
The rain is over and gone;
The flowers appear on the earth;
The time of the singing of birds is come—
And the voice of the turtledove is heard in our heart.

So, now is it good and comely
For one to eat and to drink,
And to enjoy the good of all our labour
That we take under the sun
All the days of our lives, which God giveth us:
For it is our portion.

Therefore,
Go thy way,
Eat thy bread with joy,
Drink thy wine with a merry heart,
Live joyfully with the one whom thou lovest,
And whatsoever thy hand findeth to do,
Do it with all thy might!

And make a joyful noise unto the Lord!

Come before God's presence
In thanks and in praise,
With gladness and with singing!

Hymn: "For Flowers That Bloom About Our Feet"
#76 in *Singing the Living Tradition*
#30 in *Hymns of the Spirit*

Minister:

For lovers,
Summer is the sacred season
Of the heart

And all its days
With but one person
Start

Brim-full
Of mystic vows

Of hopeful quests
For earthly joys

Of fiercest heights

And direst depths

Of plain gold rings

Green cirlet wreaths

The churches promises
A tenor sings—

And all in search
Of some sweet, magic way
In which two lives
Eternally to bind

In
One
Eternal
Kiss!

Reader:

Awake! for Morning in the Bowl of Night
Has flung the Stone that puts the Stars to Flight:
And Lo! the Hunter of the East has caught
The sultan's turret in a Noose of Light.

So come with me and leave the Wise
To talk; one thing is certain, that Life flies;
One thing is certain, and the Rest is lies;
Love lives, though Summer's Flower dies.

Ah, Love! could thou and I with Fate conspire
To grasp this sorry Scheme of Things entire,
Would we not shatter it to bits—and then
Re-mould it nearer to the Heart's Desire!

Away with words:—
What boots it to repeat
How Time is slipping underneath our Feet:
Unborn Tomorrow and dead Yesterday,
Why fret about them if Today be sweet!

Here with a Loaf of Bread beneath the Bough,
A flask of Wine, a Book of Verse—and Thou

Beside me singing in the Wilderness,
And Wilderness is Paradise enow.

Ah! my Beloved, fill the Cup that clears
Today of past Regrets and future Fears—
Tomorrow?—Why. Tomorrow I may be
Myself with Yesterday's Sev'n Thousand Years!

Vocal: "Who Knows Where the Time Goes?"

Minister:

The children know the summer best.

They greet each morning
In its purity
As if it were
But newly-made
And made for them alone.

With innocent indolence,
For hours they lie
On grassy slopes
And contemplate the sky.

They root in earth
And revel in
The loamy wealth
We sometimes call "unclean."

They talk to birds,
Embrace the trees,
Make braids of flowers
Intermixed with weeds.

They take to water
As the fish in the sea,
Calling her "Mother"
In their wise secrecy.

They hear music in streams
And hum with the wind,
Know the yearnings of hills
And feel holy in woods.

The face of a meadow
Fills their souls with a joy
That human faces
In time will alloy.

The children, the children
Know the summer the best—

As they play at their games
And fairy tales weave
Out of earth's simple bounties
And their own honest zest.

Vocal: “Row, Row, Row Your Boat”

A group of children enter hand-in-hand and pantomime the action as “Row, Row, Row Your Boat” is sung by a junior choir or by the children.

The children also pantomime the action as “Ring Around the Rosie” is sung:

“Ring Around the Rosie”

Ring around the rosie,
A pocket full of posies,
A-tishoo! A-tishoo!
We all fall down.

The cows are in the meadow
Lying fast asleep,
A-tishoo! A-Tishoo!
We all get up again.

The children finish their pantomime and to their places after taking their bows

Two boys pantomime the action as the reader reads from Mark Twain’s Tom Sawyer. Or the boys may memorize and speak the lines:

Reader:

Saturday morning was come, and all the summer world was bright and fresh, and brimming with life. There was a song in every heart; and if the heart was young the music issued at the lips. There was cheer in every face and a spring in every step. The locust trees were in bloom and the fragrance of the blossoms filled the air. Cardiff Hill, beyond the village and above it, was green with vegetation, and it lay just far enough away to seem a Delectable Lane, dreamy, reposeful, and inviting.

Tom Sawyer enters.

Tom appeared on the sidewalk with a bucket of whitewash and a long handled brush. He surveyed the fence, and all gladness left him and a deep melancholy settled down upon his spirit. Thirty years of board fence nine feet high. Life seemed to him hollow, and existence but a burden. Sighing, he dipped his brush and passed it along the topmost plank; repeated the operation, did it again; compared the insignificant whitewashed streak with the far-reaching continent of unwhitewashed fence, and sat down on a tree-box discouraged.

He began to think of the fun he had planned for this day, and his sorrows multiplied. Soon the free boys would come tripping along on all sorts of delicious expeditions, and they would make a world of fun of him for having to work. The very thought of it burnt him like fire. He got out his worldly wealth and examined it—bits of toys, marbles, and trash; enough to buy an exchange of work, may be, but not half enough to buy so much as half an hour of pure freedom. So he returned his straitened means to his pocket, and gave up the idea of trying to buy the boys. At this dark and hopeless moment, an inspiration burst upon him! Nothing less than a great, magnificent inspiration.

He took up his brush and went tranquilly to work. *Bern Rogers enters.* Ben Rogers hove in sight presently—the very boy, of all boys, whose ridicule he had been dreading. Ben’s gait was the hop-skip-and-jump. Proof enough that his heart was light and his anticipation high. He was eating an apple, and giving a long, melodious whoop, at intervals, followed by a deep-toned ding-dong-dong, ding-dong-dong, for he was impersonating a steamboat.

“Stop her, sir! Ting-a-ling-ling! Set her back on the starboard! Ting-a-ling-ling! Chow-ch-chow-chow! Shhhhhhhhh-t”

Tom went on whitewashing—paid no attention to the steamboat. Ben stared a moment and then said:

“Say—I’m going in a-swimming, I am. Don’t you wish you could? But of course you’d druther work—wouldn’t you? Course you would!”

Tom contemplated the boy a bit, and said: “What do you call work?”

“Why, ain’t that work?”

Tom resumed his whitewashing, and answered carelessly: “Well, maybe it is, and maybe it ain’t. All I know is, it suits Tom Sawyer.”

“O, come now, you don’t mean to let on that you like it?”

The brush continued to move. “Like it? Well, I don’t see why I oughtn’t to like it. Does a boy get a chance to whitewash a fence every day?”

That put the thing in a new light. Ben stopped nibbling his apple. Tom swept his brush daintily back and forth—stepped back to note the effect—added a touch here and there—criticized the effect again—Ben watching every move and getting more and more interested, more and more absorbed. Finally he said: “Say tom, let me whitewash a little.”

Tom considered, was about to consent; but he altered his mind.

“No—no—I reckon it wouldn’t hardly do, Ben. You see, Aunt Polly’s awful particular about this fence—right here on the street, you know—but if it was the back fence I wouldn’t mind and she wouldn’t. Yes, she’s awful particular about this fence; it’s got to be done very careful; I reckon there ain’t one boy in a thousand, maybe two thousand, that can do it the way it’s got to be done.”

“No—is that so? O come, now—lemme just try. Only just a little—I’d let you, if it was me, Tom.”

“Ben, I’d like to, honest injun; but Aunt Polly—well Jim wanted to do it, but she wouldn’t let him; Sid wanted to do it, and she wouldn’t let Sid. Now don’t you see how I’m fixed? If you was to tackle this fence and anything was to happen to it—”

“Oh, shucks, I’ll be just as careful. Now lemme try. Say—I’ll give you the core of my apple.”

“Well, here—No, Ben, now don’t. I’m afeard—”

“I’ll give you all of it!”

Tom gave up the brush with reluctance in his face, but alacrity in his heart. And while the late steamer Big Missouri worked and sweated in the sun, the retired artist sat on a barrel in the shade close by, dangled his legs, munched his apple, and planned the slaughter of more innocents.

There was no lack of material; boys happened along every little while; they came to jeer, but remained to whitewash. By the time Ben was fagged out, Tom had traded the next chance to Billy Fisher for a kite, in good repair; and when he played out, Johnny Miller bought in for a dead rat and a string to swing it with—and so on, and so on, hour after hour.

And when the middle of the afternoon came, from being a poor poverty-stricken boy in the morning, Tom was literally rolling in wealth. He had, besides the things before mentioned, twelve marbles, part of a jew’s-harp, a piece of blue bottle-glass to look through, a spool cannon, a key that wouldn’t unlock

anything, a fragment of chalk, a glass stopper of a decanter, a tin soldier, a couple of tadpoles, six firecrackers, a kitten with only one eye, a brass door knob, a dog collar—but no dog—the handle of a knife, four pieces of orange peel, and a dilapidated old window-sash.

He had a nice, good, idle time all the while—plenty of company—and the fence had three coats of whitewash on it! If he hadn't run out of whitewash, he would have bankrupted every boy in the village.

Tom said to himself that it was not such a hollow world, after all. He had discovered a great law of human action, without knowing it—namely, that in order to make a man or a boy covet a thing, it is only necessary to make the thing difficult to attain.

If he had been a great and wise philosopher, like the writer of this book, he would have comprehended that Work consists of whatever a body is obliged to do, and that Play consists of whatever a body is not obliged to do.

Barbershop Quartet

Community Sing: *See attached song sheet for suggested songs*

Minister:

It was a happy time:
A time of innocence
A time of inexpressible vigor,

A sentimental time—

Perhaps
A foolish time.

We had life by the throat,
And the world at our feet—

And
In our prodigal optimism
We dared to believe
That it would never,
Ever
End.

Reader:

Walking barefoot
Across parking lots,
My toes yearning for the feel
Of anachronistic cobbles,
I avoid imaginary cracks
That break a mother's back,
As well as figmentary lines
That snap a father's spine,
And I despise you,
Pourers of glacial blacktop!
You have robbed me,
Robbed us all
Of peripatetic games,
Leaving us only
These ebon stretches
Of goo!

And you, Norman Rockwell,
 You
 Preserver of Memories
 On covers
 Of Satevepost,
 Where are you,
 Norman Rockwell?

Where are you
 As I ride on diesel busses,
 Wishing for a gas mask,
 And slither on vinyl seat-covers,
 My insecure bottom longing for
 The waffled solidity of woven benches
 On a streetcar named Lagonda—
 Shrieking on its rails and sparking blue overhead,
 With a clangorous ringing as it comes!
 Or came—
 For now it is gone.
 They have taken it from us.
 Not for roadside diners
 (TRUCKERS WELCOME: GOOD EATS),
 Not at rest—or even resting in some elephant's graveyard—
 But gone, totally gone!
 O Toonerville Trolley, lost folly of technology's
 Adolescence!
 And mine.
 And thine,
 Norman Rockwell,
 Etcher of Past Glories on hardware store calendars,
 Where are you,
 Norman Rockwell?

Where are you,
 As I munch my drearyburger,
 Processed wafer-thin and sterile,
 Untouched by human hands,
 Out of an infra-red reactor,
 Dulling the palate
 With the gummy enrichment of Wonder-buns,
 While I grow wistful
 For Saturday picnics by the bandstand's blare,
 For potato salad potlucks put together with largesse
 By maxi-skirted women unemancipated by The Pill,
 And stodgy fathers playing one-a-cat in spats,
 And dogs unpedigreed, all answering to "Spot,"
 And God in His Heaven, bearded and benign!
 But damnitall, Altizer, and blast you Bishop Robinson,
 And all you marrying priests and potsmoking pastors:
 You have killed off picnics as well as The Deity!
 And left us what?
 Coca-Cola in a can with a lift-off lid to litter by,
 And not even Norman Rockwell to limit the way it is:
 Drawing teenyboppers with hickeys,
 And the matted hair so real you can smell it,
 And The New Morality as old lechery rebottled,

And the dinning thump, unamplified and dissonant,
And Master MacLuhan truly seen at last in his emperor's clothes,
And sugar cubes in their rightful places
In horses' mouths!

And then, perhaps, it would all go away.

Yes, I think it would,
If only you were here,
Norman Rockwell,
Immortalizer of Americana
In mail-order catalogues.

Where are you,
Norman Rockwell,
Now that we need you?

Minister:

Mercenary humanity—
In its infantile pride,
Has thought
To have taken
The measures of earth,
And of nature.

Forgotten
Are the outdoor memories
Of childhood.

Discarded,
The beatific visions
Of youth.

Lost
Are the sunny aspirations
Of adulthood.

For
In the desparate round
Of getting and spending,
We have grown apart
From Mother Earth,
From the sun, our Father,
Our siblings the trees,
And the whole blessed family
Of plants and flowers,
Beasts and birds.

We have lost our delight—
That age-old delight—
In the feel of the earth,
In the things that grow.

Reader:

Seeing her there, huddled frail
Against my house, displaying

Her wounds, cruel shearings-off
 Of half her branches by icicles,
 Monstrous things still posed
 Above her, loosened by thaw,
 I cannot resist playing God
 And, with shovel, pick and rake,
 I set to work at her feet,
 She no longer looking young
 But old old old, bent over
 In that gnarly way, thatched white
 With the burden of many, too many
 Falls of snow, a weary andromeda
 Bu careless nurserymen planted
 Alongside darkling green spires
 Of yew and spruce and arborvitae,
 Obstructing sun and rain and air,
 Jostling, crowding, asserting
 Territorial rights above and below
 And she, as I discover, finding
 Little comfort in her miniscule
 Plot of earth, her shallow-rooted
 Substance misshapen by twistings,
 By frantic, desperate cleavings
 To crumbling remnants of used brick
 And the concrete shards plowed under
 By masons and builders, along with
 Rusted nails, copper strips, glass
 And odd lengths of wood-ply
 Made resistant by chemicals
 To the needful sweet decomposition
 That might have succored her
 So that her bole a dwarfed deformed
 Almost placental look has about it
 As I disengage it from that man-heap
 Where no summer's warmth was ever stored,
 No springtime waters held in spongy loam,
 No fastnesses of hidden insect world
 In aerating splendor thrived to feed
 And be fed upon by such as she.
 And so, gently, tenderly, awkward
 In my husbandry, I place her down,
 Far down in the forefront where
 Thousand-year topsoil accumulations
 Each inch-deep, await her hungerings,
 Into a bath I have prepared for her,
 A steamy seminal soup of manure and peat,
 Mounding up the rich black dirt about her
 In a sheltering basin that is awash
 With substance of every sort, and she sighs,
 Her few remaining leaves rustling breathlessly
 At the feel of an unimpeded breeze,
 The snowcaps on her head melting
 In the path of the sun's forgotten round.
 And only then, when I have finished
 And stand back to survey my handiwork
 Do I discover the flowers—

Long, pendant, delicate white bloomings
She had earlier put out
Somehow nurtured and brought fourth
Long before my accidental rescuing,
Despite her painings and her small
Starveling womb—frail, young-old
Madonna-andromeda, reacting doggedly,
Bravely, deliciously to some early touch
Of spring. And so, seeing her then,
Truly seeing her at last, I too,
Barren as I had been of pride,
Of all accomplishment, lost,
Lonely and orphaned as I had felt
In this time of wintry discard,
No choice had I except to rake aside
My lifetime's long-accumulated leavings,
Set shovel to the mounded, wasted days,
Days of a dying year, to cling no more
To shabby, bare existence but now
Myself address to newer bloomings
And then upon my own now-summoned
Springtime feed, done at last, done
With God-playing and man suffering,
Revived again, renewed, made whole
By a frail and mute andromeda.

Minister:

It is not too late
To make amends
With the earth we live on,
With one another.

As we sit here,
Surrounded
By this sea of trees
That enfold us
Let us cherish again
The memories we have lost.

Restore anew
The visions discarded.

Recover once more
The aspirations forgot.

From a wiser Nature
Let us learn
To change without destroying,
To grow without overpowering,
To be without demanding.

Let us grow wise
Under waterfalls,
Learn of living
And of dying
From the trees as they are felled,

From the vines as they wither on the wall.

Let the birds in their twitterings
Teach us the glory of a dew-sweet morn.

Let children instruct us—

Let lovers inspire us—

Let all humankind,
In its misery and its ecstasy,
Teach us hunger.

Oh, let us hunger!

Let us hunger
For more than we can get—

Give more of ourselves than is—

And, in loving, become love itself!

Let us,
In this gentle, mothering season,
Try to discover—
As Thoreau did—
All that life on this earth
Has to teach us.

So that we may not,
When we come to depart.
Discover
That we have not lived,
Have not enjoyed to the fullest
What is everywhere about us
And within us:

These simple gifts!

Hymn: "'Tis a Gift to Be Simple"
#16 in *Singing the Living Tradition*

Minister:
The service is concluded.
Another summer's day awaits you.

Recessional

Community Sing

Daisy, Daisy, give me your answer, do!
I'm half crazy, all for the love of you.
It won't be a stylish marriage,
I can't afford a carriage,
But you'll look sweet

I've been workin' on the railroad
All the livelong day.
I've been workin' on the railroad
Just to pass the time away.
Don't you hear the whistle blowin'?

Upon the seat of a bicycle built for two.

Rise up so early in the morn?
Don't you hear the captain shoutin'
"Dinah blow your horn."

Beautiful Dreamer, wake unto me,
Starlight and dewdrops are waiting for thee.
Sounds of the rude world, heard in the day,
Lulled by the moonlight have all passed away.
Beautiful Dreamer, Queen of my song—
List while I woo thee with soft melody.
Gone are the cares of this life's busy throng
Beautiful Dreamer, awake unto me—
Beautiful Dreamer, awake unto me.

Just a song at twilight,
When the lights are low—
And the flick'ring shadows
Softly come and go.
Tho' the heart be weary,
Sad the day and long:
Still to us at twilight
Comes love's old song.
Comes love's old sweet song.

Casey would waltz with the strawberry blonde
And the band played on—
He'd glide cross the floor with the girl he adored
And the band played on—
But his brain was so loaded it nearly exploded,
The poor girl would shake with alarm,
He'd ne'er leave the girl with the strawberry curls,
And the band played on.

Good night, ladies, good night, ladies, good night ladies,
We're going to leave you now.
Merrily we roll along, roll along, roll along,
Merrily we roll along, o'er the deep blue sea.

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2006

Homecoming

A Service for the Reconsecration of the House

by

John Vlahos

The Reconsecration of the House

The congregation assembles out of doors in front of the church. Each of the objects is handed out in turn to the persons carrying them. All wait outside until the trumpet processional.

Doxology

Minister:

We are gathered here
On this day of days
To celebrate,
To consecrate,
To dedicate and sanctify
In the name of aspiring humanity
This house of worship,
This ship of hope
That shall transport us
And all that follow
Toward the ultimate promise
Of earthly existence.

Here we shall,
In devotion and humility,
In reverence and faith,
Put this great structure that is ours alone
To its many uses—
Temporal and spiritual—
With a readiness of being
To serve and teach one another,
To sing our praises
Of the good and the beautiful,
To ritualize all those occasions
Of great and small moment
In our lives.

It is fitting
That we should conceive
And think of this place
As a magnificent vessel,
Waiting to bear us
Into the great adventures
Lying beyond our present horizons.
Arklike,
It sits in simple majesty
Ready to receive us all—
Men, women, and children.

It is even more fitting
That those who have traveled the furthest
In order to make this great journey
Should be the first to enter,
To step forward and lead us into this church

Membership rolls are given to charter or long-time members.

Next,
I would give to our church officers—

So chosen by us all
Through the processes of democracy
To administer our affairs—
To them I would give the articles
Empowering them to act
In our common weal
For our property and well-being:
The bylaws of this church.

The bylaws are given to church officers

To these representatives of our young
I would pass certain volumes:
The sacred books of countless others
Who have, in their time,
Stood before other edifices of worship
In like expectation,
Uttering words not unlike these,
Filled with the selfsame wishes and prayers
That move us.

To them I entrust:
The Koran of Islam,
The Analects of Confucius,
The Hindu Vedas,
The Pentateuch of Israel,
The book of the Hopi,
The New Testament of Christianity,
The Bhagavad-Gita—
All the records of human aspirations
Toward the best,
The noblest,
The eternal within them.

To these I would add,
As symbols of our own searching,
This handful of books
That question where others bow down,
Wonder where others accept,
Move onward while others remain behind.

Philosophies are given to young people

To the smallest of our children
We would give over
Certain tokens of our daily lives
To be borne into our church home:
A bit of earth,
A touch of sea water,
A handful of late summer blooms.

Flowers, earth, and sea water are given to children

For these are our relics
These, we would enshrine
In this house of glass and wood,
Beam and buttress,

Stone and slab.

Carry them all, gently,
With that reverence for the universal
That marks the truly liberal, truly questioning mind.

Let the rest of us
Follow these token-bearers
As best befits us:
As single men and women,
Husbands and wives,
Friends and families—
Each carrying within
That which is most precious to us all.
Lifting up our heads and minds,
Opening up our hearts
As we walk towards the wide-flung doors
Of this, our church, and home.

Processional “Trumpet Voluntary”

Those bearing the various objects enter the church first, standing at the rear of the church behind the seats. The congregation follows them in and sits. Then the bearers carry the objects to the front of the church, placing them on the table. The minister remains at the back of the church.

Offering

President of the Congregation:

Let us join together in singing hymn number ____.

Hymn: “O God, Our Help in Ages Past”

#281 in *Singing the Living Tradition*

#51 in *Hymns for the Celebration of Life*

Board members remain standing at the end of the hymn

President:

Congregated here now,
Having taken our rightful places
It is meet that we should look anew
Into our hearts and minds—
That we might dedicate ourselves afresh
To the aims and meanings of this fellowship.

Male Board Member:

For this alone is our destiny.
Having built this church
We must inhabit it, yearly
With that compelling vision
That has evermore been our heritage,
With those mysteries of life
That transcend time and space,
With a sense of the wholeness of life,
With convictions of enduring value,
And, lastly,
With brotherhood and sisterhood.

Female Board Member:

Therefore,
Let us now praise,
Let us bless, adore, and glorify this shell
Let us love this place in all its barren beauty.
Let us make of it a house of cool repose,
Of light and peace.

President:

For this building
Is more than home,
More than haven.
This building is our fulfillment,
The expression of our accumulated need
Repeated in line and form,
Color and texture,
Shadow and substance.
It is the embodiment
Of all our yearnings—
The symbol of our love
For one another!

Male Board Member:

And we have within it now,
In this moment,
All we need of earthly riches.

Female Board Member:

No need have we
Of graven images
Or fearful talismans.
No need for empty pomp
Or gilded vestments.

Male Board Member:

For by our every action
We shall adorn it.

Female Board Member:

By our every thought
We shall sanctify it.

President:

In service, shall we give it substance!

Choral Response: “All Are Architects of Fate”

Speakers from the congregation rise to speak

Male Speaker:

Day after day,
We hasten to our work,
Leaving home and hearth
Behind us,
Carrying with us
Memories of quick embraces
In ritual partings;

Small rememberings
Of outside greenery
And interior warmth.

Female Speaker:

Day after day,
We hasten to our work,
Abroad or at home
Tending small children,
Or elsewhere, wondering
Ever how they
Are being tended,
Wondering how to address
The needs of work
And family.

Youth Speaker:

Day after day,
We shuttle between
The twin worlds of our discontent,
In the isolated limbo
Of learning and of growing,
With no middle ground to stand on
As we are confronted by
The towering heights
Of our expectations.

Male Speaker:

What shall we make of this place
On this day and in the days to come?

President:

Please join me in the congregational response.

Congregational Response

Let us make of it
A refuge,
But not an escape—
A place wherein to stand
That we may move our world
And shape its course.

Let us make of it
A seeking-place,
Knowing
That in the questions alone
Can answers be found.

Let us make of it
An opening-of-doors place,
That we may not shut ourselves up
Within our human finitude,
Male or female,
Living unto ourselves alone,
For there is no peace of mind

In such isolation.

Lastly,
Let us make of it
A listening-place.
Let us listen
In the stillness of our beings
To the deepest regions of our hearts—
Listening for that which can be heard
If one has the courage of silence
And the strength to hear.

Choral Response: “Thou All Indwelling Mystery”

Speakers from the congregation and Board members (except for the President) all sit.

President:

Men, women, and children,
We make up this congregation.
But we cannot, as adults,
Charge the young
Or those about to join us
As adults themselves
With precepts they must find
In individual quests.

But we welcome them
To use this house of worship
In what ways they will
In their classic search
For meaning and identity,
Giving them all that we can
Through those who lead them.

Church School Speaker:

Men and women as we are—
Human and fallible—
No more than you are we,
And we can, as teachers,
But mark off
Certain guideposts along the way
And lend support
When they would have it—
Reminding them,
Out of our own experience,
That to falter and reach out
For a helping hand
Is merely a falling-back
On the nearest stepping-stone
Of humanity’s slow, tortured progress
Through the ages.

President:

We ask now that the representatives of our young people come forward to deliver the readings for this day.

First Reader:

This was written by John Dunne, in 1630:

“All mankind is one volume. When one man dies, one chapter is not torn out of the book, but translated into a better language. And every chapter must be so translated. Some by age, some by sickness, some by war, some by justice. And in the end, all our scattered leaves shall be bound up for that library where every book shall lie open to one another.

Second Reader:

This was written by Miguel Unamuno, in 1935:

“I shall be asked: What is your religion? And I shall answer that my religion is to seek truth in life and life in truth, conscious that I shall not find them while I live. My religion is to struggle with the unknown. My religion is to struggle with God as they say Jacob did, from earliest dawn until nightfall. I shall not admit the unknowable and the unrecognizable nor any ‘beyond this thou shalt not pass!’ I reject any eternal ‘we must remain ignorant!’ In short, I wish—I shall strive to reach the inaccessible!”

Anthem

Board members rise

President:

And yet, we are not whole.

Female Board Member:

Alone, we stand
Here on the shores
Of that which is to all known—

Male Board Member:

Ready to set sail with the rising sea-tides
Of our collective minds and hearts—

Female Board Member:

Desiring to fathom the unknowable—

Male Board Member:

To take measure of the immeasurable!

President:

For
We are like a great ship,
Landlocked and earthbound—
Ever in need of a captain
Keeping watch on the North Star
Overhead,
Setting us on our course
In this common journey—

Female Board Member:

This hand-held search—

Male Board Member:

This sharing and this striving,

Compacted by this small human family—

Female Board Member:

Family of many families!

President:

All joined together
In a mutual longing for meaning
In this life—

Female Board Member:

Needing only a captain
To set and deep us on our course.

Male Board Member:

Else, rudderless, we drift—

Female Board Member:

An echoing wilderness voice are we
Without the ministering hand—

Male Board Member:

The guiding, sure response—

President:

The distant-vision seeking
Of (him/her) we summon now

The minister comes forward

In this seeking
We have summoned you, _____ .

Summoned you
To submit into your hands
The most precious of our dreams.

Take it now—

Female Board Member:

Cherish it—

Male Board Member:

Hold it fast—

President:

Feed and nurture it—

Female Board Member:

Give it scope and dimension,
Power and vitality—

Male Board Member:

With thrust and tension,
Make it to soar—

President:

High make it soar—
Higher still
Than we have dreamed—

Female Board Member:

Farther aloft
Than our collected vision
Has ever taken us—

Male Board Member:

Toward all the distant wonders
Of our communal comprehension!

President:

Succor us also
In our time of need—

Female Board Member:

Uplift our hearts
When they would falter—

Male Board Member:

Illumine our joys
And give substance
To our pleasures,
That they may all transcend
The transiency of each moment—

President:

Instruct us as well,
For there is no end to learning,
And there is none among us
Who is not beset by the unanswered.

Board members sit. Speakers from the congregation rise, one by one, and remain standing

Male Speaker:

We are but humans
An aeon or two removed
From the primeval mire
Of this fair earth's evolving,
And only lately
Have we cast off
The mindlessness of our beginnings.

Shall we be led by reason, then, unto the Absolute?

Minister's Response: *To be written by the minister*

Female Speaker:

The gods of early people were fearful:
Beasts of the wind and cave—
Thunder, and flashings of heaven.
Cowering humans crouched by lonely fires,
Exorcising their gods with ochre daubs
On vaulting cavern walls.

Shall we spatter our specters on picture windows?

Minister's Response: *To be written by the minister*

Male Speaker:

The Jews of Israel stood in awe—
Their father vindictive,
Quick to anger,
Stern in justice,
Watchful as a parent.

On whose eternal knee shall we climb for guidance?

Minister's Response: *To be written by the minister*

Female Speaker:

Christ on the cross,
Redemption brings to all believers.
Blood and body pass to waiting mouths
Of genuflecting supplicants
Who walk away,
Absolved and cleansed.

Whom shall we be suffered to come unto, in our childlike agonies?

Minister's Response: *To be written by the minister*

Male Speaker:

Monstrous ids and suffocating egos
Blind us with passions.
The new witch-doctors tell us
We are captive
In the deep integument of flesh,
Lost,
In the tortured labyrinths of self.

What universal couch-confessional shall give us our release?

Minister's Response: *To be written by the minister*

Youth Speaker:

False prophets,
Prophets of doom and indulgence
Beset us on all sides,
Urging us
To consume and to destroy,
To find salvation in alienation
When we seek only to create,
To find oneness in each other.

What voice shall lead us
Out of the synthetic wilderness of our times?

Minister's Response: *To be written by the minister*

Speakers from the congregation sit. President rises

President:

Free men and women in a free church
We lay no charge upon you
As you ascend
This pulpit's tree-like heights
To undertake your chosen portion
Of this precious dialogue.
We ask only this—

Will the congregation repeat with me as indicated.

Congregational Response:

That, with love, you will lead us toward love,
With insight, toward understanding,
With humbleness toward humility,
With caring, toward commitment,
With joy, toward fulfillment.

President:

This we ask
As we call upon this child
To take your hand
And sweetly lead you
To your place.

A small child comes forward, leading the minister to the pulpit

Minister's Response: *To be written by the minister ending with:*

In that prospect, let us rejoice
And be joined now in quiet meditation.

Unison Meditation:

Hear us when we speak,
For we are not ciphered groundlings
In our timeless yearnings
And our ageless dreamings.

Standing in this company of friends—
Unfettered by creed, untouched by dogma—
We are the glorious sum of every man,
Reaching out in growing numbers
Toward the blessed infinity of love
And the steadfast comfort
Of unanswerable eternity.
Amen.

Choral Response

Minister:

United in love and fellowship,
We reverence the memory
Of those who have passed
From our midst.

They are with us on this day—

In every fluttering of a leaf beyond,
In the motes and beams
Of each ray of sunlight warming us,
In all that they loved and knew
Of this good green earth.

As they are always in our thoughts,
Let us, in this solemn moment,
Memorialize their presence
By this roll call.

Let each who knew and loved them—
Whether friend or kin—
Resonantly call out their names
Unto the uppermost reaches
Of this, our common sanctuary!

Congregational Roll Call of the names of members (printed in the Order of Service) who have died during the past year

Minister:

In gentle celebration now let us join together singing.

Hymn: “May Nothing Evil Cross This Door”

#1 in *Singing the Living Tradition*

159 in *Hymns for the Celebration of Life*

Minister’s Benediction:

Standing before this green altar, Earth,
Awash on all sides by this sea of trees—
The North Star forever beckoning overhead—
Let us, hand in hand,
In love’s name venture forth
From this fair, hallowed spot,
Joined
In the sweet brother and sisterhood
Of this human family,
Now and forevermore,
Amen.

Choral Amen

Recessional: “Trumpet Voluntary”

A Service for Thanksgiving

Adapted in part from:

Stephan Vincent Benet's Western Star

by

John Vlahos

A Service for Thanksgiving

The chancel is set as a farmyard in the fall. Dried cornstalks can be tied to the pulpit to resemble a shock of fodder. An axe can be imbedded in the end of a log beside a stack of split firewood. A bale of hay, a small stone fence and an antique wooden wheelbarrow would be nice touches. Dried leaves can be scattered on the floor. Use your imagination.

There are two pairs of readers; one pair is the "Minister" and a "Reader" (who should be the opposite gender from the minister). The other pair is a "Man" and a "Woman." There are also three readers (two men and one woman) reading the "Proclamations" of Governor Bradford and President Washington and the letter of Pricilla Alden.

THE SUMMONS

Minister:

The darkling season of the year
Comes now upon us.
For November is the twilight month,
The very dusk-time of nature.

Reader:

Earth pulls her russet blanket
Fast about her.
The winter stars come forth
To deck the limbs of trees gone bare.

Minister:

These are the wistful days and nights.

Woman:

Nights of orange moons and frosty silence.

Man:

Dew-cold mornings in stubbled fields.

Woman:

Birds in flights across barren woods.

Man:

Leaves, gone to mold.

Woman:

The soft forest loam giving way,
Underfoot.

Man:

Stone walls emerging,
Proud in their ordered symmetry.

Minister:

For Man it is the time of the hearth.
It is the season when each of us kneels
To perform the sacrament of the fire
Within his house.

Reader:

The ceremonial of the first fire

Fills our houses with the wood incense of earth.
Summer's warmth is recaptured and remembered
As we pile the hearth with seasoned oak,
With deadwood, ensalted by the sea.

Minister:

Touching the heaping boughs to flame,
We gather about to be warmed
And in so doing,
We consecrate our homes
And our selves.

Woman:

Summer is ended!

Man:

Harvest is come!

Reader:

The world goes forward,
And we move with it,
Holding on to that which we have known.
And those before us have known.

Minister:

“And it came to pass, in the eleventh month of the fortieth year, that Moses spake unto the children of Israel according unto all that the Lord had given him in commandment unto them, saying:

Thou shalt keep the feast of the tabernacles seven days, after that thou hast gathered in from thy threshing floor and from thy wine press; and thou shalt rejoice in thy feast, thou and thy son, and thy daughter, and the stranger and the fatherless, and the widow that are within thy gates. And thou shalt be altogether joyful.

And they went out into the field and gathered their vineyards and trod the grapes and held festival. And there was very great gladness.”

Reader:

In the names of Ceres and Demeter,
Astarte and Semele,
Tammuz and Dionysius
Were festivals also kept.

Man:

Four days and four nights,
The Indians of the new world
Performed their annual rites of purification.

Woman:

Whole villages were cleansed and renewed.

Man:

Old clothes and provisions were discarded.

Woman:

New fires were kindled.

Man:

White men came,
And in the first year,
They sat together—

Woman:

Feasted together—

Man:

Gave thanks together.

Woman:

For festivals are the time of the heart!

Minister:

These are the moments
When the heart sings and dances,
When love is given and received,
When changing earth lifts us
From the pattern of our lives,
Feeding the many hungers of the spirit.

Therefore,
Let us keep festival here this day:
Husbands and wives,
Sons and daughters,
Fathers and mothers,
Brothers and sisters,
Friends and fellow-men.

Gathered together
Under one roof in this church,
Let us now give praise and thanks.

Hymn: "For the Beauty of the Earth"

#21 in *Singing the Living Tradition*

12 in *Hymns for the Celebration of Life*

Male Reader:

Proclamation. To all ye Pilgrims:

Inasmuch as the great Father has given us this year an abundant harvest of Indian corn, wheat, beans, squashes and garden vegetables, and has made the forests to abound with game and the sea with fish and clams, and inasmuch as He has protected us from the ravages of the savages, has spared us from pestilence and disease, has granted us freedom to worship God according to the dictates of our own conscience; now I, your magistrate, do proclaim that all ye Pilgrims, with your wives and little ones, do gather at ye meeting house, on ye hill, between the hours of 9 and 12 in the day time, on Thursday, November ye 29th of the year of our Lord one thousand six hundred and twenty-three, and the third year since ye Pilgrims landed on ye Pilgrim Rock, there to listen to ye pastor and render thanksgiving to ye Almighty God for all like blessings.

(Signed) William Bradford
Ye Governor of ye Colony

Female Reader:

From a letter by Pricilla Alden, dated December 11, 1623:

“We set the last spring some twenty acres of Indian corn and sowed some six acres of barley and peas, and, according to the manner of the Indians, we manured our ground with herrings, or rather shads, which we have in great abundance and take with ease at our doors. Our corn did prove well; and, God be praised, we had a good increase of Indian corn. Then our harvest being gotten in, our governor sent four men on fowling, that so we might, after a special manner, rejoice together after we had gathered the fruit of our labors.

They four in one day killed as many fowl as, with a little help beside, served the company almost a week, at which time, amongst other recreations, we exercised our arms, many of the Indians coming amongst us, and among the rest their greatest king, Massasoit, with some ninety men, whom for three days we entertained and feasted; and they went out and killed five deer, which they brought and bestowed on our governor.

And although it is not always so plentiful as it was at this time with us, yet by the goodness of God, we are so far from want, that we wish you all partakers of our plenty.”

Male Reader:

“Proclamation.

I, George Washington, President of the United States, do recommend to all religious societies and denominations, and to all persons whomsoever within the United States, to set apart and observe Thursday, the 19th day, as a day of public thanksgiving and prayer, and on that day to meet together and render sincere and hearty thanks for the manifold and signal mercies which distinguish our lot as a nation. Particularly for the possession of constitutions of government which unite and, by their union, establish liberty with order. For the preservation of our peace, foreign and domestic. For the prosperous condition of our affairs, public and private, and at the same time humbly and fervently beseech the kind Author of these blessings graciously to prolong them to us. To imprint on our hearts a deep and solemn sense of our immense value. To preserve us from the arrogance of prosperity and from hazarding the advantages we enjoy by delusive pursuits. To dispose us to merit the continuance of these favors by not abusing them. And by a corresponding conduct as citizens and as men to render this country more and more a safe and propitious asylum for the unfortunate of other countries. To extend among us true and useful knowledge. To diffuse and establish habits of sobriety, order and piety. And finally to impart all the blessings we possess or ask for ourselves to the whole family of mankind.

In testimony whereof, I have caused the seal of the United States of America to be affixed to these presents, and signed the same with my hand. Done at the city of Philadelphia, the first day of November, 1795.”

THE LITANY

Minister:

Thanksgiving crowns each passing year.

In the midst of praise,
We must needs look back
To count our blessings
And reckon the sum of our tribulations.

The joys of gathering together
Are mixed forever with sorrow
For those absent from our midst

Taken hence
From family circle,
Church home,
And grieving nation.

For them,
As for ourselves,
We join to say this litany.

A litany for all people!

Reader:

For those who dream at night
Of the blessings of affluence,
Having gone to bed
Ill-fed, ill-clothed, ill-housed,
Sick in body and in spirit.

Minister:

And for those who would
Deny them those blessings!

Reader:

A litany for all people
Caught in the emptiness of strife,
Both civil and international,
For the quick and the dead among them,
And for those who unwillingly
Are about to die.

Minister:

A litany of all our failures:

Reader:

In partisan politics and universal cynicism.

Minister:

In the senseless chasm between young and old.

Reader:

In the wavering ethics of the business community.

Minister:

In the fleeting transience of family life.

Reader:

In the careless spoiling of this good green earth.

Minister:

A litany of all our longings:
Hemmed in by suspicion
Of the inquiring mind,
And the deeper distrust
Of the questioning spirit!

Reader:

A litany of yearnings
For the solemn vows once made and loosely kept.

Man:

Vows made
In childhood's khaki splendor
Listening with tenderfooted awe
To the ringing roll call of manly virtues.

Woman:

Vows made
In the straw-clutching rebellion of adolescence,
With its agonies of awkward independence.

Man:

Vows made
During the disillusion and groping,
The reaching and striving of manhood.

Woman:

In the glowing moments of the nuptial rites,
Standing alongside another,
Ring-bound and rice-swept.

Man:

On hearing the cry of our firstborn,
Lying swaddled before us
In antiseptic glory.

Minister:

A litany for all of us—
O words that call forth our gravest outcries!

Reader:

For we are like the sheaves in the fields,
Abundantly watered by the tears of Humanity.

Woman:

We are the fruit of some eternal sowing,
Rooted to one another in this fallow earth,
This warm seedbed of Humankind.

Man:

Waiting!

Waiting
To be gathered in together
In this time of sleep and renewal.
Knowing not
With what increase we have ripened,
Nor in what measure the coming winter
Will test our hardihood,
Measure our good humor,
Try out our courage and maturity.

Minister:

But
We are sustained,
Knowing that one thing passes
Only to make way for another.

As leaf-mold feeds
The first green buds of May,
So do we, in passing, nourish
The common roots of our kind.

Therefore, let us live each season
As it comes.
Taking the best of it
And enduring the worst.

Reader:

Spending the golden days
Joyously!

Man:

Mourning not—

Woman:

Weeping not.

Minister:

Let us, instead,
To each we touch
In these autumnal days,
Be of some service,
However small.

Reader:

Let us speak gently to all.

Woman:

Let us make our household glad!

Man:

Let us reach out to the lonely,
Call the stranger Brother!
Be not blinded by present evil.

Minister:

Let us
Look to the good,
Go to the good,
Rejoice in the good.

For the good is all,
And must prevail!

Hymn of Francis of Assisi

#203 in *Singing the Living Tradition*

#23 in *Hymns for the Celebration of Life*

CLOSING WORDS

Minister:

Warmed by memories
Of summers past,
Given sustenance
In the sweet expectation
Of springs to come—

Give thanks again.

Take heart in Fellowship.

Together now
Let us seek
The purifying snows ahead.

POSTLUDE

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2006

A Christmas Vigil
A Service for Christmas Eve

by

John Vlahos

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2006

A Christmas Vigil

Please see cast list, prop list, and production notes at the end of the service.

As they enter the sanctuary each person is given a candle.

Congregational Carol: "O Come All Ye Faithful"

The Speaking Chorus processes in following their director and takes its place during the singing of the carol.

House lights dim.

Chorus:

On this night of nights—
Revolving about its sun—
This planet earth
Marks yet another journey
Toward infinity.

Girl Solus:

Another year casts off
Its solar darkness—

Boy Solus:

The winter solstice ends.

Chorus:

Together
We have gathered here
To sit in solemn company—

Boy Solus:

People of our time
With people of all time.

Girl Solus:

We have lighted candles
In the winter night.

Girl Solus:

Candles burn
In our windows—
Beckoning—

Boy Solus:

That all who wish
May find their way
Into this consecrated place

Chorus:

With open doors and open hearts
We welcome you into this house
Who would in vigil, hand in hand,
With us in this ageless star watch stand.

House lights up.

Congregational Carol: "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear"

House lights down.

Boy Chorus:

Now bring into this house
The Christmas greens.

Girl Chorus:

Bring laurel and holly,
Pine branch and fir,
Rosemary and ivy.

Chorus:

To each pass out
The golden boughs of mistletoe.

Girl Solus:

With wilderness incense fill the air.

Boy Solus:

Put pine green and red berry
Into the white teeth of winter!

Ushers distribute sprigs of holly and mistletoe. Parents should be cautioned that holly and mistletoe are toxic and should prevent children from eating them. An alternative is hang the sprigs on a wire rather than distributing them to the congregation.

Congregational Carol: "Deck the Halls with Boughs of Holly"

House lights down.

Girl Chorus:

Beneath the holly, then,
Let all your quarrels end.

Boy Chorus:

Below the ancient mistletoe
Your everlasting friendship pledge.

Junior Choir: "Shepherd Shake Off Your Drowsy Slumber"

Girl Chorus:

They say that Christmas lives
In every child—

Chorus:

Not for a day
But always.

Boy Solus:

Suffer then
The children
The little children
To come unto us.

Chorus:

That we may know the secret of Christmas
And put wisdom into our hearts,
That we may be taught once more
The sweet immortality of childhood.

Junior Choir: “The Twelve Days of Christmas”

Enter a boy and a girl who pantomime the song. (See production notes.)

Chorus:

But songs alone—
Though they may fill
Our hearts with gladness—

Girl Solus:

Songs alone
Are not enough.

Girl Chorus:

Christmas is more
Than family feasting

Boy Chorus:

More than holiday giving—

Chorus:

Christmas is
And was
And ever shall be—

Congregational Carol: “Silent Night”

Enter a mother with a baby. They sit in the chancel.

Chorus:

There was
In the days of Herod
A child—

Girl Solus:

Lying in a manger.

Boy Chorus:

And as it came to pass,
The child became a man—

Chorus:

And the man became a miracle.

House lights up.

Congregational Carol: “O Little Town of Bethlehem”

House lights down.

Boy Solus:
Jesus lives—

Girl Solus:
In every child.

Boy Solus:
And every man and woman.

Chorus:
Teacher of all,
A child in our midst—

Boy Solus:
He lives.

Chorus:
For every child is the Christ Child,
And every child-song is the song of angels.

Junior Choir: “What Child is This?”

Chorus:
Little child, little child:

Girl Solus:
Born to one of us who gather here tonight—

Chorus:
Sent to us, in this winter solstice,

Boy Chorus:
To be one of our company—

Chorus:
Now and forevermore
In all the days of our joining
And our cleaving.

Child of our church,
We bring you
On this winter’s night
These gifts:

Boy Solus:
The gift of brotherhood:

A child approaches the baby and pantomimes giving a gift.

Chorus:
That none may count you different
Nor be counted thus by you.

Girl Solus:
The gift of friendship:

A child approaches the baby and pantomimes giving a gift.

Chorus:
That greets no one as stranger in any land.

Boy Solus:
The gift of charity:

A child approaches the baby and pantomimes giving a gift.

Chorus:
That you may have patience and forbearance
For those who cannot walk your way.

Girl Solus:
The gift of tongues:

A child approaches the baby and pantomimes giving a gift.

Chorus:
That you may gently instruct the immoderate
In speech and the troubles in their anger.

Boy Solus:
The gift of citizenship!

A child approaches the baby and pantomimes giving a gift.

Chorus:
To church and community, nation and commonwealth
Of nations—universe and infinity.

Girl Solus”
The gift of understanding:

A child approaches the baby and pantomimes giving a gift.

Chorus:
That you may live in harmony with all.

Boy Solus:
The gift of love:

A child approaches the baby and pantomimes giving a gift.

Chorus:
That binds us every one, from generation
To generation, time without end.

House Lights up.

Congregational Carol: “We Three Kings”

Mother and baby return to their seats in the congregation.

House Lights down.

Boy Solus:

A child is like a tree,
Ever green.

Girl Solus:

A child grows
With heart aspiring,
Upward.

Chorus:

Turning toward the light,
Singing a spring song,
Always.

Girl Solus:

Now let us celebrate
This tree of life.

Chorus:

In this Christmas time,
In the closing circle of this year—

Boy Solus:

In wonder let us worship—

Boy Solus:

With joy let us sing.

Chorus:

Hand in hand,
The children round,
Dance the ring-dance
Of the ages.

Junior Choir: “O Tannenbaum”

Junior youth group children join hands and move in a circle.

Chorus:

See how this tree points upward
To the farthest star.

Girl Solus:

We are
For all we know,
A light on some galactic tree
Deep in the infinity of space,
Beyond our little star.

Boy Solus:

And children there
May point up to us
And say—

Chorus:

“Oh, look how brightly shines
That twinkling star
On this cold winter night”

Congregational Carol: “Star of Wonder” and chorus from “We Three Kings”

Boy Solus:

Now fully sits the darkness
On the waning day.

Girl Chorus:

The sun moves on its wintry course.

Boy Chorus:

And we must now make swift,
As all folk have,
To light the last long night.

Boy Solus:

Australopithecus Prometheus, (*Enter candle bearer*)
Stone age brother,
Early man,
Bring forth your new-found flame,
For we have need of it.

Girl Solus:

Ancient Zarathustra, (*Enter candle bearer*)
Teacher of the Magi,
Symbol of grace,
Let shine your flaming nimbus upon us.

Boy Solus:

Brother Hindu, (*Enter candle bearer*)
From Varuna, god of fire and light,
Beg for our use
A touch of brightness
That we, too, may have a cluster of lights about us.

Girl Solus:

Noble Roman, (*Enter candle bearer*)
Light a laurel lamp for us.

Boy Solus:

Egyptian brother, (*Enter candle bearer*)
We seek the warming fires
Of Aton.

Girl Solus:

Judah Maccabeus, (*Enter candle bearer*)
Lend us your ritual lights
That this place of worship
May also have its yearly rite
Of renewal and purification.

Boy Solus:

Sweet child Jesus, (*Enter candle bearer*)
Loving Christmas
Another child
Awaits your light.

Chorus:

Humbly,
We invoke you all,
Light up this night.

Chorus:

Now
From these timeless fires,
Let each and every light
Be lighted,
One from another,
And with it,
Thus,
Let us pass this touch of peace.

Candle bearers pass the flame to members of the congregation seated at the end of each row.

Boy Solus:

Child to man
And man to woman.

Boy Solus:

From the eldest to youngest,

Girl Solus:

From mother to son
And father to daughter,

Boy Solus:

And friend to friend.

Chorus:

Let each pass on
This light of love.
In common light
Illuminate this hall!

Junior Choir: "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel"

Chorus:

God rest ye merry,
One and all,

Rejoice
For the dark days are past!

There is light on the leaf,
And the shadows fall away beneath it.

Grieve no more in winter darkness.

Girl Solus:
You are a light of the world,
A tree ever green,
Ablaze with the fires of centuries.

Boy Solus:
Pierce star fires—

Girl Solus:
Gentle child fires—

Boy Solus:
Inner fires
Of our eternal yearnings.

Chorus:
All are one on Christmas Eve.

Girl Solus:
For you have become as little children here.

Chorus:
As little children then
Walk forth!

Boy Solus:
Walk forth
In Christmas' glorious light—

House lights up.

Chorus:
Singing
One and all
Of peace on earth,
Good will toward all.
Joy to the world.

Congregational Carol: "Joy to the World"

Speaking chorus exits followed by gift bearers, candle bearers, and junior choir, all singing.

Cast for A Christmas Vigil

Speaking Chorus: 8-12 senior high school students—half girls, half boys.

Junior Choir

Junior Youth Carolers

Twelve Days of Christmas: a boy and a girl grades 4-6

Ushers to pass holly and mistletoe

Gift Bearers: 7 children from early grades

Candle Bearers: 7 children from 6th grade up

Mother and infant

Helpers: 2 6th to 7th graders to take care of gift bearers

Other Helpers:

Candle bearers' monitor

Production Assistants to manage lights and handling of holly and mistletoe

Sound amplification manager

Props for A Christmas Vigil

Speaking Chorus: Members should be robed or similarly dressed. They need flashlights and script covers.

Twelve Days of Christmas Pair: a set of felt cutouts depicting the "gifts" described in the song; a set of five gilt curtain rings; a partridge in a pear tree

Candle Bearers: A set of seven reversible ponchos; a set of rope ties; a set of silk ties

A Christmas tree with a blinking light at the top

Boxes of mistletoe and holly

Small candles for the congregation

Tinsel

Production Notes

The Speaking Chorus, preceded by its leader, processes to its place as the carol, "O Come All Ye Faithful," is sung. The leader directs in the same manner as a singing chorus is directed.

The "Twelve Days of Christmas" pantomime: The boy and girl enter carrying between them a basket containing felt cutouts of the "gifts." Each cutout is a single strip of linked figures (e.g. the "twelve lords a-leaping" is a single string of 12 figures). The five gilt curtain rings are joined. The girl sits on a bench holding the basket and the boy holds aloft the simulated partridge in a pear tree. Together they try to pull each item out of the basket as it is sung in the song. You can imagine the pandemonium that ensues by the time they get to the last verse, trying to pull up each of the 12 items as fast as the song announces them much to the delight of the congregation! The players exit with sighs of relief.

As the Junior Choir sings "Silent Night" the mother and baby take their places on the bench. The Speaking Chorus names the virtues as gifts from the congregation to the child. The small-gift-bearers, one by one, approach the baby pantomiming gift-giving. With the singing of "We Three Kings" the mother and baby return to their seats in the congregation.

The Light Bearers, each carrying a lighted taper, enter as their names are invoked and space themselves before the congregation. They wear ponchos of various colors and materials: burlap for Australopithecus; gold for Zarathustra; green for Brother Hindu; purple for the Noble Roman; Turquoise for the Egyptian; red for Judah; white for Sweet Child Jesus.

For reasons of safety the order of service should remind people that they need to exercise care and vigilance in handling the lighted candles and, that holly and mistletoe are toxic and (if they are distributed to the congregation) care needs to be taken to prevent children from eating them.

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2006

A Service of Installation

by

John Vlahos

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2006

A Service of Installation

Note: Some of the metaphors and other phrases refer to the architecture and setting in the woods of the Westport, Connecticut church and will need to be modified to fit the architecture and setting of your church.

A speech choir speaks the Chorus lines.

Prelude

Processional Hymn: “As Tranquil Streams”

#145 in *Singing the Living Tradition*

#253 in *Hymns for the Celebration of Life*

Chorus:

In the beginning was the woods—
And the woods opened wide its arms
To receive us.
A fellowship of seekers were we—
Drawn together
Out of common need,
To seek meaning
In the Eternal—
In that which was,
In that which is,
In that which yet may be!

Anthem

Chorus:

In the beginning,
Inarticulate human beings danced.
They danced—
Invoking and propitiating
The gods of the wood and the cave,
Exorcising the spirit demons
Of sickness and of death.
In supplication and in protest,
They danced—
Seeking to give form
To wordless fears and inchoate yearnings.

Congregational Response:

Human as we are,
Having found utterance,
Speaking in many tongues,
No less muted are we
In our congregational silence
As we sit here tonight,
Enfolded by woods,
Secure
In the hushed, dark beauty of its presence,
Seeking meaning anew
In this cave of our own making:
This wood-girt sanctuary,
This church,
This home!

Chorus:

There was first a circle
For the threshing of grain.
People moved about it,
Singing.
Others gathered around
To listen, to reply—
And became
Chorus!

The gods were summoned—
And in the summing
People, who were human,
Became gods.

They gathered again
In the vaulting cathedrals,
Playing out the mysteries of their faith,
Aspiring toward the furthest buttress,
In the everlasting outreach
Of the human heart.

For centuries
The church has remained
The sanctuary of human dreams.
Violated.
It has remained inviolate!
Persecuted,
It has prevailed!

Congregational Response:

We are the sum
Of its prevailing
And of its dreaming.
And this building
Is more than home,
More than haven.
This building is our fulfillment,
The expression
Of our accumulated need
Repeated in glass and wood,
Beam and buttress,
Stone and slab.
It is the embodiment
Of all our yearnings—
The symbol of our love
For one another!

Hymn: “May Nothing Evil Cross This Door
#1 in *Singing the Living Tradition*
#159 in *Hymns for the Celebration of Life*

Chairperson:

Thus far have we come,
Bound together
In the continuity of our beliefs
And the growing power
Of our love for one another—
Given new dimensions
And new strength
By the creative leadership
Of those who have guided us.

The Chorus calls out, one at a time, the names of church leaders from the past—founders, ministers, lay leaders, etc. When each name is called the Chairperson responds with a one or two sentence about the person.

Chairperson:

These leaders have given that continuity
Without which no church can survive,
No congregation flourish.
Through the continuity of their ministry,
Love and belief have become firmly rooted
In our hearts.
And now,
In this springtime of our maturing,
We await its flowering.

Chorus:

For
We are like a great ship,
Landlocked and earthbound—
Ever in need of a captain
Keeping watch on the North Star
Overhead,
Setting us on our course
In this companion journey,
This handheld search,
This sharing and this striving,
Compacted by this small human family,
Family of many families,
Family of brothers and sisters,
Wives and husbands,
Children and parents,
All joined together
In a mutual longing for meaning
In this life
And in the eternity
That is all our loves!

Chairperson:

We ask now that the representatives of the Search Committee
bring [name of person being installed] into our midst.

In this seeking,
We have sought you out, [name].
Sought you
And submitted into your hands
The most precious of our dreams.
Take it now, [name].

Chorus:

Cherish it.
Hold it fast.
Feed and nurture it.
Give it scope and dimension,
Power and vitality.
With thrust and tension,
Make it to soar—
High, make it soar,
Higher still
Than we have dreamed,
Farther aloft
Than our collected vision
Has ever taken us—
Toward all the distant wonders
Of our communal comprehension!

Chorus:

Succor us also
In our times of need.
Uplift our hearts
When they would falter.
Illumine our joys
And give substance
To our pleasures,
That they may all transcend
The transiency of each moment.

Instruct us as well,
For there is no end to learning,
And all living is but a beginning
To learning.

Chairperson:

Will the members of the [name of church] please rise
and repeat with me as indicated.

We lay no charge upon you.
We ask only this—

Chairperson and Members:

That, with love, you will lead us toward love,
With insight, toward understanding,
With humbleness toward humility,
With caring toward commitment,
With joy, toward fulfillment.

Lead us in all these ways
And we shall construct about you
A sheltering home
Of love and companionship,
Outstretched hands, and welcoming hearts.

We and our children,
And their children to come,
One and all,
We do so pledge,
This night!

Minister *may write his/her own response or use the following:*

I assume the duties of this ministry
With feelings of both joy and fear—
Joy for the opportunity you place in my hands,
And fear for the responsibility you have placed beside it.
I accept the embrace of your love
In the hope that I can return it
From you I ask love and understanding,
Concern and dedicated labor
To the end that together
We can transform hope into fulfillment,
Dream into reality.
Together may we seek
Meanings and values for ourselves.
Together may we seek
To make the world a better place
In which all people can live
In peace and goodwill.

Unison Meditation:

Hear us when we speak,
For we are not ciphered groundlings
In our timeless yearnings
And our ageless dreamings!

Standing in this company of friends—
Unfettered by creed, untouched by dogma—
We are the glorious sum of every person,
Reaching out in growing numbers
Toward the blessed infinity of love
And the steadfast comfort of unanswerable eternity.
Amen.

Anthem

Sermon

Recessional Hymn: “Not in Vain the Distance Beacons”
#143 in *Singing the Living Tradition*
#195 in *Hymns for the Celebration of Life*

Benediction by the Minister:

Standing before this green altar, Earth,
Awash on all sides by this sea of trees—
The North Star forever beckoning overhead—
Let us, hand in hand,
In love's name venture forth
From this hallowed spot,
Joined
In the sweet fellowship
Of this human family,
Now and forevermore!
Amen.

Choral Amen

Postlude

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