

“Reverie on the Time That Is”

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dreams that sometimes
leave the dreamer hanging like the last
leaf on an otherwise barren tree,
dreams that watch and wait
for the autumn thing that pursues them.

I wonder how many of us here this morning have known this past week as a strange collage of “dreams that sometimes leave the dreamer hanging like that last leaf on an otherwise barren tree.” While we’re not quite this far into autumn, these words of Fredrick Zydek describe the mood of my spirit this past week, for one too many leaf has fallen. Yet I can recall an afternoon just a few days ago, when not Zydek, but the poet e.e. cummings was recalled and I wondered why, in the glorious beauty of an autumn day, in spite of the deep sadness, we all didn’t sing out in that gathered community,

I thank You God for most this amazing
day: for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes

Yes, to the celebration of life. Yes, to the celebration of a life. Yes, to love that transcends loss. And as we consider our larger community in such moral disarray, yes even to hope that transcends despair and action grounded in that hope.

Yes, also to the morphing of those “greenly spirits of trees” into the amber and russet and crimson fragments spiraling downward in gusts gentle and not. Yes, to a long walk in the seasonal mood of reverie—reverie on the time that is and reverie on a time that was.

Downtime, the beach, hazy blues and pale yellows, sunshine that lingers, *al fresco* dining, vacating, emptying out. Such are my images of summer. Then comes autumn. Burnished leaves, brisk air, brilliant vistas, apple cider, apple crisp, frost on pumpkins, pumpkins carved, bright yellow buses, waving youngsters with backpacks in tow, and even Woolworth’s, variety store of the past, with its aromatic offering of crayons and corn candy, sawdust and cherry Coke on tap. The long parade of memory continues with shrieks of laughter that came with daring jumps off trees and porches into leaves piled as high as we were tall, the pungent residue of great bonfires that consumed them—backyard bonfires that were once legal! Then there were the cookouts, the first of seasonal feasts, with hotdogs and marshmallows rendered into carcinogenic mysteries on long sticks in fires soaring skyward against the backdrop of a harvest moon.

But what of this memory itself? How is it that such reverie of time past is kindled over this particular arc in the cycle of seasons? We think back; we move back: back to school, back to work, and perhaps back to church in its “full season.” We even “fall back” as we move off of Daylight Savings Time in a few weeks. We return to something that once was.

As the life cycle suggests the metaphor of the seasons, so the seasons suggest the rhythm of the life cycle. How frequently autumn has been tucked into that phrase, “the autumn of one’s life.” We sense the passing of a year. We sense the passing of years. Consider the seasons of life in the lyrics we so recently sang:

The shoots of spring have mellowed with the year.
 Buds, long unsealed, obscure the narrow lane.
 The blood slows trance-like in the altered vein;
 Our vernal wisdom moves from ripe to sere.

When I first sang these words, I thought, “sere?” My on-line thesaurus reports “no results found.” In desperation, I turned to the dictionary. The term “sere” comes to our current usage from an Old English word meaning “dry” or “withered.” What exactly is redeeming about dry or withered? Precisely, I believe, that which is redemptive and revelatory about autumn itself. Our lives don’t last forever. They are fragile. We are fragile. In the words of Fredrick Zydek:

The fate of the self is written
 in these dreams. The soul knows
 all too well what the trees mean
 each time a leaf lets go and makes
 the wind its temporary home.

If we dare to pay attention, the time that is now edifies us in the most abiding manner. It edifies us with its smells, which remain with us for years, decades, lifetimes even. It edifies us with its visual magnificence, its wind-driven swirls of amber and crimson and plum and saffron. It edifies us with evidence that summer, vernal, green, is finite. The time that is now is harvest time—time to take in that which nurtures, time to transcend our habits of taking for granted the gifts of this earth and the blessings of one another; time for pause and pondering of how we as humankind are all too often not so kind in what we visit upon one another and this earth that is slowly but surely losing patience. It is time to turn as the leaves turn.

There is a paradox here. We harvest; we let go of. We revel in the grandest of colors; light is less. We take languorous walks through heavy leaves; we quicken our pace with schedules resurrected. What a time of contrasts we inhabit. A time to be still and a time to dance with the leaves, the very leaves just outside these windows.

Leaves—brown and gold
 Rising upwards
 From the tree outside the lead-paned church window
 Gently borne by an autumn breeze
 Soaring away
 Small, fluttering shapes
 Sparkling in the sun
 Enjoying their freedom to fly.

Dead leaves
 Leaving the safe tether of their branches
 The souls of the tree
 Starting their winter journey
 By dancing joyfully in the breeze.

Such were the reflections of my late friend, Marietta Moskin, in the autumn of 2001. I believe our world is no less fragile in this autumn of 2018. Yet then and now we are invited to join the dance of the leaves, like the memorable Zorba the Greek of Kazantzakis' novel—Zorba, who danced in the face of love and loss, death and violence. He just danced in the face of it all. Is that not what our friends, the leaves do, dance in the face of it all, dance their way to the ground as if their downward flight were a journey of joy?

Such is the demeanor of the most mindful among us.

Buddhism teaches that freedom is letting go. Through meditation and reflection, we recognize the core impermanence of life and discover that we are free only by giving ourselves up to that realization. I'm reminded of those lyrics of Kris Kristofferson: "Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose." I suppose this puts me at risk for bowing to that concept of predestination, so anathema to our religious consciousness as Unitarian Universalists. The Calvinist doctrine of predestination says that all has been decided, that we can't do a thing about it, that our destiny has been mapped out by a formidable God.

It's always intrigued me that folks who profess this belief don't seem to take a whole lot of joy in life. I've never known adherents of this resolute doctrine to dance the dance of Zorba, to revel in whatever joy is theirs, however momentarily. Letting go, really letting go, is altogether different than throwing up one's hands in spiritual futility, as if we didn't have a single original line to write in this saga in which we find ourselves. Letting go is rather an affirmation of our connection with the God who breathes through nature, not a God of the held breath. In Buddhist terms, letting go is our pathway into the nature of mind and release from the desire that causes us to hold on to what is ultimately transient, even ephemeral.

We are intertwined with nature, not above it, not beneath it, simply and most wondrously a part of it. We are family with those leaves that seem to whisper: "Stop holding on. Watch me dance. Watch me dance my way onto the ground, into the ground that gave me birth in the first place."

This kind of watchfulness, this manner of attentiveness, is the stuff from which we might discern how to modify the direction of our living into what matters most. It is a seasonal conduit of hope for moving onto paths of caring and compassion and making the most positive of differences in our world that is so full of itself with futile attempts to grasp and hold onto and seize and violate. This form of reverie on the time that is provides a venue in which to turn and return to richer and fuller living, individually and communally. It is a mindful movement from ripe to sere.

Portia Nelson takes us a step further in her brief “Autobiography in Five Chapters,”

1) I walk down the street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk
I fall in.
I am lost...I am hopeless.
It isn't my fault.
It takes forever to find a way out.

2) I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I pretend I don't see it.
I fall in again.
I can't believe I'm in the same place.
But it isn't my fault.
It still takes a long time to get out.

3) I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk
I see it is there.
I still fall in...it's a habit
My eyes are open
I know where I am
It is my fault.
I get out immediately.

4) I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk
I walk around it.

5) I walk down another street.

Sogyal Rinpoche, a practitioner and teacher of Tibetan Buddhism, finds Nelson's piece instructive as he considers the value of reflecting on that ultimate form of letting go.

“The purpose of reflecting on death,” writes Rinpoche, “is to make a real change in the depths of your heart, and to come to learn how to avoid the ‘hole in the sidewalk,’ and how to ‘walk down another street.’ Often this will require a period of retreat and deep contemplation, because only that can truly open our eyes to what we are doing with our lives.”

What better time to retreat and contemplate these realities than the season we inhabit, with its multi-hued foliage that, leaf by leaf, lets go of its tenuous hold on host branches? What better time to consider the deep holes in our individual and global sidewalks than this time when nature's breath scatters what only a short while ago seemed so secure? What better time to reconfigure our often painful solitude than to take our cue from our children, who took up the

fallen leaves from our Wonder Box and shaped a chalice, a constellation of community, a flaming chalice, born so many years ago as a symbol of sanctuary in a time when hope was dim and dimmer and ripening into the symbol of our faith that we are called to kindle again and again and, when we can no longer do so, to trust that others will.

“now light is less, moon skies are wide and deep;
the ravages of wind and rain are healed.
The haze of harvest drifts along the field...”

Autumn carries the potential for reflection and reverie and contemplation, for mood mellowing, for the exuberance of children leaping into massive leaf piles, for humility and gratitude in the consciousness of life’s fragility. It is also a time that renders us vulnerable to edginess, desperation, even despair. I find autumn richest in its metaphors when the textures of these tendencies coalesce, when the bitter melds with the sweet, because it prevents us from taking for granted the blessings of this life, blessings overt and blessings covert. It confirms those overt blessings of earth’s beauty and those covert blessings of abbreviated time. It is a season of letting go.

The time that is now unleashes the lessons of fragility—the fragility of our planet earth, the fragility of each of us as we move through the seasons of our living, the fragility of our capacity to sustain life, and the tenacity of loving community and the connectedness of all life.

I wish us each and all every possible blessing in the time that is now.

May it be so and Amen.

Sources:

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