

THE JOURNEY: A Guide for Reflection

Impermanence

(November 2022 | Volume 2, Issue 3)

Unitarian Universalist minister Forrest Church often said that religion is our human response to the two hard facts of life: that we are alive in the here and now, and that we will eventually die. This is not a wholly new or original insight. It's long been understood that religion has helped people grapple with some of the great questions of human existence—why are we here, how shall we live, and what does it mean for our lives to come to an end? It could also be said that religion is, in many ways, a response to the problems of impermanence—though various religious traditions reach very different conclusions.

This month, taking up the theme of Impermanence, we are inviting you to reflect on the changing nature of the world around us, giving thought to what endures and to what, in the fulness of time, passes away. This is an exercise in humility. An invitation to connect more deeply with what *is*, at least for now. And an opportunity to learn how better to live “in the meantime,” which is all that we have.

I'm wishing you rich reflections and engaging conversations on this theme in the weeks ahead.

In faith and love,

Shawn

Questions to Live With



1. What were your earliest or most important lessons about impermanence?
2. Are you able to live gracefully and maybe even gratefully with the uncertainties that come with impermanence? If so, how?
3. How have you learned to contend with the countless losses that come with life's impermanence?
4. How has impermanence been a good thing in your life?
5. What have you found, if anything, to be enduring or permanent?
6. If not one of the above, what is your question about impermanence this month?

For Inspiration

A garden is always a series of losses set against a few triumphs, like life itself.

- May Sarton

The more sand that has escaped from the hourglass of our life, the clearer we should see through it.

- Jean-Paul Sartre

People change and forget to tell each other.

- Lillian Hellman

All changes, even the most longed for, have their melancholy; for what we leave behind us is a part of ourselves; we must die to one life before we can enter another.

- Anatole France

Time changes everything except something within us which is always surprised by change.

- Thomas Hardy

Senescence begins
And middle age ends
The day your descendants
Outnumber your friends.

- Ogden Nash

All that you touch
you Change.
All that you Change
Changes you.
The only lasting truth
Is Change.
God is Change.

- Octavia Butler,
Parable of the Sower

What is of absolute value never changes; we may cling round it and grow to it forever...The question puts itself to each (of us), "Will you cling to what is perishing, or embrace what is eternal?" This question each must answer.

- Theodore Parker,
19th century Unitarian Minister

You need only claim the events of your life to make yourself yours. When you truly possess all you have been and done, which may take some time, you are fierce with reality. When at last age has assembled you together, will it not be easy to let it all go, lived, balanced, over?

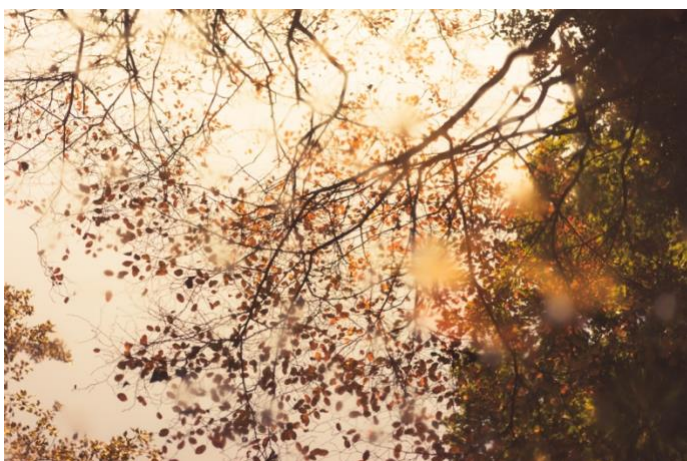
- Florida Scott-Maxwell

The world changed while I slept, and much to my surprise, no one had consulted me. That's how it would always be from that day forward. Of course, that's the way it had been all along. I just didn't know it until that morning. Surprise upon surprise: some good, some evil, most somewhere in between. And always without my consent.

- Carlos Eire, *Waiting for Snow in Havana*

Had I gone looking for some particular place rather than any place, I'd have never found this spring under the sycamores. Since leaving home, I felt for the first time at rest. Sitting full in the moment, I practiced on the god-awful difficulty of just paying attention. It's a contention of my father's—believing as he does that anyone who misses the journey misses about all he's going to get—that people become what they pay attention to. Our observations and curiosity, they make and remake us.

- William Least Heat Moon



“Today is a moment of light surrounded on all sides by darkness and oblivion. In the entire history of the universe, let alone in your own history, there has never been another just like it and there never will be another just like it again. It is the point to which all your yesterdays have been leading since the hour of your birth. It is the point from which all your tomorrows will proceed until the hour of your death. If you were aware of how precious it is, you could hardly live through it. Unless you are aware of how precious it is, you can hardly be said to be living at all. All other days have either disappeared into darkness and oblivion or not yet emerged from them. Today is the only day there is.

- Frederick Buechner

For a seed to achieve its greatest expression, it must come completely undone. The shell cracks, its insides come out and everything changes. To someone who doesn't understand growth, it would look like complete destruction.

- Cynthia Occelli

If we can recognize that change and uncertainty are basic principles, we can greet the future and the transformation we are undergoing with the understanding that we do not know enough to be pessimistic.

- Hazel Henderson

“The Way it Is” - Lynn Ungar

One morning you might wake up to realize that the knot in your stomach had loosened itself and slipped away, and that the pit of unfulfilled longing in your heart had gradually, and without your really noticing, been filled in—patched like a pothole, not quite the same as it was, but good enough. And in that moment, it might occur to you that your life, though not the way you planned it, and maybe not even entirely the way you wanted it, is nonetheless—persistently, abundantly, miraculously—exactly the way it is.

"Reluctance" (Excerpt) - Robert Frost

Out through the fields and the woods
And over the walls I have wended;
I have climbed the hills of view
And looked at the world, and descended;
I have come by the highway home,
And lo, it is ended.

And the dead leaves lie huddled and still,
No longer blown hither and thither;
The last lone aster is gone;
The flowers of the witch hazel wither;
The heart is still aching to seek,
But the feet question "Whither?"

Ah, when to the heart of man
Was it ever less than a treason
To go with the drift of things,
To yield with a grace to reason,
And bow and accept the end
Of a love or a season?

"Prayer for What Is Lost" – Stuart Kestenbaum

We are moving forward
or in some direction up,
down, east, west, to the side,
down the canyon walls,
watching the light fall
on the cliffs, which makes
the light seem ancient because
the red stone is hundreds
of millions of years old,
but the light is from today,
it is what the plants are moving
out of the earth to meet,
it heats the air that lifts the birds
that float and hover
over what is made from now.



"Perishable, It Said" - Jane Hirshfield

Perishable, it said on the plastic container,
and below, in different ink,
the date to be used by, the last teaspoon
consumed.

I found myself looking:
now at the back of each hand,
now inside the knees,
now turning over each foot to look at the sole.

Then at the leaves of the young tomato plants,
then at the arguing jays.

Under the wooden table and lifted stones,
looking.

Coffee cups, olives, cheeses,
hunger, sorrow, fears—
these too would certainly vanish, without
knowing when.

How suddenly then
the strange happiness took me,
like a man with strong hands and strong mouth,
inside that hour with its perishing perfumes and
clashings.

"The Unbroken" - By Rashani Réa

There is a brokenness
out of which comes the unbroken,
a shatteredness
out of which blooms the unshatterable.
There is a sorrow
beyond all grief which leads to joy
and a fragility
out of whose depths emerges strength.
There is a hollow space
too vast for words
through which we pass with each loss,
out of whose darkness
we are sanctioned into being.
There is a cry deeper than all sound
whose serrated edges cut the heart
as we break open to the place inside
which is unbreakable and whole,
while learning to sing.

“Holding the Light” - Stuart Kestenbaum

—for Kait Rhoads

Gather up whatever is
glittering in the gutter,
whatever has tumbled
in the waves or fallen
in flames out of the sky,
for it's not only our
hearts that are broken,
but the heart
of the world as well.
Stitch it back together.
Make a place where
the day speaks to the night
and the earth speaks to the sky.
Whether we created God
or God created us
it all comes down to this:
In our imperfect world
we are meant to repair
and stitch together
what beauty there is, stitch it
with compassion and wire.
See how everything
we have made gathers
the light inside itself
and overflows? A blessing.



Optional Spiritual Exercise



This month's spiritual exercise is an invitation to make peace with impermanence, at least in some part of your life. The exercise is this: reflect on some cherished aspect of your life, be it a relationship, your own body, or a beloved object. What would it really mean if this cherished thing was permanent if it was forever unchanging? What would the consequences of permanence be? And does this start to make the trade-offs of impermanence more acceptable, at least given the alternative?

Join Us

Join a Journey Group

Journey Groups are a great way to go deeper with our monthly theme by sharing with small group of people for a couple of hours each month. Groups meet online on Zoom and are scheduled at different times during the month.

For more information, visit our website firstunitariantoronto.org/journey-groups/ or look for the link in *First Light*.

Upcoming Themes

December – Healing | January – Grounding
February – Love | March – Anger | April – Welcome | May – Freedom

Upcoming Services Sundays at 10:30

November 6th
“Acknowledging History”
Rev. Shawn Newton

November 20th
“Recalculating”
Rev. Shawn Newton

November 13th
“Losing Control”
Rev. Shawn Newton

November 27th
“The Gifts of Impermanence”
Rev. Lynn Harrison

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