



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Harvest Home

Meghann Robern, Guest Preacher
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301 N. Orange Grove Blvd. Pasadena, CA 91103 (626) 449-3470 information@uuneighborhood.org

This Friday is the Fall Equinox. In the Wiccan liturgical year it's a Sabbath, the second of three harvest festivals. As the midpoint of the harvest season it's a celebration of balance, of acknowledging that much work has already been done, and that there is still much work to do. It is a sacred time, dedicated to reflection, refinement, and preparation.

"But Meghann," you say, "we live in Southern California. The only seasons we have are fire, flood, earthquake, and pilot!"

How can this be relevant to us, who live in a part of the world where it feels like summer is from April to October, no matter what the calendar says? What ties do we have to a harvest festival in a pagan tradition, when so few of us work the land anymore? Even those who grow small amounts of food in the backyard might have a hard time finding meaning in the metaphor of the immense amount of time and labor required for harvesting the fields of an entire village. And yet . . . I would ask you to think of your lives as the rich fields ripe for harvesting, and of this blessed community as the village that collaborates on the harvest.

This village, this church, is the place we have chosen to be our spiritual home. How many of us, then, actually treat it this way? Home is where we live every day. Home is where the little things pile up and threaten to consume us just as much as the arrival of a child or the death of a loved one. Home is where people we love share those little burdens with us.

Home is where the heart is. And the heart of this church is you.

The fall equinox means that winter is coming, and though we may not have the extreme temperatures of Westeros, the days will begin to shorten, and darkness will come upon us. Now is the time for us to gather around the warm hearth and strengthen our bonds with each other, so that we have the resolve to continue to build our bridges outward. Chalice circles are starting up again. VOYAGers has begun transitioning from a primarily social organization to a small group ministry. We have the women's group, started last year, and the new parenting group, both of which are digging into matters of the heart and soul in addition to external realities. Many strong and beautiful bonds will arise from these endeavors and the other groups this church has to offer.

But in this economy of second and third jobs, or no job, sometimes Sunday morning is all anyone has to give us. What do we give back to them in return? What ministry can we offer them?

How are you? I'm fine, thank you, how are you? This is the liturgy of small talk, the ritual of congeniality. Here, at this church, when was the last time you gave an honest answer in this exchange? When was the last time you got an honest answer that you weren't expecting?

We are each an individual soul, with independent beliefs. But we each have chosen to be part of this larger congregation, a singular word. This congregation will live or die by our individual efforts. How much stronger, how much healthier would this congregation be, if we expected honest answers during coffee and conversation, and gave them in return? How much safer would you feel, in this village, if you believed you had the freedom to give honest answers when asked, "How are you?"

We deliberately create a sacred space here in the Sanctuary during worship. Let us make the grounds a safe space as well, where we can rise above that liturgy of small talk and take communion with each other. A great feast to celebrate the arrival of fall and the new program year is an excellent place to start, wouldn't you agree?

One of my favorite things about fall is pomegranates. Not only are they tasty, but they're a plot point in the tale of Demeter and Persephone. Almost everyone's heard Demeter's side of the story: Hades takes a liking to Persephone, her only daughter, carries her away to the underworld against her will, Demeter stops doing her job, and then Persephone is tricked into eating the pomegranate seeds of the Underworld to make sure she has to come back to Hades for half the year. It's a cosmological explanation for the wheel of the year, one that is interesting but usually fails to speak to us on a spiritual level anymore.

What I like to share with people is Persephone's side of the story, as retold by Ellen Dugan. In her version, Persephone is not kidnapped, but ventures into the Underworld herself, drawn by the call of lost souls who need her help and love to ease their suffering. She has found her purpose, and she is content. But then she learns of her mother's grief, what it is doing to the world above: the land of the living desolate and fallow, with no source of nourishment. So she willingly eats the pomegranate seeds to force a compromise between the call outward and the call inward. It's a version of the myth that now serves a metaphysical purpose, and for me it keeps the story relevant to modern life. It's now about maintaining the balance of ourselves while recognizing that the big picture will go on with or without us. We, like Persephone, must circle between a place of rest, to bring ourselves back to life, and our work in the world. We must surrender to the situation in order to most effectively bend it to our will.

But it's not enough to understand the relevance of balance — we must also learn how to implement it in our own lives. One of the most important parts of the harvesting process is the separation of the wheat from the chaff. How many of us come back from a "vacation" exhausted? We may have vacated our jobs and homes for a bit, but often we fill up our schedules with so many activities and people that we are doing nothing more than tipping the scale further. The fields are abundant, yes, but unless we actually take the time to harvest we will get no nourishment from them. We must be able to look at ourselves and cut away that which will only wither and rot, so that decay and disease do not spread to that which feeds us.

This is, more often than not, a deeply painful process. For many of us, it is especially painful when it comes to religion. We, as Unitarian Universalists, tend to ignore our previous religious paths that have left us wounded, and hope that we will heal without tending. But not only do those wounds rarely heal over time without attention, but they affect our honest search for truth and meaning, one of the core principles of our faith. To quote Reverend Richard Trudeau, "I have come to think that our congregations should be not so much 'decontamination chambers' where people wash away their former religions, but rather workshops where they confront them." UUs are not alone in our liberal, progressive outreach, but too often we let our hurtful experiences spread rot in our spiritual fields. We do not hesitate to engage the Islamic community, to fight the prejudice created by the terrorists and fundamentalists who have usurped the name Muslim, and yet how many of us stand up for liberal Christians when someone claims Michelle Bachmann is what being a Christian is.

How many of us are afraid to say that we even go to church?

Our country is coming to a boiling point, and our silence is no longer acceptable.

When someone declares that religion is a source of evil, that it should be eradicated because it causes wars and persecutions, how many of us tell them our own stories? Our tales of love, and compassion, and of how our seven principles can transform hearts, as all religious truths should do. Every single member of the sermon class that preached this summer did exactly that. What a gift Reverend Jim has given this village, by helping us find our voices. What would you say if you were given the pulpit? What is preventing you from telling your stories, as deep and personal as they are, to each other on the patio as opposed to from up here? Our preaching class congregants have shown us the way, and I don't know about you, but I was brought to an even higher devotion to our faith, and to this church, by what they shared. We are the living embodiment of what it means to be a UU and to give life the shape of justice. How does that fit in to who you are? What is holding you back from coming into your whole self? The tale of Persephone, the

symbolism of the harvest — both remind us that something must always die so that something else may live. Do not be afraid to let go of that which weighs you down.

Make the time for your personal harvest, and you will learn what makes your heart sing with joy, and the world will be better for it. Knowing both your strengths and your weaknesses means that you can walk in to Jericho Road and give them the best version of yourself. We all have an obligation to prepare ourselves, holistically, not just for the good fight, but for the long fight.

And I want to be clear that this is not about taking a break from social justice outreach for a few months. We, as a society, can't afford that. This is about letting the shorter days and longer nights remind you to take stock of who you are, what you stand for, and what will make you an even better warrior for righteousness. This is about making sure we remember to take care of ourselves so that after the trials of everyday life — work, or the lack thereof, children, errands, chores — we still have something left to give to those who need our help. The bigots and the racists have control of the noise machine and the only way we can drown them out is to say loudly, and proudly, we are Unitarian Universalists, we know who we are, we are standing on the side of love, and we are not alone!

Harvest the stories of your fellow congregants. Between now and the last harvest festival, Samhain, separate your stories — the things that make you who you are — into wheat and chaff. Remember that both come from the same plant, and Mother Earth has shown us we do not need to throw away every thing for the sake of one thing. Learn the language of God, of the spirit of life, as it is used by the souls sitting around you here today. Reclaim testimony and witness as words that we UUs can be proud of, in talking openly about our free church and blessed community. Look at our candles, in the back, and see them for what they are — joys... sorrows... memories.... hopes... all belonging to the people sitting around you right now. The equinox is here, darkness is coming, and the light we carry in each of us will be what sustains us until the return of the light at the winter solstice. We need this kairos, this set-apart time, to rejuvenate us for our work towards justice and equality.