

The Slowed-Down Season

Rev. Luke Stevens-Royer

Sunday, December 3, 2017

First Unitarian Universalist Church

Rochester, Minnesota

READINGS

Winter Grace by Patricia Fargnoli

Bear In Mind by John Martin

Sermon – The Slowed-Down Season

*It's a robot, a race car, a building, a balloon, a mountaintop,
a rocket-ship lifting a child to the stars.*

It's not simply the casing, the holder, of the gift –
it is a gift itself – inviting wonder and imagination –
a type of simplicity –
a simple, not extravagant, not complicated
invitation to create a world and find joy in the common.

This is a type of simplicity that isn't about diminishment –
it isn't about a rejection of things, necessarily,
a rejection of the wider world, a rejection of society or culture, necessarily –
it is a rejection of the idea, the assumption,
that more stuff, more items, more things
are necessary, and good, and right.

This is a type of simplicity
that opens up to more possibility –
finding a whole sky filled with stars
spilling out of a cardboard box.

Trying to keep things simple, in a season and culture of excess,
is not always the easiest thing.

And the pressure to shop and buy, to produce and create,
to plug into the festivity machine that glitzes up
the centuries-old rituals, spanning culture and traditions,
of candlelight and fire, of song and poetry and humility and hope –
the pressure to do and make and shop 'til you drop
can be a less than jolly task.

I'm not one to dismiss festivity –
maybe because of my family growing up,
or my own natural draw toward and love of
celebration and feasting and festive gatherings –
parties, and music, and good food –
eat, drink, and be merry is my natural tendency in life.

And it would be too simple, really,
to make such a dichotomy between the holiday season in our culture
and the spiritual, religious call to simplicity –
as if it were that simple –
buying stuff is always bad – sitting in silence is always good
festive music is always bad – ancient chants are always good
parties and food and drink are always bad – isolation and quiet are always good.

It's not so simple.

A tradition that has lived into a nuanced and deep practice of Simplicity are the *Quakers*. The Philadelphia Meeting of Quakers wrote this, of their practice of Simplicity as a way for not diminishing life, or stripping away everything or rejecting *all things worldly* as bad, but as an opening up to deeper meaning and beauty. They wrote,

*Simplicity, when it removes encumbering details,
makes for beauty in music, in art, and in living.
It clears the springs of life...;
it cleans the windows of life and lets joy radiate.
It requires the avoidance of artificial or harmful social customs and conventions,
but it opens wide the door
to cultivate and express to all sincere cordiality, kindness, and friendliness.
This sort of simplicity removes barriers and eases tensions.
In its presence all can be at ease.*

The Quakers, in their strong tradition of not rejecting, but filtering the wider culture through values of justice and spiritual well-being, begin to find the balance needed in a frenzied world –
*it requires the avoidance of artificial or harmful social customs and conventions,
...and opens wide the door to kindness and friendliness – removes barriers and tensions.*

In this season,
perhaps the opposite of simplicity
is a feeling of pressure, tension –
a closing in of obligations and tasks –
a feeling of constriction on the spirit
that has real life consequences on one's health –
financial strain, family strain, festive strain.

On a beautiful winter evening on the prairie
the snow began to fall -
lightly at first, but growing thicker -
the roadway more and more obscured by the flakes on the windshield
illuminated by the headlights like a white wall
against the backdrop of a dark prairie sky.

They were in the open prairie on a 2-lane highway,
and couldn't believe how much the car felt surrounded,
trying to see through –
this was the 1960s when cars were built like tanks
but a muscle car doesn't help much
when it feels like it has been covered by a sheet.

How much further was the next town? they thought, not paying attention to the
odometer.

Why can't we even see any exits or farm lights or towns – or even any other cars?
How long before a plow – before anyone – comes along?

So they decided to stop the car.
My father, and his friends, could barely see a foot outside of the car
it felt as if the world had ended – because they couldn't see any of it anymore
so he sat up on the window and got his head above the roof...

He looked around, the swirl somewhat calmed above the car,
squinting through the swirling snow -
And then...a faint sound
growing fast
“vroooooom”

My father saw headlights faintly zoom past through the deep snow,
at least 10 feet above his head.
“Well I think I see the problem” he said – “the highway is up there.”
They had been driving in the ditch for miles;
muscling through the snow in the ditch,
which was flying up over the hood of the car onto their windshield -
the end of the world they thought was coming down on them
was their misplaced path.

So, they took a little maneuvering
pushed the car up the side of the ditch
and onto the clear and, now plowed, road,
where the snow was still falling, but the road was much clearer now
for a safe drive.

Just above their heads –
just above the ditch,
the place swirling with snow and wind
that obscured the senses and made difficult the path –
just above that,
was an opening, a clearing, a road –

lost in the swirl of the ditch,
trudging through as if this were the only way –
was it not for their stopping, and knowing deep down
this isn't the way it's supposed to be –
they would have never found the clear open sky,
the place of air and breath –
out of the encumbering details and into deep breaths of fresh air.
It wasn't that the winter, or the snow, were not beautiful –
they just got dragged down too far into it
so it was only the chaos that they could see.

They needed to stop, to pause, to find their way back to simple,
manageable, common beauty.

*From Sufi Mystic poet, Rumi:
There comes a time
when sea and land come to rest.
There comes a time
when even the heavens withdraw.
There comes a time
when weary travelers
need a rest from the journey.*

You don't have to keep running, keep going, keep producing,
keep buying, keep making and doing –
until, in words I've heard from some of you –
be a *human doing* instead of a *human being*.

You don't have to keep fleeing the bear,
assuming that you must flee,
and the bear must chase –
you don't have to keep the capitalistic consumeristic machine going
by keeping up with the decorations or the hosting,
the gifts or the parties or the frantic joy
to be a good friend, or parent, or co-worker, or citizen –
you don't have to do it.

The hard part is – we know that.
And it's really hard not to be swept into the fray, over and over again.

This season,
which can be so hard for so many reasons –
the pressure of measuring up to the crisis level of festivity,
or the hard memories of loved ones gone,
or complicated relationships
or isolation by the wider culture
because of religious or cultural differences –
it can be easy to get trapped in the ditch,
it can be easy to feel surrounded by the swirl of isolation
and trapped in a box – that is just a box.

Martha Postelwaite writes, in her poem, "Clearing":

*Do not try to save the whole world
or do anything grandiose.
Instead, create
a clearing
in the dense forest of your life
and wait there patiently,
until the song that is your life
falls into your own cupped hands
and you recognize and greet it.
Only then will you know
how to give yourself
to this world
so worthy of rescue.*

The *slowed-down season* makes for beauty –
makes for a gracious spaciousness
an openness for air and breath –
makes room
in the heart, in the mind, in the body, in the soul
for beauty, for music, for love –

not to reject the beauty and festivity of the season, necessarily,
but to dwell more deeply within the parts of it that feed your soul –

to relish in and soak in
those things that give you life and love and nourishment –
lights, stories, gifts, wonder, music – whatever it is -

let it surround you, and filter out the distractions
telling you what you must do to be happy, to be generous –
find and love and celebrate
the moments to slow down and remember
what it is that opens your own heart
to make more room *to live and breathe outside the box.*

It doesn't have to be just a box –
you don't have to travel in the ditch –
try your best to avoid the encumbering details, the swirl of chaos,
light enough candles, sing enough songs,
gather with those you love – enough to make some type of clearing for the soul,
to plow the road
and find a way to dream out of that box,
hitch your soul to a rocket-ship
to the stars just above your head
and hear angels, and singing, and music, and beauty, and joy.

Recently, sitting in a coffee shop with a group of friends, a young voice behind us.

It must have been a 4-year-old voice, or so,
a type of voice I'm attuned to and noticed right away –
sitting with her family, squirming around the chairs,
and up through the typical noise of a public space,
yelled, as if proclaiming from a mountaintop, filled with wonder and joy,
"this is a coffee shop!"

Sometimes,
the still, small voice – isn't so still – it's a loud, small voice.

Simply naming what is –
a coffee shop – something that, at the moment, was giving her great joy –
whether it was the coffee shop itself, or the fact that she knew what it was –
whatever it was,
it was a type of clarion call
breaking through the regular noise
rising above the common hum of everyday life –
her voice, just over our heads, rang out crystal clear –
above all the bustle, a voice sounded –
calling our attention
to the beauty and place of now.

Maybe,
with a little concentration or intention
maybe,
with a little help from others,
from whatever source it comes from,
something larger than yourself or deep within you, both of which are sacred,

Maybe
something will call to you
and it will invite you,
ready and longing as you are,
asking if you're ready to slow down,
ready for a clearing in the dense forest of your life,
ready for a pause and a breath
to notice the open road just over your head,
out of the blizzard swirl and chaos of what the season can quickly become
when you are just over a few feet from where you know you want to be,
maybe, right at the moment you're ready to receive it,
some still small voice
will be waiting for you
with breath and silence and stillness and simple beauty,

it will seem so simple
and with a sigh beyond words,

maybe, something, somehow,
some voice within or voice over your head
will ask why have you been in this frantic frenzy
to keep up, measure up, in this festive strain –
from wherever that voice may come from,
after you stop and pause,

and are ready to travel through the season in a new way –
maybe that voice will say to you,

okay - ready when you are.