

Seed Time

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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
November 3, 2019
Annual Service of Remembrance

Reading

from *Autumn Light* by Pico Iyer

We cherish things, Japan has always known, precisely because they cannot last; it's their frailty that adds sweetness to their beauty. In the central literary text of the land, *The Tale of Genji*, the word for "impermanence" is used more than a thousand times, and bright, amorous Prince Genji is said to be "a handsomer man in sorrow than in happiness." Beauty, the foremost Jungian in Japan has observed, "is completed only if we accept the fact of death." Autumn poses the question we all have to live with: How to hold on to the things we love even though we know that we and they are dying. How to see the world as it is, yet find light within that truth.

Sermon

The view out the window of my second floor study in the Parish House is mostly filled with the copper beech along Main Street – which at this season this year is as fiery as I have ever seen it.

So, if we are accustomed to thinking of autumn as the season of endings, or at least of closing in on endings... and if that sounds sad... well, that tree does not look sad, it looks exuberant!

Thoreau, in an essay titled "Autumn Tints" wrote that *changed* leaves are not the same as *withered* leaves:

I think the change to some higher color in a leaf is evidence that it has arrived at a late and perfect maturity, answering to the maturity of fruits....

Yes, he acknowledges that "the leaves ripen but to fall," but lest that sound grim, the falling is of course to enrich the soil so that new life can be nourished and rise.

They that soared so loftily, how contentedly they return to dust again, and are laid low, resigned to lie and decay at the foot of the tree, and afford to new generations of their kind...

They teach us how to die. One wonders if the time will ever come when men, with their boasted faith in immortality, will lie down as gracefully and as ripe...

Well, it seems to me that we can read Thoreau, writing almost two centuries ago, as responding to Pico Iyer's autumnal question we heard a little earlier:

Autumn poses the question we all have to live with: How to hold on to the things we love even though we know that we and they are dying. How to see the world as it is, yet find light within that truth.

For yes, we and all those we hold dear are dying, but that is not the end of the story. For just as autumn is seed and mulch time in the world of trees and grasses, isn't this so in our lives as well?

For though autumn each year and the autumns of our lives are indeed often poignant times, sometimes even sad, there is also light within that truth.

To begin with there is the light of ripening about which Thoreau wrote. Don't we all know elders – or others near the end of their lives, even though younger – who at a certain point begin to shine with ripeness, as if their true selves, though always present are now revealed ever more clearly, brightly.

I once preached a sermon I titled “True Colors” – using the metaphor of turning leaves. For, as you know, the bright colored pigments of some species of trees in autumn have always been there, just waiting to be revealed when the chill of the season strips the green. Perhaps similarly for us, with age the accretions of ego and the facades of personality can be stripped away, revealing us for who we more truly are – in all of our unique and splendid colors... and at the same time “in the image of God” as Genesis put it, in other words our higher and best selves also revealed, transcending personality.

There is also another way that light shines through the truth of autumnal endings. Indeed there are the innumerable ways in which each of our lights sheds light on all those we've touched in our lives. In other words, to switch metaphors, even in our dying we are offering seed and mulch for the lives of those who follow.

I've officiated at more than three-hundred memorial services during the past thirty-two years, and over twenty in just the last year. Many of you knew many of those Old Ship members and friends that we named at the outset of our remembrance ceremony today. This means that many of you were and still are nourished by the seeds, if you will, that the gifts of their lives, whether through example or teaching, shed – light-filled seeds.

Think of them for a moment, perhaps focusing your attention on the one or two or three you knew best: Jennifer, Bill, Priscilla, Everett, Hal, Renato (Ron), John, Kitty, Sherry and Jim, Bertha, Leslie, Peter, Joan, Trenchard, Mary.

Some of their qualities?: perseverance, enthusiasm, kindness, humor, passion for social justice, creativity of all kinds, music, art, wit and intelligence, leadership, peaceful presence, integrity, dedication to family, competence in the service of others.

These qualities don't die, don't suddenly go dark. Of course we miss the living person walking or sitting by our sides. Of course! But as long as we live, so shall they... and indirectly on through the generations.

Back to the trees for a moment. When I did a web search for “when is the best seed time,” I was wondering when trees typically dropped their seeds. But the first web site to appear was from the Scott's lawn care company. It hadn't been my intention to discover when I should plant new lawn seed. In fact, I already knew that.

But the Scott's advice was relevant – do what you will with the metaphor. Their message is:

Fall is the best time. The autumn season comes with a mix of warm soil and cool air, perfect for planting grass seed and allowing time for new grass roots to develop before winter sets in. It is also a good time to fertilize to build stronger, deeper roots for winter, resulting in a thicker, greener lawn next spring.

Well, of *course* it's the best time to seed and fertilize! If we had been paying attention to the trees we would know that, since the falling leaves at this time of year are after all nature's fertilizer – and if you have an oak tree you know that late summer and autumn is acorn time, maple seeds twirling down too.

Not that autumn is the only seed time in the world of woodlands and fields, but it's a good time.

Just as in our lives, we are planting seed not only in the autumn of our lives, but every day with every word and gesture, every time we are present for another or teaching a child a new skill or helping an elder.

Every time can be seed time. It's just that autumn might be among the best times – certainly with less time left to lose.

Now, does this mean we should be picking up our pace in the autumn of our own lives, make the best, most efficient use of every moment, and so on? Elsewhere in his book, Pico Iyer wonders too.

...every year the autumn poses the same question, which I, every year, am barely able to answer. There's no time to waste, the *yuzu*-colored light reminds me; and yet it would be a crime – a sin – to turn away from the beauty of the season. The bright days make me unable to resist the impulse to go outside...

So... a few pages later:

Why, I wonder, must I so often be running against time, when I know that the only way to be happy is to make my peace with the autumn, and to see it as a friend?

With this thought in mind, yet another metaphor for our lives occurs to me. Do you sometimes have this experience at a concert, as I do? The piece – maybe a Mozart piano sonata or one of Bach's Brandenburg Concertos... or think of any long piece of music that you love... - is approaching its completion. You know this either because you are familiar with the piece or you can just sense it. And maybe your attention has wandered a bit, as our attention does, during the earlier parts of the music. But at that point, knowing the final phrases and notes will soon be arriving... what is your response?

For me it is quite simply to return to full awareness of the music, full presence, which includes the poignant awareness that it's almost over. And it's beautiful.

Perhaps this is like making peace with autumn, and making peace with endings of all kinds, including the endings of our lives and the lives of those we love.

And, you know, it doesn't help to regret all the times our attention wandered during the first or second movement of the concerto or in earlier years of our shared lives. That's just how we humans are. What *does* matter is the moment we return to full attention, no hurry... just renewed presence.

Whether for that copper beech outside the study window in the waning days of autumn... or for each other in the dwindling days of our lives.

So, yes, autumn is a time of endings and of loss, often poignantly reminding us of the fragility and brevity of our lives. *And* autumn is also seed time, time to be more fully present, time to remember to share our gifts and to appreciate the gifts of our dear ones, family, friends.

But before I conclude this morning – a coda... one, maybe two, last brief ruminations:

Who do we think we are anyway? We didn't come from nothing; we haven't made our lives from scratch. We have come from all our ancestors, and since birth have been shaped by many, many others – seed-planters all.

As I think of my own ancestors, I can turn my gaze away from my study window and toward a photo on one of my bookshelves. It is a somewhat grainy black and white photo of Christian Yergin and family taken in 1895 in Indiana. About forty adults and children are in the photo, standing on a Midwestern porch – siblings, cousins, parents and children... three generations of Yergins, including my mother's father Howard Yergin, who was just a boy, and his father, who (the caption says) was a minister on his way between pulpits in Fargo, North Dakota, and Clyde, New York.

In other words, these are some of my people, though only one of those in the photo – my great Aunt Helen – did I ever meet. But they are my people, some of the roots and seeds from which my life grew. The faces in the photo reminding me of one of the particular streams of life from which I've come.

Reminding me too that my life will find its way into the lives not only of the children and grandchildren I have some direct influence upon, but through them into following generations who will know me if at all only through photos and maybe a story or two. But who will carry a bit of my genes and maybe a bit of my influence.

In other words me too, like you, like all of us, a seed. Me, like you, mulch and fertilizer. And not only for my direct genetic descendants, but as with all of us in innumerable ways, through every interaction, every word and deed, every day.

Finally – coda of the coda – cosmically expanding our view: me, you, all of us, materially, when the time comes: our atoms dispersing, seeding in this way too, as a poem has it (*shared in an essay in "Friends Journal" by Muriel Edgerton, a Quaker, hospice chaplain, and cancer survivor*):

...joining the universe as it sweeps
these invisible seeds into its birth canals
for new stars and planets,
tosses them into the dark soil of matter,
grows them into fuels of energy,
stirs them into cocktails
that may again pour out life.
You're going to be big.

Seed time, autumn time, every time, every moment seed time

Blessed be.