

For Everything There Is A Season

**a reflection
by Rev. Bill Gupton**

**Sunday, Dec. 18, 2005
Heritage Universalist Unitarian Church
Cincinnati, Ohio**

The ancient author of Ecclesiastes said it all: “For everything, there is a season.”

As we have each year, for as long as humankind can remember, we have entered the season of darkness, the time to turn inward – toward home and hearth, family and friends, introspection that will allow a fuller shining forth – when the time is right.

Indeed, it is appropriate that our Director of Religious Education, Layne-Richard Hammock, is taking her sabbatical from solstice to solstice – following the rhythms of the earth, which at this season (at least, in our hemisphere) draws in upon itself to rest and gain strength, that the Spirit of Life may once again bloom in the spring, to reach its zenith in those long, bright days of summer.

But for now, for this morning, let us be in Winter.

Look outside. The evergreens, timeless symbol of the season – represented here, in our warm sanctuary, by this wondrous Christmas tree – those evergreens speak to us at some deep, elemental level, because – unlike their deciduous cousins, whose brilliantly colored leaves are the signature of Fall, and the inevitable turning of the wheel of the year – the evergreens offer us a sense of continuity – a sense of permanence, which mirrors that abiding presence, that is the Source of all.

Both types of trees have their place – those that shed their leaves in a splash of color, only lie dormant for a time before budding forth again, in spring,

bringing new life to our world; and the steadfast evergreens, a perpetual reminder of the eternal truth that life continues, even through the harshest of times.

Both types of trees are necessary; both perspectives are needed. For everything, there is a season.

As Judith Meyer writes, “The lesson of the Winter holidays is that time, and Nature, will make us whole. [We learn that] we don’t have to do everything ourselves. [Often] our job is [simply] to wait ...and to let the cycles of life, and of creation, do the rest.”

This is the lesson of the season – as well as the lesson taught by sabbatical. I realize that Layne’s is the first sabbatical taken by a religious professional in this congregation in more than a generation. And so, I think it is important, for just a moment, to recall the meaning of this historic religious tradition.

It was the Hebrew people who, attuned as they were to the rhythms of the natural process, created an elaborate cosmology that reflected their understanding of the sacred patterns they witnessed all around them. If Nature follows a cycle of work and of rest; if the world that we see with our eyes and taste with our mouths and imbibe with our lungs, indeed ebbs and flows, like the breath, like death and rebirth – so, too, must be the work of creation.

Hence, the seven-day cycle in which the Genesis writers envisioned God’s resting on that seventh day. Hence, the religious requirement that people, too, should rest every seven days – by setting aside a sacred time, for reflection and renewal – the “sabbath,” a word that derives from the same root as “sabbatical.”

In many faith traditions, then, it has become commonplace to send religious leaders off on a period of required introspection, following their work of creating the religious community. For the professional, it is a time to replenish the creative juices, and to learn new skills that might benefit the community; it is a time, as one Universalist author has put it, to concentrate on that most important of human callings: the “growing of a soul” (or, in more Unitarian parlance, the “building of a theology”).

And it is a time, as Judith Meyer said, for we who do the professional work of the ministry, to discover that we don't have to do everything, ourselves.

For the gathered congregation, on the other hand, the enforced absence of a religious leader is a time to spread its own wings; to examine, with care and with intention, both strengths and weaknesses, habits and customs. To try new ways of being. It is a time to learn the lesson of the season: That we are part of a greater cycle, and that life – as well as the work of the church – continues onward.

Yes, the beginning of a sabbatical by one of our staff offers us a chance to reflect on the true significance of the Wheel of the Year, and the Wheel of Life that it symbolizes.

Robert Weston, in his book “Seasons of the Soul,” writes, “I am amazed, and all but mute with awe, that on this cinder hurtling around the Sun, a living thing arose – to clothe the earth. That all this splendor – of leaf and flower, life in the sea and on the [ground], from crawling thing to singing bird and [human being] – all fruit of the same life, continually renewed through cell, and seed, and birth – [that all of this,] in spite of Winter storms ... this miracle of shared and sharing Life arose – and, evolving, still goes on.”

For everything, there is a season.

And so, as we settle down, in Clement Moore's wonderful phrase, for “our long winter's nap,” let us be mindful of these truths. It is right that we should rest. It is right that we should reflect upon what we are doing, and how it relates to our deepest calling. Whether we be professional religious leaders, active church volunteers, or simply seekers on the path of spiritual growth – all of us are called to recognize the beauty and the wonder in which we move. All of us are enriched by rituals that mark the turning of the wheel – by taking the time to acknowledge that for everything, there is a season.

In the words of Lynn Ungar, “Quit your pride, and listen. There – beneath the [snow]fall and the raven's call ... you can hear it: The great tongue, constantly enunciating something that rings through the world, as grace.”

May you hear those bells – and feel that grace – this holiday season. May you live the season fully, in the faith that whatever is left behind, whatever

passes away – as well as all that grows, and all which is created – everything is sustained by a Source we can neither control, nor understand, yet which is worthy of our praise and reverence.

Merry Christmas, and Happy Solstice. Blessed be.