

The Spirituality of Autumn: Turning Inward  
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Thursday is my sermon writing day. So I spent Thursday morning writing. Once I had a good first draft done I decided to check my Facebook and Twitter feeds before lunch. They were, of course, lit up with the news of the tragic mass shooting in Oregon. I felt great sadness, and then great anger. Then I started thinking practically: what do I, as a minister need to do? Plan yet another candle light vigil? Prepare words for yet another interfaith prayer service? Throw away yet another sermon and start over? I am so tired of this! Usually I don't keep the TV on during these media frenzy tragedies, but Thursday I decided to watch the President make yet another speech in response to yet another shooting. And he said just what I was thinking! He told the truth about us as a nation. And he helped me decide what to do.

As a result I did not throw out my sermon and start over. The President gave me permission to be sick and tired, and I realized that the very topic of this sermon – Sabbath and solitude – was completely relevant to the way I was feeling. And the way I imagine many of you are feeling. And the way many Americans of all faiths are feeling. We are SO TIRED of gun violence. And we are SO TIRED of feeling helpless in the face of a well-funded lobby group that has sold us a bill of goods – the assumption that their presumed Second Amendment rights trump the rights of the rest of us to life, and liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Last week I talked briefly in my sermon about liberation theology. The ongoing cycle of reflection and praxis that has energized generations of faithful advocates for justice and radical love. And I recognize that we need some of that reflective piece, the piece that allows you to take a break from

non-stop advocacy, to recharge your batteries, to reflect on both tactics and basic assumptions before heading back out there to fight the good fight. We need a Sabbath. So here's the sermon I wrote before I heard the news.

Once upon a time, a long time ago, all religions were in some sense earth based. People across the globe lived by the rhythm of the seasons, by the waxing and waning of the moon, by the ebb and flow of the tides. They felt awe watching a beautiful sunset, fear and trembling in the face of a storm, and gratitude for the bounty of the harvest. They built their religions around those core experiences that guaranteed their survival. Over time, and very gradually, things changed. Humanity evolved from nomadic hunter/gatherers to landed agrarians to an industrial and then to a post-industrial economy. The religions practiced by the people around the globe also changed to reflect the reality of their day to day lives. In that change we lost some of the deep and instinctual wisdom that was embedded in those ancient earth-based religions.

Until recently, when earth based spiritual practices began to emerge again. Not surprisingly, their practitioners found a sympathetic home in Unitarian Universalism. It used to be that we Unitarian Universalists affirmed a living tradition that drew from five primary sources: personal experience, prophetic women and men, Jewish and Christian teachings, wisdom from the world's religions, and religious humanism. But the increasing influence of earth based spirituality in our movement prompted us to add this sixth source: "Spiritual teachings of Earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature." This new earth religion that we have incorporated into our theological spectrum is not a return to the traditional agrarian spirituality so much as it is a call to carefully consider our

relationship to the earth in the light of what science and technology have taught us about creation. Evoking the tenets of environmental stewardship, this new spirituality is concerned with ending the exploitation of the earth, inviting a new reverence for the natural world and replacing the image of humanity as the crown of creation – free to manipulate the environment for our own needs – with the powerful metaphor of the interdependent web. Our new earth based spirituality affirms the intrinsic value (some would say the divinity) of all living things – trees and mountains and animals and people. Out of reverence for this divinity which is so immediate (or immanent as theologians are fond of saying) in our surroundings, we attempt to live carefully and mindfully on the earth.

Earth-centered spirituality reminds us above all of what the rhythms of nature can teach us. At the time of the autumn equinox, for example, the number of hours of light and darkness are equal; it is a time of balance between light and dark that calls us to seek balance in our lives as well. In agrarian societies, the autumn is a time to gather in the harvest and to take careful stock of what will be needed for the winter. In our more suburban practice of this form of spirituality the autumn is a time to focus on the inner harvest as well. A contemporary Wiccan celebration of the equinox might include a time of solitude, of reflection on questions like: “What have I done well lately? What have I coped with? What am I grateful for? What is the fruit of my living, the harvest of my soul?”

In terms of the rhythms of the seasons autumn comes between the summer season of high energy activities (vacations, hiking, biking, swimming, camping, outdoor sports) and the winter season of low activity, of hibernation. As the bridge between the two, the fall is a time to slow down gradually, to recalibrate, and to balance. The balance of light and dark

at the fall equinox models for us the balance we need to seek in our lives. A balance that to some extent needs to be sought in solitude.

A couple of years ago in Westport, the Small Group Ministry session writing team chose solitude as their topic for the month of October that year. My irreverent mind immediately brought to mind Billy Holiday singing the Duke Ellington song of that name. “In my solitude you haunt me with reveries of days gone by. In my solitude you taunt me with memories that never die. I sit in my chair, filled with despair. Nobody could be so sad. With gloom everywhere I sit and I stare, I know that I'll soon go mad. In my solitude I'm praying ‘Dear Lord above send back my love.’”

That doesn't sound very spiritual does it? The truth is, the song is not really about solitude; it's about loneliness. The theologian Paul Tillich wrote that loneliness describes the pain of being alone while solitude describes the glory of being alone. Bemoaning her loneliness, Billy Holiday is telling us that something has been done to her – she has been abandoned, let down. She is filled with sadness, yearning. The woman who has been done wrong. She was really good at that. And of course the fix for her loneliness is for somebody, or something, to come and fill the void. So I'd like to reframe that song and call it Loneliness instead of Solitude. I can only hope the gods of jazz will forgive me.

True solitude, as opposed to loneliness, is something you choose intentionally. (Intentionality, by the way, is one of two essential aspects of any spiritual practice. The other, according to Scott Alexander, is regularity.) You choose to be alone so that you can probe your inner being. This chosen solitude is filled with hope and possibility and strength. You are not waiting for anybody to come and ‘fix’ your solitude. You are waiting for the promptings of the spirit, for the still small voice within. You don't want to

be rescued from solitude; what you most want is more of it than you have time for. In solitude you discover new sources of inspiration; you expect a hint of what you need to do to prepare for the next stage on your life journey. “Loneliness is the poverty of self,” wrote the poet May Sarton. “Solitude is the richness of self.”

Yet it is very difficult for us to find the time or the setting that allows us to experience the glory and richness of solitude. We are too busy, too plugged in, too stressed. It is almost ridiculous to suggest that you put ‘find solitude’ on your to-do list, but unless you make an intentional effort to find it, you are unlikely to ever get there.

I am willing to bet that for many of us, the only intentional silence we experience in our entire week is the minute or two of shared silence that is part of our meditation sequence here on Sunday mornings. Imagine what would happen if you didn’t make the effort to come to services. If you weren’t sitting here in this room full of people, you might not get a single second of solitude. And herein lies the real conundrum about solitude: we need one another in order to attain it. In order to be alone in a healthy way, we need to be part of a community of faith. In order to turn inward and grow spiritually, we need each other for support. In order to experience the richness of self, we need everybody else. To be part of a religious community is to have the assurance that our aloneness will be solitude and not loneliness; that our turning inward will lead to deepening, greater compassion, a greater capacity to care rather than navel gazing.

One of my favorite readings from the back of our hymnal is by Kenneth Patton, that incredibly articulate spokesman for religious humanism in 20<sup>th</sup> century Unitarianism. “We arrive out of many singular rooms, walking over the branching streets. We come to be assured that brothers and

sisters surround us, to restore their images on our eyes. We enlarge our voices in common speaking and singing. We try again that solitude found in the midst of those who with us seek their hidden reckonings. Our eyes reclaim the remembered faces; their voices stir the surrounding air. The warmth of their hands assures us, and the gladness of our spoken names. This is the reason of cities, of homes, of assemblies in the houses of worship. It is good to be with one another.”

We come together, intentionally. We are known, assured, made glad. And in that context it is safe for us to seek “that solitude found in the midst of those who with us seek their hidden reckonings.” Having known what it is like to be held by a reliable community of faith, we can turn away for a time, turn inward and seek our hidden reckonings.

I’ve led workshops on how to integrate more Sabbath time, down time, into our lives. We always talk about how we are all very busy people with lots of important things making demands on us. We always recognize that technology makes intrusive and irrational demands upon us that we mistakenly believe to be unavoidable imperatives. At the workshops, in order to incarnate our desire to set aside the time as true Sabbath time, we all put our wrist watches and/or cell phones into a box and close it for the duration of the workshop. Some of us have been tempted to imagine what would happen if, on Sunday morning, everybody did the same. Picture baskets full of cell phones and iPads and watches sitting outside the doors of the sanctuary, and a room full of unplugged people sitting inside. Fully present. Fully focused. No distractions. No multi-tasking.

Now I realize that conflicts with my enthusiasm for using real time social media to tell people about this wonderful church. I have even been encouraging you to tweet out your experience of the church service as it is

happening. I guess I can't have it both ways. Maybe we could declare a Sabbath every once in a while – a Sabbath from watches and phones and iPads. And the rest of the time we could use them as forces for good instead of allowing them to be chains around our necks. Because let's face it, to a great extent Thomas Merton was right. Our busyness is a pervasive form of violence. It prevents us from being fully present to those we most love, to our work, to our inner lives. Given that truth, solitude becomes not a luxury, but a necessary antidote to the violence of modern day busyness. It is the balm that soothes our stress. It is the magic bean that grows an amazingly generous plant that feeds our souls. It is what makes it possible for us to be wise rather than smart, to be peacemakers rather than protesters. So, ridiculous as it may sound, I am advising you to put 'find solitude' on your to-do list.

Wayne Muller calls Sabbath "effortless, nourishing rest." As we stand at the threshold of autumn, achingly aware of the hurts and needs of the world around us, let's think of Sabbath as a time to lie fallow for a while, a time to recharge, to rebalance. For each of us, our Sabbath, whatever form it takes, can be the opportunity to recharge our spiritual batteries so that when we emerge from our personal time of reflection we are ready to do our share, once again, of the healing of the world. Tikkun.

In closing, I have been so bold as to rewrite the lyrics to Solitude. I'll recite them rather than sing them. In our solitude we're healed, with reveries of calm and serenity. In our solitude, we're comforted with evolving possibilities. We sit in our chairs, stillness everywhere. Everyone can be so calm. With peace everywhere we sit and we share, the breath of life with all humanity. In our solitude we're praying 'Dear Lord above, help us to love.'