



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“The Seasons of Our Lives”

© by the Reverend Alison W. Eskildsen & Virginia Carver
Two sermon reflections delivered on October 29, 2017
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Centering Thoughts:

For everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven. Ecclesiastes 3:1

Whoever seeds a thought, harvests a destiny. Zen Proverb

The tragedy of life is not death but what we let die inside us while we live. Norman Cousins

*Just as a year includes autumn and winter, life includes death, not as an opposite
but as an integral part of the way life is made. Rachel Naomi Remen*

Reflection by Rev. Alison Eskildsen:

Do you plant gardens? Each year my husband, Paul, plants a garden. He buries the seeds in late winter or early spring when the ground is no longer frozen and there's little chance of frost biting any tiny seedlings.

In spring and throughout the summer he tends the garden. He weeds the rows, giving the seedlings room to grow and access to sunlight. He waters the plants when the clouds refuse to bless the garden with rain. And when the pea pods fill out with sweet green globes, the tomato vines dangle bright orange ornaments, and the okra stalks reach towards the sky, he harvests the fruit of his labors. Because he's gardener and chef, he cooks these beauties for me and I show my delight and gratitude by eating them!

When the seasons of growth and harvest end, he pulls the last of the remaining plants, then tills the soil to ready it for a winter rest. He completed this task just a week ago as the various plants were barren and beginning to die.

Over the winter Paul will review his garden notes. He'll reflect on what plants did well, what ones did not. He'll consider whether each variety was planted at the best time or not. He'll decide whether to plant something new when the days lengthen and begin to warm.

Our garden offers many life lessons as it moves through this seasonal cycle of sowing, tending, harvesting, and resting. It reminds us, mostly him, since I have little to do with it, that much of life is not in our control. Just like the seeds of ideas and projects we plant in life, we never know just

which garden seeds will take root, blossom, and bear fruit. Even though he tends them, sometimes they don't amount to anything. Sometimes the rabbits get them before we do. And sometimes, if we're away and can't pay attention to them, they wither and die. While at other times, we have a bounty so great, we give much of it away. As in life, we rarely discover exactly why one season produces well and another does not.

In her book, *A Mystic Garden*, author Gunilla Norris says [page 5], "In my garden while I am digging I am also tilling inner soil. My garden is a place of commitment and neglect, of arrogance and humility. It is a place of taking stock and of deep silence—a place of contemplation. And so for me over time it has become a place of grace."

I'm sure my husband doesn't think of his garden quite so mystically, but it is true that commitment and neglect play out visibly in what lives and dies. And when our arrogance over our ability to control the garden's outcome meets the unassailable truth that the Brussels sprouts or winter squash just won't grow, we learn a lesson in humility. Anything we receive from the garden comes to us by the grace of the universe, the Spirit of Creation offering up its bounty, and we are grateful.

The cycle of the garden also mirrors the cycle of our lives. Like the seed in the soil, we gestate in the darkness of our mother's womb. Like the seedling bursting into the light of day, at birth we greet the world. As we grow, we learn, gain strength and skills, experience life's storms, and perhaps create careers, families, and friends, all the while enjoying the fullness of each season. Finally, we ease into retirement if we're blessed to live long and well enough. Later, we watch the cycle repeat itself with others as we move closer to meeting our own death.

Rachel Naomi Remen sums up this cycle. She writes, "A human life has seasons much as the earth has seasons, each time with its own particular beauty and power. And gift." But she continues with a commentary on our culture. "By focusing on springtime and summer," she writes, "we have turned the natural process of life into a process of loss rather than a process of celebration and appreciation. Life is neither linear nor stagnant. It is movement from mystery to mystery. Just as a year includes autumn and winter, life includes death, not as an opposite but as an integral part of the way life is made."

Remen warns us not to ignore loss and death, anymore than we can ignore autumn and winter. But ignoring death is too easy. For example, grocery stores no longer suggest any sense of the season. Fruits and vegetables that once appeared only in summer or winter are available all year long. If I asked my sons to describe the difference between winter squash and summer squash, I doubt they could say. Because strawberries and blueberries and corn and beets are available whenever I want them, they no longer seem special. I don't have to wait in anticipation for them. They're almost mundane.

The human season of death is not mundane, but certainly out of sight. Few of us participate in the ritual of washing a body or otherwise readying it for burial or cremation. Many of us die in antiseptic hospitals, away from family. I am encouraged by the increasing use of home hospice care because it allows us to die with loved ones near and in familiar surroundings. I realize this is not always possible, but when death becomes less strange, it loses some of its power to cause fear.

To make death more real, I schedule this annual service that encourages us to face the truth that we all will die. But, as Remen says, we need not see aging only as a loss, for it offers a chance to celebrate life. And, as Virginia will soon share with us, as we near the end of an average lifetime, we don't need to simply wait for death to come. We can make vital use of that time to harvest or make meaning of our lives.

John O'Donohue writes in *Anam Cara*, "Aging is not merely about the body losing its poise, strength, and self-trust. Aging also invites you to become aware of the sacred circle that shelters your life. Within the harvest circle, you are able to gather lost memories and experiences, bring them together, and hold them as one."

When you or someone you know nears that time, I hope you ask them to share the stories of their life. When they harvest their wisdom and share it with us, we should accept that as a precious gift. And as they give that gift, they also receive a gift, the gift of knowing their lives had meaning and matter to another.

May we learn to see our lives as part of a great seasonal cycle.

May we anticipate the coming of autumn and reap the rewards we've earned.

And, may we share with one another this harvest of treasured stories and wisdom we gain through our living.

Reflection by Virginia Carver

To everything there is a season: Some thoughts on Inner Harvesting

There's a small branching plant with clusters of yellow pods that burst open in the fall to reveal intense orange jewel-like berries. In Indiana where I grew up, we loved to gather this and use it as a highlight in fall flower arrangements. It's called bittersweet.

And what a fitting name for this time of year when crimson, gold, copper, amber, and orange create a glorious, glowing fiery display before the stark days of winter take over. This vivid canvas provides the backdrop for a time of thanksgiving and celebration of the harvest which originally, in earlier cultures, capped the long, hard work of planting and tending.

The seasons have long been treated as a metaphor for one's life and each has its special gifts. The gift of fall is the joyous reaping of the fruits of our hard labor, much like the recognition and freedom that comes with retirement. But it also is accompanied by that bittersweet aura of a heightened sense of the transient quality of time as we become more acutely aware that winter lies ahead. This ambiguous passage of time is quite pronounced for me as my birthday is in October and last Monday I celebrated, with some trepidation, my 88th year.

Recently the YMCA had a Health and Wellness Fair passing out colorful T-shirts that seemed to cheerfully proclaim "Everybody does it!" --- and although they probably meant "keeps fit", I took

it as an attempt to put a more light-hearted spin on the challenges of aging. I've had to grapple with finding my way through this new territory; it's like being in a foreign country and as I learn its language I begin to find the riches that are there. . . and there are many. . . one of these is having the time to become more attentive so that it's quality that matters, not quantity.

I've never been one to readily accept the messages of popular culture so I feel the voices that keep telling me to just “keep fit” and “keep busy”, although well and good, don't address the fact that the autumn of life might hold an invitation to explore another layer of meaning, and in my search for this, I am led to the writings of John O'Donohue who has touched my life ever since my pilgrimage to Ireland in 2004.

O'Donohue is a philosopher-poet in the Celtic tradition; his Irish temperament and outlook are aligned with my Scotch-Irish ancestry, and although I realize this may not appeal to everyone, he does offer up a viewpoint that might hold value for many.

It is the concept of inner harvesting that John O'Donohue speaks so eloquently about. This harvesting is much like memoir writing, but its purpose is “not merely to journey back to the past; it is rather to awaken and integrate everything that has happened to you. It is part of the process of reflection that gives depth to experience.” It is a way of Coming Home to Yourself. O'Donohue goes on to explain that “everything that happens to you is an act of sowing a seed of experience. It is equally important to be able to harvest that experience.”

The art of inner harvesting invites us to look back and find the patterns and themes, the fluctuations, the little deaths and rebirths, the losses and disappointments, the failures and accomplishments, the trials, crossroads, dead-ends, and something I call “divine accidents”, to see what mattered most and what led you to where and who you are now in this ongoing journey of becoming. And although we recognize that memory can be notoriously unreliable this process can reveal a new understanding of yourself. As I do this what becomes clear to me is that life is a conspiracy to make me grow! So maybe this current need to take a look at my personal history was a sign that I was not finished with that growing, even at this late stage.

The gift that came to me through probing the past yielded an even greater value than that of self-knowledge. A kind of clarity emerged that gave me an enlarged appreciation of others as I became more sensitive to how each of our lives is struggling to grow into its own expression through the personal circumstances we encounter. Everybody has an amazing story full of mystery and meaning. As I reflect on my story, it opens my heart to be more present to others and to see the world-at-large with greater empathy and compassion, to embrace all of life more fully, to be connected in a deeper way.

We may be more inclined to do this harvesting in the autumn of our lives, but as each fall rolls around with its keen sense that all things change and die, this coming home to ourselves can be a way to reflect on our values and direction. It can ground us in the midst of a world of full of distractions and divisions. Hopefully this will help us move forward with greater awareness. . . more awake and more alive.

To remember means to re-member, to put all the parts of our life together so that we become Whole and THAT is the fruit of harvesting.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion:

1. What season do you feel you are living in right now? What wisdom can you glean from past seasons that will serve you in this current time?
2. How has the death of a friend or loved one affected you? Did you (or might you) express your feelings in a tangible or creative way, such as in writing, art, or music? If so, how did this help?
3. In what ways does (or might) this UU community give you comfort in difficult times?