

GROWING INTO SPRING; SPRINGING INTO GROWTH

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Suzanne Wasilczuk at the
Lakehead Unitarian Fellowship, Thunder Bay, Ontario
Sunday, January 29, 2012

In the Christian tradition February 2nd is Candlemas Day, the day when candles are blessed for use in church throughout the coming year.

*If Candlemas Day be fair and bright
 Winter will take another flight.
 If Candlemas Day be cloud and rain
 Winter is gone and will not come again.*

In the Wiccan tradition February 2nd is a cross-Quarter day – it is midway between the Winter Solstice and the Spring Equinox [Yule & Ostara]. “The year is turning toward light and abundance,” we are told, “yet the reality of Winter is still vivid.” [Celebrating the Seasons of Life, O’Gaea, 207] Death and dearth give way to life and growth, but not without a struggle.

Candles are made. Labyrinths are walked. Seedlings are started in protected places.

“Stay seated in your soul,”
 says activist poet Elizabeth Page Roberts
*“Stay seated in your soul,
 remember the sun is there,
 truth and time are there.
 Stay seated in your soul.”*

It is said that Groundhog Day was inspired by an old Scottish couplet:

*“If Candlemas Day is bright and clear
 There’ll be two winters in the year.”*

One old belief is that hibernating animals – the badger in England, the groundhog (or woodchuck) here in North America – wake up on Candlemas Day and come out to see if it is still winter. If it’s sunny they see their shadows, are frightened, and return to their burrows for another 40 days of winter. If it’s cloudy, well, that’s it – winter is over.

Groundhog Day is also a favorite movie of mine. In it Bill Murray plays Phil Connors, a totally self-centered TV weatherman. He’s going to cover the annual Groundhog Day event in Punxsutawney, and he is alternately bored and cynically snide about the assignment. Phil finds himself repeating the same day over and over again. After he re-examines his life and priorities, he is finally able to break himself out of this cycle.

In researching groundhogs I discovered that, since Warton Willie’s death, Gary the Groundhog has taken the reins in Kleinburg, Ontario. In Nova Scotia there’s Shubenacadie Sam; Brandon Bob in Manitoba; and “The Prairie Prognosticator” Balzac Billy in Balzac, Alberta.

We in the northland know there’s probably another eight or ten or twelve weeks of cold and snow left, no matter what a furry rodent may predict.

Not only furry critters hibernate. Frogs, toads, salamanders and snakes also bury themselves below the dirt. Fish are immobilized in frozen lakes.

And then there's us – humans – we may also go through a hibernation of sorts. “Faced with horrible adversity or nameless anxiety” [Ackerman, 90] some of us go into a type of hibernation, we remove ourselves into a low-energy state, sleep too much, shut down. We “sink under the weight” of it all. We become disheartened, demoralized, despondent, [maybe even] devastated.” [Ackerman, 122]

Seasonal Affective Disorder

Seasonal Affective Disorder is a relatively newly-recognized type of despondency. If you're like most people with SAD, you begin to feel symptoms beginning in the late fall. Symptoms like a loss of energy, a heavy “leadened” feeling in your arms or legs, oversleeping, loss of interest in activities you usually enjoy, changes in appetite and weight gain, difficulty concentrating.

Once the season changes – from winter to spring or, for some folks, from summer to fall – you feel like your old self again.

Scientists suggest that this mini-hibernation of the body and spirit may be a part of our evolutionary history. For millennia we worked and were active during daylight hours. When the days turned dark, we turned inward, tended the home fires, slept more. Winter was a quieter, less active time.

The relatively recent introduction of electricity has allowed us to be active during many more hours of the day. And our biological clocks become confused, tell our bodies to slow down as the days darken.

Research here in Ontario suggests that between 2% and 3% of the general population may have SAD. Another 15% have a less severe experience described as the “winter blues.”

Other research shows that neurotransmitters, chemical messengers in the brain that help regulate sleep, mood, and appetite, may be disturbed in SAD.

SAD is more common in northern countries, where the winter day is shorter. Shift workers and urban dwellers who experience reduced levels of exposure to daylight are also more prone to SAD.

http://www.cmha.ca/bins/content_page.asp?cid=3-86-93

Depression

While Seasonal Affective Disorder is, just as its name states, seasonal, depression – at any intensity – can occur any time of the year.

In any given year, about seven percent - between 13 million and 14 million people - will experience a depressive disorder in Canada.

Of those who develop depression/anxiety, only about 20 percent will receive adequate treatment.

About 16 percent of adults will experience depression/anxiety at some point in their life. (that's eight [out of 50] to ten [out of 60] people in this room)

Approximately 8% of adults will experience major depression at some time in their lives. (that's four or five people here)

http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/publicat/miic-mmacc/chap_2-eng.php; accessed 26 February 2012.

Depression and anxiety continue to be Canada's fastest-rising diagnosis.

Most people with depression or anxiety report that (about 97 percent) their work, home life and relationships suffer as a result.

54% of people believe depression is a personal weakness.

http://www.bayridgetreatmentcenter.com/facts_statistics.html; accessed 26 January 26, 2012.

Suicide

Depression may be so deep, so long-lasting, that the pain feels too much to bear.

The suicide rate for Canadians (as measured by the WHO) is 15 per 100,000 people. The suicide rate is even higher among specific groups. For example, the suicide rate for Inuit peoples living in Northern Canada is between 60 and 75 suicides per 100,000 people, significantly higher than the general population.²

http://www.ontario.cmha.ca/fact_sheets.asp?cID=3965; accessed 27 January 2012.

In Canada, among youth ages 10 to 24, suicide is the second highest cause of death. Each year, on average, almost 300 (294) youths die from suicide. Many more attempt suicide. Aboriginal teens and gay and lesbian teens may be at particularly high risk, depending on the community they live in and their own self esteem.

http://www.canadiancrc.com/Youth_Suicide_in_Canada.aspx

Over the past 30 years, the suicide rate among 15- to 19-year-olds has increased nearly fivefold for males and threefold for females. Much of this increase is likely due to improved accuracy in reporting suicide as a cause of death, against a backdrop of more openness and less social and religious stigma.

http://www.statcan.gc.ca/kits-trousses/cyb-adc1999/health-sante/edu04_0078b-eng.htm

Where Is the Light?

Where is the light?

In her book *When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times*, author Pema Chodron, an American Buddhist nun, talks about our attempts to escape pain and suffering. Her advice to us is counterintuitive: move toward the painful situation with friendliness and curiosity.

Chodron writes: “To stay with that shakiness – to stay with a broken heart, with a rumbling stomach, with the feeling of hopelessness and wanting to get revenge – that is the path of true awakening. Sticking with that uncertainty, getting the knack of relaxing in the midst of chaos, learning not to panic – this is the spiritual path. Getting the knack of catching ourselves, of gently and compassionately catching ourselves, is the path of the warrior.” [10]

“Maybe the most important teaching is to lighten up and relax. It’s such a huge help in working with our crazy mixed-up minds to remember that what we’re doing is unlocking a softness that is in us and letting it spread. We’re letting it blur the sharp corners of self-criticism and complaint.” [140]

Another Buddhist, Joanna Macy, writes of depression on a macro scale: the depressing state of the world.

“[The] future seems ever more fragile. With wars igniting around the globe, the forests falling, the hungry and homeless on our streets, the poisons in our food, water, air, and breast milk, and the extinction of whole species and cultures, it grows harder to take hope in our common journey. We are tempted to shut down, narrowing our sights to our own and our family’s short-term survival. In the face of all the bad news, the challenge of creating a sustainable civilization can seem absurdly unrealistic.” [*Coming Back to Life: Practices to Reconnect Our Lives, Our World*, 6]

Macy tells us that, just as we need to own our personal pain, we need to acknowledge “the shadowed darkness of this era. We must walk through the gates of grief.” She urges us to realize both our personal and our social despair. And share those realizations with others – in therapy, support groups, workshops, coalitions, churches. Only then can we discover a new joy, as we become aware of the deep core of our compassion at our center. Our souls awake to our part in the Great Web of Being, the fact that we are wondrously and inextricably interconnected. We hold the world in our hearts and hands. We have “gifts for the healing of our world.” We are held by Loving Kindness.

Nature writer Diane Ackerman, in her book *A Slender Thread: Rediscovering Hope at the Heart of Crisis*, talks about “the small demonology of our age”[87] – anxiety, dread, panic, depression, and all the trials, uncertainties and conflicts of our lives. Crisis, she insists, “is a normal part of human life and cannot be wholly erased or relieved. In evolutionary terms, it provides turning points, it allows necessary change.” Though “crises may be normal, and even liberating” they are also “painful and frightening.” [12]

If we work at it, if we are lucky, even in the worst crisis, even in our darkest moments, we are held to Life by a slender thread. We are held to Life, by a tenacious thread.

So, winter can be exhilarating for some of us – skiing, skating, hockey, sledding, snowshoeing, ice fishing, sled dog racing and more.

For others of us, it is a bit too cold, a bit too gray, a bit too long.

Or maybe it is way too cold, way too gray, and way too long – and we turn cold and gray and long-faced with it.

And many of us face, or will face, depression to some extent.

In depression “one clings to life by... a humble knot.

In this sometimes dark season, where is the light?

For Seasonal Affective Disorder the light may be quite literal. A very bright fluorescent light mimics the light from the sun, and provides some relief.

Where is the light?

Talk to someone.

Make a list of the activities that bring you back to life. Do at least one of these activities a day. Find one small lifebelt, one slender thread – a bird in a tree, a favorite poem or song or movie, an old photograph, a soak in the tub.

Walk. Walk with a partner if you can, a dog if you have one.

Own your feelings. Reach out to others.

Know that even in your darkest moments there is a bit of light, a wisp of hope, within you.

As an Ojibway song says: “

Sometimes I go about pitying myself,
and all the time

I am being carried on great winds across the sky. [Ackerman, 63]

Diane Ackerman concludes: “Although I regret our bloodthirsty nature, I’m nevertheless a great fan of humankind. What seems astonishing to me is that, despite our ferocious heritage, we so often act so well – as virtuosos of kindness, tenderness, peacefulness, generosity, cooperation, and spirituality.... It’s remarkable how we restrain and triumph over the dark side of our genes. We are resplendent beasts.... We carry our instincts on our backs in invisible knapsacks filled with ancient needs and cravings, we struggle under the weight, often start to sink and thrash our way back to the surface, and yet somehow we keep our heads above water, and even celebrate the world’s beauty, even sing songs of praise and forgiveness, even help our kin and absolute strangers cross, too, as we swim frantically toward the far shore. We act nobly, even when to do so may fatigue or endanger us. It doesn’t make sense that we should, but it is our nature.” [61]

Where is the light?

When it's late [January], dark and cold - **Where is the light?**

When old man [winter] is bending low - **Where is the light?**

When the sun runs off to bed too soon - **Where is the light?**

And there's nothing but a skinny moon - **Where is the light?**

It's in my skin and in my bones

In my heart and in my soul

That light of life, so bright and golden

Like a summer day

When the sun goes missing in the sky

It is rising in my eyes

Chasing all that winter gloom away

ARTIST: Peter Mayer

So, may we

Light a candle of

Hope where despair keeps watch,

Courage for fears ever present,

Light a candle of

Peace for tempest-tossed days,

Grace to ease heavy burdens,

Light a candle of

Love to inspire all your living,

Light a candle that will burn all the year long.

[adapted from Howard Thurman]

Readings:

“A Friend Visiting” by Parker Palmer

Twice in my life I have experienced deep depression. Both times various friends tried to rescue me with well-intended encouragement and advice...

In the midst of my depression I had a friend who took a different tack. Every afternoon at around four o'clock he came to me, sat me in a chair, removed my shoes, and massaged my feet. He hardly said a word, but he was there, he was with me. He was a lifeline for me, a link to the human community and thus to my own humanity. He had no need to “fix” me. He knew the meaning of compassion.

“Groundhog Day” by Lynn Ungar in *Blessing the Bread*

Celebrate this unlikely oracle,
 this ball of fat and fur,
 whom we so mysteriously endow
 with the power to predict spring.
 Let's hear it for the improbable heroes who,
 frightened at their own shadows,
 nonetheless unwittingly work miracles.
 Why shouldn't we believe
 this peculiar rodent holds power
 over sun and seasons in his stubby paw?
 Who says that God is all grandeur and glory?

Unnoticed in the earth, worms
 are busily, brainlessly, tilling the soil.
 Field mice, all unthinking, have scattered
 seeds that will take root and grow.
 Grape hyacinths, against all reason,
 have been holding up green shoots
 beneath the snow.
 How do you think that spring arrives?
 There is nothing quieter, nothing
 more secret, miraculous, mundane.
 Do you want to play your part
 in bringing it to birth? Nothing simpler.
 Find a spot not too far from the ground
 and wait.