

## “Autumn Equinox Lessons”

Given the events which have taken place in the financial world over the course of recent weeks, I thought I'd begin this morning's reflection on Equinox Lessons with an announcement expressed in this poem, entitled

“Just Another Autumn Day ” by Roger McGough:

[There is a possibly unfamiliar word in this poem - “conkers” - a hard, shiny dark brown nut of the horse chestnut tree. A children's game in which each child has a conker on the end of a string and takes turns trying to break another's with it.]

In Parliament, the Minister  
for Mists and Mellow Fruitfulness  
announces, that owing to  
inflation and rising costs  
there will be no Autumn  
next year. September, October,  
and November are to be  
canceled, and the Government  
to bring in the nine-month year instead.  
Thus will we all live longer.  
Emergency measures are to be  
introduced to combat outbreaks  
of well-being, and feelings  
of elation inspired by the season.  
Breathtaking sunsets will be  
restricted to alternate Fridays  
and gentle dusks prohibited.  
Fallen leaves will be outlawed  
and persons found in possession  
of conkers, imprisoned without trial.  
Thus will we all work harder.  
The announcement caused little reaction.  
People either way don't really care  
No time have they to stand and stare  
Looking for work or slaving away  
Just another Autumn day.

Unlike the folks who have no time to stand and stare, I have confidence that most of us are very aware of the opulent beauties around us in the Autumn, though we may be distracted from them by cares and worries. There are problems aplenty to take up our attention - whether they are global crises, national fracas, family concerns or personal struggles. Yet the very fact that you are here today is witness to your freedom from slaving away - you are willing and able to lift your attention from daily worries and preoccupations in order to share fellowship, seek a little meaning, and, perhaps, even, discover beauty indoors on this fine September morning.

Tomorrow the day and the night will be perfectly balanced. We are at the place in the “Wheel of Life,” as it is called in the neo-Pagan tradition, when we give our regards to the waning sun and make a place, perhaps reluctantly, for the coming weeks of turning inward and increasing darkness. Six months ago in March, over on the opposite side of this Wheel, we were at 0° Aries, the first sign of the zodiac, whose element is Fire. Hopes for Spring began to seem real, and with the perversity of New Englanders we began to look forward to mud season. Seed catalogue orders had arrived, and some of us had started plants with these seeds containing tiny sparks of life. Others of us were thinking about starting plants, but we didn’t get around to it. We were sparked by the idea, though. The sun gained strength with every following day.

Sunlight in early summer seems to have a quality of youth and possibility. The gentle, waxing light builds until the summer solstice on June 21, when the sun entered Cancer, a Water sign. On that solstice, the longest day is marked by sun shining into megalithic tombs in old England or through slits cut into the rocks of southwestern kiva walls.

And though we still had the summer stretching before us, and many hot and muggy days when we sought the relief of the cold waters of ponds, pools and garden sprinklers, the sun began losing its strength day by day. It was still dominant in the sky, until this present season. Tomorrow, the sun will shine less than half the time. It will enter Libra, crossing over into the element of Air. Minute by minute, we will be on our journey towards the longest night and the winter Solstice, Capricorn and the element Earth. Cold and frozen as the earth may be, from December 21 we will again celebrate the light within that always shines while the light of the sun increases incrementally in strength, moving toward the Spring, Aries and Fire again.

These are the days on the Wheel that have been marked by people sensible to the changes of earth and sky from the beginning of humanity. Not only humans, but creatures of every kind are sensitive to the waxing and waning of light. My canaries know when to mate, when to molt, and when to sing by the light of the respective seasons. The geese know when to migrate. Yesterday I saw a fox in the cemetery near my place here in Burlington. Even city foxes know when to hibernate, judging by the lessening light. And what do we know how to do, this time of year?

The sixth source from which our Unitarian Universalist tradition draws is articulated as: “Spiritual teachings of Earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.”

This source is not one of the original sources articulated by our General Assembly of congregations in 1984. In 1989, a movement began to round out the sources with one which would complement our 7th principle, “Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.” Not all UUs supported the idea of claiming an earth-centered source for our tradition. Many Unitarian Universalist Christians, a group I was active in at the time, objected to this source because of their dislike of paganism. Traditionalists among UUs didn’t want to give encouragement to potentially unruly and

unpredictable hippie hooahas. It took six years for advocates to pass the amendment; in 1995, by a slim margin, the sixth source was added.

Thus, the relatively recent history of our own Association illustrates the tenacious discomfort a good number of folks may feel when earth-centered spirituality is the focus of our worship together. "Earth-centered traditions" may mean Pagan spirituality, Native American, Humanist, Goddess-centered or any other nature-honoring tradition. It is even possible to be an earth-centered Christian.

When earth is central, in the words of Thomas More, we "pay close heed to the natural seasons, letting go of some of the control over our actions, allowing an external principle, more beneath the ego than above it, to set the pace. We are nature, and to be profoundly in sync with the seasons and the weather is an effective way to be in tune with our deeper selves. Obeying the sun, regarding the moon, imitating the plants, moving with the winds, we find that elusive sense of self that we thought was only interior and not part of the world." [Original Self: Living With Paradox and Originality by Thomas Moore, Harper Collins 1981, p. 8]

The four cardinal points of the equinoxes and solstices are like brief resting places between the seasons which give us an opportunity for reflection. There is a heartbeat under girding life which calls us to recognize and appreciate where we are on that wheel - both our place in the natural cycle of the seasons, and where we are in our own lives. The ways in which we honor this calling are particular to each one of us.

- Some of us, this season, harvest the last vegetables and fruits of the year and put the garden "to bed," as they say.

- Those who celebrate the Jewish holidays recognize this time as a season of High Holy days, the time to begin a new cycle and a new year - a period which brings the opportunity and obligation to ask forgiveness of one another and the creator and to make the effort to begin again with a clear conscience and a clean slate in the Book of Life.

- In Wiccan traditions the Autumn Equinox marks the festival of Mabon. Spells are worked for protection, prosperity, security, and self-confidence. Offerings are scattered on harvested fields, libations are made to trees, burial sites are decorated with pine cones, acorns and leaves.

- As we heard in this morning's reading from Grey Wolf, Lakota wisdom counsels that we turn our attention inward to balance what is within us so the beauty within our souls shines forth.

These practices, though they pertain to human activity, nonetheless teach us how to live in harmony with nature because they connect us to the rhythm of the earth itself. When we nurture our consciousness of the seasons' cyclical rhythmic pattern and intentionally join in, in whatever way is right and true for us, the heartbeat of our lives comes into

synch with the living pulse of nature. This may be thought of as a kind of spiritual “entrainment.”

You may be familiar with the phenomenon of entrainment. Jonathan Goldman writes

“Itzhak Bentov [gave] an excellent example of entrainment in his book *Stalking the Wild Pendulum*. If you have a room full of pendulum-type grandfather clocks and start the pendulums in motion at different times, they will all swing differently. However, if you walk out of this room and come back the next day, you will find that all the pendulums are swinging together at the same rate. This locking in step of rhythms is entrainment. The Dutch scientist Christian Huygens discovered it in 1665.”

This “lock step” of rhythms happens with fireflies who blink on and off in synchronous rhythm with each other on summer nights; two folks having a good conversation have brain waves that entrain with one another; the heartbeats of singers in a choir will entrain, as will the heartbeats of the audience which listens; women roommates’ menstrual cycles will coincide - the examples of entrainment are manifold. I imagine you have experienced entrainment yourself. Entrainment is a type of resonance, but it is an active process, wherein, as Goldman writes: “the powerful rhythmic vibrations of one object will cause the less powerful vibrations of another object to lock in step and oscillate at the first object’s rate.”

We may also say “the powerful vibrations of one subject cause the vibrations of another subject to resonate in rhythm.” So when we attend to the rhythms of nature around us, we begin to embody that rhythm in our lives. As we, ourselves, resonate in sync with nature’s heartbeat, our own heartbeat is strengthened, the earth’s heartbeat resonates more fully in and through us.

We have choices. We can entrain with the flailing economy, for example, or we can entrain with the sacred circle of life. It all depends on what we choose to listen for as the fundamental heartbeat of our reality. There is a lot of noise and static in our culture,

and in some circumstances the cycles of nature are being drowned out. It isn’t always easy to attend to the seasons and the natural cycles. I don’t know if I want to give up eating strawberries from Israel in January, for instance. Substituting turnips and root vegetables is just not going to make it for me. We all entrain with nature when and where we can.

In 1854, Chief Seattle of the Suquamish Tribe gave a speech concerning the sale of native lands to white settlers. The authenticity of the speech as we have it today is questionable. However, the spirit of the teachings in that speech resonates with something deep in our contemporary souls. I am sure it is familiar to you. He said something like this:

“This we know: All things are connected like the blood that unites one family. We do not weave the web of life,

we are merely a strand in it. Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves. We love this earth as a newborn loves its mother's heartbeat.”

May tomorrow's Autumn Equinox inspire each one of us to orient ourselves, once again, in whatever way is natural to us, within that heartbeat. May we be nurtured, calmed, inspired and empowered by earth's heartbeat as we turn towards the coming fall.

Blessed Be