

Water Communion

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
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Reflection

I was sorry to miss it,
and I'm sure you were, too.

I'm speaking, of course, of the long-awaited—
by which I mean the very long-awaited—
chord change that occurred this week in a composition
by the avant-garde composer John Cage.

The performance of this piece,
aptly titled “As Slow as Possible”
began on a small organ
in an old church in Halbertstadt, Germany,
on September 5th, in 2001.

Things got off to an intentionally slow start.
There was a pause in the first bar that lasted eighteen months.
Then the first note of the piece
finally sounded in 2003 for a full five months.

The most recent chord change, before this week's,
took place seven years ago.

If you missed this week's big moment,
you'll be delighted to know—mark your calendars!—
you can catch
the next chord change on February 5th, 2022.

Clearly, this piece is really starting to zip along!

Unfortunately, it's highly unlikely
any of us will be around to hear the end of this work.

The performance, carefully planned to last 639 years,
will not end,

assuming all goes according to plan,
until the year 2640.

No one will hear the whole thing, or even most of it.

The performance of this composition is bigger than all of us.
With a life longer than our own, many times over.

I found the thought of this oddly comforting this week.

In these strange days
as my own sense of time has been so warped by the pandemic,
and the geography of my daily life limited mostly
to the footprint of my own home,
it's been helpful to be reminded
there are things bigger than us and beyond us.

Ideally, that is what meaningful rituals do.
They transcend the present moment,
helping us to feel more deeply connected:
to ourselves, to others, to life—
to all that we hold sacred.

They help us to feel and understand our place in the larger story.
To hear our note in the long song of the universe.

This year we gather for a Water Communion ritual
like none in our congregation's history.

Where we've gathered in years past at summer's end,
with sun-kissed skin,
and bearing jars and thermoses filled with water
gathered from mountain streams and sandy beaches,
from melting glaciers and heaving ocean waves,
from the kitchen faucet or the hose in the back yard,
this year, we gather together, but are physically apart.

And the water we may have scooped up
in meaningful moments across recent months—
symbolizing our hopes and our joys,
our sorrows and our fears—

will have to wait for another day
to be poured, at last, into our common bowl.

So much has been upended in this pandemic.
So much has been lost.
So much of our future held captive by uncertainty.

Even for we who have been blessed
with good health and good fortune in this time,
especially relative to so many other parts of the planet,
and, it must be said, relative to people living
in different realities in other parts of our own city,
there is a toll in the mounting little losses
of rituals postponed and routines revamped,
of this chapter of our lives being rewritten
in ways we likely didn't see coming.

While there are hidden blessings and silver linings in this time,
many of us are desperately waiting for the next chord change.
Some are understandably searching for a different song!

We live in a liminal season, just as we always have.
This strange period we're in—
that may feel stuck between *what was* and *what will be*—
is, at the same time, all that we can be sure of.
This is our life.

Today is what is given.
And it is ours to rejoice and be glad in.
To hold and cherish, for the gift that it is.

Amid the monotony and frustration and fear,
and all the many struggles so many of you are contending with,
that, I know, may be a very hard thing to do—
to rejoice and be glad.

But it is the work of this day, and every day.

To celebrate the life we are given
for but a brief slice of time.

It's the poignant point Ellen Bass makes in her poem,
"The Thing Is":

"The Thing Is"

to love life, to love it even
when you have no stomach for it
and everything you've held dear
crumbles like burnt paper in your hands,
your throat filled with the silt of it.

When grief sits with you, its tropical heat
thickening the air, heavy as water
more fit for gills than lungs;

when grief weights you down like your own flesh
only more of it, an obesity of grief,
[and] you think, *How can a body withstand this?*

Then you hold life like a face
between your palms, a plain face,
no charming smile, no violet eyes,
and you say, yes, I will take you
I will love you, again.

Again, this is what our best rituals help us to do.
To help us to hold, at once,
the ultimate and most intimate aspects of our life.
To awaken the heart,
deepen connection,
and beckon us back to life.

In a few minutes, I will invite you
to drink a glass of water with intention.

To commune with one another and the earth.

To take in water, a single atom of oxygen
bonded with two of hydrogen.

The lifeblood of the world.

The substance that makes up over half our bodies.

The common miracle we cannot live without.

From the stars have we come,
comprised of the same cosmos-kissed atoms that create water.

We were born into this world from the waters of our mother's womb.

It's no wonder so many of us feel drawn
to dive into a body of water and swim.

To canoe with the current.
Or watch waves wash in on the shore.

It is a returning, to that from which we have come.
To that from which we are made.

May these atoms of water
born among the stars—
that we drink today and everyday—
become you,
reminding you again
that you belong to the great and unfolding story of the universe.

A story given life, over and over,
through the grace of water.

Blessed Be.