

Spring: Nature's Commitment to Hope
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The spring equinox is upon us and we are in that sacred liminal space between winter and summer. This is where the balance is, where the ground slopes upwards on either side of us, leaving us between the better-known peaks of winter and summer solstice holidays.

Sometimes this liminal space – the feeling of being in-between – can feel like rounding the corner and being able to see the end of the race. It's all downhill from here toward summer. It WILL come, no matter what the weather says this week. Spring is here, says the calendar and the planet and the stars and the sun. It WILL come. The spring equinox is nature's promise of warmer days. I would also say that the equinox is a much more reasonable predictor of warm weather than that poor sleepy groundhog in Punxsutawney who gets dragged from his bed in the dead of winter to be photographed by the paparazzi.

It occurs to me that we find ourselves in other types of liminal space as well as the seasonal equinox. We've had a heck of a year. We've been stuck indoors, most of us unable to get away, some of us rarely seeing another soul in person for weeks or months at a time. We are in this weird liminal space with the pandemic, with vaccines becoming more readily available, but with variations and mutations of the virus that seem to be smarter and more deadly than the original version that drove us indoors in the first place. This is the kind of liminal ground that feels like it is moving beneath us, throwing us off balance, causing anxiety anew.

We are also in the first 100 days of a new presidential administration and that feels new and weird as well.

One of the things I have noticed is that I don't feel the constant nightmarish dread when I turn on the morning news. In the last year of the previous administration, I began writing my sermons early on Sunday morning because I could not predict what might happen late at night on Saturday that might need addressing in worship the next day. I started getting up at 4 or 5 a.m., brewing coffee and wincing in anticipation as I turned on the news to see what horrors the president might have wrought. Would we be at war? Would his followers have caused some kind of violence? Was there another mob of hateful guys waving flags and looking for the weak and marginalized to attack for fun?

There was a short time – five days or so – when I thought maybe 2021 would be more reasonable than 2020, but then a mob stormed the capitol looking for people to kill.

Just when I thought it might be safe to finish my writing on Saturday nights like normal ministers, I got blasted back into hypervigilance and elevated levels of adrenaline that have not fully abated even now.

I do more of my writing on Saturdays now than I used to, but I still get up in the morning early in case something has happened that I need to address. That is the nature of long-term repeated trauma. It leaves us all with habits that may not continue to serve us in the present as they did in the past.

I've noticed this weird kind of slack in our national pool of anxiety as well. It is as though we are swirling in a river's eddy, past the violence of the falls, but lacking real direction yet so we spin in a corner until we can figure out which way is up.

We've had four years of hypervigilance and now we must learn how to simply BE again. We must train our limbic systems to NOT respond like everything we see is a saber-toothed tiger threatening to eat us.

Our relationship is in a new place. Like the relationship between members of this congregation, and your relationship with me.

For four years, I have been your minister in the time of a tyrant. We all had much to be afraid of. My first experience on the job here was the rally addressing the white supremacist violence in Charlottesville. Since then, I have had no shortage of outrages to rail against. Were I back in journalism, I would refer to that administration as "easy copy," meaning the words flowed off the page with my righteous indignation.

Now we've got someone arguably sane in that place. Other relatively sane people oversee both houses of congress, and the obstructionists and foes of democracy are regaled to the back benches where they are whining and pouting.

And while we have been in each other's company for this past four years, we are going to have to learn how to be in a covenanted relationship without a common enemy to bind us together.

After a year of gathering for worship and small groups and committee meetings and everything else online, our understanding of how we connect is shifted. We get all our information over the phone or through a screen, and it is easy to shift our understanding of how we participate in community to something that looks like how we interact with other forms of media, which is to say – entertainment. Those of us with televisions and cable access in our homes know that if a program bores us, we flip to another of hundreds of options available to us. We are the customers, so we pay for a package and pick and choose what parts of it we will consume.

After a year of looking at church through a screen, its easy to think about your faith community in the same way. "I'm bored. What else is on?" "I don't like this sermon, let's

mute until coffee hour.” Or perhaps worst of all “I am no longer getting what I want, so I’ll cancel my subscription.”

Membership in a religious community is not a consumer, transactional arrangement. It is a commitment to participate in a self-identified group of people seeking to deepen their spiritual lives and improve the world. Belonging to the UU Congregation of the South Jersey Shore brings with it a commitment to live out the values of Unitarian Universalism as best we can, to seek and learn and pursue truth where it leads, and to do that in community.

Our commitment to being in this community goes beyond our pledge cards to our emotional and spiritual investment in this community. Church is not a gumball machine into which we put a coin, turn a crank, and get a brightly colored, sugar-coated bit of enlightenment to chew on until it gets stale, and we toss it away.

Religious community is first and foremost a freely gathered group of people, dedicated to engaging body, spirit, and mind to improve ourselves and support each other in our journeys.

It can be hard to do when we can’t be in the same room with each other. I get that. All professionals, including ministers, who care for groups of people everywhere get that. What we are being asked to do is impossible – hold together a community of diverse souls, who are all suffering and traumatized after four years of terrorism and a full year of pandemic and its accompanying loss and isolation. All while being human ourselves. I love you folks, but I need to remind you that I’m experiencing this stuff too. I worry when I don’t see people in worship on Sunday mornings. I can’t inquire of their friends about their absence – are they ok? Are they sick? Do they need a visit? A phone call? Unless someone tells me that someone needs support, I can’t know that. So I worry. I miss you and I care about you. I want to know that you’re safe and OK. I want to hold your hand again, hug you again, listen to you in person again, have tea and chat, listen as you share, hold you as you cry. I want all of that, and all of that is trumped by this damnable virus and its mutant cousins. To keep us all safe, we must keep up this distancing thing for a while longer. And we need to be patient with each other as we continue to find our way through.

I want you to look at your screen if you are able, and see the faces and names of the people in attendance this morning. If you’re able and willing, turn on your camera so we can see you. Flip through the pages of faces. See how many are familiar and dear to you. See how many you miss. Think about who you’d like to hug, who you’d like to sit next to, share a hymnal with.

A commitment to a spiritual community is a commitment to the community, and that community is made up of people like you, people you love. Some, perhaps who irritate you, but that’s natural. This community is so much bigger than the sum of its individual

parts. Belonging here is not a transactional relationship. Its not like your cable bill or your cell phone contract, yet it is easy to treat church like that now that we're online, and especially now that we are in this weird space without a dragon to slay.

Look at these faces. See these friends, these beloved souls whom you care about and who care about you.

In this liminal time, this moment between winter and summer, with spring a promised reality, drink in the feelings in your heart in this moment. Send virtual hugs to those you see and imagine being close to them again.

Fall in! Fall in! Marge Piercy urges us. Fall in! Immerse yourself in this community. Let your heart connect with those you love. Feel your spirit grow! Know your place of belonging!

It is stewardship time, and I am asking those who can make a pledge of support in line with their values, and to invest in this faith community, to keep us connected in this imperfect, liminal way, until we are able to meet again in person.

Spring is nature's promise of warmer, sunnier times. Stewardship is when we make our promise that we are committed to this community and are in this covenant with our whole hearts.

May this generosity of spirit, mind, and resources be our practice and our prayer.

Amen.