

Sermon: “Lying Fallow”
Rev. Lisa Friedman
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Mankato
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Readings

from Henry D. Thoreau’s Journal 1852

This summer I wish to do something worthy of it and of me; to transcend my daily routine;... To have my immortality now, in the quality of my daily life... May I dare as I have never done. May I attain to a youth never attained! I am eager to report the glory of the universe; may I be worthy to do it... it is reasonable that we should be something worthier at the end of the summer than we were at the beginning.

“Going to Walden” by Mary Oliver

It isn’t very far as highways lie.

I might be back by nightfall,
having seen
The rough pines, and the stones,
and the clear water.

Friends argue that I might be
wiser for it.
They do not hear that far-off
Yankee whisper:
How dull we grow from hurrying
here and there!

Many have gone, and think me
half a fool
To miss a day away in the cool country.

Maybe. But in a book I read
 and cherish
 Going to Walden is not so easy
 a thing
 As a green visit. It is the
 slow and difficult
 Trick of living, and finding
 it where you are.

Sermon “Lying Fallow”

The gardeners will be the first to tell you – this summer has been a strange season. Mother Nature has once again defied predictability. She has played the trickster to our human longing for concreteness and control. For a while it seemed as though the rains would never stop, and more than one friend told me that they couldn’t remember another spring, when they had planted their garden so late. I’m won’t complain that there have been so few days of scorching heat, but neither can I recall another July, when I have still had flannel sheets on my bed. The rivers run high, the mosquitoes fly low, the flowers bloom late, and the evening wind carries an early warning of autumn’s crispness. It is as if Mother Nature wants to tease us – do we really know which season we are playing in?

Perhaps it has just been the odd weather, or its mingling with the joyful noise of children playing in the alley behind my house, but it struck me this summer how much we modern people, city and country dwellers alike, have shifted our seasons from the rhythm of the land. Mother Nature rests and replenishes herself during the cold, gray months. But the summer, not the winter, is our fallow season - the time when we give ourselves permission to kick back and relax, to take it easy, to release ourselves from the pressures of having to always produce or manage or succeed. This is the time that we give ourselves to rejuvenate, to renew, and to refresh for the busy days that come when the calendar turns to September. Not that we stop doing things altogether – the work, the grocery-shopping, the special projects remain. But this is the season when we allow ourselves to take it all a little less seriously, to do as Thoreau suggests and dare to steal a few precious moments, when we might “transcend our daily routine.... and report the glory of the universe.”

It sounds so simple, doesn’t it? Schedule and set aside some personal time, fallow time, then let nature run its nourishing course. But, as the poet Mary Oliver laments, it is not so easy to go to Walden as it might seem. I was reminded of this the other day, when I drove past a church, which regularly places a quote on its sign for the inspiration and education of those who pass by. This week’s message caught my eye. It read: “We tend to worship our work, work at our play, and play at our worship.” While I’m sure the sign keeper intended it as a commentary on misplaced priorities, I took it instead as a caution. “We tend to work at our play.” The most extreme example of this came to me while I was listening to a radio talk show one morning. The host was interviewing an author, who had

researched and written a ground-breaking, well-documented book about the stress of going on vacation. “Few people realize,” the author warned, “that if they don’t take the proper precautions, they will end up more exhausted at the end of their vacation than if they had never gone at all!” To avoid this travesty, he spelled out the proper precautions clearly: how to take an extra day off beforehand to pack, how to come home a day early to catch up before rushing back to the office, how to turn cell-phones and pagers off without guilt. The list went on and on. And I found myself listening with wonder – have we really come to this?

Yet, one point that the author made did not seem so extreme to me. He pointed out the contradiction in the fact that while most of us long for some fallow time, dreaming for months ahead how we will savor our unfettered days, when the time actually comes, often we have no idea how to embrace it. A friend of mine was two weeks overdue with her first child in the middle of summer. I called her to ask, “So, how *are* you?” I found her sitting under the tree in her backyard. She was fine, she assured me, although she found herself pondering a rather strange predicament. “I’ve been trying to appreciate this time I have,” she said, “time to just sit here and wait. But the truth is, I’m bored. I keep having to fight the urge to go do something useful, to make a list of projects, to have something to show for myself.” Knowing that she needed to rest, knowing that this was her last chance to be bored again for several years, she confessed that sitting there in the midst of such beauty was a gift that was harder to receive than she thought.

Why is it so hard for us modern people to embrace the fallow times? We are out of sync with Mother Earth in more ways than one. It is not just that we seek our fallow time in a different season, but we have lost our understanding of the importance of having such time at all. Although it is tempting to place the blame on our modern society, I do not believe that it is simply a problem of culture. Even if we could erase for a moment 400 years of puritan work ethic, even if we could let go of the American dream of the self-made man and woman or the individualistic call to somehow do it all, I believe that there is something about facing the open expanse of a free day that would still give most of us spiritual pause. Put another way, I think our propensity to try to lead time rather than letting it lead us serves an often unspoken need to avoid what that time might reveal. It is as if we are afraid that if we could truly capture Thoreau’s moment of transcendence above our daily routine, what would be revealed is not the glory of the universe, but, rather, something else. It is as if we fear the truth in Mary Oliver’s words: “Going to Walden is not so easy a thing as a green visit.” Why is it so hard?

I suspect that the answer lies back with Mother Nature herself. Even though I know that we are here today on a warm, muggy morning in July, let me invite you back into your memories of this landscape in winter, to imagine these church grounds lying fallow. Recall, if you can, the bare trees, the blankets of snow, the brown tufts of grass peering out, the pale sky. What is happening out there? Nothing that you can readily see. But that does not mean that nothing is happening at all. The fallow season is a time of

unseen growth. It is when the brown earth soaks up the nutrients of the decayed harvest. It is when the seeds and the bulbs that lie deep in the ground prepare for the season of growth to come. It is when the squirrels and the rabbits sleep, resting up for the role that they will play in their little corner of creation. All of the greenness, all of the beauty, all of the successes and disappointments of this summer that we enjoy now were there last February – waiting, listening, preparing. The growth that we can see is dependent on what happens deep within the fallow earth, deep within the unseen seeds of life. It was this marvel that once prompted Henry D. Thoreau to observe: “Though I do not believe that a plant will spring up where no seed has been, I have great faith in a seed. Convince me that you have a seed there, and I am prepared to expect wonders.”

As I look around me this summer, it seems to me that we need to reclaim our faith in seeds – not just the wondrous seeds of the earth, but also the seeds of the spirit. Who knows what true growth might come from the gift of our fallow times, if we truly embrace them? It is not always only the difficult demons who show up. Sometimes, we discover to our surprise that we are in love. Sometimes it comes to us that we are more satisfied with our lives than we allow ourselves to admit. Sometimes we find ourselves ready for new challenges we had not known were calling to us. There lies within the earth some creative power, some life force, that tends to itself, that seeks to adapt to adversity, that reaches toward greater beauty and more life. Despite our current lifestyles, we are of the earth, of this creation. Why would we assume that it is any different with us? We are already in danger of forgetting how to listen and to learn from the earth, and so, too, we forget or neglect to listen and learn from the seeds of the human spirit that lie deep within ourselves.

In her book, *Ordinary Time*, author Nancy Mairs observes, "I always expect spiritual insights to shower like coins of light from on high. When instead they bubble up from the mire like will-o-the-wisps, I am invariably startled." I had one such startling moment a few summers ago, when I was traveling through Maine on the way to Canada with my husband's choral group, the Flint Mastersingers. One night, relaxing in the early cool of the evening, a member of the group discovered a luna moth resting beneath the door light of the hotel. I had never seen a luna moth before. To my uneducated eyes, it seemed less of a moth and more of a cross between a huge butterfly and a praying mantis. Five inches long, with shapely wings and a long graceful tail, all of a vibrant, verdant green, it was a creature of stunning delicacy and beauty. It was still there the next morning, as forty of us tramped through the door to board our bus. People gathered around to watch it, and I heard myself saying aloud, "I'm surprised it's still here." "Well," the moth's discoverer offered, "They don't live very long. Just a few days. It's probably dying." "Dying?!" I said, "That's horrible!" "Of course, it's dying, Lisa," he replied. "Everything that's living is dying." Oh. Of course, I thought to myself. I know that. Of all people in all professions, I know that statement to be true. But still, I found myself staring at that luna moth – such an incredible creature to be so shortly lived. A piece of the glory of the universe, and, but for the sharp eyes of a friend, I might not have even noticed. A piece of the glory of the universe, with a lesson to be learned.

Thoreau writes: “I am eager to report the glory of the universe; may I be worthy to do it... it is reasonable that we should be something worthier at the end of the summer than we were at the beginning.” But what he doesn’t tell us, is that it takes a kind of readiness to be able to receive that glory as the gift it is. Mary Oliver is perhaps more honest when she calls the journey to Walden a trick of living, a trick made all the more difficult, because we must somehow find it where we are. This, to me, is where the importance of the fallow season comes. For it is only when we take a few steps back from the tyranny of our doing, that we come to know the true state of our being. And only when we lie fallow with the seeds of growth and the places of loss and decay within ourselves, can we look out at the glory of the universe itself and truly see it, without giving in to the urge to flee the beauty and the truth that await us there. It is a trick of living. It is a trick of living to learn how to embrace time, whether it runs or flies or stands still. It is a trick of living to learn how to grow according to the nature of things and not to our own contrived sense of order. Who knows what insights might bubble up to startle us?

My friends, the days of summer have not yet passed us by. There is still time to lie fallow, to rest and play beneath the warm sun. There are still glories to be discovered, glories to report. May we find a way to embrace the time that is yet given us. And may we be worthy of it.