

The Risk of Spring¹

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Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church

Today is the last day of winter. But we know that there will be more snow to come. Spring is a risky time, a time for going out without boots, and walking in slushy snow on the way home. A time for planting seeds in containers hoping the ground will be thawed when it is time to put them outside. A time for embracing joy even in the midst of trouble. Let us celebrate the risk of spring!

Our readings today were two poems, Snowdrops by Louise Gluck² and The Spring by Delmore Schwartz.³ Excerpts: Snowdrops

...remembering
after so long how to open again
in the cold light
of earliest spring--

The Spring

Spring has returned! Everything has returned!
The earth, just like a schoolgirl...

Sermon

Spring is a crazy season. First it's warmer, then it's colder again—in fact, it has been like that during these last two weeks of winter as well. We've had some balmy sunny days with melting everywhere, and I put on a light jacket, and heard the birds singing in the morning, and said to someone, “It feels like spring.” Then we got a blizzard with 19 inches of snow, and we're digging out from under again. Ski-lovers head off to the slopes. Gardeners order seeds and look wistfully out the window.

I know even many of us who like winter get weary of the cold, weary of the snow. I certainly feel that way about snow shoveling. Margy and I love our new home, but it is a snow shoveling disaster. There is no good place to put the snow outside our door except to throw it mightily off the back of the deck, as we try to make a path out to the driveway. Then a few hours after we've cleared it, another great mound of snow slides off the solar panels on our roof, and lands directly in the path on the deck that we just shoveled out. More shoveling. So yes, weary of all that snow shoveling.

But I've always been baffled by people who act surprised or indignant when it snows in spring, as if the equinox should have the power to banish snowstorms. Every spring I have ever experienced, in Michigan or Massachusetts or Maine, has included snow during late March or April. If I were a betting person I would bet that we haven't seen the last of our snow for the season.

Perhaps it is about our definitions. If we think of Spring as lovely mild weather with green plants and flowers coming up everywhere—well that Spring arrives by fits and starts. It reminds me of a soccer game, Spring against Winter. The Spring team takes over the field one week, Winter players push back the next, and then the ball goes back and forth until finally Spring wins the game.

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2 From Louise Gluck, *The Wild Iris*

3 From Delmore Schwartz, *Last & Lost Poems*

But I also like to think of Spring as the whole season—the whole soccer game itself—and all of that scrambling back and forth between warmth and cold. If I think of it this way, it helps me to enjoy it all a bit more. I remember that the Equinox is only the beginning of this game.

The one thing that does change consistently and inexorably is the light. The sunrise is getting earlier and sunset is getting later, changing more quickly than other times of the year. It feels expansive and amazingly bright, and even brighter when shining off the snow.

Reflecting on the back and forth game of Spring helps me to stay more hopeful during the storms in our societal and political life as well. Social change also happens by fits and starts, with progress and then backlash predictably pushing each other on the field of struggle. If I look at the changes that have happened during my lifetime, I can see how many advances have been made for women, for people of color, for GLBT folks, for the environment. But then I also see how these gains have been pushed back, how new restrictions and oppressions threaten us. Many of us who have been activists for a long time feel weary now, not believing that we must once again be out on the streets to protect birth control, and young black men, and clean water, and public education.

We have to remember that social change happens like the back and forth soccer of spring, warmth fighting with cold, green shoots pushing up right in the midst of the next snowstorm. Nothing travels in a straight line from intention to action to goal achieved. We are in a backlash now, and it can feel like a blizzard threatening to bury all that we care about. And sometimes a late spring freeze *can* kill the fragile blossoms of the fruit tree and leave us without apples or peaches for a season. But backlash is not the same as defeat.

We know that Spring will eventually win its soccer game with Winter. That is the way of the seasons. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., quoting early Unitarian Theodore Parker, believed that “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” That is a foundation of hope for those who seek justice. But with social change, it is harder to see progress as inevitable.

Rebecca Solnit has written much about how to keep hope alive during the ups and downs of social change. Last week, her article in *The Guardian* was subtitled, “Why Giving Up Hope Is Not an Option.” She says:

Actions often ripple far beyond their immediate objective, and remembering this is reason to live by principle and act in hope that what you do matters, even when results are unlikely to be immediate or obvious. ... [she goes on]

I use the term hope because it navigates a way forward between the false certainties of optimism and of pessimism, and the complacency or passivity that goes with both. Optimism assumes that all will go well without our effort; pessimism assumes it's all irredeemable; both let us stay home and do nothing. Hope for me has meant a sense that the future is unpredictable, and that we don't actually know what will happen, but know we may be able write it ourselves.

Hope is a belief that what we do might matter, an understanding that the future is not yet written.⁴

4 Rebecca Solnit, “Protest & Persist: Why Giving Up Hope Is Not an Option,” *The Guardian*, at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/13/protest-persist-hope-trump-activism-anti-nuclear-movement>

Our actions for social justice have effects that we can only rarely see. Last week I was telling you about my participation in a civil disobedience action in 1987 against the *Bowers v. Hardwick* decision that criminalized gay relationships. Solnit mentions that action, as she quotes from a book by LA Kauffman about the history of direct action in America.⁵ Kauffman talks about the unforeseen effects of the Clamshell Alliance, which formed in the 1970s to protest against the Seabrook Nuclear Power plant in New Hampshire. Maybe some of you remember that movement.

She points out that the Clamshell Alliance was not successful in preventing construction of Seabrook. But they did inspire an anti-nuclear movement across the United States that likely kept 100 other planned projects from being built. And more than that—Kauffman writes that its “most striking legacy was in consolidating and promoting what became the dominant model for large-scale direct-action organizing for the next 40 years. It was picked up by ... the Pledge of Resistance, a nationwide network of groups organized against US policy in Central America” in the 1980s. “Hundreds more employed it [in 1987] in a civil disobedience action to protest the supreme court’s anti-gay *Bowers vs Hardwick* sodomy decision,” and then the group ACT UP used it for action for healthcare and research in the fight against AIDS.

When we take the long view, we are better able to stay hopeful about the future. Actions for justice during one era have often been the inspiration for later activists. For example, Gandhi was inspired by the British suffragists arrested in England in the early 1900's, Martin Luther King, Junior, was inspired by Gandhi. The Women's Peace Movement was inspired by Dr. King. In just the same way, we don't know the ultimate results of actions we may take, even if at first we don't succeed in our goals. Solnit reminds us,

You do what you can. What you've done may do more than you can imagine for generations to come. You plant a seed and a tree grows from it; will there be fruit, shade, habitat for birds, more seeds, a forest, wood to build a cradle or a house? You don't know. A tree can live much longer than you. So will an idea, and sometimes the changes that result from accepting that new idea about what is true, right, just remake the world. You do what you can do; you do your best; what what you do does is not up to you.

There is another thing, too, that she reminds us to keep in mind. In her book *Hope in the Dark*, Solnit writes,

...if you embody what you aspire to, you have already succeeded. That is to say, if your activism is already democratic, peaceful, creative, then in one small corner of the world these things have triumphed. Activism, in this model, is not only a toolbox to change things but a home in which to take up residence and live according to your beliefs, even if it's a temporary and local place...⁶

When I was part of the Women's Peace Camp, our purpose was to protest nuclear weapons at the Seneca Army Depot. We didn't succeed in closing down the Depot, though it did close years later. But we were also attempting to “embody what we aspired to.” We were attempting to live as peacemakers. We experimented with non-violent conflict resolution and consensus decision-making. We wrote songs and built access ramps and planted gardens. It often felt like we were creating a new country, with a new language and a new culture. So in that sense, in that corner of the world, peace had triumphed.

⁵ L.A. Kauffman, *Direct Action: Protest and the Reinvention of American Radicalism* (Verso, 2017)

⁶ Rebecca Solnit, *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities*, (Haymarket, new edition 2016)

And our own lives were transformed by our time there.

I have heard similar stories from people who spent time at the Water Protector camps at Standing Rock. Even though they didn't stop the Dakota Access Pipeline from being constructed under the Missouri River, and they were shut down by a militarized police force, thousands of people's lives were transformed by their stay in the camps. It was the largest gathering of Indigenous nations on this continent, and fostered a new sense of Indigenous identity and pride. Its tools were non-violence, prayer, and a profound respect for the water, and in that corner of the world, these values guided the daily lives of those who were there. The camps became a life-transforming place for those who gathered, and in that, they triumphed beyond what anyone could have envisioned. Now, the campers have been flung like seeds across this nation, and who knows what will spring up from that convergence?

Along with that, that fight against the pipeline still goes on through the movement for divestment from banks who are supporting the project. The water protectors borrowed a tool from the movement against apartheid in South Africa. Even more important than the fight against DAPL is the choice to reclaim and celebrate kinship with the water that all beings need. The Water Protectors have spread the message that Water Is Life all around the globe. So all the efforts to protect water have been strengthened.

Thomas Merton writes:

Do not depend on the hope of results. When you are doing the sort of work you have taken on, ... you may have to face the fact that your work will be apparently worthless and even achieve no result at all, if not perhaps results opposite to what you expect. As you get used to this idea, you start more and more to concentrate not on the results but on the value, the rightness, the truth of the work itself.

We must always remember in this soccer game of social action—there is no finish to the game. We will never arrive at any ultimate outcome. We will never experience the perfect society full of compassion, equality, and freedom. We can't hold our breath or put everything aside, working for a better day to come. We can't remain sad and angry and all fired up until change comes. So we need to find a way to stay present to the game itself. To embody now what we aspire to. To find our joy right in the midst of it all.

I don't mean that we won't feel grief, rage and frustration as well. But the more we can “embody what we aspire to” the more we will have moments of compassion, equality and freedom along the way. Moments of beauty and creativity and dancing and joy. As A.J. Muste once said, “There is no way to peace, peace is the way.”

I share a birthday with the early 20th century revolutionary, Emma Goldman. She is quoted as saying, “If I can't dance, I don't want to be part of your revolution.” That sentiment is likely taken from a story she wrote in her autobiography, *Living My Life*, published in 1931.⁷ She writes,

At the dances I was one of the most untiring and gayest. One evening a cousin of Sasha, a young boy, took me aside. With a grave face, as if he were about to announce the death of a dear comrade, he whispered to me that it did not behoove an agitator to dance. Certainly not with such reckless abandon, anyway. ...My frivolity would only hurt the

⁷ Emma Goldman, *Living My Life*, p. 56

Cause.

I grew furious at the impudent interference of the boy. I told him to mind his own business. ...I did not believe that a Cause which stood for a beautiful ideal, ...for release and freedom from convention and prejudice, should demand the denial of life and joy. ...If it meant that, I did not want it. "I want freedom, the right to self-expression, everybody's right to beautiful, radiant things." ...and I would live it in spite of the whole world — prisons, persecution, everything. Yes, even in spite of the condemnation of my own closest comrades I would live my beautiful ideal.

The more we can embody what we aspire to, the more joy we can find even in the midst of challenges and troubles. Rebecca Solnit says “Joy doesn’t betray but sustains activism. And when you face a politics that aspires to make you fearful, alienated, and isolated, joy is a fine initial act of insurrection.”

Spring includes crocuses poking their heads up through the crusty snow, and bright sunshine melting snow piles even when the temperature is still freezing. Spring includes the most beautiful songs of the cardinals as they stake out their territory and woo their mates. Spring includes the sap of the maple trees rising up and the people who go out to tap the trees and boil the sap into syrup.

If we want to be water protectors, we can start every day by giving thanks for the water we drink, or taking a walk to the nearest body of water that we love. If we hope for a society where people of all colors are welcome and celebrated, we can celebrate all of our neighbors, right now, and learn about the cultures of people that are not our own. If we want good food, we can plant a garden, or work in a community garden, or find great local food at the farmer's market or food coop.

Professor Omid Safi writes, “Every farmer who plants a seed takes a risk. We work through faith that the good deeds we do are to put down roots. The roots are invisible, but they sustain plants that may not give fruit for awhile. How lovely is this planting the seeds of love.”

After she retired my colleague, Rev. Judy Wells, decided to devote her volunteer energy to the problem of climate change. She has been working with several local, national and international climate organizations. But the situation with the climate is getting worse. She writes:

What keeps me working so hard on this issue are the faces of my 8-year old grandson, his 4-year old brother and their 3-year old cousin - all flesh of my flesh, dearly loved by me. I imagine them fifteen years from now, when things are worse, asking 88-year old me "Nonna, why didn't you *do something?*" I want to look those beloved boys right in the eye and truthfully say "I did *everything I could.*" So I'm doing everything I can. [she goes on to say] Vaclav Havel has written that hope is an orientation of the spirit; "it's not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out."⁸

I want to close these reflections by sharing with you a "Crocus Prayer," adapted from a poem by Jo Carr.⁹ I dedicate this poem to our own Sally—as many of you know, Sally is moving to Texas this week to be with her children as she faces the return of cancer. Sally has been a crocus-minded advocate for social justice in our midst and everywhere she goes.

⁸ Rev. Judy Wells, in a March 14, 2017, Resistance & Resilience, weekly reflections emailed by the UU Ministers Association, with permission granted to share.

⁹ This version of the prayer was created by Rev. Kim Crawford Harvie.

Today we honor the small and mighty crocuses--
first flowers of the season--
Knifing up through hard-frozen ground
and so sticking their necks out
Because they believe in spring
And have something personal and emphatic to say about it.
Most of us would rather wait 'til June,
Like wise roses,
When the hazards of winter are safely behind
and we're expected,
And everything's ready for roses.
But *crocuses*?
It takes *courage* to be crocus-minded.
Somebody who cares enough
To think through
And work through
Hard ground,
Because they believe
And have something personal
And emphatic to say about it.
Somebody has to stick their neck out.
Could it be me? Could it be you?
Oh, give us the courage to be crocus-minded!

Closing Words

Stunned by the astonishing mix in this uneasy world
that plunges in a single day from despair
to hope and back again, I commend my life
to Ruskin's difficult duty of delight,
and to that most beautiful form of courage,
to be happy.

Jeanne Lohmann¹⁰

10 "What the Day Gives," in *The Light of Invisible Bodies*