The Olympian Twelve: Culture, Creativity, and the Dance of Chaos and Cosmos
Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda, January 29th, 2018.
Interim Minister the Rev. Fran Dearman,

I take my text this morning from the New York Times Obituary for fantasy and science fiction writer Ursula K. Le Guin, who died at her home in Portland Oregon last Monday. Her works include "The Left Hand of Darkness", "The Lathe of Heaven", and the "Wizard of Earthsea" trilogy. Ursula Le Guin's fiction ranges from young-adult adventures to philosophical fables. Her work combines compelling stories, rigorous narrative logic, and a lean, lyrical style that draws readers into the "inner lands" of the imagination.

Le Guin believed that such writing could be a moral force. She said: "If you cannot or will not imagine the results of your actions, there is no way you can act morally or responsibly." Children and babies need their imagination trained into foresight and empathy. And so, the writer's pleasant duty is to ply the reader's imagination with "the best and purest nourishment that it can absorb".

And she was very good at that.

[Editor's Note: The greater part of this introduction is paraphrased or quoted directly from the New York Times' Obituary, re-published January 26th, 2018 in the Globe &Mail, page B20.]

Every culture has its heroes and gods, its stories and legends. The stories of gods and heroes from ancient Greek and Rome have been significant to western culture, have helped shape it, for good or ill. The stories of the Greek gods on Mount Olympos are stories that Western European culture used to imagine itself into being. Fluid stories, stories that are retold to new purpose with each generation. Stories that perhaps reveal the inner worlds of the people who tell them, and re-tell them. Not always right. Not always just or kind. But powerful.

Where do the stories come from? Before there was writing, there were stories, told and re-told. The stories travelled the trade routes of the Middle East and the Mediterranean, and beyond. The stories began to be written down, in Greek, about eight hundred years before the common era—almost three thousand years ago.

From someone named as Homer, we have the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad*. From someone named as Hesiod we have the *Theogony*—where the gods came from—and the *Works and Days*—essentially a farmer's almanac, and a little bit more. There is a collection known as the Homeric Hymns, with stories about individual gods. The famous Greek Tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides elaborate on stories and themes associated with these mythic gods.

Plato took Homer as his starting point, as did other philosophers, some of whom named themselves as skeptics or atheists. Art, sculpture, ceramics, textiles, and architecture re-told the tales in their own way. The Romans adopted Greek myths and legends, and used them to their own purposes.

Much of what we have we owe to the Latin poet Ovid, because he wrote the poetry so beautifully that learned churchmen would build elaborate allegories so as to justify the continued use of this pagan material.

The ancients had a fluid sense of the ancient myths, continually re-shaping the stories to serve their own purposes. We still do that! Thus the films *Wonder Woman, Troy,* and earlier *Clash of the Titans*—the first film to rely heavily on special effects, including a very cute clockwork owl for Athena. There is also the teen series about Perseus, retold as *Percy Jackson*.

[Films from China and India similarly turn to ancient myth and legend for heroic plots. Maori and Polynesian legends have also served as a basis for films recently.]

Comic books and movies in theatres turn the old stories to new purposes. Adventure! Passion! Intrigue! Struggle and resilience! Sexual attraction. Moral quandary..... and death. The hero always faces death.

We still tell stories, over the coffee cups, about people larger than life. We still tell stories we've compressed down to myth and legend, like stories about Winston Churchill, or Princess Diana, or Pierre Eliot Trudeau, or Daniel Boone, or Big Mike Fox here in Olnda—stories we tell again and again, a little different each time, perhaps stories from our own families—stories of identity. As the Greeks would say, "Know Thyself".

The old Greek heroes, larger than life, are described as the offspring of the gods, but they are not immortal. In the end, the immortals of Olympus cannot die. To some extent the old Greek gods are even indifferent to our human difficulties. It is the struggle of the humans, who can and will die, that brings depth to the stories of gods and humans. The Olympian gods cannot die; so the contentions between them are played out through humans, like a proxy-war in Syria.....

There is one passage in Homer's *Iliad* that chills me to the bone: The goddesses Hera and Athena are poised at the gates of Troy, like ravens in an oak tree, watching the warriors prepare for mortal combat. The poet describes them as "shivering like doves"; I was not sure how to understand that, "shivering like doves". Then it came to me—these two mighty and immortal goddesses were excited to see humans facing death, a state they would never know. As if it were Saturday Night Hockey.

The gods of ancient Greece are not always kind; they can be petty, mean, and vindictive. And relentless.

I was doing a crossword puzzle the other day. The clue was four letters, “a jealous god”; the answer—Hera, sister-wife of Zeus the serial adulterer, Hera who vents her wrath on her husband’s hapless consorts—and that is why the great bear and the little bear circle the northern skies, unsetting, Ursa major and Ursa minor, because the nymph Callisto was loved by Zeus and jealous Hera turned Callisto into a bear, and Zeus turned Callisto’s son into a bear also, and set them in the heavens to be safe.

Some myths are just ripping yarns, and some seek to explain things, and others ask questions that have no answers.

Let’s look at the twelve gods and goddesses of ancient Greece who dwelt on Mount Olympos, or as some would have it fourteen, or fifteen. They arise out of the dance of Chaos, of raging elemental forces at the formation of the world. Then Zeus brings order to the world, order—Cosmos—and earns his place as ruler of the gods of Olympos.

Anyone ever been to the Prado Museum in Madrid? There’s special room there, off to one side; if you go in there you will not come out the same. That room is where they keep Goya’s so-called “black paintings”. Goya painted them on the walls of his house when he was old and deaf, and sick of Spain’s murderous civil strife. The worst is called “Saturn devouring his sons”—Saturn being the Roman equivalent of the Greek Cronos. It’s horrific. Cronos believes his sons will overwhelm him, so he devours them when they are born. Zeus is hidden by his mother, grows up in hiding, and returns to destroy his father and rescue his siblings, with whose help he destroys the monstrous Titans of the old regime.

I was driving out to Perth County the other day, listening to CBC Radio; there was an interview with an author who had just written a book about a sister who travels to Afghanistan to fetch home her brother, who has run off to join ISIS, to his mortal peril; the author says that essentially the story is Antigone, from the ancient Greek tragedies; the author admires how the Greeks could look horror and terror, full in the face.

So who are these Olympian Twelve, or so? I wonder what chords they might strike in you, or what stories about them, or art-work, you might recall?

Zeus we’re mentioned; Zeus is a sky god—the flash and crash of thunder and lightning. His bird is an eagle. Zeus is a raptor and a ravisher. If ancient Greece had the internet, Zeus would have his own hashtag for # me too.

Zeus' wife, and sister, is Hera, goddess of married women.

Zeus' daughter is Athena, goddess of wisdom, technical skills, and defensive warfare.

Athena is the daughter, not of Hera, but of the goddess Metis. There was a prophecy that the children of Metis would be very wise, wiser than Zeus; so Zeus swallowed Metis whole, like the big bad wolf swallowed down Red Riding Hood's old granny. Then Zeus had a really bad headache, and Athena leapt out of his head—wisdom, born from his head, fully armed and clothed, daughter of Zeus and Metis. Athena is very independent, and remains unmarried.

(Zeus, Hera, Athena. That's three.)

Zeus has two brothers; one is Hades, who rules underground, the realm of the dead. Hades kidnaps Persephone; she's his niece—I told you these stories were not always pretty—and carries her away to rule the dead in the underworld. Demeter, goddess of crops, mother of Persephone, mourns for her daughter, heart-broken, and the earth sinks into famine and despair.

Persephone ate six pomegranate seeds in the underworld; eventually she is returned to her mother, but only for half the year; for six months each year, one for each pomegranate seed, the corn maiden stays underground with her husband Hades, and rules the shadows of the dead.

Demeter and Persephone were associated with the underground mysteries at Eleusis. We still don't know what they were about—it's a mystery. Nothing was ever written down. Perhaps there never were mere words to be written down. Everyone kept the secret.

Myth explains things; birth and life and death, the seasons and seed time....

(And that's six.)

Zeus rules the sky, Hades rules beneath the earth, and brother Poseidon rules the seas, also horses and earthquakes—a god of powerful motion.

Aphrodite, Venus to the Romans, born upon the waves, is goddess of love and fertility, a powerful goddess, holding sway over all creatures, and not always kind; Botticelli's painting pretty well says it all—perfect beauty.

It has been said that if you go to the Louvre Museum and look at statue of the Venus de Milo there for a full fifteen minutes, she'll look as if she's breathing....

I know a friend and I sat a full fifteen minutes looking at a bronze statue in Athens known as Artemision Zeus, barely breathing ourselves. Perfect confidence. Braided hair, symbolizing self-control, or so I would think. Powerful. Awesome.

So, Zeus, Hera, and Athena, Hades, Persephone and Demeter, Poseidon and Aphrodite.

Aphrodite was married off to Hephaestos, the blacksmith to the gods, who hammers away at his forge in the fires of Mount Aetna. Hephaestos is said to be club-footed, and ugly, a child of Zeus and Hera, whom Hera cast down from a great height, in her displeasure at his deformity.

Hera was never good at unconditional love; and her step-son Heracles—she made his life hell.

A forge is a good job for some born lame, like Hephaestos, in the days before corrective surgery.

Aphrodite is not particularly faithful, to Hephaestos or to anyone for that matter; she is known to carry on with Ares, Greek god of war.

Now the Roman god of war, Mars, is a farmer-soldier; he wants and needs land; Mars' wife is Anna Perenna, the eternal turning year, a maiden bride in the spring, fruitful woman in the fall, then withered and old through the long, cold winter, until spring returns, and with spring returns her youth.

But Greek Ares, he's a madman, raging for war, insane for combat, and between battles, Ares is the hyper-masculine lover of Aphrodite.

Where were we? Zeus, Hera, and Athena; Hades, Persephone and Demeter; Poseidon, Aphrodite, Hephaestos and Ares; that's ten. Add in Apollo and Artemis, twin-born sun and moon, and we have twelve. But we're not done.

Apollo is light and reason, or so the European philosophers of the Nineteenth Century would like us to think; and he has another twin, more a doppelganger—Dionysus. Dionysus the god of wine, the god of wild excess to the point of madness, the god of ecstacies. Both could be cruel and arbitrary. Both could bring life or death, at a whim. Both live within us, at the same time.

Sometimes some folks take a shine to the old stones such as the marble bones of the Parthenon temple in Athens, atop the Acropolis, and praise them for their presumed purity, their clean lines, and praise the Greeks for austere rationality. In real life, it's not so tidy; the glory that was Greece included painting the Parthenon pink, and painting the statues, putting earrings on them, draping them with cloth and necklaces, and trying to control outcomes with magic spells. [See Eric R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951.]

There are two more Olympians we need to mention, two that speak to me of Olinda—Hermes and Hestia.

Hestia is not so often seen in art; Hestia is the older sister who stayed home to help raise the younger children and never married, or maybe there was no money for a dowry, a little shy, very quiet, doesn't say much, but it's her steady gentle presence that makes the house a home, a warm and quiet place when day is done. Hestia is the hearth fire, and harmony. You've seen her, when

you went camping; she's the half dozen rocks you pulled together to make the fire pit, a few stones gathered in a circle, the simplest of fire-places.

And Hermes, the messenger of the gods; Hermes is a trickster—the day he was born, Hermes stole a herd of Apollo's cattle, then sweet-talked his way out of it by inventing the lyre and giving it to Apollo as a peace offering. Hermes is clever and tricky, so the gods keep him busy and mostly out of trouble running their errands, running across the waves, winged cap and boots. Hermes carries a special message sometimes—he is also Hermes Psychopompus, the conductor of souls, who will lead you wherever you need to go, even to the underworld, when life is over.

Hermes, like Hestia, is also represented by rocks.

Have you ever taken a long walk, perhaps a hike over a mountain pass; at the top of the pass perhaps there was a cairn, like the cairn on route two that marks the Battle of the Longwoods. Or perhaps, just a heap of stones.

There was a cairn like that, up in the Cantabrian mountains, when I walked the old pilgrim trail in northern Spain, el Camino de Santiago de Compostella. There's a high point at the Cruz de Ferro, the Iron Cross, and heaped about it are thousands of stones, small stones that some pilgrim might have carried hundreds of kilometres, and brought from thousands of miles away, from home. And at that high point they lay the stone with all the other stones, and leave a part of what might be troubling them, just leave it there with the stone.

Or maybe just a stone to say, I passed this way. I was here.

Olinda may not be a mountain pass, but it is one of the higher places on the old trail from Niagara to Detroit. The trail itself is a moraine of stones left over from the Ice Age, elevated above the bogs and swamps and thus the logical place for a trail, for the first peoples, for the fur trade, for the war trails of 1812, for the Talbot Trail and colonial settlement; this is where the road goes.

In the stones in the Graceland Cemetery across the road here, in the sturdy stones of the foundation under this church, in the old trails beneath the paved ways, stones seen and unseen, I see some trace of Hermes the traveller, swift as thought, and solid as the weight of time.

And that's more than enough, and more than twelve....

In conclusion, what does it matter? What does it matter that there were "projected ideologies" that took the names and shapes of gods some two or three thousand years ago, and thousands of miles away from here. What does it matter that our books and our artists still tell their stories, and our weighty civic buildings still reflect the styles of architecture from their times? What does

it matter that we have this record of the dreams and nightmares of the Greeks and Romans, when there are hundreds of other cultures with hundreds of other stories, authentic and powerful stories to inspire any life?

Because these stories fire the imagination. Because they live on in our art and in the very words of our language. Because they challenge us to enter the story and make our own sense of it.

Can you think of Aphrodite and not be moved?

Can you be moved to rage and not 'know thyself' more keenly if you think of Ares, Apollo, and Dionysus, or jealous vengeful slighted Hera?

And when you hear a story from a culture that is not Greek or Roman, like the Queen Empress of the West whose handmaiden carries in her basket the golden peaches of youth and immortality, will you have a better notion of how to understand that story because you have learned a little of the old tales of the old gods of ancient Greece?

Ursula K. Le Guin believed that such stories nourish the mind, and lead us through the inner lands of our imagination, so we might in turn imagine the results of our actions, and learn to act as responsible moral agents.

May it be so.

Bibliography:
The Essex County Library System includes a range of materials on mythology. Here are some:

Zachary Hamby, "Greek Mythology for Teens: Classic Myths in Today's World", 2011. A teaching aid, geared for classroom used and creative learning. [JUV 292.13 Ham]

Eric A. Kimmel, "The McEldererry Book of Greek Myths", 2008. [JUV 398.20938 Kim]

Helen Morales, "Classical Mythology: A Very Short Introduction", Oxford University Press, 2007. An excellent, brief summary of myth, its fluidity, how it works, how it has been used, and how mis-used. Interesting reflections of Freudian and Jungian adaptations, also feminist engagement. [292.13 Mor] Highly recommended.

Don Nardo, "The Gods and Goddesses of Greek Mythology", 2012. The comic book summary. Brief, to the point, with lively drawings. [JUV398.210938 Nar]

Richard Woff, "A Pocket Dictionary of Greek and Roman Gods and Goddesses, 2003. The British Museum and Getty Publications. An excellent, succinct summary, with very fine photographs and some interesting editorial choices that extend the range beyond the Graeco-Roman into other Mediterranean cultures. I really like this book. [JUV 292.21103 Wof]

Obituary published in the New York Times for the fantasy and science fiction writer Ursula K. Le Guin, died in Portland Oregon 22Jan2018.

See also “Tanglewood Tales for Boys and Girls”, 1853, by Nathaniel Hawthorne.

Eric R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational*. Berkeley: University of California. Press, 1951.]

Stephen Fry, *Mythos*, 2017. I enjoyed *The Guardian’s* review of this book.

For an example of Greek elements that continue in modern architecture, take a peek at the Bank Theater—the old Bank of Montreal building—next time you drive through Leamington four corners: Corinthian columns and a Greek-style pediment above the doorway.

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