

“Awakening”

Nicole McKay

First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto

Online Service via Zoom

10 April 2022

I am one of those Unitarian Universalists who came to this faith from another religious tradition. I was baptized Catholic and attended Catholic schools until I went to post-secondary. In my formative years, my days were punctuated by the Christian liturgical calendar, even though my family didn't go to church. Teachers made me aware of days of celebration and fasting and how these were tied to the sacred stories found in scriptures. My seminary studies in a Christian school offered me the opportunity to come into a new relationship with the faith of my childhood. And, the liturgical year stayed the same. It was a familiar pattern that I met once again, but this time in a new way and as a new person.

In my worship class, the professor asked us: what is the first season of the liturgical calendar? Of course, he implied the Christian liturgical calendar. I replied: “Advent.” The professor gave me a curious look as if he was wondering where I came to know this. The truth is, my life still recognizes these rhythms of the year, one which I now share through the lens of our Unitarian and Universalist heritage.

I am also blessed to take a wider vision: I know this is not the only liturgical calendar out there and I appreciate how in our tradition, that diversity is welcome among us. We take time to get to know the sacred in many ways and the multiplicity of celebrations which help us remember the wisdom stories in our midst.

Today, Christian siblings of the West mark today as Palm Sunday. On this day, which is still in the 40-day Lenten season of preparation for Easter, they remember Jesus' triumphal entrance into Jerusalem on a donkey. This begins the celebration of Holy Week. In a few days they will remember Jesus' death and on Sunday, his resurrection.

Our Muslim siblings are also in the most holy month of their liturgical calendar, the Holy month of Ramadan. In this ninth month of

the year, the Qur'an was revealed to the Prophet Muhammed, peace be upon him. In this month, Muslims fast from food and water during daylight hours, where it is safe to do so, they gather in prayer, give of their time and resources to important causes, and spend time reading or even reciting Qur'an.

Our Jewish siblings are also making their preparations in their homes and their hearts for the 8-day Passover celebration which begins later this week. This commemorates the liberation of the Hebrew people from slavery and the passing over of destruction on the eve of the Exodus. During this period, Jewish people don't consume leaven. The Passover Seder, a ritual meal, shares the stories and the symbolic foods which commemorates this liberation.

Of course, not everyone practices these celebrations in these ways and some have adapted them to meet their unique context and needs.

In each of these periods of observance, there is a practice of letting go of things we may want. Often, the first thing we think about is food but it is not limited to that alone. These days provide opportunities to open ourselves to the experiences of the past and experiences of others in the present with compassion - those who are hungry, those who have had to leave home, to those seeking communion with others and with God.

Why do we have these religious celebrations and observances? These periods of time set aside for prayer and fasting, for celebration, for reading and sharing. In the Qur'an, it is written: "O believers! Fasting is prescribed for you—as it was for those before you—so perhaps you will become mindful of God." (Quran 2:183)

Rev Summer Albayati shares what Ramadan offers her in this way:

"It's always a challenge to feel a sense of the holy when I go through difficulties. But it's at that exact time that I need to find more time for prayer, study, and meditation. When the holy month of Ramadan

approaches, it becomes a beautiful reminder to return to myself, and remember who I truly am and what the divine is calling me to become.

Ramadan is a time of going deeper into a spiritual oasis, like entering a cave for a few hours while I fast from bodily nourishment. It's an invitation to pause for a whole month while I find spiritual awakening by studying the Qur'an more deeply, and performing embodiment prayers five times a day. It becomes a holy retreat from the mundane, even in the midst of the ordinary.

For thirty days, I fulfill my spiritual needs as if in great hunger for the divine spirit and, hopefully, I emerge from the cave transformed. This holy experience is the healing. This sacred time is an abundant act of love. And this is what I seek each year during this most blessed of months, so I can answer the call of the divine spirit.

What if I were to find spiritual nourishment by entering whatever doors opened up to the divine spirit on a daily basis? What if each day I awakened and began it in theological reflection, or praising the name of the divine each morning and evening? Who would I become?"

How amazing it is to gather with others in your community and around the globe in a shared recognition and in the shared commitment to spiritual growth. These times invite us to bring together our daily lives and spiritualities. It is in these times that we practice intertwining them. We are given the opportunity to practice what we have learned in our hearts and take that out into the world. In doing so, we are bound to mess up. We will make mistakes, turn our attention away. And that isn't the lesson - the lesson is that there is enough room for love to come back into community, to recommit ourselves to the work even when no one knows what happened. We learn to make changes in our lives and come to know change as possible. We learn that our lives, our commitments are both personal and communal.

When we take all of the traditions into consideration, the whole year can be seen as sacred. Going back to my worship class, the professor asked me: what is the liturgical calendar for Unitarian

Universalists? As with everything else, there is no easy or short answer when it comes to this faith.

It can be anything we want. One of the few things that we have agreed upon as congregations is that we will not set out creedal requirements, that is, we will not tell our membership what to believe. This is not only about our theology, what we believe about the sacred and the divine, but it also leaves our worship life up to each community of people. If you have ever had the opportunity to visit other UU congregations, you may have noticed that they each have their own feel. I was surprised to learn in the book “Worship That Works: Theory and Practice for Unitarian Universalists” that not all congregations include a chalice lighting as part of their worship, although it is one of the most common liturgical elements shared across our tradition. There are traditions and moments in the service that are special to the congregation, whether that be closing the service with a particular hymn, a candlelight service at Christmas, marking the turning of the wheel of the year, a consistent weekly covenant, or the creation of an archway as children head off to engage in offerings of religious education. As I have been in pulpits across Canada and the United States, I have been privileged to hear from UUs about these meaningful moments in their services, some of which have helped them through the pandemic as important touchstone moments. These are some of the ties that bind.

With all of our differences, what is it then that ties us together? There isn't a shared knowing that we and other Unitarian Universalists around the world are engaging in a common practice during a common period of time. And yet, despite all odds, here we are, together on this day turning our hearts to the sacred within and among us.

As I have come to learn, Unitarian Universalist ministers and Religious Education professionals ask themselves this question. There is something beautiful about a cyclic calendar of readings and stories that we get to revisit. I remember a sermon where Rev Shawn shared about a Rabbi colleague who said that in this yearly reading of the Torah, the stories remain the same and yet we change. We approach these stories in new ways, come to new understandings.

What rhythms do we build for ourselves to help us engage with these stories and with our commitment to spiritual growth? How do we understand the year and set time aside to look within, take inventory of where we are, and engage and nurture spiritual practices that bring us closer to the divine in many forms?

I am not going to argue that we should make one overarching liturgical calendar for the entirety of Unitarian Universalism. There is beauty in the multiplicity and it leaves room for us to encounter one another with open hearts. What we do need, is to have people that we can lean on, people who are present with us, people who share in the stories and the struggles. The beauty is found when we open this part of ourselves and our exploration with one another. None of this is founded on sharing the same beliefs. This is part of the work of being a minister that makes me come alive. I am invited into tender moments of people's lives and at times, I am called upon to offer presence and guidance in their own spiritual growth. What congregants and patients don't know, is that in their own sharing, they are helping me in my own spiritual growth as they invite me to be a witness. I want to share with you one of those moments which I treasure dearly from a hospital visit I did during a unit of Clinical Pastoral Education.

We received a referral for spiritual care for a patient in the mental health unit. I went up to the unit and knocked on the door. The young man, in his late 20s welcomed me in with a smile. He had been engaged in conversation with his roommate, an older man in his 50s. The patient, open to conversation with his roommate present, shared that he is Indigenous and would like to have a smudging. I was glad that he was comfortable enough to make this request and let him know that I would be happy to make those arrangements. It is what happened next though that made me pause. The patient shared that he and his roommate have both been in hospital for quite some time and they were struggling. In an effort to support one another, he and his roommate, who is Catholic, created for themselves a daily worship life in their room. Together they would read poetry and scripture, they sang songs from their traditions, they created a communal spiritual practice. These two patients helped awaken one another to the love that abounds and brought their spirituality into their healing in ways that worked for them. To be honest, in that moment of sharing, they awakened the eyes and ears of my heart

remembering this verse in the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 18, verse 20: for where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them. In that moment, I was awake to the grand presence of love.

We can create these practices for ourselves, days made holy through our commitments to each other. Our communal practices, like that of these two people, can take on many forms: we may knit or make quilts, make music, have gatherings for fun and fellowship, are part of a weekly meditation or book group, or journey groups which invite us into reflection and action. What matters is the intention with which we engage that allows us to awaken to the possibilities of growth, to new ways of getting to know the spirit of life and love present in our midst. And with intention, we can share of these explorations with one another. One of the hardest lessons I have had to learn, and still have to work to remember, is that what I offer of myself in community can help someone else. We can take our individual spiritual practices and share of them in community, perhaps engage in them with one another, or at the very least, encourage one another on the journey.

Whatever your practice, whatever wisdom stories move your heart and help you connect to a deeper truth, whatever the time of year, may we risk bringing it into community where we can be seen and supported in our spiritual growth.