

Easter Sunday Sermon, by Magdalen Lindeberg, March 31, 2024

Today is Easter Sunday. This is a Christian holiday celebrating the resurrection of Jesus. But its timing and core themes coincide with many other spring celebrations focused on new life, fertility, and renewal.

Here in upstate New York, we are on the cusp of spring and at First Unitarian we are focusing all month on the theme of Transformation. Spring is one of the great AHA moments of transformation. When I was eleven years old, I got my first pair of glasses after several years of increasing nearsightedness and I'll never forget that first spring with corrected vision. I could see the tiny leaves emerging, filling the bare wintertime woods with a mist of green. The pale pink of rue anemones suddenly visible against the backdrop of last year's leaves. Almost 50 years later it can still feel like magic.

In thinking about Easter and our theme of transformation, I've been reflecting not just on the AHA of rebirth but also the larger cycles of which it is a part. The cyclical nature of the Earth and also the cyclic nature of our lives. Seasonally, we move through cycles of warmth and cold, hibernation and emergence, dormancy, and growth. The children's rhyme may progress in an orderly way from March winds, April showers, to May flowers but the reality of spring - as we've seen this year - is more often marked by multiple rounds of snow, flowers, and mud and often not in the preferred order.

As human beings we move through cycles in our lives of growth and aging, births and deaths, sickness and health. And in our inner life, inspiration and discouragement, hope and despair, sadness and joy. And as with spring, not always in the degree and order of our choosing.

We live in a culture that prizes one-way, linear transformations and almost mythologizes continuous improvement. What is the American Dream but one positive transformation after another. Each generation better off than the last. Every child above average. To quote the French psychologist Émile Coué whose ideas swept the country in the 1920s and still echoed by many self-help gurus, “Every day, in every way, I’m getting better and better”. But the idea of transformation as a one way street of infinite improvement often coupled with relentless pressure to celebrate and think positively can feel like an incredible burden.

Religious and spiritual communities can serve as one of the few places where the cyclic nature of our lives and experiences are held and honored. They can provide supportive community where joys and sorrows can both be expressed. And they can provide stories and context for all different kinds of transformations. I was raised as a Lutheran and found a great deal of comfort in the cycles of the liturgical year. Periods of celebration like Christmas and Easter felt more significant because they were preceded by designated periods of reflection and contemplation in the form of Advent and Lent. You might not be surprised that the part I liked the most were the associated color changes. The transformation of the house decorations from the blue or purple of Lent to white and gold of Easter followed by green, and ultimately a return to purple for Advent.

While we draw inspiration from many traditions not limited to Christianity, one of the great gifts of this community is that it provides a space to honor and acknowledge - together - the seasonal cycles and the full cycle of our life experiences.

It’s easy to forget how rare and precious this is. Not only because we swim in a culture and an economy built on the idea of constant self-improvement but even in the secular version of Christianity, it can feel like we’re being propelled from Christmas to Easter with a brief stop for a Mardi Gras blowout in between. As if life were all Christmas, Easter,

flowers, and chocolate with no time or space to sit with the feelings of helplessness and heartbreak that are also part of our lives.

There is a poem attributed to Jalaluddin Rumi that starts:

This being human is a guest house. Every morning a new arrival. A joy, a depression, a meanness, some momentary awareness comes as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all! Even if they're a crowd of sorrows, who violently sweep your house empty of its furniture, still, treat each guest honorably.

Do I do this? Do I welcome unexpected arrivals into my heart and soul? No I do not! I'm happy to welcome the sunshine and inspiration. The brokenness of the world? My own sense of helplessness? Not so much. Often, without even a conscious thought I exert all the energy I have to keep them out. Do you ever think to yourself, why do I feel so off today? Then realize, oh yeah – my brain is working overtime trying not to feel what I'm feeling.

I was reminded of my tendencies last month when news broke that Alexei Navalny, Russian opposition leader, anti-corruption activist, and political prisoner had died in a Russian penal colony. Something about his death on top of everything else in the world just felt like one thing too much. This man who had beaten the odds for so long, been poisoned in Russia, recovered in the West, and then returned to Russia to continue his activism in the face of unimaginable obstacles. I felt overcome by the world's brokenness.

I felt flattened. Like the door to my soul had been pushed open by unwelcome visitors and I was squashed underneath. I remember one of our kids wailing as a child, "but that's not what's supposed to happen!" Also "I don't know what to do with what I'm feeling."

I need help with the unexpected visitors. I need a space where I can find strength to feel the brokenness of the world. I need a community that holds space for those feelings. I need stories from our sources to help see my experience in the great cycle of human existence. I need the stories of others that say, you are not alone as we walk together through the welcome and painful transformations of our existence.

As I grappled with my grief and anger over Navalny's death, one of the stories that resonated most deeply was actually the Easter story. I thought about Mary Magdalen and the other women standing vigil at the cross after Jesus died and seeing their great hopes for justice and transformation of the social order crushed. I thought of all the other people through history who have stood at the edge of despair in moments when the arc of justice bends the wrong way, and found the strength to carry on. In the days after Navalny's death, news filtered out of Russia that people were coming out to lay flowers in public places and attend his funeral at great risk to their own personal safety. And it felt like a small seed of resurrection – a glimmer of hope in the darkness.

I also found comfort thinking of the trickster figures that appear in many of the world's cultures. Those figures like Loki, and Hermes, Anansi, Coyote, and Raven who challenged power structures with humor and cunning and whose stories have been passed down through generations. I thought of Navalny poking fun at the Putin's autocracy and creating protests that were powerful and theatrical. And how the spirit of the trickster embodies one of the most transformative powers – the ability to bring laughter to people living in fear.

And I thought of so many people in this community, currently or no longer with us, who have exemplified the power to carry on and bring about change in the face of incredible odds.

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This year for the first time since 1945, Valentines Day and Ash Wednesday fell on the same day. Ash Wednesday is the first day of Lent and is observed by some Christians with a daub of ashes on the forehead and the words from Genesis, "For dust you are, and to dust you shall return" And I imagined all these couples celebrating love in fancy restaurants with roses and wine and chocolate with the ashes of mortality on their foreheads. And somehow that seemed perfect - like a model for every day. To celebrate and embody love knowing that our time on this earth is just for a brief moment.

Together in this community may we leave the door open to transformation in the many forms it takes, embracing love and mortality, facing both brokenness while recognizing beauty, and in [John O'Donohue's words as offered in the Opening Word part of the service delivered by Marie Benedetti] "welcoming the wonder of this day."

Addenda and Notes

Translated by Coleman Barks

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A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.

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Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still, treat each guest honorably.

He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
meet them at the door laughing,
and invite them in.

Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.

¹To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven:

²A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted;

³A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up;

⁴A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance;

⁵A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;

⁶A time to get, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away;

⁷A time to rend, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;

⁸A time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace.

This event was not celebrated in the spring until more than 300 years after his death but the alignment of the resurrection with more ancient celebrations of Spring and renewal was a natural one. Indeed, the word Easter is thought to be derived from the name of the Germanic fertility goddess Eostre or Astara. Celebrations of renewal and rebirth in the spring are common to many traditions – an association which feels imprinted in our DNA.

<https://mindfulnessexercisec.com/spring-meditation/>

<https://corbiemitleid.com/a-meditation-to-call-forth-spring/>

<https://splendidspoon.com/blog/a-meditation-for-the-spring-equinox-6c25a0984399/>