

Sweetness Follows

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We've had a long, dark, difficult winter this year. There's been a lot of snow and ice and cold, making everything complicated and limiting everyone's movement. Believe it or not, I'm not sure it's a bad thing. Winter is a good time to think. As the mother of a very active toddler, I've come to value highly, time to think. The cold and snow provide a natural break, a time for stillness, for silence. The trees, the soils, many of the animals, including the humans – we shift into a slower, sleepier time. The Earth is covered in snow, hiding and resting, frozen solid, not allowing for access in or out. The work of the land stops until it warms and opens again. There's a natural rhythm for Earth and all her inhabitants. We need to rest. It's in the silence of the winter that we can think most clearly. Annie Dillard says it's during the winter that she can reap the harvest of the year's planting.

I live in the woods and for much of the year, we can't see the other houses on our street. But in the winter, the woods empty and we can see everything. The spring is a virtual cabaret of flowers and budding trees and the summer is a carnival of life and the autumn a festival of color. But the winter is more like a memorial, a time for reflection and revelation. The trees and shrubs end the autumn in a dramatic striptease exposing a bare Earth and the humans make our way inside where we are less vulnerable, less exposed than the planet appears to be.

Because our culture doesn't bend often to weather, we expect life to continue forward as if nothing has changed. If our roads are covered in ice, we wait impatiently for a few hours until it can be melted artificially and cleared. A foot or two of snow might cancel school for a day, but little else. When we moved to Northern Westchester 8 years ago, I bought a 4-wheel drive car for just that reason. I'm not letting a few inches – or feet – of snow stop me.

When we give in to the expectation of busyness, I suspect we neglect a natural rhythm. We miss the stillness that the winter has invited us into. We fill the emptiness with something-ness and neglect the fertile vacancies. The new life of spring is only possible after the rest of winter. The clarity of winter is the necessary precursor for the regeneration of spring. The Earth is laid bare. We can see clearly. We are moved indoors. The snow and ice conspire to keep us there. We shift into a semi-hibernation state. That is the natural way.

At least that's the natural way for those of us in the northeast. Most religious traditions, nearly all of which were founded in warmer climates, create a period of quiet and emptiness generally marked by fasting and prayer to different degrees. Even if the planet doesn't enforce this time of rest, we humans still seem to need it. At the new year, Jews fast and pray for 10 days. The Ba'hai put aside 19 days in March, the Muslims are in for 30 during Ramadan and the Catholics beat us all with their 40 days of sacrifice during Lent. For millennia, humans have practiced these seasons of surrender and contemplation as one of the natural rhythms of existence. And here in the northeast, Earth obliges with her dark, cold winters.

Those religious cycles of emptying are designed to open us to new insights about who we are and how we live. The English word religion comes from the Latin word *ligio* which is also the root for ligament; it means "to connect". *Religio* is to reconnect. The world's religions are designed to help us reconnect. Reconnect with our god, maybe. With our families, usually. With our communities, generally. With our deepest selves, always. These seasons are opportunities to eliminate excess and to be authentically present.

During these cycles of stillness, it is generally expected that we'll take stock of our behavior. It's a time to recognize when we've done something hurtful, are on the wrong path, have gotten distracted from our core values. It's time to take inventory of our interior lives and to then seek forgiveness or redemption so that we can move forward anew. It's an intentional winter to spring cycle.

According to Hebrew scripture, land is planted for 6 years and then given the 7th year to rest which is called a sabbatical, coming from the same root for Sabbath. After 7 cycles of 7 years, the 50th year is declared a Jubilee and the land is redeemed – that's the language. During the Jubilee year, everything is made fresh

again: debts are forgotten, harms are forgiven. The world is redeemed and given a chance to start over.

I wonder what land we have that needs to lie fallow for a season.

One of my spiritual masters is Julian of Norwich, a 14th century mystic and anchoress who chose to empty her life so that she could see and speak with greater clarity. For those who don't know, an anchoress or anchorite lived walled into a church. When a woman or man decided to take this route, the church would perform a mass for the dead as the stones were laid around her. The walls were built on the outside of the church behind the altar with a window looking in so the anchorite could go to mass every day and receive communion. Julian had a bedroom, a sitting room and a garden and, as was common, she had a window through which she would council the townspeople which is how she earned enough of a living to provide for things she might need. An anchoress is not cut off from the world as you might expect, but is anchored into it.

Julian was 30 when she decided to become an anchoress and it happened after she'd been incredibly sick. To oversimplify this story, I'll say that Julian had a series of visions that lasted about 24 hours after which the only safe thing for her to do was to wall herself in somewhere. Once she was safely behind stone forever (under threat of excommunication), she wrote a book revealing the truths that came to her during her visions. And, to the great satisfaction of every medieval scholar and theologian, 20 years later she wrote the same book again with deeper theological insight than she'd had the first time.

So what did Julian learn that was so dangerous that she needed to protect herself behind such a permanent barricade? One thing for which she tends to be popular is her image of god as mother. But, any medieval scholar can tell you that plenty of mystics - both male and female - used similar images. No, the thing that had her so afraid was her theology of hope. Julian famously said "All shall be well, and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well."

These don't sound like dangerous words. But, they were subversive because behind them was a profound theology of redemption. Julian was living and writing 150 years before the Reformation. Bubonic Plague was sweeping Europe, littering the streets with the dead and dying. During her life she saw the Peasants Revolt, the 100 Years War, the Great Schism following the completely insane Avignon Papacy and the Inquisition, all leaving people depleted and exhausted physically, emotionally and spiritually. The popular theology taught that for each sinful act, there was a punishment - like plague and war - and there was a redemptive act to counter balance it ranging from a few prayers to serious money paid to the church. You might remember learning at some point about Indulgences, which come from this basic idea that one good act can undo one bad one. Indulgences could be purchased for the dead as well, so after your father or daughter died - remember 1/3 of the population of Europe died as a result of the Plague - you could buy them out of purgatory, you could buy their redemption. There's the famous line "When the coin in the coffer sings, a soul from Purgatory springs." And Purgatory was a scary place for 14th century Christians.

Julian, though, was offering a very different theology. In her vision, she knew God to be completely forgiving and loving. Her visions included Jesus healing and adoring and nursing at his breast. In her vision, there was no hell. There was only a god who cared greatly for a fragile planet and who loved all the people on it.

Julian was a Universalist. We are all saved because God is so good. We are all saved. Whatever you've done, whatever offenses you've made, whatever you think you will carry with you into eternity...it's all forgiven. We have been redeemed by the grace and compassion and love of God. And that was heretical.

So, during this self-enforced winter, this separation from the busyness of life, Julian stayed very still and was able to see a reality no one else was seeing. And out of her silence, she was able to speak her truth. And her truth was about redemption, about a God who loves, about a human race forgiven. From her window, Julian saw the hanging of the followers of the early Reformer John Wyclif as well as the peasants who tried to revolt and she was able to hear the cries of children left for dead on the streets, waiting to be picked up by porters. In the same way we can see through the woods that used to be blocked by leaves, Julian could see that hope was near, that a spring would soon come, that All Shall Be Well. She sat very still, confronting one of the most difficult times in human history and then she rejoiced in the knowledge that, like every season, this too shall pass. That the frozen Earth of her time would soften and yield to new life which it did, albeit generations later.

We are also in a difficult moment in human history. Given the long lens of centuries or even millennia, I suspect our descendants will note the 20th and 21st centuries as a time of dramatic change and upheaval, times for a full rethinking and retooling of how we work and live together. Just this week, the House voted to cut funding to Planned Parenthood, thereby eliminating screenings for HIV and cervical cancer for millions of women shortly before they voted to sponsor NASCAR for another year. We're about to commemorate 10 years of war in Afghanistan while Libya, Egypt and Iran wrestle with the potential of civil war. The governor of Wisconsin is trying to eliminate labor rights in his state. And we're watching, sometimes helplessly, as civil and medical rights are being attacked, our economy stagnates and our planet comes ever closer to flat lining.

In the face of such sadness and chaos, despair might be warranted. But after every winter comes spring. The cycle of birth and death and new life continues. What I hope we can see in the sparse winter landscape is that we are moving toward greater life, even if not in a straight line.

Some of this will happen naturally, as we defrost and the light returns. We'll shake off the cold and move back out into the world with a renewed engagement. And some of it will happen because we make it happen. Before this winter ends, maybe we'll consider ways we can, individually or collectively, help the new growth of spring take root.

I had a conversation with religious environmental leaders this week and a colleague introduced his vision of himself as spiritual warrior seeking to gather an army of redemption.

An army of redemption. I think I want one of those. I wouldn't call it an army- maybe more of a squad, a crew, a band, a bunch, a troop, a team. A Team of Redemption.

What would a liberal Redemption Team do? We don't generally buy into dualistic thinking declaring one thing good and another bad. Liberals tend to think in terms of complexity. We don't talk about individual acts of sin but about dismantling racist, sexist, classist infrastructures. I don't see us trying to save souls as much as trying to save systems that consume souls.

During these dark, cold days of winter, it might be time for us to regroup. The question I've been asking from this pulpit for weeks has been "what's next"? I've been asking all of us to consider where we want to go and how we're going to get there. I charged us with taking the call to justice seriously and to ponder our ability to be welcoming to visitors and seekers. I invited us to consider our internal workings and how our system functions. I examined our role as a covenantal society, grounded in relationship rather than doctrine. It's been a season of reflection.

The challenge of Unitarian Universalism is to create a special, and sacred place where lives are transformed, where we can move from broken-ness to wholeness, where we can face our shortcomings and celebrate our potentialities, and where we can find ways, acting together, to be agents of redemption in a world so in need of hope and healing.

While I've been indulging my role of preacher, putting our work in this larger context, our Board has been engaged in the tedium of bylaw changes. They weren't doing that work because they were bored or wanted to solidify a new hierarchical structure or press a secret agenda. They've given up every moment of free time they may have had over these past 7 weeks because they have a vision of hope too. They've become, I dare suggest, our own Team of Redemption. They've painstakingly reviewed the document that is supposed to serve as the ground of our governing system and have found that if we don't update it, it will soon be irrelevant. They've researched best practices of growing congregations and they've investigated healthy systems and have used that data to inform their work laying the ground for our own growth.

Let's face it. Things at 4th U aren't quite perfect. We do a lot of things well, but some things are beginning to fall apart. Or, if I understand our history, some things have been slipping for a while and we're finally seeing the results of that. Either way, it's time to start looking to the spring, to the time of life anew. I believe that this vote will be the softening of the earth that we need so that our seeds can begin to emerge.

There's a gorgeous Robert Frost poem called Putting in the Seed. It ends with these words:

How Love burns through the Putting in the Seed
On through the watching for that early birth
When, just as the soil tarnishes with weed,

The sturdy seedling with arched body comes
Shouldering its way and shedding the earth crumbs.

I believe that these bylaw changes are the Putting in the Seed. I believe that soon the sturdy seedling with arched body will come, shouldering its way, shedding earth crumbs. And in that budding of new life, lies the hope of our own springtime.

As the frozen ground begins to soften and yield to a new season, I want to invoke the optimistic vision of Julian of Norwich who anchored herself into the world so she could spread her good news of redemptive love. And in her spirit, I hope we recognize ourselves as anchors right here where we seek clarity in the emptiness of winter and spread our message of hope and our faith in the new life of spring.