

*The Need to Be Dormant'*  
*Rev. Myke Johnson*  
*December 16, 2012*  
*Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church*

We shared a prayer today for Newtown, CT, written by Rev. Fred Small. You can find it at <http://www.standingonthesideoflove.org/blog/prayer-for-newtown/>

Our reading today was *The Winter of Listening*, by David Whyte<sup>2</sup>

*Sermon*

There are animals and plants that grow dormant in winter. The chipmunk in our yard is still gathering food this week, but soon he will burrow under ground, and let his body grow cold, and his heart slow to only a few beats per minute. He will hibernate through the freezing weather, waking every so often to eat and eliminate and sleep again.

Deciduous trees shed their leaves, because they no longer need them to make food, and also to avoid losing their water in the dry winter. The sap slows down, sugar is collected in the roots below the soil. Trees have done this many times before. If they are subjected to an artificial endless summer, to continuous light and warmth, they will grow for a couple years, but then stop. Then, no matter what the environment, they go into dormancy. Without a time of cold, they cannot break that dormancy and will likely die. The deciduous trees need the wintertime.

There are many plants in our landscape that will not flower without going through a time of cold. "Vernalization" is what they call it. It means that these plants only acquire the ability to flower or germinate in the spring by going through the prolonged cold of winter. Winter wheat must be planted in the fall because the seeds need the cold season to be able to sprout when it warms again. If they are planted in spring, they won't germinate.

Human beings do not hibernate in winter, though some of us might wish we could. Some might wish they could lie down for a long winter's nap at the beginning of December, and not wake up until the flowers bloom in April. Instead, we bundle up, turn on the heat, make soup, and shovel snow.

But we also have our own kinds of dormancy. Author Julia Alvarez wrote about how her own creative process was inspired by the story of Persephone.<sup>3</sup> Let me remind you of the story, in case you don't remember it from Greek mythology.

Persephone lived with her mother Demeter, the goddess of the harvest. Persephone was abducted by Hades to be his bride in the realm of the underworld. Demeter was so grief stricken when her daughter was taken that she withdrew her fertile energy from the world, and famine came on the land. After some time, the Gods grew worried. They didn't want her anger to destroy all life, so they intervened.

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1 Copyright 2012 by Rev. Myke Johnson. Permission must be requested to reprint for other than personal use.

2 From *The House of Belonging*

3 Julia Alvarez, "The Older Writer In the Underworld," in *Parabola*, Winter 2012-2013, p. 8-13.

Persephone would be brought home unless she had eaten the food of the dead. But Hades had been smart—he had given Persephone a pomegranate and she had eaten some of its seeds. So a compromise had to be worked out. They decided that Persephone could live with her mother in the above world for most of the year, but must go back to Hades for a few months each year. When she returns from the underworld, spring comes to the world.

Julia Alvarez wrote that it seemed she herself needed to go into the underworld each time she approached a new book. Some part of her had to die—the part that was the author of her previous book. She enters a time of shadows and darkness, never knowing whether inspiration would come back. But without that time in the underworld, the writing would not be deep or transformative. The pomegranate seeds of creativity would not germinate. So Julia welcomed that darkness, and faced it courageously.

Perhaps there are people who do not have such a need, but I notice a similar process in my own monthly rhythms as a preacher. Every month I need a time of emptiness, a time of no activity, even just a day or so, in order for sermon topics to float to the top of my consciousness for the coming month. Every month I wonder, what am I going to talk about? Do I have anything left to say? Sometimes I even wonder, how can I possibly do this work of preaching any more? But with a time of emptiness, things again seem to bubble to the surface, conversations, books I've read, questions. Then something emerges. It is all very mysterious.

Linda Leonard writes,

A major obstacle to creativity is wanting to be in the peak season of growth and generation at all times... but if we see the soul's journey as cyclical, like the seasons... then we can accept the reality that periods of despair or fallowness are like winter—a resting time that offers us a period of creative hibernation, purification, and regeneration that prepares us for the births of spring.<sup>4</sup>

Really, our whole lives turn in cycles of activity and dormancy. The word dormancy itself means “sleep.” Human beings need to sleep every day for about a third of the hours of the day. If we don't sleep, we will go insane and die. When we sleep, our bodies repair their cells, and our brains organize our perceptions and sensations of the day. If sleep weren't so familiar to us, it might seem bizarre and terrifying. I can hear someone interviewing for the position of human being: “What do you mean I have to be unconscious and helpless during 8 hours of every day?”

And yet we do. We are tuned to the daily and seasonal rhythms of light and dark, warm and cold. Dormancy is the mulling over time, the time by the fire, the time after we put the book down and its images replay in our imagination. Dormancy is the nap in the middle of the day. Dormancy is the quiet. Dormancy is curled up like a kitty on a couch in the sunlight. Dormancy is winter, is night, is cold. Dormancy is sleep. Dormancy is also the twilight before sleep.

Dormancy is the womb of creativity. It happens when I've been working on a sermon all day and getting nowhere, but then I go to bed, turn the lights out. All is quiet for a few minutes. Then suddenly I have to turn on the lights again and write because the ideas start popping. Or often it waits until the next morning, and I have to steal time away from something else to capture the thoughts.

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4 From [Call to Create : Celebrating Acts of Imagination](http://abbeyofthearts.com/blog/2009/01/16/cycles-of-creativity/) at <http://abbeyofthearts.com/blog/2009/01/16/cycles-of-creativity/>

But there is also a longer kind of dormancy, a time of shadows and darkness that is more frightening and bitter. There are times when our lives feel like they have lost their spark, their direction, the juice that gives vibrancy to our days. It is easy to feel panicky during such dry spells. I remember a long period in my late twenties when the life I had didn't seem to work for me anymore. I wasn't even sure what was wrong. But something cast a pall over my days. I started therapy then, and did a lot of journaling. Eventually, that time shifted into a decision to study at Chicago Theological Seminary—a new phase of my life was beginning to grow.

This is true in relationships and communities as well as in the individual. I think about it for our congregation. We have the exciting times of new ideas and changes, and then the quieter times when everything seems familiar and perhaps almost boring, when what is happening might lie hidden beneath the surface. There are times with lots of visitors, and then times when everyone seems to be on vacation or staying in bed. Creativity is essential in a spiritual community. What makes us come alive is the creative efforts of our members, sometimes sparked from an individual, and sometimes grown in the magic of a small group. But sometimes we need to rest too. We have to honor those cycles of growth and dormancy. Relationships are like that too. Our feelings ebb and flow, and we can become frightened during the low times, and wonder if the relationship can come alive again.

In the dormant times, we face our inner demons. We face our fears, our loneliness, our sense of unworthiness, our grief, our rage. It is a time when we can't figure things out with the knowledge and tools we already have. This is important. The knowledge and tools we already have can't lead us to the next awakening. And so we are invited to let go. We are invited to let go of the idea of self that we had. If we are willing to embrace the dormancy, change is possible. We can become more whole.

Stephen K Levine, an expressive arts therapist and professor suggests:

It is essential to human being to fall apart, to fragment, disintegrate, and to experience the despair that comes with lack of wholeness. ... I believe it is at this critical moment that the possibility of creative living arises. If we can let go of our previous identities and move into the experience of the void, then the possibility arises for new forms of existence to emerge. Poiesis, the creative act, occurs as the death and re-birth of the soul. . . . We are called upon constantly to re-form ourselves, to engage in what James Hillman calls 'soul-making.'<sup>5</sup>

Our society doesn't do well with the human need for dormancy. We are supposed to be always productive. If the earth tried to get a job with a food manufacturing plant, the boss would be incredulous that she wanted the winter off. Most people have jobs that they have to keep going to, or bills that they have to keep paying. There is no refuge for people who are in transition. Wouldn't that be good? A place to go when your current life isn't working, and you're not sure of your next steps? Instead, responsibilities continue to roll on and on. Maybe unemployment insurance is like that a little bit for people who have lost their jobs. It offers a bit of help to sort out where to go next.

In the Christian tradition, we are in the season of advent, of season of waiting. Of knowing that something beautiful is about to happen, but it's not yet. Children feel it as they wait for Santa to come on that magical ride around the world. Don't you hate to wait? I notice it when I am driving and get behind a slower car. My impatience is an inner demon that comes out during those moments.

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5 Stephen K Levine, *Poiesis: The Language of Psychology and the Speech of the Soul*, (Palmerston Press, 1992) p. xvi.

If we want to live deeply, we need to be able to wait, to let events unfold in their own rhythms, let new ideas be born when they are ready. The Tao Te Ching says, “Do you have the patience to wait till your mud settles and the water is clear? Can you remain unmoving till the right action arises by itself?”<sup>6</sup> “Mystery and manifestation arise from the same source. This source is called darkness. Darkness within darkness. The gateway to all understanding.”<sup>7</sup>

We need the darkness to find understanding. We need to quiet the mind, in order to find true wisdom. We need the cold to find the fire. We need the winter to find the spring. We need to let go of all that we know about our selves, to find ourselves. This is the natural rhythm, and we are a part of it.

*Responsive Reading* "Winter" by Greta Crosby (#543 in *Singing the Living Tradition*)  
Let us not wish away the winter. It is a season in itself,  
Not simply the way to spring.

*When trees rest, growing no leaves, gathering no light,  
they let in sky and trace themselves delicately against dawns and sunsets.*

The clarity and brilliance of the winter sky delight.  
The loom of fog softens edges, lulls the eyes and ears of the quiet,  
Awakens by risk the unquiet.  
A low dark sky can snow, emblem of individuality, liberality, and aggregate power.  
Snow invites to contemplation and to sport.

*Winter is a table set with ice and starlight.*

Winter dark tends to warm light: fire and candle;  
Winter cold to hugs and huddles; winter want to gifts and sharing;  
Winter danger to visions, plans, and common endeavoring --  
And the zest of narrow escapes; winter tedium to merrymaking.

*Let us therefore praise winter,  
Rich in beauty, challenge, and pregnant negativities.*

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6 *Tao Te Ching*, a New English Version by Stephen Mitchell, (Harper Perennial, 1988), #15.

7 *Tao Te Ching*, #1.