

**January/February 2024**



## **Frozen Season – Staying Soft**

**What does it take to stay soft and incubate during this frozen time of year?**

*“Whoever you are, and whatever helps, I hope today is a day you are finding the softest way through.”*

*Andrea Gibson*

### **LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

We acknowledge with respect the Seneca (Onöndowa’ga:’) Nation, Keepers of the Western Door and part of the Haudenosaunee People, on whose ancestral land First Unitarian Church of Rochester, First Universalist Church of Rochester, and the Unitarian Universalist Church of Canandaigua now stand.

Beloveds,

Are you diving into this packet with the fervor of a newly resolute human in a new year, ready to come at your spiritual work with the full force of a fresh start? Hold up, for me. Take a moment. Breathe.

We have come through the season of Rest, and perhaps we've accidentally received the message that rest's purpose is to ready us for ever-greater productivity. In this season (and all the others) I want to invite you to reject productivity and resolution as the culmination of your good rest. Can we find a way, instead, to stay soft? To carry the softness of rest with us? Can we let our deep rest make us, not better workers, but better humans?

My non-parish ministry is work as a birth doula, and helping people give birth means I spend a lot of time reflecting on what it means to become a parent. For me, parenthood has been a great softening. As a gestational parent, growing humans softened my body in all kinds of ways. But it has also been a process heart-softening to hold such a ferocious love and protectiveness for people who will, I hope, go off into the world without me. Parenting brings my own inner child to the surface of my being, and I have had to be so gentle with all of her hurts, so that I'm able to be gentle with my children's.

I think we all find our way into this softening when we practice love without control. It is such a vulnerable act to love deeply, whether we are loving those individuals we know personally and care for intimately or loving the whole of the interdependent web. It breaks our hearts sometimes. And it's a radical resistance to systems of oppression for us to find power in that vulnerability, in a love that is not about control. Those systems of oppression would have us trade in our vulnerability for a sense of security and order, but we can resist by staying soft. Making gentle space for all the children who need care, even the ones inside of us grown-ups. Loving wholly, even when it breaks our hearts.

So please, don't dive in. Take a breath. Hold the hand of your inner child. Wade in slowly. Let us offer ourselves the gift of softness and vulnerability in this season.

Peace,  
Rev. Eileen Casey-Campbell  
Minister, Unitarian Universalist Church of Canandaigua, NY

**Gratitude** to this season's packet team leads, Suzy Farrell and Amy Stockwell, the very inspiring 3-church worship team, and the supportive contributions of the entire packet team. We hope you find inspiration to soften and receive in this frozen season.

**Authors' Note:** *This packet is intended to be a buffet of various offerings around our theme. Think of it as a host of possibilities to be sampled and savored, not homework that needs to be completed! Everyone's processes of spiritual deepening are different, your authors tried to give a number of starts for your consideration. Let this packet accompany you on your spiritual journey.*

## READINGS FOR CHALICE LIGHTING/EXTINGUISHING

### Chalice Lighting



May we be reminded here of our highest aspirations, and inspired to bring our gifts of love and service to the altar of humanity.

May we know once again that we are not isolated beings but connected, in mystery and miracle, to the universe, to this community and to each other.

– *Singing the Living Tradition* #434

Do not leave your cares at the door. Do not leave there your pain, your sorrow or your joys. Bring them with you into this place of acceptance and forgiveness. Place them on the common altar of life and offer them to the possibility of your worship. Come then, and offer yourself to potential transformation by the creative process that flows through you and all of life.

– Norman V. Naylor, UU Minister



### Chalice Extinguishing

May the lessons of the dark time of year, deepen our roots, ground our spirits, and keep us true to our whole selves; may we find rest, know joy and broaden our view.

– Rev. Jude Geiger

We don't have to go anywhere to obtain the truth. We only need to be still and things will reveal themselves in the clear water of our heart.

– Thich Nhat Hanh

## SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

As the thermometer drops to chilling temperatures and the ponds thicken with ice, the Frozen Season offers a great time to bundle and stay warm so you can gently receive the world around you. Soften your gaze on our sometimes-harsh world. As tempting as it is to clench your fists, try approaching different viewpoints with a sense of curiosity. Below are the exercises practicing this new skill.

### A. “Never in My Life...”

A child might say, “Never in my life...” when seeing something for the first time. Imagine your experience being a child, doing or seeing something for the very first time. Some might call it a beginner’s mind: a curious openness without preconceived ideas. A willingness to be surprised by reality, letting go of assumptions and thinking that the experience is known and expected. What if it were a surprise?

As an example, look at this picture:



What is the very first thing you see? Is there a second thing you see shortly after? Can you go back to your first view? As with many new explorations, start small and as you become more at ease with the way of looking at things/people try some more challenging situations.

Another example might be to imagine what a foreigner might see as they view an unusual tradition particular to your family.

### B. Mind/ Body Practices

Mind/body practices including mindfulness meditation, Tai Chi, Yoga, and Qi Gong, as well as gentle or energetic outdoor pursuits (walking, hiking, skiing, etc.) can help one become more alive. Mind/ body awareness can be available anywhere, anytime without equipment or instruction: practice whatever speaks to you . . . and maybe try out some unfamiliar forms.

Try a simple movement/breath practice: place your hand on your heart, take several slow deep breaths, and concentrate on the feeling inside your body under your hand. Whatever the feeling is, notice and honor it. Continue to breathe into the feeling, sensing if it is softening as you honor and name it.

Do you make regular time for the restorative effects of one (or several) mind/body practices? Notice its impact on your life. To take this further, perhaps form an intention to experiment with another practice for one week. What do you notice about the new practice? How do you experience it in your body?

### C. Incubate with Intention

As the frozen time of year descends upon you, give yourself permission to relax in a warm comfortable spot and let your mind wander to warmer times to come. Begin your mental exploration with a softening of preconceived ideas. Perhaps it is a trip you’d like to plan or a change in your surroundings. Maybe you are dreaming of your garden to be as you flip through seed catalogues.

Fantasize about the possibilities! None of it has to be written in stone, just let your dreams happen. We all have hopes that in one form or another can come true. Let those thoughts incubate for a while and create a sense of gentle anticipation. Record the exploration and notice what parts of the ideas make you feel alive.

### D. Seeing Softly

We are accustomed to seeing the things in our lives as solid, hard edged, with mass and weight. Our morning coffee cup, our cereal bowl, or anything we might see every day, these have size and depth and firm boundaries. But how true is this really? Quantum physics is telling us that what we see as solid is actually mostly space filled with tiny whizzing electrons. Quantum physics is also telling us that things we see as separate are actually connected: entangled, with shared histories and futures.

Make a playful drawing of your cup and bowl, imagining that the invisible elements of electrons and probability fields and entanglement are visible. Don't draw the hard edges of the objects but instead give your interpretation of their connections. Or take a photo and alter it to soften the edges and express the light. Reflect on your drawing/photo. How does softening and opening your understanding of reality change how you experience the people in your life? What other insights do you have as a result of this exercise?

### E. Multigenerational/Family

Read about the variety of ways animals adapt to the frozen time of year. There are some who completely hibernate, some that partially hibernate and some that migrate to warmer climates. Have each family member describe the approach that is right for them. How would they like to act to prepare during this time of year?

Perhaps you or your child have a favorite soothing piece of music, with or without lyrics. (Here are some options: <https://www.thebump.com/a/lullabies>.) Listen to it a few times on some different occasions. Where does that music take your mind? A different place? A relaxing feeling in part of your body? Alone or surrounded by different people? Is this something that can be recreated?



## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

*These questions aren't "homework" that need to be covered entirely. Instead, simply pick the one question that speaks to you most and let it lead you where you need to go. The questions often lead not to answers, but to more questions.*

1. Are there times that are easier than others when you can soften to a new idea?
2. How do hope and/or fear play a role in your willingness to soften? Does curiosity contribute?
3. What is the opposite of soft? There is more than one answer.
4. Sometimes expectations of a person or situation can have a solid hold on you. What does it take for you to soften and think beyond those expectations?
5. How can the ideas of softening help with work for social justice through love?
6. What kind of experiences "melt your heart?"
7. When bombarded by choices, we can be "frozen by our options." What strategy might you have to soften in the face of too many choices?
8. What does your "soft underbelly" look like? How do you protect your vulnerabilities, and are there pillowy protection strategies rather than rigid ones?

## FROM UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISM

"Walk softly. Speak truthfully. Love gently. Breathe deeply. Live wisely. Go in peace."

– Rev. Elaine Gehrmann

"Water is soft and yet it is persistent

Water flows and takes the shape of the boundaries it is given

Yet over time water, in her persistence, she can carve through mountains

When you try to grab water, you just get wet, but if you can stop grabbing at her

She will hold you up and you can float and even swim

Water under pressure cleans dirt off houses and can cut diamonds;

Water raging can overflow the bounds put upon her; she can drown whole towns, flood freeways

She can put out fire and save lives

So contradictory, both soft and hard

Never dominant or submissive

Water sustains, gives, and yields to

Life."

– Melissa Jeter, UU Commissioned Lay Minister and seminarian

## WISDOM FROM WORLD RELIGIONS

### Christianity

“Everything perfect doesn't exist. Human beings can't accomplish this because it simply was not intended to be completed here. Here is an opportunity to learn. So take this challenge that is life and do it now . . . love more, forgive more, embrace more, love more intensely and leave the rest in God's hands.”

– Pope Francis

“Nothing is so strong as gentleness, nothing so gentle as real strength.”

– St. Francis de Sales

“The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy. Instead of diminishing evil, it multiplies it. Through violence you may murder the liar, but you cannot murder the lie, nor establish truth. Through violence you murder the hater, but you do not murder hate. In fact, violence merely increases hate. Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.

“The question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists for hate or for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice or for the extension of justice?”

– Rev. Martin Luther King

### Islam

“Then your hearts hardened after that, so that they were like rocks, rather worse in hardness; and surely there are some rocks from which streams burst forth, and there are some of them which split asunder so water issues out of them, and there are some of them which fall down for fear of Allah, and Allah is not at all heedless of what you do.”

– Sura al-Baqarah, 2:74

“Hardness of the heart is a disease and needs to be cured. To achieve true success in both the worlds, the human being must have a heart that is soft and responsive. Imam Muhammad al-Bāqir (a) said: *No-one has been struck with a punishment greater than hardness of the heart (MH, H. 16,695)*. The human heart is not created hard. The child's heart is very soft and tender. The adult however, through accumulation of sins and heedlessness, gradually acquires a hard heart. It is the duty of every believer to be wary of the state of his heart and take steps to avoid hardness.”

– [Academy of Islam](#)

### Paganism/Celtic Traditions

“Imbolc falls exactly halfway between the Winter Solstice (**Yule**) and the Spring Equinox (**Ostara**). Daylight is increasing and spring is the air. While too early for planting gardens, Imbolc is a time to start thinking about what you wanted to plant and harvest in the coming year. In modern day living Imbolc and the quiet weeks post holiday season is a great time to reflect and think about where you want to go in the coming months.”

– [Mabon House](#)

### **Taoism**

Nothing in the world  
is as soft and yielding as water.  
Yet for dissolving the hard and inflexible,  
nothing can surpass it.

The soft overcomes the hard;  
the gentle overcomes the rigid.  
Everyone knows this is true,  
but few can put it into practice.  
—Tao Te Ching 78

### **Hinduism**

“Feelings of heat and cold, pleasure and pain, are  
caused by the contact of the senses with their  
objects. They come and they go, never lasting  
long. You must accept them.”  
— Bhagavad Gita 2:14

## **POETRY**

### The Cure for It All

Go gently today, don't hurry  
or think about the next thing. Walk  
with the quiet trees, can you believe  
how brave they are—how kind? Model your life  
after theirs. Blow kisses  
at yourself in the mirror  
especially when  
you think you've messed up. Forgive  
yourself for not meeting your unreasonable  
expectations. You are human, not  
God—don't be so arrogant.  
—Julia Fehrenbacher ([Full poem](#))



Photo: Suzy Farrell

### A Song in the Dark

Just ask anyone who, for a time,  
has lost their own light  
then receives it from another  
who received it from another,  
and soon they find themselves

part of a radiant circle of light  
where before  
there was only ice.  
—Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer  
([Full poem](#))

## **QUOTATIONS**

"I'm practicing softening, and softening some more, and softening again. And then forgetting, becoming tightened once more. And then remembering, letting softening loosen the hardness. Over and over. Forever."  
— Lisa Olivera, Writer and Therapist

“Trees need their protective bark to enable the delicate process of growth and renewal to unfold without threat. Likewise, we must have our boundaries and defenses so that the more vulnerable parts of ourselves can safely heal and unfold. But our growth also depends upon our ability to soften, loosen, and discard boundaries and defenses that we no longer need. It is often the case in life that structures we put in place to help us grow eventually become constricting.”  
— Madisyn Taylor, [The Daily Om](#)



“At any moment, we have a choice in how we greet life. Either we meet it with a clenched fist or an open palm. Control or surrender. Either as a problem to be solved, or a mystery to be lived. Control was, and still is, very much in fashion. . . . Yet, I have learned that it is an open palm that invites us to surrender to a dance with a much larger web of life.”

– Nipun Mehta, Graduation Speech at Assumption College, 2018

“Letting go is a difficult skill to acquire and yet we have no choice but to practice. . . . Letting go is not a passive state of acceptance but a recognition of the brevity of all things. This realization invites us to love fully now, in this moment.”

– Francis Weller, American Poet

“I know most people try hard to do good and find out too late they should have tried softer.”

– Andrea Gibson, American Poet

### **RESOURCES FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION**

*Articles, TED talks, videos, blogs, podcasts, books ...*

The Importance of Vulnerability. The softening it takes to reveal our own vulnerabilities to others is a brave act that creates real human connections and enables us to grow. [YouTube](#)

How to Foster Beginners Mind. Understanding new information, especially when it is contrary to our original beliefs, can be uncomfortable. Different types of biases can act as barriers and may get in the way when we want to think critically. The goal for free-flowing connection is mutual understanding. [YouTube](#)

Curiosity, Learning and the Growth Mindset: Sal Khan on Why I’ll never tell My Son He’s Smart. [YouTube](#)

#### **Blog Post**

“I think one of the tragedies of our world is how it encourages us to be hard. Not resilient – hard. Our hardness is the Social Media masked version of our true reality; we’ve become numb in order to get through a dangerous, violent, and collapsing system. We feel like we can’t run from it, and we feel as though we can’t fight back without being crushed. So we freeze. We numb out. We become hard towards the suffering of the world. Of others. The stranger. We stop giving our f—s about anything other than our own survival.”

– Mitch Gainey [Staying Soft in a Hard World](#) (*Content Warning: Strong Language*)

#### **Movies**

Rustin (2023) A docudrama about Bayard Rustin, a close advisor to Martin Luther King Jr. as one of the main organizers of the 1963 March on Washington. Rustin was strongly influenced by his Quaker roots to become a human rights activist.

A Man Called Otto (2022) A curmudgeonly widower makes his way through life and, despite his negative outlook, his heart begins to soften and he notices and accepts the good things/people around him.

Groundhog Day (1993) A bitter weatherman is trapped in endless repetition of a day until he softens his assumptions and finds that an expansive love is the way forward.

Won't You Be my Neighbor? (2018). This film depicts the life of the radically kind, supportive, empathetic man called Fred Rogers. Fred hosted Mister Rogers' Neighborhood, a program on TV for 33 years, showing his audience a caring human. He was full of grace and understanding toward all with whom he came into contact. He possessed an unwavering ability to soften even the most rigid beings.

**Practice Improv.** Improvisation is an art form that requires a clear and open mind in order to invent. The performers in an improv show have to open up to whatever situation they are handed and be immediately willing to incorporate into a new story line. There are several opportunities to practice here in Rochester. Both the Focus Theater and Comedy @ The Carlsons offer classes and open mike nights.

**Play a Non-Competitive Board Game.** Try one of the [Top 40 Cooperative Board Games](#).

## **Music**

### Dock of the Bay

I'm just sitting on the dock of the bay,  
watching the tide roll away.

Ooo, I'm sitting on the dock of the bay, wastin' time.

– Otis Redding. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ReLPQbCjaxE>

### Dark of Winter

Dark of winter, soft and still, your quiet calm surrounds me.

Let my thoughts go where they will; ease my mind profoundly.

– [Singing the Journey #55](#)

### Find a Stillness

Find a stillness, hold a stillness, let the stillness carry me.

– [Singing the Journey #352](#)

### Let it Be

– Paul McCartney (Lennon-McCartney partnership) [Boston Gay Men's Chorus](#)

## **Books**

*All available in hard copy in Monroe County Library System*

### Four Thousand Weeks: Time Management for Mortals

Instead of focusing on being more productive and efficient, adding stress and extra pressure to our lives, the author encourages us to accept the finitude of life and gives suggestions on how to live differently.

– Oliver Burkeman, British author and journalist

### Radical Acceptance: Embracing your Life with the Heart of the Buddha

The author draws on Buddhist teachings to help us explore ways to open our hearts and get away from the fear and shame that often prevents us from staying soft to perspectives and individuals.

– Tara Brach, Ph.D, American psychologist and author

### Becoming Wise: An Inquiry into the Mystery and Art of Living

Tippett brings together ancient and contemporary wisdom to hold love as a muscular practice to make possible a life of presence and meaning.

– Krista Tippett, American journalist and author

### Magic Eye II: Now You See It

This series of books include colorful 3D images that reveal themselves when you softly gaze at the pages.

[Magic Eye](#)

### **Children's Book**

Hiders, Seekers, Finders, Keepers

This delightful book explores the ways that many animals adapt to the frozen time of year.

– Jessica Kulekjian, author

### **Social Change through Softening**

Martin Luther King's Principles of Non-Violence: [In the Doha Declaration](#)

### **Seeing Softly**

Quantum Physics for Beginners: What is Quantum Physics?

– [Caltech Science Exchange](#)

10 Mind Boggling Things you Should Know about Quantum Physic

– Colin Stuart, British astronomy author, in [All About Space Magazine](#)

Seeing Softly Aids Babies' Mental Development: The findings from this study suggest that by analyzing a newborn's normal vision development (blurry in the early stages of life outside the womb), children born prematurely or without sight could have difficulty with visual tasks later in their lives.

– Vogelsang L, Gilad-Gutnick S, Ehrenberg E, Yonas A, Diamond S, Held R, Sinha P. [NIH Study](#)



Finger Trap: A 7-inch woven tube that is difficult to escape from once you place a finger in each end. Only when you let your hands soften toward each other is it possible to slide your fingers out.

Making Things. Both making canoes and baskets requires soaking hard materials to make them soft. Instructions for soaking materials for basket making:

<https://thebranchranch.ca/soaking-willow>

### **SERVICE OPPORTUNITIES**

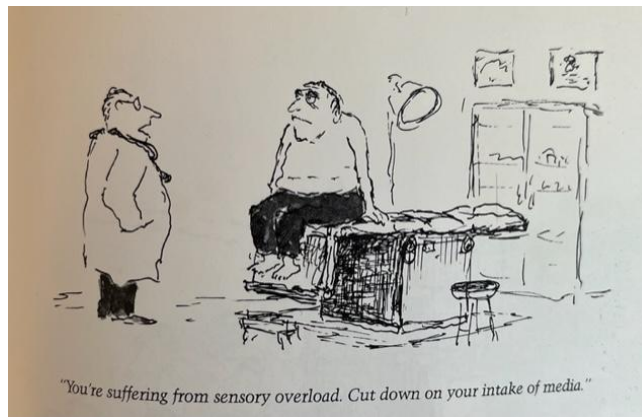
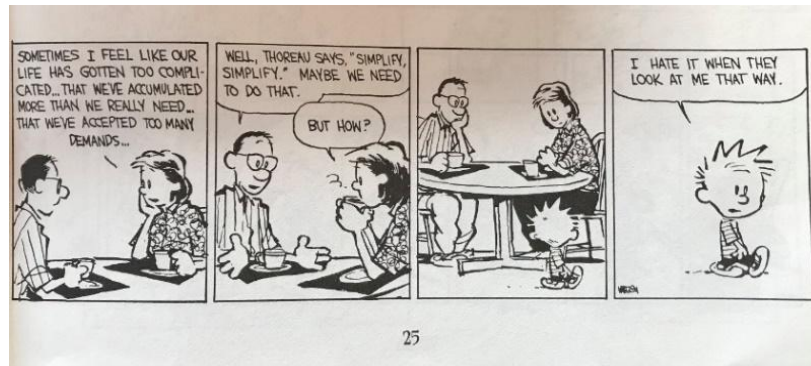
Where can you find opportunities to join with like-minded people to shine a light into dark spaces, and soften others' experience of a harsh world? Where can you see the beginnings of growth in nature?

You might consider Rochester organizations helping refugees resettle (like [Refugees helping Refugees](#) or [Keeping our Promise](#)). Or you might plan to participate in the MLK Day of Service on January 15, 2024.

Our season includes Black History Month, with numerous opportunities to serve. Watch for calendars of events at the end of January.

Or maybe you are called to be in nature and softly help preserve our natural resources in this community. The Cumming Nature Center, the Lamberton Conservatory and the Butterfly Garden at the Strong Museum are places you can experience nature in the frozen season that also welcome your help.

## HUMOR



**And:** If the soft gray skies of winter are getting you down, look for soft and warm colors like Pantone's 2024 color of the Year: "Peach Fuzz captures our desire to nurture ourselves and others."  
[Peach Fuzz!](#)