



## UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

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“Time for Turning,”  
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson  
on October 16, 2011

Last Monday, that warm and beautiful day, I heard that telltale sound of fall, the sound of geese overhead. I ran outdoors and looked up, and there they were, against the deep blue sky, getting organized into something of a “V,” on their way to somewhere south of here. At the same time, lots lower, but against the same blue sky, I saw a monarch butterfly, its orange wings vivid in the sunlight, on its own migration south.

That night I heard geese again, flying under a nearly full moon. I ran outside and looked up, but I couldn't see them. I remembered a scene from a book that I love, *The Earth is Enough*, by Harry Middleton. It's the story of a young boy who goes to live with his grandfather and great uncle on a tumbledown farm in the Ozarks. When the cold nights come, these old men drag their blankets out onto the roof of their farmhouse, and with the boy they sleep out there, waiting for the geese. Here's a passage from the book, narrated by the boy:

On the third cold night of that week in November, after we had climbed the ladder to the roof and spread out our quilts, the geese finally came. It was well after midnight when we first heard them, way off above the hills, low in the sky, their calls a rollicking, vibrating sound, irascible and blaring as diesel horns. Moonlight shone on the damp grass, glimmered for an instant on the wings of the big, dark birds as they flew overhead, not in elegant, precise formations but in tattered lines, reminiscent of an apprentice tailor's first stitched seams. No perfectly straight wedges, but a weave of birds, their grace individual as well as collective.

The geese were overhead, dancing to the music of the earth, the ancient movements that thickened their blood. On that cold night atop atop the farmhouse roof, it seemed to me that life evolved with the earth, not in spite of it. The old men lay there looking up, saying nothing, just looking and smiling and seeming young again, expecting nothing of the earth and accepting everything...

“Well, the messengers have come, Emerson said from beneath the mound of quilts.

“Amen,” said Albert.

Emerson sat up. “Bless them for coming,” he said. “For giving us another year, another chance.”<sup>1</sup>

The message of this story is that the blessings of this earth are enough to assuage the pain of this life; enough to heal and bless us. I wonder: do you know how to put yourself in that state of earthly grace?

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<sup>1</sup> Harry Middleton, *The Earth is Enough: Growing Up in a World of Trout and Old Men* (New York: Fireside Books, 1989) p. 157-58.

There's something so poignant about this time of year, when things are turning and changing. You feel the season slipping away, don't you? The light growing less, winter on its way. It's not the easiest time of year, but it reminds me that I am alive, and that life is fleeting. And it's good to be reminded--that we don't have all the time in the world. But we do have today.

Our reading this morning<sup>2</sup> is a prayer written by Rabbi Jack Riemer. Though it doesn't say it in our hymnal, he called it "Time for Turning." This is that time --turning is happening in the natural world, and in the Jewish tradition, we're just past the High Holy Days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the time for, as Riemer says,

"Breaking with old habits, admitting that we have been wrong, starting all over again; saying: I am sorry." We all need ways to do this. We all need some time for and some encouragement to turn. This isn't easy, Riemer says, but it is necessary, if we are going to turn, as he prays,

From callousness to sensitivity,  
From hostility to love,  
From pettiness to purpose,  
From envy to contentment,  
From carelessness to discipline,  
From fear to faith.

Are there ways you need to change? Are there things you need to turn away from, and things you ought to turn toward?

I'm struck by the level of anxiety and anger these days. Times are hard. People are out of work. Those who have jobs are feeling pressure too. The relationship between Democrats and Republicans has gone from bad to worse. Ordinary people and pundits come on the radio and TV so they can yell at one another. The rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer. Does anyone doubt that we need to turn things around?

But what can any of us do? There are big forces at play, some of which we are unable to affect. We can't do everything, but still, we can do something, and we need to do this, for our own wholeness and happiness, and for the common good.

Does it seem, some days, that everything is falling apart? But that's not true, and we need to be reminded of that. Perhaps it's our nature to focus on what's broken. What if the morning news said, "Thousands of people kissed their spouses before going off to do an honest day's work. Millions of people fixed breakfast for those they love, then went out to teach our children, to tend the sick and dying, to keep our streets clean and safe. They visited those in hospitals and nursing homes and prisons. They tended gardens and sat down with a friend over a cup of coffee. They did this mostly with humor and grace and grit. It was another good day on planet Earth."

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<sup>2</sup> #634 in *Singing the Living Tradition*, by Jack Riemer.

When you feel things are falling apart, when you find yourself in despair, find some way to connect with the good earth. Get away from that glowing screen and out under the sky. Think of those geese that are flying south. Remember these lines from the poet Mary Oliver:

Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.  
Meanwhile the world goes on.  
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain  
are moving across the landscapes,  
over the prairies and the deep trees,  
the mountains and the rivers.  
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,  
are heading home again.  
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,  
the world offers itself to your imagination,  
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting --  
over and over announcing your place  
in the family of things.<sup>3</sup>

To turn is to remember who you are, and who you belong to, to seek your place in the family of things. It's to find that place where you are called to stand.

I've been following the "Occupy Wall Street" movement, and the one down in Boston. Some of my colleagues have been helping out down there, leading vespers services and standing with those protesting the influence of wealth and corporate money in our government. Both the Tea Party and the Occupy movements are tapping into a deep-seated anger and resentment about where our society is heading, and we would be foolish to ignore them.

A few weeks ago I saw a photograph of a Tea Party anti-tax protest. Someone opposed to the Tea Party had added captions to the photograph, labeling things like the city sidewalk the protestors were standing on, the streets they had traveled on to get there, the police who controlled traffic for them--all those things made possible by taxes.

This week I saw a picture of an Occupy Wall Street crowd, treated in the same way. This protest against corporate influence and greed was labeled with captions that said "shirt by the Gap, camera by Nikon," that pointed to some blond hair and said "color by Clairol." The caption below the picture ended by saying, "We deserve more from these greedy corporations. Join us afterwards at Starbucks!" It was pretty funny. Both of these parodies were designed to make fun of these protesters and make them look like hypocrites.

But are they? This week I read an essay about this, called "We Need a Confessing Movement."<sup>4</sup> The author, Nicola Tobett, says we need to tell the truth "that we are implicated in everything we indict. Just by virtue of living embedded in a network of social structures that privilege some at

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<sup>3</sup> Mary Oliver, "Wild Geese," from *Dream Work*, 1986.

<sup>4</sup> Torbett's essay, and the photograph which inspired it, may be found at [www.jesusradicals.com/we-need-a-confessing-movement/](http://www.jesusradicals.com/we-need-a-confessing-movement/)

the expense of others, we end up participating in oppression, violence, and exploitation.” In other words, we’re all part of the problem. There are no clean hands.

But it’s so easy blame someone else when we are unhappy or uncomfortable. Increasingly in our culture people are unwilling to take responsibility for their own stuff. I’m not saying you shouldn’t criticize what is wrong or unjust, you should. But it’s important to ask yourself, “Am I being too hard on those I disagree with, and too easy on myself? If we would each do our own work, and spend less time and energy casting blame, I’m convinced some of our problems would disappear. And it would be easier to work on the real problems, because we wouldn’t have alienated those who might be our allies.

We need ways to examine our conscience, and turn from selfishness and self-righteousness toward community and compassion. We need to give up being right so we can be in right relation. We need places that are safe enough and we need to be courageous enough so we can speak and hear these hard truths.

I hope this church is such a place, a place where you can speak your truth in love. I hope we are doing our own spiritual work, and are grounded enough, than when someone criticizes us, we can reflect honestly on the criticism, and see if their concerns are valid. I hope we are a community where we encourage and expect one another to live out the words we affirm every Sunday: “Love is the doctrine of this church, the quest for truth is its sacrament, and service is its prayer.”

Do you ever ask yourself, “Am I acting out of love, am I seeking and speaking the truth, am I serving others?” Do you ever say to others here, “Tell me how you are living out your faith these days”? If not, how come?

Here’s a little confession from me. I’ve been following some online conversation among my UU minister colleagues about the Occupy Boston movement. I’ve been searching my heart and praying over whether I ought to find ways to participate. There’s some meetings and a UU Vespers service down there this afternoon that I’ve been invited to. The truth is, on Sunday afternoon, what I really want to do is head home, make a big cup of chai tea, and spend time in my backyard. The truth is, for better and for worse, I am more of a contemplative than an activist. But I’m trying to develop those other parts of myself, trying for some balance. The truth is, if I wasn’t connected to my colleagues, if I didn’t love and respect them, it would be pretty easy to go home and have that cup of tea. But I don’t want to let them, or you, or myself, down. So I’m going down to Boston this afternoon. And I suspect that I’ll be glad I did.

We live in a world of great beauty and great pain. Life requires us to hold both joy and sorrow. To stand in the space between them, stretched to breaking sometimes, but not to break. To do this, we must be able to confront our own failings, to tell the truth about them, and to turn, again and again, toward life and love, toward healing and wholeness.

Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.  
Meanwhile the world goes on.

Meanwhile people are going to work and going to worship, trying to do what is right, building community one step at a time.

Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,  
are heading home again.

My faith and my hope is that we are part of a great Love, a force that is with us always, that invites us to become ourselves without shame or fear, that encourages us to stand on the side of love and of justice. That gives us strength to look into our shadow and to lean toward the light.

My faith is that no matter how far we stray, no matter what systems fail or fall, that love does abide. That come what may, the Spirit overseeing all, eternal Love, remains.<sup>5</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> The lines in the paragraph echo words by John Greenleaf Whittier from the hymn “Immortal Love,” #10 in *Singing the Living Tradition*.