

“The Fruits of Our Labour”

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
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Reading:

Picking Blueberries, Austerlitz, New York, 1957 by Mary Oliver

Once, in summer
in the blueberries,
I fell asleep, and woke
when a deer stumbled against me.

I guess
she was so busy with her own happiness
she had grown careless
and was just wandering along

listening
to the wind as she leaned down
to lip up the sweetness.
So, there we were

with nothing between us
but a few leaves, and wind's
glossy voice
shouting instructions.

The deer
backed away finally
and flung up her white tail
and went floating off toward the trees -

but the moment she did that
was so wide and so deep
it has lasted to this day;
I have only to think of her -

the flower of her amazement
and the stalled breath of her curiosity,
and even the damp touch of her solicitude
before she took flight -

to be absent again from this world
and alive, again, in another
for thirty years
sleepy and amazed,

rising out of the rough weeds
listening and looking.
Beautiful girl,
where are you?

Reflection:
“The Fruits of Our Labour”

Well, here it is, the Labour Day weekend.

One of those special times of year that is ripe with expectation, memory and feeling...

For many, it feels more like the “true” New Year than the one that comes in January.

It’s a time of both promise and loss...

A poignant time that weaves together beginnings and endings...

And one that might evoke a certain nostalgia, for seasons of the past.

Seasons that may now seem like a distant dream, like Mary Oliver’s memory:

“Once, in summer
in the blueberries,
I fell asleep, and woke
when a deer stumbled against me.”

This year, in our new life of ever-watchful vigilance, that unexpected encounter may seem even more unlikely.

And yet, right now, we're learning so much about encountering the unexpected.

Although it may seem startling or even dangerous at first, the unexpected has so much to teach us.

On this Labour Day weekend that may not match our usual expectations, we may find that our spiritual growth bears fruit...

If we're able to be open, and receptive, to the unexpected gifts of Life.

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In his recent book, "Drinking From the River of Light," the poet Mark Nepo tells a story of the sculptor Auguste Rodin.¹

As a young artist in the 1850's, Rodin worked out of a horse stable.

He paid an elderly handyman to be his model, because he couldn't afford anything more.

He created a sculpture called "The Man With the Broken Nose"—which was his first great work.

But then, the following winter, the back of the sculpture froze and cracked away, leaving only the front part

¹ Mark Nepo, "Drinking from the River of Light" (Sounds True, 2019), 39

of the face—only a mask remaining.

Rodin, of course, was completely devastated.

And yet, as he spent time with what still remained, with its broken nose and time-worn face...

He came to feel that it held even more truth and power than his original sculpture—and so, he submitted it to the Paris Salon.

Where it was rejected.

Even so, Rodin said that “the mask determined all his future work...that it was the finest piece [he had ever made].”

Letting go of his original expectations, Rodin was able to work with the “what is.”

As the author Mark Nepo put it, he followed what happened, rather than what he intended.

That willingness, in turn, shaped all of his subsequent work. And indeed, shaped his life.

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As many spiritual guides teach us, clinging too tightly to expectations can prevent us from having a rich and fruitful life.

This principle is illustrated very well in improv theatre, where actors learn to say “yes” to any offer that comes to them, no matter how unwelcome or difficult it may seem.

By accepting the offer of whatever life brings them with an open heart, they make space for joy and laughter.

When I took part in Theatresports in my twenties, I found improv quite difficult especially at the beginning.

I was likely holding too tightly to what I expected in a scene, rather than opening up, and letting life flow in, in whatever direction it wanted to go.

More than thirty years later, I still remember the joy of one unexpected encounter onstage...

It has continued to live in me, much like Mary Oliver’s encounter with the deer.

I still remember the astonishment, the release of control, the surge of energy...

Something I might now call “The Spirit of Life.”

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In the ongoing conversation of living,
our expectations of others
can often lead us into difficulty.

The author Thomas Moore recently taught an online course on “Dark Nights of the Soul”—feeling that it might resonate with people seeking growth during the coronavirus pandemic.²

He said, “From my experience as a therapist, I would say that a relationship turns into a dark night when one or both people remain fixed in their expectations.”

Often without realizing it, we may hold expectations in our relationships with partners, family members or friends...

Projecting upon them a vision of our own idealized selves perhaps...

Or projecting our own shadow side:
that which we don't expect or want to see.

We also naturally hold expectations for
the organizations to which we belong,
the people we work with,
our country and our leaders.

These hopes and expectations inspire us
and bring us together in common cause.

² Recent online course by Thomas Moore from spiritualityandpractice.com

We invest our energies, our care and our resources,
imagining that they will bear a particular kind of fruit—
perhaps the kind we've always had a taste for.

That may lead us to judge too harshly
or to reject entirely
the fruits of our labour
that are unfamiliar or unexpected.

While these patterns can be observed at any time,
they become very clear in times of stress—

Such as the one we've all been going through,
for six months now.

We strive to understand the public health guidelines,
and expect that everyone will arrive at the same
understanding.

We work to adapt to new ways of relating to one another,
and are surprised when people around us have different
responses.

This time is requiring of us a new level of agility and
resilience...which means letting go of expectations at times,
and cultivating openness and kindness in our relationships
with others.

While some fruits may not be viable anymore,
others may be ripening.

Our new labour might include coming to live with much
more uncertainty and change than we're accustomed to.

The poet Wendell Berry wrote these words
that point us in the direction of unfamiliar fruits:

“It may be that when we no longer know
what to do, we have come to our real work,

and that when we no longer know which way to go
we have come to our real journey.

The mind that is not baffled is not employed.
The impeded stream is the one that sings.”³

Another poet, Jeanne Lohmann, put it another way when she
spoke of “the bewilderment that invites possibility.”⁴

I don't know about you, but I often have not been
comfortable with being bewildered, caught off guard,
or baffled.

I remember how astonished I was when I learned where
Wendell Berry's words came from:

An essay entitled “Poetry and Marriage”—

³ Wendell Berry, *Standing by Words: Essays* (Counterpoint: Berkeley CA, 1983), 97.

⁴ From Jeanne Lohmann's poem “Questions Before Dark”

An affirmation of the deep and rewarding growth that can take place not when one's hopeful expectations are met exactly as imagined, but when they are met in different ways.

The limitations placed on us, whether in any relationship, or when we are writing a lyric or making a sculpture...

Trying to shape and sustain an organization during a difficult time...

Or most urgently, to bring about necessary social change to eliminate systemic racism and heal our planet—

All of these call from us a great deal of labour.

And the fruits may not, at all times, be the ones we hope for or expect.

They may take time to ripen...and it may be that we're not even able to enjoy them.

Though perhaps our ancestors will.

I'm reminded of the passage from the Hebrew Bible in Deuteronomy, in which it is said the promised land will be "filled with all kinds of good things you did not provide, wells you did not dig, and vineyards and olive groves you did not plant."⁵

⁵ Deuteronomy 6:11

The passage goes on with the reminder to be grateful to the Source of Life that brought you to that place...a place not of control, but rather of amazement and humility.

I'm reminded, too, of the Mary Oliver poem, and the unexpected encounter she lived through...

The fact that she was astonished...sleepy and amazed...

And in that astonishment, a relationship was born that lasted her whole life.

Her harvest, it turned out, was about so much more than blueberries.

Even we as listeners, were invited into the unknown,

as we heard a poem that turned out to be about something completely different than what we expected.

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This idea that we might learn to live beyond our expectations does not mean that we should simply accept injustice.

To shrug our shoulders in a kind of cynical acceptance of “whatever” or “it is what it is.”

Just the opposite.

It's not to encourage the abandonment of our responsibility...but instead, to cultivate our ability to embrace it.

It's an invitation to be more open to the conversation with life that is calling us today:

To the answer we were not expecting.

To the response that bubbles up from us,
from a deeper place than our typical desire for control.

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No matter what is going on in the wider world,
at every stage of life,

We will build up expectations only to see them fall.

Perhaps that's a helpful image as this autumn season begins.

As the Buddhist teacher Pema Chodron writes,
“Most spiritual experiences begin with suffering.

They begin with groundlessness.
They begin when the rug has been pulled out from under us.”

In a very important sense, the coronavirus pandemic and the state of the world today can be seen as a collective initiation, as we all experience groundlessness together, yet in different ways...

And, hopefully, together find new ways to say “yes” to life.

Even in the unfamiliar new behaviours we’re learning now,
we can find helpful symbolism for this journey.

The future may be masked to us now.

Even our sense of who we truly are
may be hidden to some extent.

Yet in this mask and mystery,
there is also an affirmation that more is at work.

That each of us is a crucial part of a much larger whole.

An interdependent web that is so much greater than our
own individual expectations and understandings.

Our first source of wisdom in Unitarian Universalism is,
“the direct experience of that transcending
mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures,

that moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to
the forces which create and uphold life.”

It does not say, “the direct experience of transcending
certainty and wonder.”

It suggests that there is indeed something “transcending”
about entering into the new...of being open to the
unexpected.

Many people are familiar with the seven Unitarian principles, but the six Unitarian Sources are perhaps lesser known.

Right in that first source, we are called toward that “openness to the forces which create and uphold life.”

Called into that improvisational openness,
that ability to respond,
that leads to lives of personal and social responsibility.

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It would be wrong of me to suggest that this is easy—that we can simply make a decision to graciously receive “what is” and respond creatively.

At one of our drop-in groups recently, we were talking about being in “conversation with life.”

Thinking about it afterward,
with a particular worry on my mind,

It suddenly struck me that I’d been arguing with Life when it came to this particular issue.

An ongoing commentary of expectation had been running though my head...and nothing could get a word in edgewise!

It was time for me to quiet that voice, and make space to listen without expectation.

It can be said that spiritual practice,
be it meditation, prayer, yoga or something else,
is a process of releasing expectations and opening up
to the “forces that create and uphold life.”

The Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh said that,

“Practicing mindfulness in each moment of our daily lives,
we can cultivate our own peace.

With clarity, determination and patience—the fruits of
meditation (and I would say, any spiritual practice)—
we can sustain a life of action and be[come] real instruments
of peace.”⁶

As we each venture forth this September
into fields of challenge and possibility...

May we meet what awaits us with open hearts...
saying “yes” to Life in all its wonder and mystery.

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⁶ Thich Nhat Hanh, *Peace is Every Step: The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life*, (Bantam: New York, 1991), 99.