

“Turning Points”

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
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Reading: “Lucky Streak” by Rev. Angela Herrera

Who cast a spell over my world?
Who opened the doors,
stirred the crowd of possibilities,
put gold dust in my dreams
causing my life to turn?

O Fate, O Love, O Spirit, O God:
is it true
that all good things must end?

Or have you set me on a path of meaning
Not luck

Of clarity
Not magic

And this grace
that brought me to the mountaintop
is also assigned to carry me through dark forests of
loss,
the ones that await us all,
that disturb our peaceful sleep.

The same grace that guides the seasons:
cracking the ice,
pushing up saplings,
scattering the earth with their first dramatic leaves.

Reflection: “Turning Points”

“Going through changes now...”

That is so very true.

When the pandemic began,
we knew immediately that changes would be necessary,
that changes would take place...

But as the months have unfolded,
we may find ourselves going through more changes,
or different changes, than we expected.

Change always happens because of some kind of catalyst,
and when we look back at our lives,
we can identify turning points
that take our lives in new directions.

Whether they are painful experiences, or joyful ones,
they are precious points along life’s journey.

The turning points we experience
give shape to our lives.

As Angela Herrera wrote, together the turning points of our
lives may form a kind of “lucky streak.”

In which something...call it fate, or love, or Spirit
...sets us on a new path of meaning.

No matter what direction we travel after a turning point,
we can see that point as significant...

Perhaps even sacred, worthy of reverence.

For many people, the pandemic
is emerging as a turning point.

And despite the many difficulties it creates for us,
it may also offer great blessings.

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Last week, I spoke about the “all will be well”—

How the Wholeness of life, including both its difficult and
pleasurable aspects, can be held within a spaciousness that is,
itself, a “well” from which we can draw.

I spoke of noticing the personal “rocks and trees”
that block our view of the Wholeness...

And I reminded myself, while reflecting with you,
on the value of trying to reframe my perspective,
in whatever difficult experience I'm having.

In itself, that reframing is a turning point:

A turning away from an outlook of scarcity
and discomfort—

An outlook that first must be noticed and accepted--

But then, a turning toward the “well” instead.

A turning toward peace, or gratitude,
God, or Beloved Community...

In saying this just now,
I can feel my body relax, just a bit,
Into a sort of knowing or remembering...

That in the moment, I can choose to turn
in the direction of healing and peace...
even for a moment.

It can be a very small turning.
Often it is, for me.

And yet, we know that even the smallest actions
ripple outward to have profound and positive
effects on our world.

In meditation, I've heard teachers identify the importance of the moment between the in-breath and the out-breath.

The "still point" in between the turnings,
in which nothing special is happening...

And yet from which everything opens up.

The turning point: a sacred moment.

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This tiny little turning of the breath,
that happens about 22,000 times every day...

is just one of many turnings within turnings within turnings...
that make up the miracle of Life.

We can picture the spiral of DNA
that brings to life the ballet dancer who twirls,
who is part of a community and a society
that moves in spiraling patterns,
on an earth that turns,
revolves around the sun
and is part of a spinning galaxy.

To spend time contemplating these turnings,
or to dance them, pray them or sing them...

Is to affirm our life experience of continuous change.

And to reassure us that we can
turn and return, again and again
and that it is well and good to do so.

Many people right now are experiencing
very significant turning points...perhaps
some of you are as well.

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In a Pew Research study in the U.S. in July,
about 22% of respondents had either moved
during the pandemic or knew people who did.¹

I couldn't find current figures for Canada,
but I'm sure we're experiencing the same trend,
because I see so many people moving right now.

Careers are changing—
by necessity and/or by choice.

Patterns and priorities are shifting.

Relationships are at turning points, too.

For some people, increased time together
has led to a deepening of closeness.

¹ Jacey Fortin, *New Data Sheds Light on Who Is Moving Because of the Pandemic*, New York Times, July 7, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/07/us/pew-survey-coronavirus-relocation.html>

But other relationships have been broken
by the added strain.

On a societal level, we're witnessing dramatic
and transformative change across
North America, as the urgent priorities
of anti-racism work and climate justice
are propelling us in new directions.

And in our personal lives,
the turning points of illness and loss
take place no matter what else is going on around us...

As do births, graduations, recoveries...and other
happy milestones.

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Turning points happen when a pattern is interrupted...
when the straight path suddenly curves...

And from that interruption, a new direction naturally
emerges.

Because the world is so full of references to turning,
I had no shortage of songs, poems and stories to refer to
today...

But one of my favourites is that line from Green Day song
called "Good Riddance"—

"Another turning point, a fork stuck in the road..."

It's just a funny little line...but isn't it true?

Turning points often turn up as annoyances...
obstacles in the path we thought we were going...

But in fact they are precious markers for us
along the path of life.

I encourage you, at Coffee Time today
and in the days to come,
to reflect on your life,
notice the turning points,
and consider how this time might be one, too.

Perhaps a time to turn toward something...
such as intimacy, kindness or justice...

A time to turn away from something...
such as an outgrown pattern,
or a limiting outlook of some kind.

You might also look around
and witness other turning points,
and see how you are part of them.

It has been suggested that our world is embarking on a
“Great Turning” now of environmental and social change.

How is that larger transition having an impact in your life,
and creating new turning points for you?

I have to note, of course, that both First and Neighbourhood Unitarian Congregations are at turning points in our histories now.

As congregations, we are turning toward new locations and possibilities, while also embracing new technology to connect with each other and with the world.

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Not surprisingly, we've been hearing the word "pivot" a lot lately. And to be honest, I'm getting a bit tired of it.

As appropriate as it may seem right now, the word "pivot" suggests an abruptness of change that may not be exactly what we need.

In the sweep of planetary time, even a seemingly slow turn of a few years is a rapid turn of events—

Though admittedly we do need to make significant changes very quickly now, given the urgency of the world's changing climate.

Sometimes, though, the word "pivot" might suggest instant response, or instant gratification...

A feature of the consumer-oriented life that some of us are now turning away from.

Turning doesn't have to be instant.
It may take time.

One of the most challenging aspects of Zoom calls,
for me, is the abruptness with which they end.

No matter how well we've prepared for the end of the
gathering, that moment when the faces on the screen vanish
instantly and we're by ourselves again...

That's a "hard pivot" very unlike the softer ritual
of moving through a doorway or saying a lingering goodbye
with a friend.

We ministers miss the opportunity to connect with people
after services, whether in a receiving line or in other ways,
and we've appreciated very much, by the way, the kind words
you send sometimes in the chat, at the end of an online
service.

After the turning point of the pandemic,
will we be closer to each other or further apart?

This may depend on how we approach the smaller turnings
of this challenging time...

Whether we turn toward each other or away...

And how gently and mindfully we move
into the new directions that life takes us.

As I mentioned in the Joys and Sorrows, this week marks some important turning points in national and human history.

Yesterday, August 1st, was the anniversary of Emancipation Day in Canada. It's an official holiday in Ontario but not yet in Canada as a whole.

On that day in 1834, the Slavery Abolition Act came into effect ending slavery throughout the British Empire, including in British North America.

South of the border, Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation was not made until 1862—so in those interim years, many Black Americans came to Canada via the network of assistance known as the Underground Railroad.

As well, in world history this week, August 6th and 9th mark the 75th anniversaries of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

As our friend and colleague Dr. Sehdev Kumar writes from Auroville, India, the dropping of those two atomic bombs:

“[Marked] a turning point in our human civilization when an entirely new source of energy was discovered and first employed, not for anything constructive but as a weapon of unprecedented destruction.”

This week, so many people around the world will mark this somber anniversary while continuing to strive for non-violence and global peace.

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Both in our own lives and on a larger scale, we witness how turning points connect us to both the joy and the sorrow of existence, and open up possibilities for new life.

The outpouring of love and justice work in the aftermath of George Floyd's death is one such example...

As is the re-turning toward peace that takes place for many, following any act of war.

The following poem reveals how turning points take place anywhere...even in the most tragic of circumstances...and how new life and relationship is always emerging.

The poem is called "Let Us Be Midwives:
An Untold Story of the Atomic Bombing."

It was written by Sadako Kurihara,
and translated by Richard Minear.

"Night in the basement of a concrete structure now in ruins.

Victims of the atomic bomb jammed the room;
It was dark—not even a single candle.

The smell of fresh blood, the stench of death,
The closeness of sweaty people, the moans.

From out of all that, lo and behold, a voice:
"The baby's coming!"

In that hellish basement,
At that very moment,
a young woman had gone into labour.

In the dark, without a single match, what to do?

People forgot their own pains,
worried about her.

And then: "I'm a midwife. I'll help with the birth."

The speaker, seriously injured herself,
had been moaning only moments before.

And so new life was born
in the dark of that pit of hell.

And so the midwife died before dawn,
still bathed in blood.

Let us be midwives!
Let us be midwives!

Even if we lay down our own lives to do so.”

The author Sadako Kurihara was a survivor of the Hiroshima bombing. She lived from 1913 to 2005.

The poem was based on her real-life experience. But with a twist.

In reality, the midwife survived... and later met the child she had delivered.

It's worth contemplating the decision the writer made in deciding that the figure in her poem should give up her life for the greater good... in particular the life of future generations.

That decision in itself was a turning point— a point of departure— that shaped the poet's message to the world.

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The ecologist Joanna Macy writes:

“Future generations, if there is a liveable world for them, will look back at the epochal transition we are making to a life-sustaining society.

And they may well call this the time of the Great Turning.”

At whatever point we find ourselves in life...

Whether we are entering adulthood, in mid-life,
or elderhood...

Beginning or ending careers...

Entering or leaving relationships or
living through the changes they undergo...

We will find ourselves at turning points
that move us in new directions...

Whether toward action or toward rest...
Toward speech or toward silence...
Toward birthing something new...or letting something go.

When we find ourselves at a turning point,
the direction we go is often
led by something larger than the sense of
our own small selves.

Sometimes there's an outer imperative—
a call from voices outside ourselves
that propel us toward a greater good.

Sometimes it's an inner nudge, that moves us
in ways that can seem mysterious, even preposterous!

But that move us all the same.

The tradition of gospel music often names this moving force as the “Spirit” or the “Lord” in the Christian tradition.

“When The Spirit Says Do” is an African-American spiritual from the civil rights period.

I notice, and I love, the fact that although it’s a rousing and I would say hopeful and energetic song, it’s written in a minor key, suggesting a time of trouble.

You’re warmly invited to sing along if you’d like!

(Hymn: “Do When the Spirit Says Do”)

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