

**“Balance,” a sermon by the Rev. Sylvia A. Stocker
Unitarian Universalist Church of Brunswick
Preached at the Minnie Brown Center in Bath
September 18, 2011**

Thought to ponder at the beginning:
Blessings on him who invented sleep,
the mantle that covers all human thoughts,
the food that satisfies hunger,
the drink that slakes thirst,
the fire that warms the cold,
the cold that moderates heat,
and, lastly, the balance and weight
that equalizes the shepherd and the king,
the simpleton, and the sage.
- Cervantes, *Don Quixote*

Spoken Meditation and Prayer

Prayer for the Great Turning, Joanne Sunshower

From: <http://www.joannamacy.net/poemsilove.html>

May the turning of the Earth save us.
May the turning of the seasons & the turning of the leaves save us.
May we be saved by the worms, the beetles & the microbes turning the soil.
May we be saved by the turning of vegetation into compost
& the turning of compost into rich soil.
May the turning of seeds into plants & the turning of flowers
into fruits save us.
May the grasses & weeds, the vines & mosses all conspire to save us.

May we be saved by the turning of sprouts into saplings, of saplings into trees,
& the trees into forests.

May the scurrying, foraging, pouncing & lumbering of the animals save us.

May the breath of heaven in the breezes & the stormy winds save us.

May the dance of the butterflies, & the musical flight & return
of the birds save us.

May we be saved by vapors turning into clouds & by the turning of
the ever-changing clouds into rain.

May the waters flowing from springs into the lakes save us.

May the streams flowing into rivers, the rivers into seas,
& the great heaving of the oceans save us.

May we be saved by the patient turning of the rocks, the hills,
the mountains, & the volcanoes.

May the metabolism of the climates of the Earth save us.

May the turnings of all Beings great & small move us to find wisdom in our own turnings.

May we be saved by our waking & sleeping, by the rhythms of our blood
& our appetites, by the cycles of birthing & nurturing, injury & healing,
mating & nesting, loss & discovery, joy & mourning.

May we find in time the grace to turn to one another, & may this turning
also become our salvation.

May we learn to benefit the life of Earth with peace, humble in our needs,
& generous in our giving.

May we learn to celebrate the abundance of life with gratitude, & to embrace
the Earth with our bodies in return.

Reading By: Abby Bard

Aug. 11, 2011 The Edible Landscape:

Autumn Equinox in the Garden (excerpt)

From:

http://www.sonomadiscoveries.com/stories/the_edible_landscape_autumn_equinox_in_the_garden/133/

Life in balance is what I strive for and the garden is where I go to find it. As the sun begins to lower in the sky to bring equilibrium to day and night, I notice how the garden has responded to the change in light. The tomatoes, sunflowers, beans and basil have reached their ultimate height and set their final flowers. The greens have sent up central flowering shoots, forming seedpods to fulfill their destiny of reproduction. Apples and pears have dropped their heavy fruits, and figs and kiwis are beginning to swell and soften. These are autumn's signs of the coming darker days and the need to conserve and preserve the fruits of summer.

Of all the gifts that the garden provides, the most important to me is this connection to nature's rhythms, which we humans have all but obscured with artificial means. This year has highlighted the fragility of life and the role we humans play in tipping the balance—everything can change in an instant. While earthquakes and tsunamis, hurricanes and snowstorms are natural events, oil spills and nuclear accidents are our own creation.

What, ultimately, do we need to survive? Not the Internet, not even electricity. We need the basics: food, water, shelter. We need the earth to survive and grow the seeds we sow to maturity; we need to know that our children will have the healthy food they need to sustain them.

In our desire to collect things and achieve faster, newer technology, have we forgotten that everything we really need comes from earth and sea?

Sermon: Balance

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As the autumn equinox draws nigh, the world moves inexorably toward one of the only two times during the year when equal amounts of light and dark grace our 24-hour day. We swing

toward a balance of darkness and light on September 23 before our earth tips, again, into a new realm of seasonal ordering, this time the hours of darkness deepening and prevailing. May the turning of the earth and the momentary balance of the equinox save us. May seed time and harvest time save us.

The approach of the equinox brings questions, observations, and feelings about balance to mind. How much do you yearn for balance in your life? My guess is that most of us have gone through periods of time when things felt out of whack for us... too much of this, too little of that... times when we thirsted for balance, whatever that meant for us, to be restored.

Certainly for me the issue of balance is often prominent in my mind and in my striving. Like many people, I am often trying to set the proper balance between the various people, commitments, and activities that beckon to swallow up my limited time. Sometimes I get it right and sometimes not. Knowing how often I fail means I am preaching more from a stance of questing and seeking than I am from a position of having attained solid wisdom.

Balance, for me, comes in small spurts, here and there. I am somewhat comforted by the observation that even the earth, turning on its axis, has only two equinoxes a year. If you fail to call the equinox into your awareness on the 23rd, you have to wait until March for the next one. The balance we swing toward in a few days is a momentary, transitory one then. So perhaps its OK, normal, for our moments of balance to lack the kind of permanence or habitualness for which we might hope. Perhaps there is some innate, earth-bound wisdom in the rhythm of seeking balance, achieving it, losing it, then seeking it again.

I hear a lot about balance – or, more to the point, imbalance – in this frenetic world. Perhaps you do, too. I hear people lamenting the challenge of finding the right balance between work and play, between alone time and time with others, between civic and family obligations, between power and acquiescence...Some seek to strike a balance between spiritual practices and pursuits and more worldly activities. Some wrestle with their level of church commitment and engagement: Is it too much or too little with respect to the other aspects of their lives? Many

strive to eat a balanced diet or to balance exercise with periods of rest. Parents of young children often seek balance between fulfilling their monumental child-rearing duties and finding time for their adult partners and friends.

The balance of wealth continues to wither with astonishing speed. Even in these current economically trying times, the rich are gaining in wealth, while the poor are gaining in numbers... 1 in 6 Americans – and 1 in 8 Mainers – now live in poverty, according to numbers released this past week. In Maine 1 in 4 children live in poverty. And yet this is one of the states featured in a *New York Times* article during the summer that covered families using private and charter jets to deliver their children to summer camp. Not much balance there.

Nationwide, close to 50 million people are without health insurance. While we pay for members of Congress to have free health care, they have labored mightily to make it inaccessible to us. Not much balance there, either.

Perhaps for me, the biggest and most concerning struggle for balance, though, is evident in the natural world. Nature will balance itself, I suppose, although more and more I don't know whether to be comforted or discomfited by that knowledge. Increasingly the balance of nature comes at a terrible cost – the death of species and ecosystems, for death itself is the ultimate balance. And the death of nature I lay at the feet of my own kind – human beings. Take, for instance, this article, published on Thursday. Titled “Record Arctic Ice Melt Threatens Global Security,” by Stephen Leahy (<http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=105112>), the article says:

All the analysis and commentary about safety and security on the tenth anniversary of 9/11 ignore by far the biggest ongoing threat to global security: climate change. Just days before Sunday's commemoration of the attacks, German scientists pointed to yet another smoking gun of climate change: the Arctic sea ice reached a new historic minimum ice extent.

The rapidity with which the planet is losing its northern ice cap continues to astonish experts. The defrosting northern pole is one of the prime drivers of Earth's climate system and is changing global weather patterns in unpredictable ways.

The Arctic ice melt is also accelerating the rate of climate change beyond what humanity is doing with every barrel of oil, tonne of coal or cubic meter of gas burned.

On Sept. 8, researchers at the University of Bremen in Germany reported that the Arctic ice melt bettered the previous minimum of 2007.

Other research centers using different satellite and analysis tools say the extraordinary decline of ice in 2007 has not yet been exceeded this year and 2011 remains a close second.

“We think it will end up a little bit short of the record – not that it really matters,” said Mark Serreze, director of the National Snow and Ice Data Center in ... Boulder Colorado. “What is extraordinary this year is that there was no weird weather pattern that created the perfect conditions for the record melt in 2007,” Serreze [said]

*This year, the summer weather was normal and yet ... the ice vanished in similar amounts to 2007. “That tells us the sea ice is too thin now to hold up under **normal weather** conditions,” he said.*

News reports make me want to weep. I think, here I am trying to live more and more simply upon the earth. I drive a small car, compost, and refrain from buying stuff. I reuse and recycle. And the polar ice cap is melting.

Here I have not just the balance of nature to concern me, but also my own internal balance of hope and despair. It's hard to remain hopeful in the face of the facts, but I know despair is not helpful – not to me and not to the world around me.

So let me suggest three things I do find helpful to regain my own inner balance. After all, regaining **that** balance might very well be the first step to my effecting change on a larger scale.

The first suggestion addresses the issue of hope, in a world where it's hard, sometimes, to feel hopeful. Joanna Macy, whose work I have started to explore in the last couple of years, devotes her life to promoting peace, justice, and ecology. A Buddhist who works on the deepest of spiritual levels, Joanna Macy leads workshops to reconnect people to their inner wisdom, to one another, and to the earth, with the goal of bringing about sustainable communities. To do her work, she has to find and lift up the pockets of positive change she discerns even in a world where positive change seems hard to come by. In her book, *World as Lover, World as Self*, she tells this story.

"When I confronted my own despair, I was haunted by the question, "What do you substitute for hope?"

I had always assumed that a sanguine confidence in the future was as essential as air to breathe. Without it, I had thought, one would collapse into apathy and nihilism. It puzzled me that, after owning my own despair, the energy I devoted to peace and environmental causes did not lessen, but increased.

One day I talked with Jim Douglass, the theologian and writer who had left his university post to resist nuclear weapons, and was jailed repeatedly for civil disobedience. He had said he believed we had five years left before it was too late to avert the use of our nuclear arsenal in a first strike strategy.

I reflected on the implications of that remark and watched his face, as he squinted in the sun with an air of presence and serenity I could not fathom.

"What do you substitute for hope?" I asked.

He looked at me and smiled. "Possibilities," he said. "Possibilities ... you can't predict, just make space for them. There are so many."

That, too is waiting, active waiting - moving out on the fogbound trail, though you cannot see the way ahead." (p. 101).

Certainly the world is full of possibilities we cannot conceive all on our own. When I find myself on that fogbound trail, it's helpful to celebrate the value in **not** knowing, **not** controlling, and **not** being able to predict what is ahead. Surprising possibilities present themselves when I open myself to them.

Sometimes the possibilities arise even from disasters, like phoenixes from the ashes. Our church community – a microcosm in the face of all the wide earth – is one example of the surprising emergence of new possibilities. A few months ago, our community was devastated and traumatized by a church fire. But in our parish meeting after church today, we open the door to new beginnings. A year ago, who would have ever guessed we would be faced with the possibilities that face us today? Perhaps one of the greatest gifts we can offer one another in our shared religious community is the space and encouragement to seek, discover, and promote possibilities. Keeping our senses, minds, and hearts open to the limitless possibilities, we may perpetually discover new ways of restoring balance to our lives and world.

The second suggestion has to do with practice. Creating, maintaining, and restoring balance can be a matter of practice, a matter of attending, with acute awareness, to the possibilities that reside within our hearts and souls and to those in the world around us.

Think for a moment of creating balance in the most basic of ways. A baby spends most of the first year of her life teaching her body how to balance, first holding her head up, then eventually learning to walk and even run. She makes a lot of mistakes. She loses her balance. She tumbles, she cries. And then she gets up again and keeps working at it.

I remember my godson at that early toddling age, when he could almost walk on his own and he could usually manage to keep his balance if he was holding onto someone's hand. One day he was walking with his mom. His little arm was stretched up to reach her hand – only instead of holding her hand directly, he was holding onto one side of a mitten. She was holding onto the other side. Curious to see what would happen, his mom gently let go of her side of the mitten. My godson continued forward, resolutely holding his arm up in the air, holding onto that mitten!

Perhaps that model of learning to walk could inform our striving for balance throughout our lives, as we practice achieving balance in the many arenas important to us, until we reach that day when we discover we are moving along, holding onto only the mitten.

The third suggestion has to do with challenging the absolute goodness of balance. Sometimes a little *imbalance* is a good thing. A high diver maintains balance on the diving board, but the minute he steps off, he throws himself hands first into the air to effect his athletic feat. As he sails through the air, he is off balance, coming to terms with gravity in a new way, as it pulls him into the water below.

When balance serves only to maintain the status quo, sometimes a little poke to throw a system off kilter can bring about the possibilities we most need. Sometimes a new voice can open the portals of insight. Sometimes a new perspective can cause a shift in purpose and action, bringing about needed change. Sometimes we need to propel ourselves off that diving board.

Remember, the equinox happens only twice a year. In between times, we travel to darkness and then to light, in seasons of seeming imbalance. The darkness brings rest and quiet. The light bringing new growth and harvest. We need both.

Religious and spiritual practices come in all guises ... these three suggestions included. In our days, may we cultivate the openness to new possibilities, harvesting the bright beginnings of what could be. May we draw on the resolve and intention to practice finding, maintaining, and

restoring balance in our lives and world. May we be tuned to those places and moments when change might be the seeds of a new, more fruitful equilibrium.

Individually – and even collectively, here, in this community – the positive changes may seem small. But you never know what magnitude of change can result from a tiny beginning.