



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK
Spirituality · Community · Justice

**"High Summer:
How We Are With Each Other"**
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It is a hot July night in 1981, and I am laying on my back on the forest floor. My clothes are damp, there is only a small corner of tarp under my head, and all around me I can hear the noises of the woods, most of which are completely mysterious to my suburban ears.

In 1981 I was nine years old. Never have I been more keenly aware, sleeping outside with other girls at summer camp, having been caught without our gear on the far side of the lake after thunderstorms tossed our tiny canoes - never before have I felt so very very small. Perhaps if I had my bedroll...but it was with my cabin's gear on the other side of the lake. Perhaps if I had a good friend with me...but it was my first year as a camper, at a camp that had been a part of my family's history since the 1950s, and I had a lot of expectations but not any friends yet. When I was nine I was pretty shy. All that family reputation was a lot to carry. Another reason to feel tiny in the face of it all.

Tiny and cold and pitiful: that's how I felt. Also more than a little scared. But after a while, I heard soft voices from the direction of our campfire, which our counselors had eventually gotten going even after the rainstorm. We had even managed to make s'mores, so clearly not ALL was wrong with the world. Since I wasn't sleeping and had no real hope of doing so anytime soon, I got up and went to the fire. I moved very quietly, and I sat close to the fire, drying and warming myself. After a few minutes, watching the sparks rise from the fire, I looked up.

For the first time in my life I could see the band of the Milky Way. There was all the warmth of the fire beside me, and far above me spun so many stars, so many suns, so many other worlds as to make me, and my world, and my tarp-corner, feel very small indeed.

After a while, though, staring up at those impossibly distant neighbor-stars, I found myself feeling...at home. Still very small of course...but no longer the only one.

Compared to all THAT, I thought, we are all pretty small. I still didn't have my bedroll, but I was warmer, and dryer, I had s'mores in my tummy, and I had found companionship - in the soft voices, the sparks, and the boundless stars.

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Ten days ago, on July 2, we reached the midpoint of the year. Since 2020 is a leap year, the midpoint is truly a point - at midnight, perched between July 1 and July 2, 2020 tipped over into its second half. In this strangest of years, our planet is currently a little more than halfway through another trip around the sun.

August 1, just a few weeks from now, is the Gaelic festival of Lughnasadh, a celebration of the start of the harvest. It is approximately the midpoint between the summer solstice and the autumnal equinox.

All the work done up to this point in the year (in this hemisphere!) has prepared for this moment, for the coming harvest. The fields that rested in winter, that were turned and sown in spring, that have grown and flourished in summer with tending and care, are now ready for the harvest.

These are human celebrations - and human instruments. We name the time it takes for the earth to describe a single orbit, we learn the seasons and the best time to plow, to plant, to harvest, and to rest. However, we don't learn alone. All the chorus of nature joins in to show us where we are in the year, what work lies ahead, what has gone before. The high echoing sounds of the cicadas, the drone of bees, the feel of the sun and the rumble of afternoon thunder tell us when it is, even in the absence of calendar or clock.

We are part of something larger here - something that can, of course, make us feel quite small. Like looking up at the stars or considering another year moving around the sun, it can all get a bit overwhelming. What am I, just one me, just one small being, to do? With all the work of that part of the year that has gone before me? With all that is to come?

In Naomi Shihab Nye's poem that Danielle shared with us, we're asked to consider the small gestures and generousities that enrich our lives each and every day - both when we receive them and when we give them. We hear, "This is the world I want to live in. The shared world. Not a single person in that gate - [...] - seemed apprehensive about any other person. [...] This can still happen anywhere. Not everything is lost."

Dear ones, there is another harvest here to speak of. In this year, in 2020, there is a consideration too large to ignore when I speak of the natural cycles of the world, the work of turning over soil, planting, feeding, weeding, and harvesting. The latest iteration in the long struggle for justice in this country, the long and agonizing work to allow America to fulfill its as yet unfulfilled promise, feels like a harvest long overdue. And when I returned again to Nye's poem, a longtime favorite of mine, it held a new

ache for me. The rush of a busy airport, the hand-holding with a new friend, more than anything else the image of the powdered sugar moving through the crowd of folks sharing cookies - these images brought up a sense both of horror and of longing. That is how easy it is to spread, I thought. That is how changed we are, how vulnerable.

And in this most vulnerable time, as we face the continued and in too many places increasing struggles with the pandemic, we are also asked to do the work of turning over the soil of all that has been sown. We can no longer hope for any kind of return to "how it's always been" because parts of our society are feeling more deeply than ever how it has never been the same for us all.

All those natural processes are still occurring. The earth is moving around the sun. The days are getting shorter. The plants are coming to fruition. The bees are working, soon the birds will be migrating. And we have the planet to consider, as well as the way we humans move upon it. How are we to contain the multiplicity of issues that require our attention? How many harvests can be brought in? Can we plant new fields at the same time? What old spaces, old ideas, old practices simply MUST be left fallow? With all that feels out of step, out of sort in our larger world and our daily lives, are we humans still up to the task of working this world to bring a more true and bountiful harvest that benefits us all?

Well, speaking as a representative human, I certainly would like to try.

I started today with a story from summer camp in 1981. A lifetime ago - though of course right now January feels like a lifetime ago - my time at that camp and my memories, as well as the family's deep legacy there, felt like a pure good. In the course of doing the work of the world, I learned that this camp misappropriated images, terms, activities, and names from indigenous peoples. I learned and internalized harmful stereotypes, including the insidious untruth that the lives of tribal nations on these lands ended in the distant past. This week, the Supreme Court handed down the decision that much of Eastern Oklahoma, including the majority of the city of Tulsa, is the rightful and sovereign land of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation. This decision not only holds the United States accountable to an agreement it made (and broke) long ago, it serves as a reminder of the fact we are saved from perfection. The notion of pure good, of perfection, must not restrain us from action. As representative humans, we can't do everything, and there is definitely much we CAN do!

Looking at the work of this year, and of our own lives, this can seem like a truly daunting task. How am I supposed to go experience the wonder and joy of nature AND work for a world where Black Lives Matter AND consider my family and their wellbeing as well as my own AND consider the economic, social, and environmental impact of years of failed policy AND still pay the bills on time? In the middle of a global pandemic?! What sort of harvest am I supposed to glean from all this!? I'm just one tiny person!

That's an interesting word, tiny. It feels like what it is, small and maybe a bit cute. We do that sometimes, conflating smallness with cuteness. And another dangerous thing we do is conflate cuteness and smallness with weakness. Small things can be very strong indeed.

We have been talking about harvest. Are you, my Unitarian Universalist beloveds, ready for the parable of the mustard seed? A parable, after all, is a teaching tool. And the stated reason that the mustard seed is used to illustrate the power of faith in the Christian scriptures is, it is such a small seed that turns into something so large and magnificent. Depending on where the seed lands when it is scattered, it can grow to full flower or it can be choked on the path.

I'd like to invite us to consider another story - I'd like us to look at the impossible idea of all we are asked to do in the face of strange and unsettling conditions - and instead of thinking about a mustard seed I would like us to think first about a dandelion.

Not just any dandelion! Not the ones in your yard where you don't want them, not even the ones that have gone all white and puffy just begging you to blow on them and scatter the seeds to the wind, even though they'll probably wind up in your yard. I would like to ask you to consider, at this turning point of the year, the task of the determined dandelion pushing their way up through concrete.

Our dandelion is not just any plant. It is a tiny being determined to make its way in the world despite the obstacles placed before it. Maybe our faith is those tiny white seeds borne on the air.

One of humanity's greatest science communicators, Carl Sagan, wrote a single novel among all his other work. That novel, *Contact*, is about many things - humanity's first contact with an alien civilization, the ways we have and lose contact with one another, the hopes and fears we all confront - and in it, he writes, "For small creatures such as we the vastness is bearable only through love."

There is another way to consider this question of size, of smallness, of scale. A tiny seed may become a huge plant - but it is supported within a complex ecosystem of interdependent life, from bacteria in the soil to mycelium connections in a web of communication, from bird and insect pollinators to bustling neighbor-plants who need to share the same resources.

Here, then, is another metaphor to consider. On June 19 - Juneteenth - 2020, the New York Times published an opinion piece by Maeve Higgins - a white Irish woman living in the United States - titled "To White People Who Want to be One of 'The Good Ones.'" This is a beautiful invitation to all persons in this country raised and socialized as white to consider the joy of doing the work of dismantling harmful systems of white supremacy. She writes, "When you're white, understanding racism and anti-blackness is not a root canal, it's not a one-time-only, pay-your-money, drill-the-rot-out-and-get-through-it type of experience. This is a lifelong project we get to approach with grace

and curiosity and the full understanding that it will be difficult at times and beautiful at times and any chance we have to take part in it is frankly rather stunning.”

She speaks to the issue of scale - “how can I, just one person, do anything?” with a metaphor of water. Again, I will share her words with you directly. “I hope you understand that grappling with this country’s brutal past and imagining a future that is fair is not something you are expected to do alone. You’re simply one drop in a new wave, a wave that slips easily into an ocean of people, deep and permanent, who have long been eroding the cliffs of white supremacy.

“I hope this comes as a relief to you, as it did to me. There is great solace in putting aside the fallacy that you’re entitled to a starring role in this story. When you jump from the brittle scaffold built by violence and go tumbling into the tide, you’ll see that it’s easy. You’ll find leaders and peers there, all around you. You won’t worry then about messing up or getting lost; you’ll know at once where you’re needed. Much of the time that will be behind these leaders and peers, often beside them, or when faced with danger, you’ll be in front of them, bashing into the cliffs yourself so they can float and sparkle and enjoy the world away from the fight.

She concludes, “One powerful lie that we were born into is that white people deserve different, better lives than anyone else. We see now that this lie is deadly for others, and it is dangerous for us, too. This lie that can only hold fast by isolating us from one another and having us do ugly things to keep that separation up, it divides us from what we are, just a bunch of molecules in a variety of formations that will dissolve and rebuild in the blink of time’s eye. Laugh at that lie as you squint out to the horizon and see the truth, then jump into the ocean that will inevitably get you there, and you will love it, I promise.”

We are small creatures in many ways. And in other ways we are larger than measure. And in lots of ways, size is immaterial - tell the dandelion pushing through concrete that she should be much larger, and I think you might hear her laughing. Tell an individual drop in the ocean that they can’t do much, and watch a tidal wave appear.

We love one another. We love our world. And our love compels us - it compels us to wear a mask. It compels us to jump into turbulent waters and know we are not alone. It compels us to keep apart from one another even as we know in our bones how much easier this all would be if we were allowed the comfort of close physical connection. It compels us to pace ourselves for this long journey that will outlast our lifetimes. It compels us to consider others before ourselves. At the midpoint of the year, may we pause a moment to examine the ways those loves are similar, and to consider what love demands of us. May the work of the second half of the year buoy you upon these changing seas and shifting winds, and in our work and our rest and in our love, may we find peace. So may it ever be.