

Rev. Carol E. Strecker
First Parish Unitarian Universalist Church
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Easter Sunday

"i who have died am alive again today"

I went out to get the mail one day last week and standing there in front of the box, I turned my face towards the sun. It wasn't something I'd planned on doing but it felt as natural as breathing, an involuntary act. Like a sunflower, my face longed to follow the sun across the sky. I would have been perfectly happy to have been planted, right then and there, with nothing better to do than wiggle my toes in the softening earth.

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It's been a long winter. I've grown a little weary pushing my way through the darkness and cold. I can see myself, trudging along, deep in thought (no doubt), focused on something I'm sure I thought terribly important when the sun breaks through and turns me around. I am born again with the visceral awareness that life is bigger than anything I might find in my mailbox. Basking in its life-giving warmth I remember that life is a precious gift and I am grateful for it.

In that moment I am alive again! Plugged into the larger cycles and seasons of life my hard, crusty winter husk begins to crack. I begin to grow again.

William Ellery Channing, known as the father of American Unitarianism, called that power the divine seed in every person. He believed that the aim of religion was to help people cultivate that seed. In other words, he believed that religion could help people grow their own souls. We are born into this world, a tiny seed of promise, with the holy potential to grow. Whatever it is that animates us- call it God, call it Spirit, whatever you call it, it's a vast and powerful force. And we are born with something of that power in us.

Channing had a powerful influence on Ralph Waldo Emerson and the Transcendentalists. The transcendentalists took religion out of doors into

the natural world. Emerson didn't think very highly of the preachers of his day. He found very little "life" within the walls of 19th century Unitarian churches. He found "life" in nature. In a sermon he delivered to the graduating class at Harvard Divinity School in 1838 Emerson describes sitting in church while a snowstorm was raging outside.

He says, "The snow storm was real; the preacher merely spectral; and the eye felt the sad contrast in looking at him, and then out of the window behind him, into the beautiful meteor of the snow." Emerson came to believe that while there were great teachers like Jesus, he didn't need a teacher, a preacher or a church to learn about life. He believed that the life-force in him, his divine seed, gave him the ability to connect with life's larger forces, life writ large directly, especially in nature. It was his connection with life that nourished his soul. Embracing life and our place in the natural order of things can save us, maybe not in the next life but in this one.

The point here is that we have to be plugged into the stuff of life, which brings us right back to e.e. cummings. The stuff of life is everything which is natural, which is infinite, which is yes! We are part of an infinite cycle, a cycle that has seasons; the tender new life of spring leads to the bounty of summer. Autumn - a season of great beauty is also a season of decline. And in winter - the earth lies dormant and barren. Death's victory almost seems assured - but the cycle that has no beginning and no end - only yes! Yes, the seasons will come and go. Yes, the cycle will continue.

We know the cycles and seasons of life. We know that each seed buried in the ground contains the promise of life that will spring forth. We also know that matter is neither created nor destroyed but it's continually changing. All creation teaches us that everything that is born dies, only to be born again. Life is a process of continuous motion and change.

Every day is an amazing day. Every day holds the promise of birth, growth that bears fruit and the death and decay that nourishes new life. That's the way life works. That's the way our lives work. e.e. cummings understood that. He was amazed by life and grateful for it. He wasn't trying to convince people to believe in the resurrection - at least, not the resurrection told in the gospels. But he was trying to show how death is not the end of

life, how Easter is right before our eyes. If we open them we can see for ourselves. What is real is everything...which is yes."

Being part of the natural world, it should come as no surprise that the larger cycles and seasons of life are often reflected in the cycles and seasons of the human heart. We experience seasons of the spirit.

Parker Palmer writes:

"Transformation is difficult, so it is good to know that there is a comfort as well as a challenge in the fact that life is a cycle of seasons. Illuminated by that image, we see that we are not alone in the universe.

We are participants in a vast communion of being; and if we open ourselves to its guidance, we can learn anew how to live in this great and gracious community of truth."

Knowing that new life follows on the heels of death gives us the faith to move from the winters of our lives into spring. Many of you know that Walter Moulton is in the hospital again. His legs aren't working the way they should so he's having a battery of tests. And I can tell you he's pretty scared. But our friend Walter is a man of great courage. He knows that spring follows winter. How does he know? He's been there - several times.

He's weathered some pretty harsh winters - his own dark nights of the soul. The gales of winter often force us to accept that we're being blown about by forces larger than any one of us can control. Giving up control and letting go feels a lot like dying. But the death of the illusion of control makes room for new life - possibilities grounded in the way things are.

Forrest Church writes,

"If our first birth is an unconscious passage during which the gift of life is being bestowed without our knowing, to be born again is to receive the same gift consciously, with humility and thanksgiving. In return for that gift, we understand that the world doesn't owe us a living. It is we who owe the world a living; our own."

When I saw Walter in the hospital on Friday I reminded him of our visit shortly after he'd returned from Boston. He'd weathered a brush with his own mortality and major surgery and lived to tell the tale. And boy was he happy to be home. We sat across from each other in the living room and he told me how much he'd enjoyed just sitting in his chair watching the snow fall the day before. And I could see that everything he'd been through had made room for something new in him. Walter was alive and filled with gratitude for the gift.

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Forrest Church continues,

"In the face of death, by not giving up in our struggle for meaning and by demanding to be blessed no matter what the cost, we too can be born again."

May this season of new life fill us wonder and gratitude for the gift of life. May the sun wake us up, turn us around and plug us into life's cycles and seasons. May our hard, crusty winter husks begin to crack that we might begin to grow again.

I'd like to close with the words of the Rev. Jane Rzepka:

We have wintered enough, mourned enough, oppressed ourselves enough. Our souls are too long cold and buried, our dreams all but forgotten, our hopes unheard. We are waiting to rise from the dead.

In this, the season of steady rebirth, we awaken to the power so abundant, so holy, that returns each year through earth and sky. We will find our hearts again, and our good spirits. We will love, and believe, and give and wonder, and feel again the eternal powers. The flow of life moves ever onward through one faithful spring, and another, and now another.

May we be forever grateful.

Happy Easter!

Amen.