

“Streams of Renewal”

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In a world filled with news of all that's wrong - of wildfires and disease and political tension - what does it mean to be a people of renewal?

A people dreaming of a world that's not just sustainable, but regenerative.

I lived in San Francisco for a large part of my twenties and seeing friends' photos of orange ashen skies is nearly beyond comprehension. The circumstance that created that kind of darkness is not something I was to sustain.

What does it mean for us, as Unitarian Universalists, to be a people of renewal? A people interested not just in sustaining, but in regenerating.

We live in a culture that reveres growth and busyness - we measure the health of the country by GDP, by forever making more. Ours is a culture that says more is better. And that's not what I mean by regeneration. It's not what I mean by renewal.

As we enter a new church year, a new school year, as the scent of morning becomes tinged with autumn, I suspect few of us are meeting this season feeling renewed. For we have spent the summer in the midst - be it the fatigue of endless quarantine, the anxiety over school plans, the reverberations of political deceit and civil unrest.

So what does it mean to be a people of renewal? Especially now, when our spirits have known too much of ashen amber skies?

We return to the things that ground us, the rituals that return us to ourselves and each other. We take the risk to ask for a blessing, to remember that we can make our own lives a blessing. We show up for ourselves and each other.

In our reading Jan Richardson writes of listening into a well, of seeking the quiet and stillness within, so that we might feel the water, the blessing, fullness of our spirits begin to fill the empty places. It's a beautiful metaphor, not least of all because wells present a sense of danger.

True renewal, the kind born of stillness, often involves some resistance I find. Because in the stillness we can hear our old stories, we can sense the fear and the grief that keeps us from breathing. And so it's easier to fill the space with more shoulds, more lists, more self-improvement, more news. It's hard to hold faith in the possibility that our world could be otherwise. It's harder even to imagine a world of flourishing, to make space for our part of the great balancing, when the world feels like it's spinning off axis.

Growing up, there was a dirt lane in front of my house that led to a small pond. Just beyond the far edges of the water, you could see the ocean on clear days. There was an old canoe that my family stored at the water's edge - it was some hand me down from a friend's relative, or something, a faded once-deep yellow that became my perch.

I'd cross the street in front of my house, walk the few hundred yards down that winding dirt lane, across the tiny mucky patch of grass, and climb up to sit on top of the overturned canoe. It was the place I went to feel quiet, to find some peace, to have the kind of solitude that feels less lonely.

There was rarely ever anyone there - I don't think the water was clean enough to swim in. You risked mucking up your shoes walking through the squelching grass, and had to accept the smell of marsh and sea. But if you made it to the canoe, it felt like the world paused. There was space in that place for breathing.

What are the sources that fill your well, that bring water when your soul feels thirsty? And what of our collective community - what does it mean to be a people of renewal together?

I remember a few years ago my sister calling me after she went to church. Apparently the whole service was about taking sabbath and the importance of rest. But she left feeling annoyed and sort of shamed for her exhaustion. "Clearly that person doesn't have young children" she said of the preacher.

And when I was in college, during finals week the school would plaster itself in signs about the importance of sleep. I remember feeling similarly miffed at the inference that our sleep deprivation was because of some failing on students' part and not because we were in the midst of final exams at an extremely rigorous school.

I am learning in my own life, as I try to follow the path of renewal, that I have this internal expectation that if I just do more renewing then I'll feel perfectly, glowingly at ease. It's that voice scolding me to take sabbath, to just work faster so I can sleep more.

If I personify that thought, it looks like a yoga teacher dressed in white her gym teacher whistle swinging as she yells at me to relax. Ridiculous, right?

That visual helps me check the absurdity of expecting some kind of nirvana amidst all the chaos and trauma of life, especially right now. Of course we're tired, of course we know fear - the experience of emptiness or hopelessness is not a moral failing. Nor is it the only possibility. Because we are neither the biggest thing in the universe, responsible for fixing it all, nor are we alone in some suffocating expanse.

We are a people seeking renewal together, tending our hope that life could be different than it is now - more loving, more just, more balanced, more vibrant. And we are a people seeking moments that breathe hope into empty wells, moments reminding us that the spirit of life dwells within us and all around us. Moments that regenerate. And we do this together. We come together in this congregation because our renewal is bound up in each others' - life is best lived in cooperation.

See saying something is regenerative means that it has retained the capacity to create. But not this more is better kind of creating, not a supply chain kind of creating. I think of crocuses coming back through the snow, of reforestation and salamanders regrowing their tails, of knowing joy after the loneliest hollows of depression.

That kind of creativity is defined by mutual flourishing, each member of the system offering their life as a blessing to the whole and receiving a blessing in return.

It's important to imagine what it means to be a people of renewal. And it's important to put the brakes on a culture telling us that more is always better.

When I imagine a true culture of renewal, I imagine a world in which we value stillness more than perfection. A world in which we can make space for our fear without being washed away, because we are rooted in our faith that we are not the

creators of the world, rooted in the knowledge that our spirits are filled by connection not consumption.

What if the stream of renewal comes not from us, not from our own doing, but as a blessing from beyond us. Like a gust of crisp air, a serendipitous encounter, and what if our call is simply to pause long enough to notice it? To slow down for a moment and wonder, to marvel, to notice that we are not alone, that there is life amidst the struggle?

What if we did that together? Trusted that there are others around us who are tending hope when our own well is dry, offering their talent to the great rebalancing of the world, holding faith so they might meet us in our whirlwind of despair and not be blown away?

We do this together.

I'll end with the words from our call to worship by Rev. Gretchen Haley, for in our being here, in our returning to this community, this time for collective stillness, we are a people of renewal.

Though we have been warned
and given plenty of explanations
reasons to do otherwise
we have persisted
to claim a life of joy, and justice, and to carve out
this time for renewal
of our own hearts
despite the din
demanding our attention
luring us towards fear
and cynicism
We persist
with gratitude
for this day, this life
that has been given
this chance to begin again
despite all the forces of fragmentation
the disappointing ways we fail each other,
fail ourselves

we must refuse
to let grief undo us, or
to let our dreams get lost along the way -
in spite of all of the evidence
we keep showing up at the edge
of our own longing -
and then,
we keep going
remembering this duty we have to life,
in a greater sense,
this duty we have to each other,
our children, and their children -
this hope that is also a choice we make
this promise we fight for:
to persist in kindness,
persevere in compassion
and prevail in a life that is bound
entirely to love - Come let us worship, together

Amen.