

Happy National Macaroon Day!

Sermon given at
Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Society
May 31, 2026

Rev. Craig M. Nowak

So I want to start today's sermon by taking a brief poll of everyone here.

Which of the following is most true for you:

- A. You knew the sermon title ahead of time and you just had to come and find out what this was all about.
- B. You had no idea what the sermon title was and had you known you would have stayed in bed.
- C. When you saw the title you didn't really know or care what it was about you just figured, hey sounds like a celebration, I'm there!

For those of you who chose option A, I applaud your curiosity. For those of you who chose option B, Would it have helped if I also mentioned today is National Autonomous Vehicle, National Speak in Complete Sentences Day, and National Smile Day?....oh also World Parrot Day...which, I have to say, does make me smile. And for those of you who chose option C, you may know more about what this sermon speaks to than you realize. So let us carry on...

Every so often I have this dream from which I awake feeling extremely frustrated. It's one of those dreams where I'm trying to say something and no one would listen or could hear what I was trying to say. As a preacher I'm a bit sensitive to this kind of thing. Of course preachers aren't the only people get frustrated or worried about not being heard or listened to in their dreams...or their waking life for that matter.

Take the mother in this morning's reading. She comes to a minister to have her baby baptized before he undergoes a risky surgery. Her own church won't perform the baptism because she's not married to the child's father. Dutifully, Robert Walsh, the UU minister to whom this concerned mother has turned explains the difference between a baptism and a UU child dedication service making sure to emphasize that her marital status is not an impediment, but also that the dedication is not seen as washing away sin or understood to secure a place in heaven. Patiently the worried mother listens. Finally she is able to speak, "All I want is to know is that God blesses my baby."

And in naming this concern, the women, in a sense speaks to a need we all have, to have our being matter, to mark in some meaningful way our existence...to be blessed.

Indeed as Carl Seaburg wrote in the introduction to his compilation of readings, *Great Occasions*, “From the drawings graven on cave sides to flags flung far upon the moon, humankind has been proclaiming to the universe, “I’m here.”

Seaburg continues, “Humanity’s earliest efforts have been to speak to that assumed Great Cosmic ear- by whatever name it was called. To beg for rain for the crops, to ask their fertility, to recover from sickness, to escape danger, to win in battle- all the longings felt by human creatures during their little lives.”

Among the most recognizable means by which humankind speaks its existence, its joy, concerns, sufferings, hopes and dreams is through what Seaburg calls, “crystallizing events” those rituals and celebrations both public and private we create, observe and cherish throughout our lives.

As our story for all ages, *Let’s Celebrate*, reminds us, the precise meaning and form of human ritual and celebration differ from culture to culture, family to family, and person to person but regardless of clime, creed or clan, they all reflect, what the late Universalist visionary Kenneth Patton called, the inherent human need to celebrate” ...a need to connect our individual lives to the larger rhythm or pulse of life.

We do this by stepping out of our routine and into a moment beyond space and time. Nations, states, and towns mark pivotal moments in their history, commemorate the lives and achievements of national heroes and heroines, and remember their fallen through the establishment of national holidays celebrated with various events: parades, moments of silence and so forth. Similarly religions and other voluntary associations celebrate people and events meaningful to their particular history often accompanied by a prescribed ritual or liturgy meant to imbue celebrants with a sense of belonging. And families and friends gather together to mark the birth and death of loved ones, to observe rites of passage, to carry forward traditions and create new ones. Individuals too have their ways of celebrating and remembering events, people and anniversaries highly personal to them.

Indeed, celebrations take many forms. Parties with food and drink, music and dancing...and heaven help us, karaoke. There may be cake and candles and gifts or incense and prayers, macaroons or matzo. Celebrations may involve pomp and circumstance or cutting loose and the easing formalities. They may generate

awe and wonder, laughter or tears. Sometimes celebrations are joyful. Other times sad. Often they are bittersweet.

Whatever their tenor or tone, celebrations matter. They matter because they are the way we, as finite beings connect to history, participate in life and make meaning. The human need to celebrate and the power and meaning of the celebration and rituals we observe cannot be denied. They are essential elements of our identity and sense of belonging that ground us in the midst of our ever present existential angst. This is why one of the ways conquering and oppressive forces throughout history have attempted to demoralize and subjugate those over whom they sought dominion was to attempt to diminish or deny a people's history and traditions by leveling their cities and destroying their art, cultural artifacts, and ritual objects or to alienate them by denying them participation in the dominant culture's rituals and celebrations.

But The human spirit is not that easily crushed.

Our deep human need for meaning and connection, our need to proclaim, "I'm here" to the universe is inextricably linked to the rituals and celebrations which again help establish and ground our identity as beings blessed in the midst of life's mystery and uncertainties. Thus from the ashes of war cities are rebuilt. Holidays and observances both old and new emerge to strengthen or repair bonds tested or broken in the wake of tragedy.

And oppressed people's continually seek ways to subvert the oppressors' efforts to define and determine the meaning of their lives through displays, rituals and celebrations of pride, solidarity, and self empowerment.

Our celebrations, rituals, and observances help us tap into what Kenneth Patton calls our, "native aliveness", something he notes is often buried by the weight of mass culture under a swamp of habits and routines."

Celebration then is a means of breaking out of our habits and routine that frees us to more fully discover and appreciate the depth and meaning of life which leads us towards a more awakened sense and celebration of life itself.

This celebration of life, Kenneth Patton reminds us,

"issues from the discovery of the universe around us, and from social and shared experience. It is also something intimate, native to each personal experience, and ultimately unsharable. We can share with no one else the sense of our heart's beating, the constant savor of saliva on the tongue, the weariness of our bones. The sense of time working in and through them is each human being's personal

knowledge. To experience life is to be life. In celebrating life we are celebrating our most secret and incommunicable selves as well as celebrating the universe swinging over us.”

He continues,

“The universe beneath our skins is as immense as that whole of which we are the merest atom. Infinities of time and history are composed in our brief days. If we can escape in our imagination from our entrapment in flesh and time, we can comprehend our private histories as identical with the universe, our future life extending into the untouchable tomorrows.”

Celebrations are the way we both touch and transcend the reality of our mortality...they are creative processes through which we number our days, the means by which our being is blessed. This is why for the women in our reading, some sort of ceremony, some manner of celebration to mark her tiny child's existence was so important. The form was secondary to the function of the ritual.

A few hours from now we will celebrate together my installation as your settled Minister. As you might imagine I have been thinking and reflecting a lot about the significance and meaning of this event, this celebration. As with most celebrations of this type, its meaning is multilayered. There is the formal, institutional meaning expressed through the public ritual and liturgy of the service. There is the historical meaning and context not just in terms of this congregation's succession of ministers but also the continuation of the basic tenants of congregational polity as first outlined in 1648 by our Puritan ancestors in the Cambridge Platform which established the right of congregations to choose their own minister.

Then there is the meaning this event has for you... as both a congregation and as individuals, after all even though the event has been referred to as “my installation”, it is in reality, a shared act and celebration. Indeed it is our installation.

And then there's the meaning this has for me. And this is where perhaps, Kenneth Patton's observation, “we can share with no one else the sense of our heart's beating” rings most true. When I try to translate the meaning of this celebration to me into words, I, a man who's livelihood depends upon my ability translate ideas and feelings into words, am rendered speechless. Not by the absence of thoughts or feelings but rather the sheer magnitude of the joy, gratitude, excitement, and humility with which I meet this day and this call.

It is, I have discovered, a humble reminder of our limitations and potential as human beings. For though we possess the power to reason, in the face of the ineffable, sometimes only ritual will do, for it is our celebrations great and small, happy and sad, that ultimately connect us to and convey our lived experience, reminding us in the midst of life's mystery and uncertainties we are indeed, blessed.

Amen and Blessed Be