

“The Stillness Before a New Beginning”
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Central Oregon
Service Words by Rev. Heather Starr, Minister
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Host: Rocco April

CALL TO WORSHIP

Good morning. In the midst of winter, we come together to be warmed by the twinkle in each other’s eyes, the joys of hearty laughter and of friendship, the reassurance of a community in which each and all of us are welcome, exactly as we are. In this new year, the 50th anniversary of this Fellowship, let us also ground down deeply into our gratitude and care of this congregation in which all our questions are welcome, our doubts are embraced, and our wonderings and individual spiritual journeys together form a rich resource of camaraderie. Come, let us take this time to be together and to worship together.

SERMON

“The Stillness Before a New Beginning”

“Ready. Set. Go.” The energy of a starter, a beginner, a track-runner at the starting line, is “supposed” to be focused, poised, intense, wound, ready like a spring to take off and leap forward. I, on the other hand, find myself plodding into the new year as if constantly making my way through a deep snow bank. One leg eventually makes its way in front of the other, and I do seem to make my way forward, but there’s a deep winter tiredness in my bones. I have to ask: Why is it that we have the New Year in the middle of winter?

In the middle of the darkest time of the year, when the days are the shortest, so astonishingly short, and the nights seem to go on and on and on, this is the time of year when our themes are about starting over, considering the past year and letting go of what it’s high time we let go of and moving forward into the new year. And yet this seems like the most difficult time of year to do that. I think of summer and the high energy the sun brings us then, bouyancy in our steps and so much time out-of-doors. I think of spring and the taste and smell of renewal in the air as crocus and hyacinth peek up from the ground with their promise of more delights to come. And now, in the middle of winter, those times seem so foreign to me, like children’s book descriptions of a fairy tale world I’m not entirely sure of. The things that were energizing and motivating to me just a little while ago seem heavy and arduous now.

Mirabai Starr, translator of *Dark Night of the Soul* by St. John of the Cross, writes this: “My own spiritual journey began with a passionate longing for God and has led me through the gardens and fires of each of the world’s religious traditions, where I followed and was often disappointed by a host of teachers. The expression of my devotion has moved inward now. Sometimes I wonder if this simple emptiness is enough. Lacking the trappings of ceremony and even words, it is truly a spiritual path anymore? This is not always a comfortable state. And yet it is one that I am certain I share with a vast circle of Western seekers. There is a scattered tribe of souls who started out on their journey long ago with all that same fire and find themselves now back in the world but definitely not of it, wondering if any of it is real—interpersonal relationships, stewardship of the environment, divine union in love with God—and their wondering causes a profound and nameless ache in their hearts” (xx-xxi).

This winter-time is our opportunity to be in the stillness, in the darkness, with that nameless ache in our hearts, and to find words, rituals, and acts of kindness that begin to give a name to that ache. This winter-time is our seed-time, our germinating-time, right now. As much as we can feel resistant to it, exhausted, like we just want to tune out the darkness and hold our breath until summer comes, this is our time to cull and sort, to weed through ourselves, to gently prepare ourselves to leave behind in this long darkness the things that will make our souls more buoyant in the light of spring and summer.

People often ask me what the core of Unitarian Universalism is for me, how it plays a role in my daily life. One of the ways I can trace the influence of Unitarian Universalism in my life is a deep faith in possibility, in the possibility of each and every person to change and to grow. As the Massachusetts-based poet Emily Dickinson wrote in her home which was surrounded and frequently visited by prominent Unitarians of the time,

“I dwell in Possibility—
A fairer House than Prose—
More numerous of Windows—
Superior—for Doors—

Of Chambers as the Cedars—
Impregnable of Eye—
And for an Everlasting Roof
The Gambrels of the Sky—“

I dwell in possibility. But I have certainly had times when I lost sight of this possibility, times when I felt myself becoming resigned to a narrower list of options, not realizing that in order for something new to emerge, I needed to surrender to this quiet, empty expanse, the long winter.

I entered the search process for a parish ministry position while I was living in Portland and working as a hospital chaplain. I wanted to stay near my Portland-based family, but all the potential full-time ministry placements were in faraway places like Ohio, Arkansas, Maine, Tennessee, Winnipeg, Manitoba or Waterloo, Ontario. I didn't want to move somewhere to be a solo parish minister in a town where I knew no one. But this was the path I had chosen, this was the next step: the search process, the first settlement as a new minister; I didn't have a whole lot of other options if I wanted to continue in this work. The scope of possibilities seemed narrow to me. My whole being resisted the idea of picking up my life yet again and moving to a brand-new community far away from the home state I'd only just returned to. Aware of my own ambivalence, but not sure of what I'd do instead, I reluctantly took myself out of the search process. My heart wasn't in it.

And then the long rainy winter in Portland ensued—it rained 60 days straight. What had I done, I thought as I walked through the rain each day to the hospital. Have I done all this preparation—seminary, psychological testing, internship, hospital residency—all of this and I'm not going to make use of it? I looked out the window; it was raining. I wrestled with my own expectations, I tried to make some new sense of things, to look on the bright side. I looked for jobs with non-profits and community organizations in Portland. I dropped off applications—being careful to keep them dry as I walked through the rain.

From Mirabai Starr's translation of St. John of the Cross: “When you see that your desires are darkened, your inclinations dried up, and your faculties incapacitated, do not be disturbed. Consider it grace....The soul has no clue that she is advancing on her path. When

new gifts come to her, they come in a way that she cannot understand. Since she has never before had this experience which drives her out of herself, dazzles her, and takes her on a wild detour off her normal path, she thinks she is getting lost and losing ground. And it's true. She is losing herself to all that she has ever known or tasted. She is walking a road of entirely new flavors and new knowledge" (148-49).

In the early spring in Portland that year of the incessant rain and my floundering vocational discernment struggle, I learned that part-time parish ministry positions in the Pacific Northwest District were posted later in the church year than full-time positions. Around March or so, a position in Astoria was posted, and then one in Bend. I decided to put my packet together; why not. My supervisor and peers at the hospital, who'd experienced me leading worship several times, encouraged and affirmed me. There was something there I wasn't allowing to peek out, some possibility I hadn't seen or considered. Perhaps I could do parish ministry part-time and stay here in my home state. Perhaps the long winter had been a necessary time, a necessary quiet to find, trust, and carry my way through.

William Bridges, author of the seminal book on life changes called *Transitions*, describes trying to be open to the possibility of new life, new beginnings, and new love after his wife of four decades dies following a long illness. Alone and carrying on, in what he calls the "neutral zone," grieving the old and not yet ready for the new, Bridges wonders about the possibility of ever beginning a new relationship. "Every aspect of my life was up for grabs," he writes. "I didn't know what kind of work I wanted to do or even if I wanted to keep working. I liked where I was living, but I found myself imagining moving to an island off the coast of Maine. I thought about how I might meet someone that I could go out with. I went out to dinner and to plays and concerts by myself, and I imagined that I might bump into someone that I'd want to date. But I didn't....It felt as though I was at the point where [at sixty-three years old] I ought to be thinking about winding down, rather than starting new things (164).

"Seeking reassurance," he goes on, "I started noticing examples of people who did new and impressive things when they were...older. Michelangelo had been the chief architect of St. Peter's Basilica when he was between the ages of seventy-one and eighty-nine. Claude Monet didn't even start his great series of water lilies paintings until he was seventy-three. Grandma Moses took up painting when she was seventy-eight. Edith Hamilton, whose books on mythology I had read with such pleasure, had not even started writing on that subject until after she retired as a school principal at sixty-five. She had not visited her beloved Athens until she was in her eighties! At ninety, when she was planning another trip, someone said that it was wonderful she could take one last trip. 'Last, herrumph!' she replied. She took three more trips to the classical world before she died at ninety-five. But I didn't feel very reassured by these people. They must have known something that I didn't. *I didn't act—I just imagined*" (164-65).

In fact as Bridges goes on to realize and describe, it is that time of inaction, of imagining, that time in the neutral zone, in the long still winter, that is so crucial. He *does*, eventually, meet someone, someone who becomes very dear to him. He *does*, eventually, set out on a new life, a new relationship, a new beginning. And when he looks back and reflects on this uneasy transitional time, he writes "It isn't the events that make a period of your life transitional. It is the deep inner shifts that take place, the inner turnings that you may not even recognize until you can look back and see that at that point your footsteps curved off in a new direction" (174).

How difficult it can be to open ourselves up to new experience. I don't know if you make new year's resolutions or not, or pretend that you don't but secretly do, like me, because if you don't tell anyone then you don't have to feel bad for not following through on your unspoken not-really-a-resolution resolution, but regardless, I challenge you today to think about this: what new experience can you open yourself up to? What is something you've written off that you didn't imagine you'd ever do...but still could? What is something that you've said "I've never done that" or "I've never been that kind of person," or "I've never believed in that" to which you could add the word "yet," and approach doing, trying, believing in, this year?

I've come around to a physical understanding of why we begin again in the middle of winter, in the middle of the long, dark night. It is precisely because that's where the stillness is, the quiet moment when we come to a pause, a stop sign in our otherwise hurtling-forward lives, and can choose to turn a corner. This long winter is an opportunity to, as Mirabai Starr writes: "Borrow a moment from each day to stop and touch down with the stillness that is your true nature, which is God's true nature, which is nothing, which is love." This is a luscious Unitarian Universalist-ready statement in which there is room for every one to connect in some way. "Borrow a moment from each day to stop and touch down with the stillness that is your true nature, which is God's true nature, which is nothing, which is love." And from within that wide, strange and quiet place, may we each discover new possibility. May it be so.

BENEDICTION

When you leave this sanctuary, may you step forward in gentleness. Be tender with yourself during this long winter time. Softly blanket yourself like the snow envelops the landscape. And may you gently "borrow a moment from each day to stop and touch down with the stillness that is your true nature, which is God's true nature, which is nothing, which is love." Go in love, and go in peace.