

“From Ripe to Sere”

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Downtime, the beach, hazy blues and pale yellows, sunshine that lingers, *al fresco* dining, vacating, emptying out. Such are my images of summer. Then comes autumn. Autumn leaves, autumn air, autumn vistas, apple cider, apple pie, gusts of wind, frost on pumpkins, pumpkins carved, bright yellow buses, waving youngsters backpacks in tow, and Woolworth's, variety store of the past, with its aromatic offering of crayons and corn candy, sawdust and cherry Coke, on tap. The long parade of memory continues with shrieks of laughter that came with those daring jumps off trees and porches into leaves piled as high as we were tall, the pungent residue of great bonfires that consumed them—backyard bonfires that were once legal! Then there were the cookouts, the first of seasonal feasts, with hotdogs and marshmallows rendered into carcinogenic mysteries on long sticks in large fires rising against the backdrop of a harvest moon.

But what of this memory itself? How is it that such nostalgia is kindled over this particular arc in the cycle of seasons? We think back; we move back: back to school, back to work, back to church in its “full season.” We even “fall back” as we move off of Daylight Savings Time in a few weeks. We return to something that once was.

Just as the life cycle suggests the metaphor of the seasons, so the seasons suggest the rhythm of the life cycle. How frequently autumn has been tucked into that phrase, “the autumn of one's life.” We sense the passing of a year. We sense the passing of years. Consider the seasons of life as we return to the lyrics of our morning hymn:

The shoots of spring have mellowed with the year.
Buds, long unsealed, obscure the narrow lane.
The blood slows trance-like in the altered vein;
Our vernal wisdom moves from ripe to sere.

From ripe to sere. Yes, I had to turn to the dictionary to pin down that word, “sere,” though I would linger over these lyrics if sere had no meaning at all. It does though. It comes to our current usage from an Old English word meaning “dry” or “withered.” Now what exactly is redeeming about dry or withered? Precisely, I believe, that which is redemptive and revelatory about autumn itself. Our lives don't last forever. They are fragile. We are fragile. In the words of Fredrick Zydek:

The fate of the self is written
in these dreams. The soul knows
all too well what the trees mean

each time a leaf lets go and makes
the wind its temporary home.

The life of this earth on which we are guests for a split second of eternity is fragile.

Autumn edifies us in the most abiding manner if we dare to pay attention. It edifies us with its smells, which remain with us for years, decades, lifetimes even. It edifies us with its visual magnificence, its wind-driven swirls of amber and crimson and plum and saffron. It edifies us with evidence that summer, vernal, green, is finite. Autumn is harvest time—time to take in that which nurtures, time to give thanks, time to transcend our habits of taking for granted the gifts of this earth and the blessings of one another; time for pause and pondering of how we as humankind are all too often not so kind in what we visit upon one another and this earth that is slowly but surely losing patience. It is time to turn as the leaves turn.

The summer ends, and it is time
To face another way,

writes Wendell Berry, the Kentucky farmer/poet.

Our theme
Reversed, we harvest the last row
To store against the cold, undo
The garden that will be undone.
We grieve under the weakened sun
To see all earth's green foundations dried,
And fallen all the works of light.

There is a paradox here. We harvest; we let go of. We revel in the grandest of colors; light is less. We take languorous walks through heavy leaves; we quicken our pace as we go back to school, back to work, back to church. What a season of contrasts we inhabit. A time to be still and a time to dance with the leaves, the very leaves outside these windows.

Leaves—brown and gold
Rising upwards
From the tree outside the lead-paned church window
Gently borne by an autumn breeze
Soaring away
Small, fluttering shapes
Sparkling in the sun
Enjoying their freedom to fly.

Dead leaves
Leaving the safe tether of their branches
The souls of the tree
Starting their winter journey
By dancing joyfully in the breeze.

Such were the reflections of my late friend, Marietta Moskin, in the autumn of 2001. I believe our world is no less fragile in this autumn of 2012. Yet then and now we are invited to join the dance of the leaves, like the memorable Zorba the Greek of Kazantzakis' novel—Zorba, who danced in the face of love and loss, death and violence. He just danced in the face of it all. Is that not what our friends, the leaves do, dance in the face of it all, dance their way to the ground as if their downward flight were an act of joy?

Such is the demeanor of the most mindful among us.

Buddhism teaches that freedom is letting go. Through meditation and reflection we recognize the core impermanence of life and discover that we are free only by giving ourselves up to that realization. I'm reminded of those lyrics of Kris Kristofferson: "Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose." I suppose this puts me at risk for bowing to that concept of predestination, so anathema to our religious consciousness as Unitarian Universalists. The Calvinist doctrine of predestination says that all has been decided, that we can't do a thing about it, that our destiny has been mapped out by a formidable God.

It's always intrigued me that folks who profess this belief don't seem to take a whole lot of joy in life. I've never known adherents of this resolute doctrine to dance the dance of Zorba, to revel in whatever joy is theirs, however momentarily. Letting go, really letting go, is altogether different than throwing up one's hands in a gesture of theological futility, as if we didn't have a single original line in this saga in which we find ourselves. Letting go is rather an affirmation of our connection with the God who breathes through nature, not a God of the held breath. In Buddhist terms, letting go is our pathway into the nature of mind and release from the desire that causes us to hold on to what is ultimately transient, even ephemeral.

We are intertwined with nature, not above it, not beneath it, simply and most wondrously a part of it. We are family with those leaves that seem to whisper: "Stop holding on. Watch me dance. Watch me dance my way onto the ground, into the ground that gave me birth in the first place."

This kind of watchfulness, this manner of attentiveness, is the stuff from which we might discern how to modify the direction of our living into what matters most. It is a seasonal conduit of hope for moving onto paths of caring and compassion and making the most positive of differences in our world that is so full of itself with futile attempts to grasp and hold onto and seize and violate. This kind of autumnal reflection offers us a venue in which to turn and return to richer and fuller living, individually and communally. It is a mindful movement from ripe to sere.

Portia Nelson takes us a step further in her brief "Autobiography in Five Chapters,"

1) I walk down the street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk
I fall in.
I am lost...I am hopeless.
It isn't my fault.
It takes forever to find a way out.

2) I walk down the same street.
 There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
 I pretend I don't see it.
 I fall in again.
 I can't believe I'm in the same place.
 But it isn't my fault.
 It still takes a long time to get out.

3) I walk down the same street.
 There is a deep hole in the sidewalk
 I see it is there.
 I still fall in...it's a habit
 My eyes are open
 I know where I am
 It is my fault.
 I get out immediately.

4) I walk down the same street.
 There is a deep hole in the sidewalk
 I walk around it.

5) I walk down another street.

Sogyal Rinpoche, a practitioner and teacher of Tibetan Buddhism, finds Nelson's piece instructive as he considers the value of reflecting on that ultimate form of letting go.

"The purpose of reflecting on death," writes Rinpoche, "is to make a real change in the depths of your heart, and to come to learn how to avoid the 'hole in the sidewalk,' and how to 'walk down another street.' Often this will require a period of retreat and deep contemplation, because only that can truly open our eyes to what we are doing with our lives."

What better time to retreat and contemplate these realities than the season we inhabit, with its multi-hued foliage that, leaf by leaf, lets go of its tenuous hold on host branches? What better time to consider the deep holes in our individual and global sidewalks than this time when nature's breath scatters what only a short while ago seemed so secure? What better time to reconfigure our sometimes painful sense of solitude than to take our cue from our children, who took up the fallen leaves they imagined themselves to be and shaped a constellation of community, a flaming chalice, born as a symbol of sanctuary in the early days of the Second World War, when hope was dim and dimmer, and ripening into the symbol of our faith that we are called to kindle again and again and, when we can no longer do so, to trust that others will.

"now light is less, moon skies are wide and deep;
 the ravages of wind and rain are healed.
 The haze of harvest drifts along the field..."

Autumn carries the potential for reflection and reverie and contemplation, for mood mellowing, for the exuberance of children leaping into massive leaf piles, for humility and gratitude in the consciousness of life's fragility. It is also a time that renders us vulnerable to edginess, desperation, even despair. I find autumn richest in its metaphors when the textures of these tendencies coalesce, when the bitter melds with the sweet, because it prevents us from taking for granted the blessings of this life, blessings overt and blessings covert. It confirms those overt blessings of earth's beauty and those covert blessings of abbreviated time. It is a season of letting go.

How long has it been,
our play in the sand?
How long has it been,
the building of these castles,
the weeping at their demise?
How long has it been that
we have wandered along the
shoreline, pretending our
footprints are there to stay?
How long has it been that
we have cast the nets of our souls
in fear and longing to that which neither asks
or considers how long it has been or will be?

Summer ends. Autumn is with us in a movement that loosens the lessons of fragility—the fragility of our planet earth, the fragility of each of us as we move through the seasons of our living, the fragility of our capacity to sustain life.

Breathe in the season. Then let it go; let it go. Autumn, a time of glorious inevitability that is anything but predetermined, a time to reflect, a time to redirect, a time to take stock of our senses, a time to give up holes in sidewalks, a time to consider a different street even, a time to move with grace and gratitude “from ripe to sere.”

Amen.

Sources:

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