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Spirit of Life Unitarian Fellowship
Kirribilli NSW
20 March 2022

AUTUMN: THE SEASON OF FESTIVALS, HARVEST... AND LEAVES

Let me tell a story.

It is Autumn. I am in a small town, on a first-time visit.

I open the window of the hotel guest room
to look out over the town.

A burst of biting air suggests there was a white frost during the night.

It is Sunday.

I wrap up against the sharp morning air
and venture into the almost deserted streets.

As I walk I peer into back gardens that have been well prepared against the frost.

Apple trees have been picked clean.

Some plants have been hooded and blanketed against the cold.

It is cold and utterly quiet. There is no wind
and no one in the town seems to be awake.

As I round a corner I come upon a park,
a long terraced stretch which overlooks the roof tops
and has a view into the river valley.

It is a park with a row of benches interspersed with a long line of elm trees.

They are a blazing yellow - each leaf like a giant, drooping glove.

The yellow is so shocking I halt in my steps to stare.

In the utter stillness I hear only the noise of the leaves falling.

Plop. Plop. Plop-plop.

Up and down the row, every tree is losing its leaves - right now in front of my eyes.

The trees are raining down their leaves with steady determination.

Was it the frost that caused this event?

Or the first rays of sun?

I stand in silence and watch.

Within half an hour I see a whole row of golden trees
turned utterly bare before my eyes.

Gaunt and grey, the empty branches reach at the sky.

At the foot of each tree is a perfect pile, yellow as sunlight.

A gift from the tree to its own roots.

By the time the townsfolk start to move around,
autumn is over.

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Holidays, festivals, and celebrations chronicle human history.
We are the creatures who celebrate.

We dance, sing, feast, fast and dramatise
important moments and events in our lives.

“Humans and the universe were made for each other,”
writes priest and ‘geologist’ Thomas Berry.

“Our experience of the universe finds festive expression in the great moments of
seasonal transformation, such as the dark of winter, the exuberance of
springtime, the warmth and brightness of summer, the lush abundance of autumn.”
(Berry 2006:34, quoted in Tucker & Grim 2014: 179)

Traditional festivals have ancient roots springing from very early ideas
of life, the world and the heavens.

Most annual Autumn celebrations originated from seasonal changes
in the lives of agricultural people.

These festivals are usually related to the movement of the earth, the sun or the moon,
“and the changes these movements made in the lives of human beings whose
behaviour was said to be governed by them.” (Nickerson 1969:x)

Scientists no longer describe the world
as a fertile blend of the four elements: earth, wind, fire, and water.

They talk *wonder*-fully about electrons, protons and neutrons.
But the four elements remain the entrance to our common experiences
of the ‘web’ we call ‘nature’ and ‘natural’.

For we are thoroughly nature.

To claim otherwise is to attempt to place human beings and everything we do
in some rare unimaginable realm beyond the universe,
thus rendering the power of our origins lost and our obligations vague.

Today, in the month called March, named after the Roman god of war,
and included in both the Julian and Gregorian calendars,
we who live in the southern hemisphere are well into celebrating Autumn,
called the season of festivals, thanksgiving, harvest... and leaves.

Sandwiched between blazing Summer and chilly Winter,
Autumn is the "cooling off" season.

The 'Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness', according to the poet Keats.

In Autumn, the duration of daylight becomes noticeably shorter.

Night-time arrives earlier.

Temperatures begin to drop considerably.

Most vegetative growth decreases, although as Albert Camus wrote:

“Autumn is a second spring when every leaf is a flower.”

In Autumn the shedding of leaves from deciduous trees is a significant feature.

In Autumn millions of monarch butterflies travel thousands of miles across North America to arrive in the mountainous region of Mexico,
where they remain until spring.

In Autumn, perhaps more so than at any other time of the year,
the interdependence of humans and the earth
comes into clear focus.

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I like Autumn. It is a season of transition and it can be spectacular.

I especially liked Autumn when we lived in Canberra...

A ‘native bush’ capital yes, but also a capital full of northern deciduous trees.

Yellow. Brown. Red. Burgundy.

Autumn’s technicoloured biology.

Rainbow alleluias.

The leaves we see in Spring and Summer are green because of chlorophyll,
that miracle of evolution whereby plants convert
sunlight, oxygen, and water into energy.

The leaves we see in Autumn, again a result of evolution,
is chlorophyll receding as the leaves and plants ‘energy engines’ shut down.

This allows the colours from other chemicals

to show their yellow and orange hues... and finally fall.

But this is not trees recycling.

Again, according to evolution, what they do is to make their leaves

in such a way that the bacteria in the soil do the recycling for them.

Presto! Next Spring’s fertiliser.

In sync with nature. Not working against nature.

As Autumn turns into Winter the Canberra landscape changes.

Barren grey sentinels stand among their evergreen siblings.

And not a politician in sight!

Trees have always fascinated me.

Right from the time as a young boy I learnt to climb

some of their more juvenile and smaller offspring

on our annual camping adventures to The Grampians (*Gariwerd*) in country Victoria.

Not to mention conquering dad’s apricot tree, and its fruit, down at the wood-heap!

Do you know, for example, that trees can communicate with each other
through their roots, even when they are many kilometers apart?

Or that they are nothing but flirts?

The scents and blossoms of fruit trees and willows
are billboards to draw attention to themselves and invite
passing bees to sate themselves.
Sweet nectar is the reward the insects get in exchange
for the incidental dusting they receive while they visit.

Each is the natural world making its own rules
and its own intricate webs - ecosystems - of energy.

After all, trees are important to our lives in many ways.
The most obvious is their role in producing
the oxygen we breathe and sequestering carbon dioxide
to help protect our atmosphere.

“Over the course of their lives [trees] store up to 22 tons of carbon dioxide in
their trunks, branches, and root systems... The forest is really a gigantic
carbon dioxide vacuum that constantly filters out and stores this component of
the air.” (*Wohlleben 2016: 93*)

Deep in the bush - wetland or state forest - surrounded by big old trees
I am often stuck by three important ingredients in nature:
awe, wonder, and curiosity.
That feeling of being in the presence of something vast
that transcends one's understanding of the world.

Philosopher Sam Keen coined the term ‘wonderosity’
to describe the combination of wonder and curiosity.

- Wonder is a natural response to the reports of our senses;
we are dazzled by something in the world around us.
- Curiosity helps us stay open to new experiences,
and it takes us to places where we can be amazed.

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Autumn invites us to look for more daily experiences of awe.
And what the science of awe suggests is that opportunities for awe surround us,
and their benefits are profound...

Researchers Dacher Keltner and Jonathan Haidt write:
“Our findings suggest that you don't have to do extravagant, extraordinary
experiences in nature to feel awe or to get benefits. By taking a few
minutes to enjoy flowers that are blooming or a sunset in your day-to-day life, you also
improve your well-being...” (*Keltner, et al: 2016*)

Awe is inspired by something larger than one's self or experience,
and that encounter helps expand our understanding of the world...
to transcend science as mere fact, and to find
renewed excitement in living.

And it is driven by a sense of curiosity.

in the way this happens.”
“We are the species that sees but doesn’t only instinctively respond to what we see; we internalise it, engage with it emotionally, and try to find meaning in the moment. We experience life in a many-dimensional manifold that blends perception with a multicolored subjective response. And we love the richness of the now makes us feel, even if we have no clue how it all happens.”

(Gleiser 2019)

To nurture the joy of wonder is to be attuned to the simple beauty of the unexpected. It may reveal itself in the silence of an old dark forest,
or in that strange uncomfortable warmth we feel
“when we witness something that defies rational explanation.” (Gleiser 2019)

Explorers, artists, poets, and scientists know of such wonder.
So can we in Autumn. Especially in watching gold and red autumn leaves
pirouette to the ground in a light wind...

Autumn is a season of great beauty, but it is also a season of decline:
the days grow shorter,
the light is suffused, and
summer’s abundance decays toward winter’s death.

Faced with this inevitable winter, what does nature do in autumn?
She scatters the seeds that will bring new growth in the spring.
She scatters them with amazing abandon.

“Here’s the thing,” writes professor of astrophysics, Adam Frank,
“we’re on the planet for about 100 years if we are really lucky. Then we die and
who knows what happens? Given that inescapable fact, you’d think we
might spend more time being amazed at everything - the trees, the birds, the
rocks, the sky. All that beautiful amazing stuff is just here, working pretty well on
its own. That should be cause enough for wonder.” (Frank 2019)

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