

A Most Human Season

Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Society
March 23, 2025

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I'm confused.

Seriously; I am.

You see since December 21st just about everyone around me, it seems, has been waiting, longing for, even craving the arrival of Thursday last. And well, here we are that day has passed. Is it everything you hoped for?

Oh! In case you're not sure what the significance of the two dates I just mentioned is, one is the first day of winter in this part of the world and the other is the first day of spring.

Now, I admit, I've always been a bit of an oddball, like the rabbit from our story for all ages, I've never really understood all the excitement and fanfare around the arrival of spring. Indeed, whenever someone has asked me what my favorite season is, I have consistently ranked spring as my LEAST favorite season.

Maybe it has to do with growing up spending a lot of time in Vermont where they have by some accounts, a fifth season, known as "mud season" which coincides with spring, and is best known not for warm temperatures and crocuses, but, black flies, which, while small, have a bite that packs a big punch and makes outdoor activities unbearable to many. So just when you want to be outside again, you're driven back inside by those pesky flies.

Or maybe it's that spring reminds me of an unreliable car I owned when I was in seminary. Indeed, for a period time I never knew if the darn thing was going to stall when I stopped at a light or stop sign and then not start again. It took a month or two of multiple tows to the repair shop and attempted repairs to finally fix the problem and even after it was fixed I always felt a tinge of anxiety stopping at a light until I totaled the car after spinning out on a snowy road and hitting a stone wall one morning on my way to guest preach for the UU congregation in Norwich.

Spring doesn't break down, but it is unreliable, especially at the beginning. One day its cold and you need your coat and gloves, another day hot and you're sweating in that long-sleeved shirt you put on in the morning.

In a similar vein spring at times feels temperamental. Like a person with whom you've planned a wonderful outing and then, when the day arrives, they decide, for some inexplicable reason, that they're not going or, perhaps worse, you discover they've unilaterally changed the plans you made together. And imagine being a flower. Flowers, excited to meet the sun, run the risk of popping up out of the ground only to be killed off prematurely by snow the next day. That's a fine how-do-you-do!

In other circumstances spring can come off as wishy-washy or indecisive, especially on those days where it drizzles off and on all day, like it can't make up its mind or the day starts out cold causing the central heating to go on and ends warm inspiring the irresistible urge to fling open all the windows.

Which brings me to another thing about spring that has kept it in last place among with seasons for me...allergies. While perhaps an annual boon to the pharmaceutical and facial tissue industry, spring's arrival is decidedly less advantageous to the sinuses, eyes, noses, and throats of allergy sufferers.

And even if spring is your thing and you absolutely love it, you have to admit that it's not all daffodils and warm breezes. It really is a season filled with irritations, too much to keep track of, pay attention to, or catch up with. And it's temperamental, moody, even, can't make up its mind, and an often exhausting assault on the senses. All of which make it unreliable, unpredictable, and, at times illogical.

Indeed, spring, it seems to me, is a most human season.

And maybe that's really what's long been my issue with spring. In contrast to summer which feels so carefree or autumn whose colors and crisp air consistently reward me with an overwhelming sense of aliveness, and winter whose snowy landscapes are nothing short of magical, spring feels too close to the experience of being human, so wrapped up in and driven by its own neuroses that it feels a lot like....well, daily life.

You know, life where "a parrot of irritation sits on [my] your shoulder."

Life with, "Too much to do...a mountain of bills to pay and nothing in the house to eat."

Life that, “just goes on and on.”

But of course, on that last point, the poet Susan Wood reminds us, “it won’t” go on and on. Indeed Wood steers us through a litany of ordinary frustrations that accompany human life straight into one of its most confounding challenges, one so far as we know, unique to being human:

We hope life, “does go on and on
forever”, she writes, “the little pain,
the little pleasure, the sun
a blood orange in the sky, the sky
parrot blue and the day
unfolding like a bird slowly
spreading its wings...”

We hope...even though we know it won’t.

To our awareness of being alive and having to die, philosophy has sought to offer meaning, religion has sought to offer solace, and science has sought to offer an explanation.

Nature, however, speaks directly to this most vexing aspect of the human condition and perhaps no more directly than through the annual arrival of spring.

“A Light exists in Spring
Not present on the Year
At any other period —
When March is scarcely here,”

writes Emily Dickinson.

A light, she says,

“that Science cannot overtake
But Human Nature feels.”

Some hear this as Dickinson’s elevation of religion over science. But I hear something larger than religion or science in her words. It seems to me her point is not to knock science or any other means of thinking about and understanding the world, but to remind us of that ineffable language, the language of the soul, if you will, through which we recognize and communicate with that to which we are alive within.

A language inaccessible to those disciplines which require the sense of solidity that comes from observation, analysis, and explanation. A language in which conversation is engaged in not through the exchange of words, but the sanctity of mutual attention.

“It waits upon the Lawn,
It shows the furthest Tree
Upon the furthest Slope you know
It almost speaks to you.”

And what might come of conversation with the light that exists in spring?

For myself perhaps a less curmudgeonly reaction to spring’s arrival going forward. Maybe even something akin to Susan Wood’s poem “Daily Life” where the annoyances of ordinary life are acknowledged, even if begrudgingly, but also appreciated, almost tenderly, as part of a larger whole that is, when you think about, pretty amazing, even when it’s not “pretty” per se.

Indeed, maybe now the valiant rise of the first crocuses and their sometime demise under the weight of a late snowfall will reveal spring not as unreliable or temperamental but radically prophetic, continually calling life forth, undeterred by its inherent vulnerability. Which, like the snow melted to water for the animals in our story for all ages, is received as a gift.

And isn’t that what’s going on when we live with the hope our days will never end yet knowing they will?

Maybe spring is onto something.

Of course, to some the next logical step is to turn that hope into a reality for human beings. But if we listen...if we’re paying attention, we notice spring does not speak of individual human lives, only Life itself.

As Frederick Turner, author of “Beyond Geography: The Western Spirit Against the Wilderness” writes, “Every added protection against the natural world contributes its bit to the steadily building illusion of independence from nature, so that in time that greatest of illusions is erected: the omnipotence of man.”

To take from spring the inspiration to advance and prolong only human interests and life is to already believe in and promote the illusion of independence from nature. And spring most definitely does not teach independence from nature.

For what makes spring a most human season is not so much that it appears to simply mimic some of the most woeful, if ordinary, aspects of human nature, or our continual calling of life forward despite knowledge of our ultimate vulnerability. But rather, that it mirrors our longings and limitations, our trials and our triumphs, our strength and our vulnerability.

To the human willing to engage in a conversation of sacred, mutual attention, spring is nature's invitation to rest in the interdependent web of existence not to establish a human colony apart from it. Indeed, in conversation, through the language of the soul our human nature comprehends nature and recognizes itself as part of it. And perhaps this why Dickinson writing of the revelatory light that exists in spring, describes its departure in language that tastes bittersweet,

“Then as Horizons step
Or Noons report away
Without the Formula of sound
It passes and we stay —

A quality of loss
Affecting our Content
As Trade had suddenly encroached
Upon a Sacrament.”

Spring, so revered a harbinger of new life, is quickly overtaken by other concerns.

Let us then welcome and relish not merely its outward expression to the senses, but embrace the conversation it invites inwardly through the sanctity of mutual attention. Wherein we may yet come to appreciate this most human season anew.

May it be so.

Amen and Blessed Be