

“In the Spirit of 76!”

Opening Words and A Reflection
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Opening Words

’Tis a gift to come down where we ought to be.” Imagine that you’re a leaf, a bright green leaf of summer chatting with your large green leaf family on an immense oak tree. The sun casts a glow on you, and you simply shine. It’s high noon. You bask in the glow, when slowly, so slowly, the sun begins to dip. You’re in shadow, but still graced by a day that will surely never end. Night comes; a balmy wind rocks you to sleep. The sun rises; a day that has never been welcomes you. Will summer end? You don’t even think about it. Day melts into day; night melts into night.

Then you notice. Where did that yellow come from, that trace of yellow you spot on your family members? Could it be that you’re losing your own green? Could it be that you’re becoming even more beautiful? You breathe in, you breathe out. Leaves do breathe, after all. Night falls. Come morning, you can’t believe what you’re seeing, but there it is. That hint of yellow on your neighbors has become a deep gold. Who wouldn’t want to be bathed in gold, so it must be good.

Night comes; it’s chillier. Morning arrives, and there’s still a chill. You shiver a bit. Your whole family is feeling it. And by day’s end, you notice that some of your friends are letting go. What dance is this? Shapes of burnished gold are flying on their own—off the branch, out from the trunk that you could barely see in the thick of summer. What a dance it is, this letting go. Will you dare to step out?

In the grace of autumn, “let it be a dance we do.” In the depths of winter, “let it be a dance we do.” With the arrival of spring and in earliest summer, “let it be a dance we do.” For at the end of this year, on the 30th of June, I am leaving you. “Let it be a dance.”
[Sing, “Let It Be a Dance” 311 in *Singing the Living Tradition*.]

Reflection

“To everything there is a season, turn, turn, turn...”

Now is a season for turning. Green to yellow to burnished red. Holding on to the last drop of summer and then, letting go, joining the spiral dance...turn, turn, turn. Transformation of miracle into mystery is the bardo at the heart of this bargain that we make with life upon our first breath. We breathe in; we let go. We move in the circle and the cycle of generation and regeneration. We revolve. In this space that we inhabit on Mother Earth we move in yet another revolution around the sun.

In the spirit of 76, yes! In the spirit of revolution, yes! In the spirit of circling and cycling and turning, yes! Just moments ago, I turned 76. I am as much as I could possibly be in the spirit of 76. May I be so with all possible grace. As the leaves turn, so do I. As the leaves become burnished with ripeness, so do I. As the yellow, amber, gold, scarlet, and deepest of purples take flight in a dance whose time has come, so do I. It is time.

Ministry defers to seasons as nature shows us her colors. You called me; and so does the inner voice that says it is time for this prologue to a postlude. It is time for a song that heralds its closing measures.

But this is not all about me. You and I are still in covenant with ministry that is shared—every single one of you—you who are five years old, 10 years old, 35 years old, 55 years old, 95 years old. And yes, we have at least two nonagenarians in this congregation. Okay, who can explain nonagenarian? [Response]

The ripest among us are seasoned, well-seasoned. We have traveled around the sun so many times, we may be a tad dizzy from so many non-stop flights. But the greenest among us hold the energy of a launch. You're just getting started, with all the vigor and excitement of an adventure unfolding.

And so we travel together. For just over six years we have done so. Some of you have been in this congregation for well over six years, and some for a matter of months. Each of us, in the aspiration of loving community, is unwrapping the gifts of who we are. Each of us is giving and receiving in varying degrees of joy and commitment. Each of us is a strand of a banner manifest to our larger community that is ever unfurling. Each of us contributes to all of us, and who all of us are is ever shifting. Turn, turn, turn. We are in revolutionary mode.

What are we about? A few years ago we agreed—most of us agreed, for perfect consensus and Unitarian Universalism just aren't in the same universe—to a mission. It is a mission to which we aspire...[motion to congregation to join in...] "Practicing loving community, advancing justice, nurturing spiritual growth." None of us can do this alone, and it takes a sky-high bonfire of commitment even to do it together.

Shared ministry—yours, mine, ours—happens in my probably not so humble opinion through a weaving of the pastoral, the prophetic, and presence. What am I talking about and why? I realize that some of you probably deem my ministry as too social justice focused—too prophetic in word, action, and interaction—and prophets can be pains in the tuches. Some of you might deem my ministry as not spiritual enough, whatever in heaven's name that means, or maybe even too spiritual. Probably none of you deem my ministry as too pastoral. Can a professional minister ever be pastoral enough through the lenses of parishioners? As for presence, I and we can only aspire to be fully present to the person who is and the moment that is, but we can do so through melding mindfulness and compassion.

How does the pastoral, the prophetic, and presence weave into the transition that I have set forth, the imminence of my departure from a professional ministry with you?

In the time that is ours together I can never let go of invoking and trying to heed the call of that 8th c. BCE prophet, Micah: “What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.” Some might prefer a mildly edited rendition of this call: “What does Love require of us, but to practice justice, to love compassion, and to walk in awe with that which we understand as holy.”

Micah spoke grist for the soul, and for the year at hand, our focus is “soul”. For me, soul is the essence of a person, the core of a community, the center of a flame that ignites and sustains, energizes and enlivens us.

I cannot be true to my soul today without holding up what can happen when a woman speaks from the bottom of her soul of what happens when her essence was violated or what happens when she speaks truth to the power and privilege of a man who seems disconnected from his soul. Is this judgmental? It is. I am profoundly “p, blank, blank, blank, blank, d” at those who would trade their soul for raw power. The connection at the heart of the spiritual just can’t happen unless soul meets soul. When power and privilege side with power and privilege, soul flies off the tree of life like leaves that never discovered how to dance in the sun. Yet a single person, a woman speaking out, other women speaking out, yet other women shouting their truth in an elevator to a lone person on what some might call “the other side”, and that lone person listening and then casting a ray of hope on what seemed hopeless—what a gift of heart and soul. This is hope against hope with which we are each and all connected.

The prophetic dimension of ministry is the most difficult to honor and sustain. It is so for me, and it may be so for you. I know it is for my ministerial colleagues. Yet I believe that if I and we are to be pastoral with soul, we need be true to ourselves through actions that are prophetic. And we need to be intentional and attentive.

In the spirit of 76, yes! In the spirit of being and becoming, changing and transforming, yes! In the spirit of becoming who we are and more than we imagined, yes!

‘tis a gift to be simple, but not to run from what is not at all simple. ‘tis a gift to be free, but not so free, that we confuse freedom with you or I doing what serves just you or me. ‘tis a gift to come down where we ought to be, knowing that a never-ending search for truth and meaning calls us eventually to let go from the familiar branch and free-fall dance into an autumn wind.

In prologue to Shel Silverstein’s poetic wisdom, which we will soon hear from Max Caplan, let us “listen to the voice that speaks inside.” As we do so, let’s listen also to the voices that speak with heart and soul all around and heed the raw truth when those voices lack heart and violate soul. And then, let us garner the energy of this faith to rise up like the prophets, to pastor through deep listening, and to be present, wholly present, in the time that is ours to share.

In the spirit of 76 trips around the sun, I invite you all to join with me in being all we can be to practice loving community, advance justice, and nurture spiritual growth that transforms us beyond our imagining. From the autumnal equinox to the summer solstice, nine precious months, who knows what we can yet give birth to?

Amen.

Sources:

Pete Seeger, adapted from Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, "*Turn! Turn! Turn!*"

Shel Silverstein, "The Voice", in *Falling Up*, HarperCollins, 1996.

"'Tis a Gift to Be Simple", Words: Joseph Bracket, Music: American Shaker tune, in *Singing the Living Tradition*, Beacon Press, Boston, Unitarian Universalist Association, 1993, 16.