

SEASONS OF THE SPIRIT

A Sermon by Kathy Fuson Hurt
BUC, January 2, 2011

“To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven”:

A time for spirituality, and a time to refrain from spirituality.

And so we gather again, or for the first time, on this first Sunday of a new year. This gathering of members, friends, and visitors of the Birmingham Unitarian Church is the same as it has always been, and different from all it ever was. Different, in that the particular group of persons assembled here on this first Sunday of 2011 is a unique grouping. Different, in that leadership has changed since the first Sunday of 2010 (and depending on how you vote next Sunday, may change even more soon). Different, in that the aspirations, memories, fears, and hopes of this group are not the same as those of last January’s first Sunday gathering. But with differences, this gathering of the Birmingham Unitarian Church has a sameness and constancy and universality. The same, in that despite any change of faces, of people and ministers come and gone, the congregation remains. The same, in that this community is still supported and led by persons of vision and skill. The same, in that the aspirations, memories, fears, and hopes of this group are much like those of other new year gatherings in their passion

and profundity. This church community does change greatly—all the while staying the same.

Around the holidays, Sunday church attendance typically peaks, as people interpret Christmas and the beginning of a new year as one of those times when it seems important to pay attention to spiritual matters. In a few weeks, Sunday attendance may drift back down, as the post-holiday season becomes a time for paying attention to things other than spiritual matters. Regardless of what some traditions say, spirituality is not always important.

But the pendulum swings. We see our children requiring the sort of training in values, in responsible questioning, and in creative answering that a church is uniquely equipped to provide. National and world events shake our security and remind us of how desperately society needs the involvement of spiritually mature people. We find ourselves longing for companionship in our search for truth. After a time, the signs of the time indicate a shift in seasons, from a season of activity elsewhere to involvement here. We work our ways back to BUC on Sunday morning. For those of you gathered here today, the time to refrain from spiritual concerns is over, and the time to attend to spiritual concerns is now.

Unitarian Universalism has long been proud, and justly so, of its ability to function as a viable spiritual path without specifying exactly how one must

follow that path. We do not find it necessary or advisable to fence the spirit, to define the right and wrong conduct of an individual's spiritual journey.

However, most Unitarian Universalists I know (myself included) do secretly believe that some expressions of spirituality are better than others—certainly better for themselves, and perhaps even better for the world as a whole.

Nonetheless, these convictions about right and wrong spiritual practice remain largely in the realm of personal opinion and it is here that the distinction between our Unitarian Universalist tradition, and other major spiritual traditions, becomes sharpest. In many traditions, individual convictions concerning the proper way to conduct one's spiritual life do not remain matters of personal opinion, but are elevated to a universal status and enshrined as unchanging, unrelenting dogma. One man finds that meditation upon the life of Jesus brings him closer to God—and eventually all persons everywhere are expected to find God through Jesus. Another small group feels that observance of dietary guidelines enhances the quality of its spiritual life—and concludes that everyone else must have the same experience. A prophet writes a description of private spiritual explorations and insights—and those writings become the norm for any sort of spiritual exploration and insight at *any* time, in *any* situation. Again and again in the history of religions, particularly those of the West, personal belief is

transformed into universal law, fences are erected about the human spirit (and the divine spirit as well), movement and change are restricted, eventually eliminated.

There is a time to attend to one's spiritual needs, and a time to refrain from such attending. The human spirit, like everything else, moves through a cycle of seasons. For one season, meditation or prayer reaps benefits, while in another season a more active, less reflective spiritual life provides fulfillment. One season requires worship in a church, and another season calls for worship in the woods or at the art museum. Reading, teaching, preaching, discussion, an emphasis on words, is appropriate for a season; but with the passage to a different season, words must yield to silence. Spring, summer, autumn, winter, in literal and figurative ways, the human spirit progresses in its season, its spiritual expressions, its spiritual needs. If this natural progression is forced or halted, if fences are thrown up about any one season, then the spirit cannot move freely, and it will surely die. Despite this obvious hazard, we Unitarian Universalists, like other communities, are tempted from time to time to control the life of the spirit and re-order its natural seasons. We toy with outlawing certain words and topics; we itch to prescribe one certain way of doing things around here. But we must resist

this temptation. We dare not fence the spirit, we dare not manipulate its season, let it die for us as it has so many times before in history.

On the still twig up there
Hunches a wet black rook
Arranging and rearranging its feathers in the rain.

I do not expect a miracle
Or an accident
To set the sight on fire
In my eye

A certain minor light may still
Leap incandescent
Out of kitchen table or chair
As if a celestial burning took
Possession of the most obtuse objects now and then

At any rate, I now walk
Wary (for it could happen
Even in this dull, ruinous landscape); skeptical
Yet politic; ignorant
Of whatever angel may choose to flare
Suddenly at my elbow. I only know that a rook
Ordering its black feathers can so shine
As to seize my senses, haul
My eyelids up, and grant
A brief respite from fear

Miracles occur,
If you care to call those spasmodic
Tricks of radiance miracles. The wait's begun again,
The long wait for the angel,
For that rare, random descent.

(Sylvia Plath)

Poet Sylvia Plath has discovered a truth which most spiritual teachers have emphasized in their work, and which many of you know from personal

experience. The truth is that revelations, miracles, mystical moments, epiphanies, spiritual insights do not typically occur as and when expected. Rather, they have a habit of sneaking up on us at unguarded times, in odd ways, bearing meanings that we may not have been seeking. Conversely, the tried and true methods of religion, the usual ways in which we attempt to acquire insight and satisfy our spiritual needs, are often markedly unfruitful. Prayer yields no answers; a “wet black rook/Arranging and rearranging its feathers in the rain” does.

In my own wandering spiritual journey, I have sought the sacred in many of the ways commonly recommended by various religious traditions: Bible study, regular church attendance, prayer, and following Jesus, as taught by the Baptists of my childhood; yoga and meditation, as practiced in Eastern religions; reading, discussion, and social action, as preferred by many Unitarian Universalists; and an eclectic mix of these and other methods, improvised by myself. Sometimes these paths did lead to real insight for me. More often, however, their pursuit left me feeling virtuous, occasionally downright saintly, often unsatisfied.

And then I recognized that I had grown in understanding, had been finding answers to my questions, but in unorthodox ways, from surprising sources. This does not discount the value of the practices I have followed.

Rather, it reveals their limitations, their inadequacy when pursued exclusively, their inability to cover all the myriad seasons of the spirit—and perhaps most important, the highly unpredictable nature of spiritual awakening. For instance:

While working as a chaplain on the psychiatric ward of an urban hospital, I heard in the utterances of “crazy” men and women a profound understanding of suffering, of its causes and its consequences, and the compassion it can inspire.

In the responses of my juvenile delinquent students to their impossibly hard and hopeless lives, I saw revealed the power of forgiveness in the face of cruelty and evil.

In soaring passages of music, in colors and shapes of paintings, and in evocative lines of poetry, I found the outlines of stunning visions of reality and the soul.

On a visit to the rainforests of the Pacific Northwest, I discovered in nurse logs, fallen trees which grow tiny saplings from their own rotting trunks, a description of the basic structure of the cosmos and the inseparability of life and death.

In the capacity of people to give and give and give, even when their own resources are depleted, and then to give some more, I learned the inexhaustible power of love.

In the singing of a small child from a crib in the early dawn of a bitterly cold January morning, I heard a purity and perfection that confirmed the presence of the sacred at the heart of life.

All these experiences and situations, like a wet black rock in the rain, are unremarkable in themselves, certainly not promising sources of revelatory insight. Yet because of their inherent *insignificance*, they do become bearers of meaning, approaching us from our undefended side, speaking to us while our attention is engaged elsewhere, without the preparation and prior interpretation which more traditional sources of insight demand. Because they come unannounced, their power is undiminished.

As long as I stand before you in a pulpit, wearing a robe, delivering a sermon at the time designated in the order of service, my words have a predictability and a limited impact. But if I hid behind this back wall and spoke over a sound system at random moments, those same words might have a very different effect. The power of revelation, of insight, is largely due to its capacity for surprise. If we are too busy preparing for it, or expect it only in familiar guises, we may miss it. The rock does, in time, fly away.

“To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven.” As we enter this new year, this post-holiday, winter season of the spirit, with its usual manifestations and schedules and observances, we can be prepared to receive all the insights we know it will bring. And may we also be prepared for the possibility of the unexpected insight from the unknown source, not usually associated with this season of time of year. Spiritual awakening is free-flowing, available in any season, anytime, anywhere. All that is required is for us to be willing to see it.