

**DANCING WITH THE EARTH**  
The Rev. Julie Stoneberg  
Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough  
October 16, 2016

**OPENING WORDS**            *Fearful Joy*    #612            ~ Rabindranath Tagore

Is it beyond thee to be glad with the gladness of this rhythm? To be tossed and lost and broken in the whirl of this fearful joy?

All things rush on, they stop not, they look not behind, no power can hold them back, they rush on.

Keeping step with that restless, rapid music, seasons come dancing and pass away.

Colors, tunes, and perfumes pour in endless cascades in the abounding joy that scatters and gives up and dies every moment.

Come, let us enter the rhythm of this moment, at this particular time, on this particular piece of sacred ground.

**STORY FOR ALL AGES**            *I Wonder*            ~ Annaka Harris

*(A young girl and her mother wander through nature and wonder at its mysteries.)*

**RESPONSIVE READING**            *Ecclesiastes 3*            #558

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

\_\_A time to be born, and a time to die;

A time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;

\_\_A time to kill, and a time to heal;

A time to break down, and a time to build up;

\_\_A time to weep, and a time to laugh;

A time to mourn, and a time to dance;

\_\_A time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together;

A time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;

\_\_A time to seek, and a time to lose;

A time to keep, and a time to throw away;

\_\_A time to tear, and a time to sew;

A time to keep silence, and a time to speak;

\_\_A time to love, and a time to hate;

A time for war,

\_\_And a time for peace. *(end of reading in hymnal-continued with a paraphrase of remaining verses in chapter 3)*

Everything has been made appropriate in its time. Eternity is set in our hearts, so that we cannot see what has been done from the beginning even to the end. There is nothing better for us than to rejoice and to do good in our lifetime, as there is nothing to add to it and there is nothing to take from it. That which is has been already and that which will be has already been.

**MESSAGE**

As of today, I have witnessed the rising and setting of the sun 22, 571 times. When I was born, the moon was at about 1/8 crescent waxing, and seen from my place on earth, it has returned to that phase approximately 764 times, and in the process, has affected 764 high tides, in the oceans as well as in my own cells. During my lifetime, the earth has traveled around the sun more than 61 times, and the Sun, along with our entire solar system, has traveled about 1-4millionth of its full orbit around the center of the Milky Way galaxy. (That might sound like a miniscule distance, but it's actually about 1.4 trillion kilometres.)

Assuming an average heart rate of 80 beats per minute, I have experienced that beat over 2.6 billion times so far. And assuming an average respiration rate of 15 breaths per minute, my chest has risen and fallen some 487 million times.

Because the tilt of the earth on its axis gives those of us living at about this latitude the privilege of experiencing the full range of the four seasons, I have gone through a transition from one season to another about 247 times. Birds and butterflies have either been flying away from me or flying toward me 122 times. I have watched the grass and leaves come back into their fullness 61 times.

As me...this one singular self...I have been alive for 541,704 hours, or thereabouts. If you put stock in the 10,000 hour rule – a theory associated with writer Malcolm Gladwell which holds that it takes 10,000 hours of "deliberate practice" to become world-class in any field – then, I ought to be 'world class' in my awareness of the rhythms and cycles of the earth, right?

Well, let's not skip over Gladwell's reference to 'deliberate practice' too quickly. I wonder what it would look like to 'deliberately practice' being aware of all that is.

I've begun taking an on-line course about using a First Nation's circle approach to achieving cultural competence. The first session was this past week, and at the beginning, an elder offered gratitude to the four directions...each direction being associated with a season, with a medicine, and with an animal, with an energy. I expect many of you have experienced honouring the directions in other places and ways...a prayer which deeply acknowledges the gifts of the earth and the creator.

After offering thanks to the directions, we smudged...a cleansing ritual which is about preparing oneself and becoming intentional. I noticed something similar during the High Holy Days here at Beth Israel; a clear glass bowl of water sat on a table just outside the sanctuary doors, so that those coming in could ritually purify themselves. Muslims also cleanse their bodies before prayers. There are many, many examples of similar rituals around the world, rituals that are meant to set one's intention...a very physical reminder...choosing to be deliberate about being in the presence of that which one finds holy or sacred.

Why am I talking about purification rituals when today's topic is rhythm and cycles? Well, I've just articulated the many, many times my body has literally experienced the rhythm of life, and yet there are very, very few times I've taken deliberate notice of those rhythms. Let's come back to this.

What do you know about biorhythms? Somewhat un-scientific, I know, but the theory is that there are various waves of energy and rhythm that move through our bodies...waves that are physical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual, aesthetic, etc. The length of each of these waves is

different, so at any given time, we feel stronger in one area than another, and there are some moments when all of the waves align, in either the high or low position. (As a point of interest, biorhythms go through their full cycle every 58.2 years, when they begin again from the relative positions they were in at the time of your birth. So, if you're about 58 years old, and if, say, you had a particularly 'aligned' time of life when you were about 10 years old, theoretically you'll experience a similar alignment 10 years from now. As another point of interest, however, my intellectual biorhythm was at a low point yesterday, when writing this sermon!)

Then there are circadian rhythms. This rhythm is embraced by the scientific community; it is the approximately 24-hour period of oscillation that affects all biological processes. This cycle helps us, and all living things, anticipate and prepare for regular environmental changes. While a world-wide reality, a circadian rhythm is also adaptable and somewhat unique...making adjustments for specific location, amount of light, temperature, etc. As humans, we seem to be born with slightly different needs for amounts of sleep, and some are early birds while others are night owls. And, our need for sleep changes over our lifespan...needing more as babies and teenagers...less for many in later life...more when ill or healing. Our circadian rhythm needs to adapt when we change our diet, travel across time zones, and as the darkness/light ratio shifts throughout the year.

Our daily circadian rhythm exists within the larger cycles of months and years, the turning of the seasons which also affects our internal biorhythms...our energy and our moods.

Both our biorhythms and our circadian rhythms can help to explain why we are not all on the same page at the same time, or listening to the same drummer, or feeling the same vibe. It would be just wrong to think there is one singular correct rhythm, and that our goal is to all be pulsing and beating at exactly the same time in the same way. In fact, it is the multiplicity of our patterns that creates the incredibly diverse web of all existence...rich in intricacy, beautiful in complexity, and yet simple in its structure and its invitation to be alive. We beat as individuals together, creating one beat that is the sound of all of us, of all that is.

Speaking of intricacy... neuroscientist Daniel Levitin,<sup>1</sup> out of McGill University, and the author of our non-fiction bookclub read this month, has found a mathematical pattern in music...and it's the same pattern of fluctuations that can be found in everything from traffic flow on busy highways, to the numbers of lynxes in the wild, to membership in churches, to the cycles of heart disease, and the size of tree rings, and on and on.<sup>2</sup> Physicists call this equation the one-over-f power distribution. It's all about the relative frequency of events (remember the waves of our biorhythms?) in which the second most common event happens half as often as the most common, and the third most common event happens one-third as often, and so on. This equation is found everywhere...in annual flooding levels, in DNA patterns, and in both the pitch and rhythm of musical compositions.

Fascinating.

Our bodies are embedded in the rhythms, even the mathematics, of nature. The same rhythms which govern the earth and the moon and the sun, shifting our seasons, changing our natural

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2012/02/20/its-all-got-rhythm-math\\_n\\_1289295.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2012/02/20/its-all-got-rhythm-math_n_1289295.html)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.67notout.com/2016/01/the-coincidence-of-rhythm-of-universe.html>

environment, also affect how much we sleep and how hungry we feel and how much energy we have. And all of this can feel like chaos, especially when interacting with our life experience in relationship to others in their own rhythms.

There's a great line in a Mary Oliver poem called *Fall Song*.<sup>3</sup> Speaking of the changes afoot as fall comes into its fullness, she writes:

....This  
I try to remember when time's measure  
painfully chafes, for instance when autumn  
flares out at the last, boisterous and like us longing  
to stay – how everything lives, shifting  
from one bright vision to another, forever  
in these momentary pastures.

There is such great wisdom in allowing ourselves to sink into the rhythm...to trust its coming and its going, to feel its rise and fall, to breathe along with it. While I often find this phrase patronizing, there is perhaps nothing as true as "this too shall pass." Everything comes into being and then goes away, shifting from one bright vision to another. This moment is just that. Momentary.

Try to remember this. Remember this when time chafes and the moment is too painful to bear. Remember this in moments of loneliness and grief. Remember this when you feel out of step or are experiencing the judgment of others. Remember this. Everything shifts and turns. To everything there is a season. We are both at the very center of this beating pulse, and insignificant in its span throughout space and eternity.

There was a great video being passed around Facebook recently...an updated version of the classic "Powers of Ten" film.<sup>4</sup> It begins with the smiling face of a woman lying in the grass, and then pans out at distances of 10x...10 centimetres, 1 metre, 10 metres, and so on...out to something like 10,000 light years. Then it reverses and travels back to the woman and continues inside her body, in the same degrees of 10x, until it reaches a quark, or a femtometre.

This is the space we live in...somewhere between the smallest particle yet known, and the furthest distance yet imagined. Here, somewhere in the midst of all of those vibrations and pulsations, we live our lives. Seeing this, being reminded of how much space and distance there is beyond us, and how much intricacy lies within, really puts things in perspective. It reminded me of that great Galaxy Song from Monty Python...

Just remember that you're standing on a planet that's evolving  
And revolving at 900 miles an hour.  
It's orbiting at 19 miles a second, so it's reckoned,  
'round the sun that is the source of all our power.  
Now the sun, and you and me, and all the stars that we can see,  
Are moving at a million miles a day,  
In the outer spiral arm, at 40,000 miles an hour,

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<sup>3</sup> <http://hellopoetry.com/poem/73376/fall-song/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0fKBhvDjuy0>

Of a galaxy we call the Milky Way.

And then it comes to the chorus...so when things are getting you down...remember. When you're feeling very small and insecure, remember how amazingly unlikely was your birth. So, lighten up! There are stars in the sky. Lighten up!

Just remember. Let's return to that intentionality piece...to rituals of cleaning. Noticing the world and its spinning as sacred. Preparing yourself to see and hear it clearly. How often do you stop to set your intention before walking into the woods or sitting along a creek? How often, and for how long, do you really focus on your breathing and feel its movement through your body? How often do you gather up fallen leaves and admire their incredible beauty? Consider stepping outside each morning, really noticing the world, and offering a prayer of gratitude. Consider taking a moment each evening to drink in the moon and stars, allowing their light to trickle into your veins. Consider making an offering to the miracle that is your life on this earth.

We are embedded in nature, and the natural world is within us. The same patterns that affect leaves and grass and dirt affect us. The same moon that pulls on the ocean's waters pulls on our bodies. And as we move through the many cycles of our individual lives, the world is moving through its own cycles in patterns that dance with us, in the amazing rhythm of all that is.

I don't know if I'll ever be a world-class 'noticer of life.' But I can surely increase the number of moments in which I stop, and pay attention, and allow my breath to intermingle with the breathing, pulsing heart of the earth. Surely I can do that. And surely, the difference will be in that noticing.

Namaste.

**READING**

*Autumn Meditation*

~ Elizabeth M Strong

We know the leaves are dying. We know that their blaze of beauty is a preparation for death. It is a time when we appreciate the effort of nature to rise above the ordinariness of life and death. It is a time when we visibly comprehend glory and wonder. And we worship with thanks.

We feel now that the air is cold and crisp. We feel now a clearing from the skies of the heaviness of the hazes of summer. It is a time when we appreciate the crispness and sharpness of the realities of life and death. It is a time when we physically comprehend the relief that clarity and insight can bring. And we worship with thanks.

We hear now the dry rustle of plants and grasses. We hear now a crackling from the earth that tells of the withering of the fullness of life. It is a time when we appreciate approaching rest from the frantic fullness. It is a time when we hear a different voice within, and know that life is settling down for a well deserved wintering.

Let it be so within each of our lives as we prepare for an autumn in our own life cycle. For we all need rest and respite if we are to understand and appreciate the rhythm of life in our soul that enables us to worship with thanks.

**CLOSING WORDS**

~ *Andrew Pakula*

May you know fully and deeply the blessings of each of your heart's seasons

The inward turning of Winter

Springtime's lush renewal

The effortless, steady growth of summer

And autumn's rich harvest

May your passage from season to season be blessed —

Eased by hands to hold, and by the light of love to guide you on.

Blessed be. Amen.