

## **BOTH SIDES NOW**

Inspired by the Judy Collins Song

Week #1 of an 8-week "Songs of Life" Series

June, 2021

Rev. Richard Maraj

### **MEDITATION**

**Rev. Lori Fleming:** I invite you to close your outer eyes. To take in a deep, cleansing breath, and release it slowly. As you make yourself comfortable in your chair: just gently relax in your body. And take in another mindful breath. And as you release it, begin to move your awareness within. Begin to open your heart space as we begin to feel God's love within us, as us, and through us, lifting us up.

In this space of openness, I invite you to let go of anything that's no longer serving us: any troubles. Just give them up to God! Anything in the past you've been carrying that you no longer need: just gently let it go. As we let go of all we've been through in the last many months, just let it go. As we move forward, we release. We let go. We forgive. As we open our hearts and minds to a new beginning, to a new awareness, to a new ability of being together. Of knowing that – over the past months – we've learned many wonderful lessons. We recognize how resilient we are. We recognize how creative we are as we've learned new ways to work, connect, and be. How much we appreciate each other when we can't be physically present. O, God, we've learned so much!

And as we move into this new beginning, we celebrate being together. We celebrate the loving relationships we have with each other as they deepen and flourish and lift us up. Sweet Spirit, we recognize your presence right here, right now, knowing that what we've learned is how important our human connections are ... and how important each and every one of us is, as an unrepeatable expression of the Divine: here to love ourselves and to love each other more fully as we move into this new beginning.

And so we celebrate all the ways that we love. The depth and the breadth of our love is ever-growing. And all the joy that we have in our lives that make life worth living. We celebrate the peace that passes understanding that's in the very depths of our souls, connecting us with each other; connecting us with the Divine. We celebrate the recognition that we live in a prosperous universe where there's enough for all. Enough to share and enough to spare.

And so, sweet Spirit, we take these ideas and this celebration within as we take just a few moments to move our awareness within as we feel the presence of the Divine in us, and as us, and through us.

### **SILENCE**

Sweet Spirit, we come in gratitude for this time together. For seeing our friends again for the first time in a long time. For sharing your love fully and completely and lavishly. We say thank you, God; thank you, God; thank you, God! And it is so. Amen.

### **HYMN**

**Guest artist Rusty Ferracane leads the congregation in "The Lord's Prayer"**

Our Father, Who art in heaven

Hallowed be Thy name.

Thy kingdom come,

Thy will be done,

On earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread;

And forgive us our debts,

As we forgive our debtors.

And leave us not in temptation,  
But deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom  
and the power,  
And the glory forever!  
Amen.

## **SOLO**

***Guest artist Rusty Ferracane sings "Both Sides Now"***

Rows and flows of angel hair  
And ice cream castles in the air  
And feather canyons everywhere  
I've looked at clouds that way

But now they only block the sun  
They rain and snow on everyone  
So many things I would have done  
But clouds got in my way

I've looked at clouds from both sides now  
From up and down and still somehow  
It's clouds' illusions I recall  
I really don't know clouds at all

Moons and Junes and ferries wheels  
The dizzy dancing way you feel  
As every fairy tale comes real  
I've looked at love that way

But now it's just another show  
You leave 'em laughing when you go  
And if you care, don't let them know  
Don't give yourself away

I've looked at love from both sides now  
From give and take and still somehow  
It's love's illusions I recall  
I really don't know love...at all

Tears and fears and feeling proud  
To say, "I love you" right out loud  
Dreams and schemes and circus crowds  
I've looked at life that way

But now old friends they're acting strange  
They shake their heads, they say I've changed  
Well something's lost, but something's gained  
In living every day

I've looked at life from both sides now  
From up and down and give or take  
and win and lose and still somehow  
It's life's illusions I recall  
I really don't know life...at all

[Congregation applauds]

## MESSAGE

**Rev. Richard Maraj:** Wow! Whooo! Thanks, man! Fabulous, fabulous, fabulous! Whooo!

So how many people loved Christmas as a child but, as an adult, you didn't really like the hassle, the commercialism, the materialistic aspect ... and you were kind of happy when it was done? Anybody ever had that experience? [Congregation laughs]

How many people ever met someone that, right off the bat, you couldn't stand them: their tone, their attitude just kind of rubbed you the wrong way! But then, after a while, you got in a conversation with them, got to know them a little, found out you had some things in common ... and you changed. And you actually liked them ... and even found them pretty cool? Anybody ever had that?

Anybody ever start, like, a new job, a new relationship or a new activity, and you were just so gung ho! After a couple of weeks, your gung ho was gone! [Congregation laughs] And you kept thinking, "This isn't my job; this is not ... this relationship isn't me. This activity isn't me." And you were done as fast as you begun. How many people ever had that experience?

You know what I think's amazing? Is how our perceptions change. How our outlook and our belief about people – about tradition, about activities, about the world – sometimes shift. And sometimes shift dramatically from side to the other. Sometimes changing from idealistic to realistic. Or from pessimistic to optimistic. From positive to negative. From intentionally attached to kind of laid back and chill.

And so, to me, I think perceptions are really important, because they affect what they see and how we see. What we think and how we think. What we feel and how we feel. They affect how interpret and interact and experience our lives every day. So I ask you the question is: How have your perceptions changed? And have they changed for the better?

Today we begin our annual "Songs of Life" series. And I've been doing this for 23 years; this week is the 23rd anniversary of my ordination. And I've been doing these series for 23 years. [Congregation applauds] And so ... And the reason I keep doing them is because music just does something to us! It touches us in a way that just the spoken word and so many things can't. I bet every one of us has a song that probably got us through a difficult time, and helped us to have the courage to keep on keeping on. I bet you every one of us has some songs that have opened our hearts to feel some deep emotions that we needed to feel, that we may not have allowed ourselves to feel that way. We all have songs that trigger some fabulous memories and "the good old days." We have songs that uplift and inspire. We have songs that really move us in so many great ways.

I really believe that songs and music add a richness and a depth to life. Usually we do a four-week series, but now we're coming back; we are doing an eight-week series, because let's double our pleasure and double our fun! Why not? [Congregation laughs and applauds]

And so today we're starting with the song, "Both Sides Now." And it was written by Canadian singer/songwriter Joni Mitchell: one of her most famous songs. And it was in the charts for 1968 for the first time when it was recorded by Judy Collins. The song has been covered many, many times: Frank Sinatra, Willy Nelson, Glen Campbell, so many more. It's been a part of many TV shows and movies: *Love Actually* being one of the ones you might remember. There's a faster version; a slower version. You got to hear a bit of both versions.

And so her inspiration was a book called *Henderson the Rain King*. And so she was on a plane reading, and then, in the book, the main character was on a plane reading ... and then paused and looked out the window at the clouds. So she put down her book and looked out the window at the clouds.

You ever look at clouds? And they look so cotton-bally soft? And sometimes they look so thin and transient? Sometimes you see angels or faces or animals or a heart? Well, Joni Mitchell looked out the window at the clouds, and was inspired to write these words:

*Rows and flows of angel hair  
And ice cream castles in the air  
And feather canyons everywhere  
I've looked at clouds that way*

*But now they only block the sun  
They rain and snow on everyone  
So many things I would have done  
But clouds got in the way*

*I've looked at clouds from both sides now  
From up and down and still somehow  
It's clouds' illusions I recall  
I really don't know clouds at all*

And some people, when they hear this song, can think it sounds sad and melancholy, even negative. But I actually think this song is inspiring. To me, it's a heartfelt song that gives us some insight and wisdom about understanding our own perceptions ... and particularly how very different our perceptions can be.

In the song, as a child, the clouds made her happy. They filled her with joy of possibilities and canyons and ice cream castles. As an adult, they got in her way. They blocked the sun; they blocked the light. And they blocked her joy and happiness. So this morning we're going to talk about perceptions, and how it's important to look at life from both sides now.

So let's look at: perception affects our personal evolution. You know, the great Mohammad Ali once said that a man who looks at life at 50 the same way he looked at life at 20 has wasted 30 years of his life. *[Congregation laughs]* We're all here to grow, and we are here to evolve. And a part of that process of growth and development and evolution – both at the human level and the spiritual level – requires that we change and evolve some of our perceptions. We are here to learn and expand our awareness. We're not supposed to see life the same way throughout our entire lives. Otherwise, we wouldn't grow; we wouldn't learn. We would just stagnate and not fulfill our divine potential. Not fully express and become who we came here to be.

In the Book of Luke, Chapter 2, Verse 52, it says this: *"Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man."* And what it's saying is: Jesus evolved! Jesus became and unfolded into all that he came to be. And that's what we are here to do, as well! We are here to evolve and mature spiritually, and evolved and mature at the human level, as well. And to evolve as leaders, as parents, as partners, as teachers, as artists. We're here to evolve in our awareness and our appreciation and our compassion and our understanding and our love! We're here to evolve in the fullness of how we express that Spirit within ourselves.

**And one thing that's important to know is that, in this evolution and our perceptions, we are the most important! We are the ones that hold the key to it.** Shakespeare – in his play, *Hamlet* – wrote these words: *"Nothing is either good or bad, but thinking makes it so."* So are clouds good? Or are clouds bad? It's all a matter of our perception. Is life beautiful and wonderful? Or is life a cruel and unpleasant place? Is the glass half full or is the glass half empty? Is it a problem? Or is it an opportunity? Is it a challenge? Or is it a lesson? Is it a trial? Or is it a blessing? We create our own perceptions.

Dr. Viktor Frankl said this. He said, *"We ask, 'What is the meaning of life?'"* But he said, *"You know what the real question is? Is what meaning do you give life?"* See, we create our own perceptions, and we create our own meaning, as well.

So what is your perception right now of life? What is your perception of yourself? What is your perception of love? What is your perception of your future? What is your perception of the meaning of your life? And what perception might you like to change?

You ever look back on your life and think, “Wow! Look how far I’ve come!”? So how have you changed over the last 20 years? What has changed in you? See, one of the things is that we’re all here to evolve, and our perceptions— and how we change them – are what really develops and allows us to evolve.

**The second thing about perceptions is that we learn our perceptions are actually illusions.** I love when it says, “It’s clouds’ illusions I recall ... It’s love’s illusions I recall ... It’s life’s illusions I recall.” We’ve all heard that phrase: “Life is an illusion.” Whatever you think is real is not real. I didn’t understand what that meant – didn’t take it seriously – until I heard a quote from Einstein, because I figure he’s pretty smart! [Congregation laughs] So I can trust him! And Einstein said this. He said, “Reality is an illusion, albeit a very persistent one.” [Congregation laughs]

Friedrich Nietzsche said this. He said, “Truths are illusions that we have forgotten are illusions.” And here’s my favorite thing that Nietzsche said. He said, “We don’t want to know the truth, because that will destroy our illusions.”

See, we live in illusion. And we like our illusions. Even when they’re not good for us, we’re so stuck in them! Here are some of life’s illusions. Fear is an illusion. Lack is an illusion. Space and time is an illusion. The sense of separation is an illusion. The belief that, if I close off my heart and push you away, that’ll make me safe. That is an illusion. We live out of a lot of illusions. We think holding on is safe and letting go is scary. That is an illusion.

And these illusions can be simple. Like you’re going down a path and you see a snake so you run back and go home. To find out the next day it was really a stick. [Congregation laughs] And so, it sounds silly ... but we live in these illusions that stop us from living and trying and risking and loving!

And I read another article about a guy talking about illusions. And he said one day he was walking out, and he saw a magpie. A bird. A magpie. And he said for some reason that day, he wanted to come closer to the magpie. And when he got a little closer, he realized it was a black garbage bag. And he kind of laughed at himself. And he said, “I could have gone all day thinking I saw this beautiful magpie!” But he said, interestingly, in different cultures, that would have been even more. Like, in England, there’s a poem that says: “One magpie for sorrow; two magpies for joy; three magpies for a girl; four magpies for a boy.” But he said, “If I was in England and I saw a magpie, and it was only one, I could have been thinking, ‘Oh, my God; what’s going to happen? Some horrible thing’s going to happen!’” He was going to be anxious all day!

And these things sound silly, but the truth is: we all live in illusions. And it’s really good for us to realize our perceptions are actually illusions. They’re not real. That we make up a lot of stories. We make up a lot of dramas. And sometimes just knowing that they’re illusions helps us in how we deal with them, and how much they control and influence our lives.

Anybody ever have an argument with someone in your head? [Congregation laughs] Anybody ever give someone a piece of your mind in your mind? [Congregation laughs] Ever yell at someone in your head? We have these things all the time! We make stuff up! They’re illusions, and they drive us crazy! We get stressed and tense over things that we make up.

Jesus said these words. He said, “Do not judge by appearances, but judge by righteous judgement.” He also said, “You are in this world, but not of this world.” And what he is saying is: don’t get hooked by the appearance and the illusions of the things that we think. Don’t get hooked by them.

So the question is: So if it’s an illusion, does that mean we stop trying and working at bettering ourselves? Improving ourselves? The answer is, “No!” You still ... We still live and risk and learn and better ourselves. We still try to get into the God-consciousness and see people in life through the eyes

of love and joy. We keep working at it. But we realize that so much of our lives are illusions! The things that we fear; the things that we dislike.

You know, like I have this fear of telling a joke and nobody laughing. *[Congregation laughs]* This fear of trying to be funny, and then no one thinks I'm funny. *[Congregation laughs]* But I realize now I don't have to fear nobody laughing, because laughing is an illusion! *[Congregation laughs]* So I can just be free to tell my jokes with no pressure or sense of embarrassment. Let's give it a try! *[Congregation laughs]*

*[Rev. Maraj laughs]* That was funnier than the jokes you're about to hear. *[Congregation laughs]* Umm ...

Are people born with photographic memories? Or does that take time to develop? *[Congregation groans and laughs]*

I left a voicemail for a sheep once. And it said, "I just called to say I love ewes." *[Congregation groans and laughs]*

This guy named Herb gave me some sage cooking advice, and I've been stewing on it ever since. *[Rev. Maraj and congregation laugh]*

You know what's funny? Is I get as much laugh when the room is empty as when it's full! *[Congregation laughs]* It's kind of strange! *[Rev. Maraj laughs]*

And the thing is – I know it's just kind of being silly, but there's things that we just make up in our heads. And we just need to be aware, but keep living. Keep trying to improve. Keep developing ourselves. Keep bringing forth that Spirit of God in us in all we do.

**And the next one: let's look at perception and the unknown.** That line of, "I really don't know clouds at all ... I really don't know love at all ... I really don't know life at all." And, again, hearing, "I really don't know that at all," can sound disappointing. It can sound sad. It can sound even scary or unfulfilling ... "Because I really don't know!" And the reason it does: we don't handle not knowing. Why? Because we think we should know everything. We want to know everything. We think we feel safer when we know everything. Life will be better if we know everything. Things will go well if we know everything.

And the fact is: We are not supposed to know everything! We cannot know everything; the human mind cannot conceptualize the fullness. And, in fact, living in the unknown is a sign of spiritual maturity, because it's an awareness that there is so much more that is vast. And the unknown calls us to actually trust and surrender to the Universe. To the wisdom and the intelligence that brought us. That we can trust to let it unfold.

Daniel Nahmod's got a great song called "I Don't Need to Know." And I'll tell you: what a liberating thing that is. To know – even if there's something not going well in my life right now – I don't need to know the answer. I just have to trust and surrender to life. And surrender to Spirit. And let it unfold.

Living with uncertainty invites us into a place of living with peace, living with trust, living with acceptance ... particularly living fully in the here and now. That it all brings us back to how fully do we live our lives.

Now imagine if you knew everything all the time! Could you imagine how predictable and dull and boring life would be? Where would be the excitement if we always knew everything and how everything would turn out?

So how's your relationship with the unknown? What are your perceptions of the unknown? Sometimes we think the unknown is scary! It's bad! No; it could equally be good! In fact, it's more than likely to be good. So can we relax and let go, trust, and just live more fully in the here and now?

So last week, went into my backyard, and on this little ledge thing where these bricks are I saw five adorable baby squirrels: two in the front, two in the back, perfectly spaced out. They moved in such harmony, you know, I literally thought it was a squirrel boy band. *[Congregation laughs]* It was

incredible! It was incredible! *[Rev. Maraj laughs]* They were so adorable! I go out just looking at these: “Oh, my God; they’re so cute! They’re so cute!” And I just watched them, and I was in awe.

But over the next 10 days, they started growing. And the little hole they were living in became an extremely large hold. Which has now become three holes. They’re running all over the backyard like they own the joint. They’re drinking out of the fountain. Playing on the patio furniture. They’re climbing on the bushes, eating all of the flowers. I saw a couple hanging by the BBQ, thinking – I’m guessing – I’m going to invite them to some family grill-out. *[Congregation laughs]* And they’re just getting rude and inconsiderate! And there’s a lot of tension building up! *[Congregation laughs]* And you know I have a history of issues – love/hate relationship – with squirrels anyway! And I’ve done a lot of healing. Apparently I have more! *[Congregation laughs]*

And I’m thinking of all the things I just want to do to these little creatures! And when I look at my perception ... My perception has gone from cute, adorable, playful, energetic little creatures of God to miserable, disgusting, vandalizing, pesky, dirty little rodents. *[Congregation laughs]* Can you see the ...? And I can tell you with all sincerity: I’ve seen squirrels from both sides now. *[Rev. Maraj and congregation laugh]* It’s squirrel illusions that I recall. I really don’t know squirrels at all. And, uh, fill in the blank in your own life instead of squirrels. I bet you it’s something else.

You know, the fact is: the quality and the experience of our lives really come down to our perceptions. And we’re the ones that create our own perceptions. Perceptions help us evolve by realizing that sometimes we need to look at it in a different way, and change those perceptions for the better. Realizing that our perceptions are also illusions, but not letting the fact that they’re illusions – just allowing that awareness to help us continue to learn, continue to grow, and to continue to express that Spirit of the Divine in ourselves. And, finally, perceptions help us in how we deal with the unknown. It’s okay to not know. In fact, it’s great to not know, and live in the mystery. To trust the Universe and live fully in the present now.

Life is an amazing gift. And it can be even more amazing – and more wonderful – when we allow ourselves to see life from both sides now.

God bless you all!

*[Congregation applauds]*

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