

Celebrating our Common Threads...

Opening Video: *Oh Happy Day* by the South African Youth Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AheC9ul5w1A>

Oh, Happy Day...it is a happy day, isn't it?

Good morning and thank you for joining us in celebration this morning. If you're new with us this morning, my name is Rev. Diana Johnson, and I am the Pastor and Spiritual Director for the Mystic Heart Spiritual Center. I'm so happy to welcome you home to our Spiritual Community, and home to your own Mystic Heart.

It's so important to take the time to celebrate, to feel and share the absolute Joy of being alive. Celebration is an important Spiritual Practice. It is a way of honoring our past accomplishments, individually and collectively. We look to the coming year, knowing we have done our Spiritual Work...we abide in the commitment to make that Work a way of life...and we Celebrate the fruits of our labor, with gratitude, in advance...because we are assured by our Faith in a Loving and Lawful presence, an Infinite Intelligence, Order, and Power, that we are becoming the beneficial presence we came here to be. That is something worth celebrating!

We tend to forget that Celebration is an important Spiritual Practice, just as important as Prayer, Meditation, Study, and Service. Celebration is an outward expression of Joy, of Gratitude. And we have a lot to be grateful for today. Did you know that today is the 3rd day of Christmas in the liturgical calendar? This is the day that the Catholics honor St. John, the only one of Jesus's disciples that did not die a martyr, but continued to speak the teachings of Jesus, knowing that death was a possibility. A prayer for the 3rd day of Christmas is that each of us may have the conviction in our own hearts to put the most important thing first...to acknowledge, and be led by, those things that truly inspire us.

On this 3rd day of Christmas, *Unity International*, a New Thought branch of the Christian tradition, acknowledges and celebrates the Spiritual *Power* that lives within each one of us...the one Power individualizes in, through and as each one of us...the Power that Jesus talked about when he said, "It is not I, but the Father within, that doeth the work." (John 14:10)

And starting yesterday, December 26th, the African-American community is celebrating the cultural holiday of Kwanzaa. We are such a rich and diverse culture. We have so much to celebrate, so much to be grateful for. Let's prepare ourselves...join me as we ground ourselves in Conscious Connection, as one human family... feeling our common desire...to be the change we wish to see in our world...to take an active part in the conscious evolution of humanity...so that we can leave the world a better place for our children and their children to grow and thrive.

Let's breathe together, feeling the life-giving Power of that breath, and knowing that through the very air that we breathe, we are connected. As we settle into a field of Absolute Joy, Gratitude, and Aliveness, where we are all One Life, inseparable... interdependent... we know that each of us an irreplaceable strand in the tapestry of Life. Feel into this moment, into the gathering of sacred community.

Now let's expand our connection. The Eye behind the eye can sense a global web of consciousness, each of us a point of Light in that web, all interconnected across the planet...let's include all beings who in this moment, might be sitting in meditation or prayer, might be attending sacred services...acknowledging the Presence of the Divine... consciously connected by our whole-hearted devotion...feeling the collective intention that brought us here...feeling the impulse to grow and evolve that's awakening in all of us.

Let us also include all humans, no matter where each one is in their spiritual walk...all of the animal beings...all plant life...all of the elements...our Sacred Mother, as well. As we sense this very intimate connection, all beings sharing in our connection, our Light shines brighter and brighter, until our separate points of Light melt into one, radiant, beaming Light.

As we feel our Oneness, we *breathe* in the Joy, the Peace, the Power, and the Life present in this moment, and then send it back out into the atmosphere on the out breath...knowing that these qualities Guide and Govern all that is unfolding.

This is our time of Celebration and Communion. In consciously establishing our connection with one another, and with all beings, we empower our work here...our prayer, meditation, and communion ripples out and touches lives in ways we that may never know. We are making a difference. Just breathe that in for a moment.

Coming back into this space, we open our eyes, our hearts, and our minds. Take a look at who is here celebrating with you this morning. This is your Spiritual Family. This is one of your support systems. These are people who care about you, who are there for you. We are social animals...interdependent. Community is so important.

Our Community's theme for the month of December is *We Are the Light*...and we are finishing the year by *Celebrating Our Common Threads*.

We are such a rich and diverse culture, aren't we? Here in Redding, we are becoming more diverse in a number of ways, and I think this can only bless our community. Today I want to talk about a Cultural Holiday celebrated by the African-American community here in the United States. Kwanzaa is not a religious holiday, and is not meant as an alternative to Christmas. Jacob Olupona, professor of indigenous African religions at Harvard Divinity School, says that, "For people of African descent, religion is a way of life, and it can never be separated from the public sphere. African spirituality is truly holistic."

He goes on to say that “African spirituality simply acknowledges that beliefs and practices touch on and inform every facet of human life, and therefore African religion cannot be separated from the everyday or the mundane.” So what you might find as we learn a little bit about this cultural holiday is that there are common threads that run between Kwanzaa and our own New Thought principles...those ideals that are carrying us forward into the next yet-to-be for humanity as a whole.

The celebration of Kwanzaa was created in 1966 by Dr. Maulana Karenga, professor of African Studies at California State University—Long Beach, to celebrate the love of family within the context of African American culture, and to honor African heritage and values. Professor Karenga based this celebration on the year-end harvest festivals that have taken place in different African cultures for thousands of years.

The name he chose, Kwanzaa, comes from a Swahili phrase, *matunda ya kwanzaa*, which means *first fruits of the harvest*.

Kwanzaa is a seven-day celebration, and each day acknowledges a different principle of African-American culture. Each principle is symbolized by one of the items on the altar. We have here a *Kinara*, or seven-branch candle holder, in honor of the branches of the ancestors; one candle is lit each day, acknowledging the light of the sun. The Kinara is sitting on a Mikeka, the placemat woven of red, green and black fabric. It represents the historical foundation on which people build their lives. The field of green represents the fertile land of Africa; the black represents the African people; and the red stands in remembrance of the blood that has been shed.

There is also a Unity Cup; on the 6th day the family shares in the libation ceremony, each drinking a blessing in remembrance of the ancestors in whose footprints we stand today. Libation is also given to the important elemental or living energies that make up the fiber of our universe, such as the rivers, forests or animal kingdom. Often, you will see corn and other food displayed to symbolize and give thanks for the abundance of the earth. Today we join the African American culture in celebration.

The first day of Kwanzaa celebrates *Umoja*, or *Unity*. The intention is that we strive for and maintain unity in the family, community, nation, race, and the world. The focus is on oneness and cooperation. We light this first candle for Unity.

Day 2 brings the celebration of *Kujichagulia*, or *Self-Determination*. As one celebrating this holiday, I would commit to defining myself, naming myself, creating for myself, and speaking from myself. There is an acknowledgment that we must work with all people and cultures for the good of the community, of the whole; but we must not lose our identity, goals, or sense of self-reliance in the process. We light this second candle for self-determination.

Day 3 brings the celebration of *Ujima*, or *Collective Work and Responsibility*. This day is about building and maintaining our community together and make our brothers' and sisters' problems *our* problems and solving them together. We light this third candle for Collective Word and Responsibility.

Day 4 gives attention to *Ujamaa*, or *Cooperative Economics*. Here the focus is given to building and maintaining family-owned businesses, and profiting from them together. We light this fourth candle for Cooperative Economics.

Day 5 speaks to *Nia*, or *Purpose*. On this day, there is an intention to make the collective vocation one of building and developing the community in order that the people in it be restored to their prior sense of greatness and mastery. We light this fifth candle for Purpose.

Day 6 celebrates *Kuumba*, or *Creativity*. There is a commitment that one does as much as she can, in the way that she can, to make the community a more beautiful and beneficial place for future generations. We light this sixth candle for Creativity.

Day 7 is the day to celebrate *Imani*, or *Faith*. This closing day of celebration brings the commitment to wholeheartedly believe in our people, our parents, our teachers, our leaders, and our righteousness, or alignment with Higher Power, with the right and the true. We light this seventh candle for Faith.

Embedded Music: A Kwanzaa Song by Lovely Hoffman

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kg2T3zRfIRc>

Isn't this a beautiful practice? We share so many of these ideals in our Spiritual Community, and in our individual spiritual journeys.

These principles are closely related to the tradition I grew up in...Science of Mind and Spirit. In his 5th Principle, Dr. Ernest Holmes says this: "**WE BELIEVE** in the unity of all life, and that the highest God and the innermost God is one God. We believe that God is personal to all who feel this indwelling presence." This spiritual principle is being applied and lived by the African American people as they strive for unity in the world.

I can see threads of self-determination, collective work and responsibility, and cooperative economics woven into these next three Science of Mind Principles:

WE BELIEVE the ultimate goal of life to be a complete freedom from all discord of every nature, and that this goal is sure to be attained by all.

WE BELIEVE in the healing of the sick and control of conditions through the power of this Mind.

WE BELIEVE in our own soul, our own spirit and our own destiny; for we understand that the life of all is God.

Basically, these speak to how we use our Spiritual Power, as conduits of Spirit, to enrich our lives and make the world a better place. The remaining Principles as written by Dr. Holmes, all speak to the Oneness of everything...the Spiritual Nature of all that is:

He sees God as “the Living Spirit Almighty; (the) one, indestructible, absolute and self-existent Cause...manifesting Itself in and through all;” and humanity as “the individualization of the One Spirit.” He speaks of “the eternity, the immortality and the continuity of the individual soul, forever and ever expanding,” and says that “heaven is within us, and that we experience it to the degree that we become conscious of it.”

All of these ideas and principles are inherent in African spirituality. Religion or spirituality informs everything in traditional African culture. So there is no need to state them as Principles. The seven principles of Kwanzaa speak to how we take these spiritual Truths and apply them in our lives and in our world.

I think that it is time that we begin to really acknowledge and celebrate the common threads that run through our various cultural practices and celebrations. In this way we can truly embrace the idea of inclusivity. Here’s something to think about...before I can truly be inclusive, I have to be able to really see you. What if I could really see you? And what if I was willing to be seen by you, just as I am, and just as you are?

Some of you may already know this but the Zulu tribe of South Africa has a greeting that I just love. It speaks to me...and it addresses inclusivity in a more deep and meaningful way than I have ever known before. The word is **Sawubona**. It literally means we see you...the whole tribe and all our ancestors see your tribe and your ancestors. It means I see you and you are important to me...I value you. **Sawubona** is a way to make the other person visible and to accept them as they are with their virtues, their nuances...and their flaws.

Sawubona is an invitation to a deep witnessing and presence. It means all my attention is with you. I see you and I allow myself to discover your needs, to see your fears, to identify your mistakes and accept them. I accept you for who and what you are, and you are part of me.

Sawubona reminds us to understand others without prejudice and to leave grudges behind. It doesn’t stop at inclusion...it speaks of integration and cohesion. It speaks of embracing another person’s soul, of seeing the Wholeness behind another’s shadow. Like the more familiar Namaste, it means the God in me sees the God in you...I see myself in your eyes.

Sawubona says that my eyes are connected to a dimension of reality that includes my ancestors and their Divinities. It’s a dialogue...seeing is a dialogue. We see each other...this is an agreement...a communication that asks, “Why are we here at the same time? What has this moment of time given us?” It’s an invitation to participate in one another’s

livese....it creates an obligation to give to another whatever is required for that moment in life to be enhanced.

Seeing represents the question, "How do I have to be for you to be free?" If I limit one person's freedom, I limit my own. There is, after all, only One of us here. When one is greeted with Sawubona, the appropriate response is Shikoba, which means, "I am relieved to know that I exist for you. By recognizing me, you brought me into existence."

The Zulu people say, "Umuntu ngumuntu nagabantu." A person is a person because of other people. Take that in for just a moment...until I am seen by you...until you are seen by me...I do not exist.

There is another interesting thing about the Zulu culture. Did you know that when someone commits an inappropriate or offensive act, the neighbors, friends and family make a circle around them, and for two days, they greet this person with reminders of their good deeds, virtues, successes, and great qualities.

Can you imagine? You lie to your coworker, putting him in an uncomfortable situation, maybe even one where he is blamed for something *you* did and you are found out. Everyone in the office...maybe even other friends and family join in...and encircle you with reminders of your Goodness, of your generosity, of your kindness...for two days. What kind of impact might that have on society?

You see, the Zulu people believe that human beings are born Good...that sometimes crises and imbalances cause us to stray from our inherent Goodness. So the purpose of meetings is to remind the person that they are good at heart...that they are important to the community...to praise them and give them visibility so that they can return to their path of harmony and joy. Isn't this what we teach in New Thought? That we are inherently Good and valuable, just as we are, no matter what the appearance may be?

So, I have a question for you to contemplate for just a moment...why don't we take the time to see the magnificence of those who cross our paths? Is this a reflection of ourselves? Do we see our own magnificence? We can't give another what we don't see in ourselves.

So here is my challenge for you...the homework has two parts. Are you ready? First, spend at least a few moments each day acknowledging and embracing your own beauty, your own uniqueness, your own greatness. Then, and only then, can we extend that gift to others. Breathe that in...

And then, the next time you meet someone, greet them wholeheartedly. Take a moment to become fully present and 'see' the person...see them beyond the physical. By really 'seeing' them, you are bestowing a great honor...a great gift. You are shedding Light upon them...a Spiritual Light that is energizing and empowering...and in turn energizes and empowers you. Sawubona.

Thank you for allowing me to share the little bit I have learned about the cultural celebration of Kwanzaa, and the African American community. I hope you can see the deep spirituality woven into the African culture, and in that, see the common threads that connect us all.

Let's pray – speaking this for myself, and by the Principle of Unity, knowing that it is equally True for you...

Knowing that there is only the One Source of all that is, One Essence, One Substance, and One Creative Process, I rest in that Unity...I know that I Am one with that Wholeness. There is no separation...all are part of the Infinite Intelligence, the Power, the Principle, and the Presence that I call God. There is nothing else.

And so I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that I Am, that each of us is, a living, breathing, expression of the Divine, walking the earth...the hands and feet of God, the Heart of Compassion and Generosity, the Voice of Truth, the perfect expression of Strength and Resilience...here on purpose to discover who we are. We serve the One by serving one another. We include Spirit in our lives as we learn to be inclusive of one another. There is no other way. And so, I surrender to this knowing, and I renew my commitment to Practice.

In this sacred space, I give thanks for the time we have shared here this morning. How sweet it is to be reminded of Truth. What a precious gift to know that I am, that each of us is, an intentional and irreplaceable part of the Divine. As I open my heart and mind to greater possibility and more enlightened action, I become a clear channel through which Faith, Peace, and Joy may flow. As I come to know the Truth of who I Am, my Wholeness is revealed.

Trusting in the power of prayer...not only the spoken Word, but the deep feeling and faith that infuse that Word...I let it go, trusting in the Loving and Lawful Presence to take it and make it so. Here and now, I release it fully and completely, watching in wonder as Love, Joy, Freedom, and Beauty come into full form and experience in my life, and in the lives of each one here. Peace prevails as I call it done...and so it is. Amen!

Music: *Let There Be Peace on Earth* by the Voices of Hope Children's Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bgL1v8FZaNM>

Offertory: *Celebration* by Playing for Change – Song Around the World

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Lu41LulQos&list=Rdf-cwM54SiPk&index=16>