



Sermon

The glories of Autumn are hard to miss. The leaves turn the most brilliant shades of color, setting the hills on fire with their red-gold splendor. Scents of cinnamon, nutmeg, pumpkin and other sweet aromas fill the air as we feast on the bounty Earth provides. Indeed, the season of harvest is recognized world-wide as a time to celebrate and reflect on the joys of life. In Judaism, the holiday is called Sukkot, and the people are enjoined to create temporary shelters to remember their ancestors' wandering in the wilderness. Even as they remember the hardships of their ancestors, they celebrate the bounty of the harvest, feasting and celebrating with family and friends. The Sukkot shelters are decorated lavishly, with symbols of home, harvest, and hope. By spending time out of doors, connecting to the natural world in simple shelters that are more symbolic than protective, the Jewish people are reminded of their connection to nature and its beauty.

The Hindu faith celebrates Diwali, a festival of lights and harvest that gives thanks to god for the blessings of nature, honors the sacredness of light as a symbol of connection to the divine, and petitions the Goddess of Abundance to fill their homes with all that is good and lovely. This festival is not only a time to petition for the Goddess to grant boons, it is a time to be generous to family and friends, giving and receiving gifts and hosting extravagant parties. Like Sukkot, Diwali is a festival of harvest and thanksgiving. In southern India, there is also the element of remembrance for when the Avatar Krishna delivered the people from a tyrant. Thus the festival of celebration includes an element of thanksgiving for freedom.

The Neopagan faiths typically celebrate three harvest festivals. Lughnasah in August, when the first crops are ripening; Mabon in September, when the first full harvest is brought in, and Samhain in October, the Celtic New Year, celebrating the final harvest of the crops, and representing the time when the veil between the worlds is thinnest. In many traditions Samhain is the time to remember the deceased, contact the ancestors, and prepare for the harsh reality that winter is coming.

In each of these traditions, there are similar elements although the faiths themselves are very different. Each seeks to honor the past, re-creating it in ways that give it religious and spiritual meaning for today. Each of these seeks to balance reflecting on the past with a celebration of the present, and each one seeks to connect practitioners to the cycles of nature, especially the harvest.

In seeking to find meaning in these various sources for our own Unitarian Universalist faith, I was struck by these common themes woven through three very distinct traditions. Each of these faiths has a different world view, a different understanding of the Divine, of life and death, of human meaning and purpose and destiny. Yet, each of these traditions has a similar sense of the importance of remembering the past, and celebrating the bounty of nature.

As UU's, we draw from many sources of wisdom. What are some things we can draw from the harvest celebrations of these three faiths?



First, we can see that in all of these there is a common element of honoring the natural cycle of life, death, and re-creation. Each faith sees this cycle differently. Jewish teaching places critical importance on our deeds in this life, while remaining ambiguous about what happens after death. Hindu tradition says that everything, even the Universe, is a part of an endless cycle of life, death, and rebirth that can only be changed when we realize the depth of our own god-nature. Paganism, with its focus on honoring the Earth, sees in the yearly cycle of the seasons a metaphor for our own lives. We as humans have a spring or youth, a summer of fertility, an autumn of splendor and yet decline, and then a winter of decay and death, within which a deeply tranquil peace can be found.

As UU's we may agree or disagree with these understandings of the human condition, but the common theme of honoring the natural cycle of life, death, and re-creation is one that all of us can identify with, even if we do so differently. Honoring the "sacred circle of life", as our Hymnal tells us, is one way we can connect some of the many strands that make up our living faith. Autumn is a reminder to us that life and death are connected, and while we may try to cling to life, holding control of our destiny like the little leaf in our story today, death will find us in the end. In many ways, our modern existence has added to the fear of death our culture has. Disconnected from the cycles of nature we fear what we do not control. Even something as simple as light and dark, once a nature cycle governing our days, has now become something to control, regulate and tax. Alternatively, subcultures like the Goth movement often seem to glorify death and dying, focusing on the darker aspects of our lives.

For us as UU's, there is a middle way, where death is understood as a part of life, neither to be feared nor glorified, simply accepted for what it is. His Holiness the Dalai Lama says that he meditates on death every day, in order to understand the impermanence of life. We can choose to be fatalistic about this, fearing death, denying it like so many in our culture do; or we can choose to honor death, finding in it a meaning for our daily lives. When we honor the cycle of nature, we place ourselves within the ever changing world. Honoring the ever-changing nature that surrounds us and dwells within us allows us to put life and death in perspective, and to celebrate the life we have been given. For some of us, that life is long and sturdy, like the branch in our story. For others, it is short, like the leaf, but even then there is a glory when we allow there to be one. The leaf had to let go to truly be its best self.

In much the same way, we have to let go of our attempts to control and to thwart the cycle of life, death, and re-creation before we can be our deepest selves. Every religion teaches us to let go of our narrow way of thinking. For Judaism, placing oneself in the footsteps of the ancestors is critical, a Jew needs to know that he or she is walking with Abraham, Sarah and Hagar, following where they have led, co-creating with the Holy One a world of better promise. By keeping the Holy Days a Jewish person is not only following the tradition of their ancestors, he or she is actually making a new pact, saying for themselves that the Jewish life is good, and holds the possibility for making the world a better place. Sukkot is a reminder of their ancestors wandering without real



homes, but it is also a reminder that people today live in poverty and that we are called to help alleviate it. Hindus in America and elsewhere take offerings and give gifts during Diwali, asking the Divine to help not only their families, but the whole world. To see people, even those who are poor, giving gifts to others to celebrate the bounty of nature is a truly moving sight, and one that reminds us that the importance of our lives is not found in the things we possess, but in the ways we use what we have to make the world a better place. Finally, our Pagan sisters and brothers teach us that by honoring our Mother the earth we help make the world brighter for future generations. By focusing on caring for the Earth we care not only for our Mother, and not only for ourselves, but for animals, plants, and future generations. All of these cultures and religions honor the earth, all of them honor their ancestors, and all of them see that by honoring the past, we are given a path to help create a better future. While each of these traditions has a different understanding of the Divine, of the meaning of life and death, and of the significance of the natural cycle of the year, they are united in the understanding that honoring the cycle of nature puts life and death into perspective, and that when we have proper perspective, we can see that honoring death is really about celebrating life.

What do I mean by that? I mean that the measure of a life is not in the things accumulated, nor is it about the money made or the power a person had. At death, in every culture, what is most remembered is the ways a person touched the lives of others. Whether reciting the deeds of ancestors ancient and modern, as Judaism does; or reaching past the veil to honor those who have passed, as Pagans do, what is important is the ways those who have died shaped the lives of those who were here. By honoring death at this time of year, we connect the death of the natural world to the death of our loved ones. Just as nature dies back, goes dormant, and lies fallow for a time; so to do our deeds done in this life. Yet, just as surely as spring will come, the deeds we do, however great or small, will one day come to fruition. A tiny seed becomes a great tree, a small good deed becomes a miracle. In this way, celebrating life gives meaning to death. The deeds we do here and now, they are like seeds. Some of them we see bear fruit quickly, like the early harvest festivals celebrate the first fruits. Other deeds take time to mature, like the fruit trees that do not become an orchard until long after the first farmers have died. However, all deeds bear fruit. In Eastern traditions this is called karma, the natural law that dictates the consequences of actions across lives. In Unitarian Universalism, we call it by many names, but the belief that what we do, for good or ill, lives on beyond us is strong and visible in the ways all of us here today have been shaped by those who came before us.

So today, as we honor the season of Autumn, that glorious time when the changes in nature are so very evident, let us draw from the wisdom of our varied religious traditions and see that our lives consist of planting seeds. We can choose whether they are seeds of hope, love, and joy; or seeds of anger, bitterness and sorrow. In the Autumn of our lives, we will see the harvest we have sown, for good or ill. As UU's, we believe we make heaven and hell right here on earth. Well, today we have a unique opportunity to sow seeds of hope right here in our congregation. Our children have lined up outside, they are going to come through and trick-or-treat for UNICEF.



"The Glories of Autumn "
Claudia Hall
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Emerson UU Chapel, Ellisville MO

Instead of focusing on themselves, our children are planting a seed of hope by sharing what they have with others. I invite you to plant a seed as well, sharing the hope you have for a world where nobody goes sick or hungry, where nobody faces war or hatred anymore. Let us give generously of the harvest we have received in this life, and let us through our generosity create heaven for our children, and for the children of the world. By donating your change, you are offering our children an example, as well as planting a seed of faith that will become a great harvest in time. I welcome our children to come forward and share with us the seed-gift of hope!

Let us give thanks for the bounty we as Americans possess, and let us give meaning to life and death as part of the created universe as we plant seeds of hope with our children, and children around the world. Amen, and Blessed Be.