

“Renewed”

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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

READING

Flirtation: Light and Wine and Pomegranate Flowers

(by Jalal ad-din Rumi, translated by Coleman Barks)

*Come to the orchard in Spring.
There is light and wine, and sweethearts in the pomegranate flowers.
If you do not come, these do not matter. If you do come, these do not matter.
Daylight, full of small dancing particles and the one great turning,
our souls are dancing with you, without feet, they dance.
Can you see them when I whisper in your ear? I would love to kiss you.
The price of kissing is your life.
Now my loving is running toward my life shouting, What a bargain, let's buy it.
The breeze at dawn has secrets to tell you.
Don't go back to sleep.
You must ask for what you really want.
Don't go back to sleep.
People are going back and forth across the doorsill where the two worlds touch.
The door is round and open. Don't go back to sleep
Come to the orchard in Spring.
There is light and wine, and sweethearts in the pomegranate flowers.
Come to the orchard in Spring.*

Helio from the Other Side!

I have just returned a 10-week sabbatical from the other side of the world in Southeast Asia. It's great to be back! I am profoundly grateful to the congregation for extending me this opportunity. Thank you for the gift of time for rest and renewal! - and Happy Spring!

Our trip took us through southeast Asia, to Thailand--where we met thirteen years ago--along with Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam and Malaysia. We slept in 28 different places in 10 weeks, travelled by bus, taxi, plane, train, tuktuk, songtaew, motorcycle; night-buses, night-trains, ferry. We experienced 37 degree heat at Angkor Wat and in Southern Thailand. Frigid temperatures of 7-8 degrees in Laos and Vietnam. One night at the market in Vientiane we counted no fewer than 8 tourists visiting the night market in their white hotel bathrobes. Though we saw and did a lot, we still managed to have plenty of time for rest and relaxation. Sabbatical after all, means, of the sabbath/of rest. We returned to my favourite place in the world; the island of Koh Phangan and the beaches of the gulf to Thailand. We took the occasional “pool day” when we felt we needed to take it easy. In addition to the R&R relaxation I read, explored new music,

and found opportunities to share music. I visited the elementary school in the town where Rinat and I had lived, and together, we taught a class of 250 students an English lesson. I shared some of our Unitarian Universalist songs with them. In a rural village in remote Thailand, they're singing *Meditation on Breathing* and *Where do We Come From*. Towards the end of my trip, I took a week on my own and went to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, where I led a series of workshops with the largest and oldest community choir in Malaysia, the Philharmonic Society of Selangor. I brought them music for building a choral community--many of which are from our musical sources. I shared with them the music of the African-American spirituals and sorrow songs.

To relax, to read, to work with choirs, sightsee, revisit a country that I am most fond of, and share all of that with our daughter... I went for all of these reasons. But most of all, I went for the sun... for the light...

January through March is the dry season in South-East Asia... aside from a bizarre week of weather which brought snow to Laos and Vietnam, and a few days of heavy rain, we encountered next to no rain. Cambodia was a dustbowl. Sad and desolate. In our six weeks in Thailand we had just one day of rain. Clear skies and blazing sun for most days--the kind of weather that makes me feel invincible. I am, after all, solar-powered.

I am a heliotrope--or heliotropic. "Helios", stems from Greek, meaning "sun". "Trope" is a suffix meaning "turning towards or affected by". I turn to the sun. In the last couple of decades of my life I have become increasingly aware of the effect that sunshine and daylight have on my well-being and the debilitating affect our winter climate has on me, my work, and my relationships. Unfortunately, it seems to be worsening with age.

It is only in recent years that I have the courage to say that I suffer from Seasonal Affective Disorder, or seasonal depression. It's only been being studied for the last thirty years. I can tell you I've been struggling longer than that. Once mid-October comes, my energy levels plummet, and with it, my health, my motivation, and my hygiene. I can spend all day in bed and lose my desire to be in community with people; lose my belief in myself. I am overcome with a sense of shame; shame that I am letting people down; that I'm doing a poor job of my work; shame that I'm not the person I believe people expect me to be; positive, engaging, inspiring. I'm an extrovert. I'm fueled by the company and energy of others. So when I lose my mojo this creates a terribly vicious circle.

Serotonin and melatonin are neurotransmitters that control our mood and circadian function.

Serotonin is generally responsible for feeling good-vibes; an uplift in happiness. It's the happy hormone. When we soak up sunlight, through our skin, our eyes, we're soaking up vitamin D.

Melatonin is what controls our circadian rhythms. It is produced during darkness; it drops our body temperature, makes us tired, stunts our appetite. Those with Seasonal Affective Disorder--I am still loathe to speak the acronym as 'sad', as I think it can perpetuate the stigma of the disorder, doing no favours; being chemically predisposed to depression, is so much more than sadness--have dramatically increased levels of melatonin during the dark time of the year as there is less light to signal the body to limit its production. A word of similar origin, melanin--'melas' is from Greek meaning darkness--is the pigment responsible for our skin, eye and hair colour. It protects us from ultraviolet light--but with this comes inhibiting our intake of Vitamin D. Those with darker skin are more prone to vitamin D deficiency.

Seasonal Affective Disorder, light therapy, large dose vitamin D supplements; these have in very recent years, just come out of the period of medical/scientific scrutiny. Not unlike Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, Seasonal Affective Disorder is difficult to scientifically diagnose, and doesn't

carry absolutes that make it a have or have-not disorder. This means that its symptoms can be dismissed as laziness, or an excuse for poor performance, or behavior. Like all mental health disorders, there is a stigma attached to it. Thankfully, combating the stigma of mental health disorders has a tremendous amount of momentum right now. An increased awareness in society and more transparency and less shame from those who suffer is meaning that people can get the help they need. Movements like Bell's "Let's Talk" media campaign have helped bring this issue to the mainstream.

What should we do when we face this kind of adversity? Now I need to speak generally here of course; everybody is different; and I'm no doctor. But most importantly, we need to seek help, try to change habits, and not be ashamed... we need to listen to what our bodies are telling us.

Sometimes that means taking time for ourselves and our healing; maybe taking a sick day, a vacation, or if we're really fortunate, a sabbatical. We can ask for help from friends and family; ask our friends to get us out for a walk, or to the gym, or a sunny cafe. Most importantly, we can be honest with ourselves and others. We can become so bound by duty, by the status quo, that we ignore the many signals our body sends us. Before I went to Thailand 13 years ago, I was finishing teacher's college, in my final practicum experience before getting my certification.

I was in the lower mainland of BC, November through March (it was supposed to be through April, but I didn't last that long), living alone for the first time, and in a rural farmhouse. I tried to fight through the grind, but every day got progressively worse. I was placed at what was known to be one of BC's finest high school music programs. I had been groomed for this opportunity.

My mentors and teachers had great expectations of me; and I held them for myself. The pressure wreaked havoc on my health. I was suffering from headaches, and with them, toothaches. Desperate to turn things around, I sought medical help for the first time; counselling, antidepressants. But they didn't seem to help. Maybe I started taking them too late; maybe I had the wrong prescription. By the end, I was a wreck. I scuttled my chances to salvage what was left and receive a passing grade when on the Friday of March break, rather than buckling down and doing what I needed to do to turn things around academically, I did what I needed to do on a spiritual and physical level--I got into my car and I started driving--south. By midday the following day, having driven through a blizzard in BC and Washington, I was in Santa Cruz, California, on the beach, soaking up the sun. I returned the following week, was soon after forced to withdraw from my practicum, and returned defeated, to Victoria, BC.

The months that followed were the best of my life. I made my bedroom in the solarium of the house I had lived in with friends. I spent nearly every day of the following months shirtless; playing chess or throwing a Frisbee with my closest friends, and working my landscaping job, which I loved. That September, I took an English teaching contract in Thailand. I had gone, intending to stay. I met my wife on my third day there. Now we're here.

Today is the first day of spring. My return on this date is no coincidence. It marks the onset of days where the light is greater than the darkness. Nature is coming alive. All around the northern hemisphere, *people* are coming alive; people are repairing, rebuilding, restoring; getting a fresh start by cleaning and planting. By making amends. Starting fresh.

It is the solar new year; the pagan festival of Ostara, or Oestre--which became Easter; a merger of the beginning of the life cycle, fertility and rebirth, flowers, bunnies and eggs, with a tale of resurrection, sacrificial atonement, new life. Pesach in Judaism is around the corner, where believers will clean their houses of every last breadcrumb to start the year afresh. For Persians, Bahais, Zoroastrians, it is Nowruz. Literally meaning, "the New Day". You may have heard the choir sing this anthem last week--"You, are the New Day". I hope you won't mind hearing it again.

You are the new day (excerpt)

*Send the sun in time for dawn
Let the birds all hail the morning
Love of life will urge me say
you are the new day*

*When I lay me down at night
knowing we must pay
Thoughts occur that this night might
stay yesterday*

*One more day when time is running out
for everyone
Like a breath I knew would come I reach for
a new day*

*Hope is my philosophy
Just needs days in which to be
Love of life means hope for me
borne on a new day*

You are the new day

Go, lifted by the light of spring. May your mind, body and spirit be renewed by the gift of the sun. The gift of new life. Namaste.