

Soul Matters 2014-15
October

*What Does It Mean To Be
a People of Renewal?*



*“Each night, when I go to sleep, I die. And the next
morning, when I wake up, I am reborn.”*
— *Mahatma Gandhi*

What Does It Mean To Be a People of Renewal?

We talk a lot in UU circles about becoming something new. We are a "progressive religion." We have faith that the arc of the universe bends towards justice and a new day that better for all of us. We believe in unfolding and evolving truth.

But sometimes the new requires a return. Sometimes renewal requires remembering and reconnecting with pieces and parts of ourselves long forgotten.

This too is a part of our spiritual tradition. As Unitarian Universalists, we see the human struggle not as a fight against temptations that lead to impurity, but rather as a journey through cultural challenges that often leave us disconnected--disconnected from our deepest selves, life's gifts and needs greater than our own. From this perspective, spiritual renewal is first and foremost about reconnection. Mending what has been broken. Retrieving what has been lost. Going back to gather again what is so easily left behind in the flurry of our dizzying days.

To be a people of renewal is to ask not simply, "How do I refresh?" but also "How do I return?" The challenge in life is not just about moving forward, but moving forward without losing touch with all we hold dear.

So hold on friends. And help each other do the same. Take the time this month to look back and reconnect, because, yes, sometimes the new does require a return.

Our Spiritual Exercises:

Option A:

Name What Needs to Return

Renewal often comes through return. We get 25 steps down the road not realizing we had left precious pieces behind. What's missing when you look around? What have you let fall from your life? And how can you help it return? Fun? Forgiveness? Quiet? Time for yourself? That weekly night at the movies? A Saturday walk in the woods? Ambition? Art?

Your assignment: Name something precious that you want to return to your life. Spend the month making it happen.

Option B:

Turn Away

“In order to understand the world, one has to turn away from it on occasion.”

— Albert Camus

This assignment asks us to take Camus' words seriously. Every religious tradition reminds us that renewal sometimes requires removing ourselves from the normal ways of the world. Often we have to remove something from our life to make room for renewal to return. Remove speed and the rat race from your life by trying out the practice of Sabbath. Remove distraction and disconnection from your family by making a rule that everyone needs to put the cell phones on the shelf from dinner until the end of the night. Remove your evening practice of a couple glasses of wine and find another way to relax. Free yourself from the stereotypes about "senior citizens" and dye your hair purple or parachute out of a plane. Kick the habit of consumerism by cutting your clothes budget for a month or two and wearing the same outfit for one week at a time. (It can be done: <http://befriendinggreen.wordpress.com/2014/02/13/same-dress-different-day/>)

You get the idea. This culture of ours offers many gifts, but it can also lead us astray and leave us lost. Take this month to renew yourself and find your way back home by finding a way to turn away.

Option C: **Turn It Into Something New**

It's one of the most important insights along the spiritual path: Renewing the world is often the best path to renewing oneself. Whether it is working for justice or finding a way to bring a bit more beauty to our little neck of the woods, fixing the world regularly fixes us. Use this month to explore the spiritual truth more deeply. Here are some stories about how others did it. May they inspire you to find your way:

- Renewal Stories - 4 : <http://www.tetley.ca/en/video/tetley-renewal-stories>
- The Mosaic Man: <http://www.karmatube.org/videos.php?id=4369>
- How I Brought a River, and My City, Back to Life:
http://www.ted.com/talks/aziza_chaouni_how_i_brought_a_river_and_my_city_back_to_life
- Washed Ashore Project <http://www.karmatube.org/videos.php?id=4168>

Option D: **Return to a Place of Renewal**

“There is nothing like returning to a place that remains unchanged to find the ways in which you yourself have altered.” — Nelson Mandela

This assignment asks us to take Mandela’s words seriously. Two ways to go about this:

1. Return to a place or time in your past by physically going there or pulling out the scrapbook. Often it helps to bring someone along on the journey. Sometimes they can see things we can't.
2. Return to a place or time that once brought you renewal. That path along the river or view out over the city which helped you feel that life had possibility again after the loss of your job. Dig out that picture of the dog you had as a kid. The one who slept with you and comforted you while your parents were going through their divorce. Even though it may make you feel silly or sentimental, pull out that old wedding dress, spread it out on the bed or dare to put it on. Call up that old friend from college. The one who was there through so much change and growing up.

Going back doesn't always mean going backwards. It often can mean gaining back something we need now. Maybe that's exactly the journey you have to make this month.

Your Question:

*As always, don't treat these questions like "homework." You do not need to engage every single one. Instead, simply find **the one** that "hooks" you most and let it lead you where you need to go. And then come to your Soul Matters meeting prepared to share that journey with your group.*

1. When was the last time laughter took hold of you and left you renewed?
2. There are those who say renewing the world is the best path to renewing oneself. Are your attempts to renew the world still renewing you?
3. During fall, the trees turn their energy away from reaching out to the sun. Instead, they let go of their leaves and seek renewal in the dark soil where their roots live? Does this need to be a season of disconnecting, darkness and turning in for you as well?
4. Do you feel the call of renewal coming most strongly from your body or your spirit? Or could it be that your spirit is expressing its hunger through your body? How has your body grown tired or pained? What is that tiredness or pain trying to say?
5. Do you live your life "in the service of renewal?" Do you even have a concept of what that means? Is something inside you wanting to figure that out?
6. Where has trust been broken in your life? And is it time for that trust to finally be renewed?
7. Are you holding on too tightly to grief? Is it possible that your holding onto grief is getting in the way of renewal? Is it possible to now finally loosen your grip?
8. Is your avoidance of grief getting in the way of renewal?
9. Out of your hunger for renewal, are you tempted to run away?
10. Are you looking for things just to be fun again? Is it joy that has somehow fallen away?
11. Do you even know what's missing?
12. What scares you about renewal? What "cost" of changing or returning seems just too high?
13. Are your problems with "religion" getting in the way of your spiritual renewal? Has your primary spiritual practice become rebelling against the religion of your past? What's your balance between renewing and carving out your own spiritual path versus rebelling against your old one?
14. Do you hunger to return to what was? Is that good? Or bad?
15. Do you wake in the morning feeling renewed? Or is it just "another damn day"? If so, what do you need to do about that?
16. There are those who say renewal requires repentance. Are you sure they are entirely wrong?
17. Has Grace/God/Life ever just come out of the blue and dumped spiritual renewal in your lap? Is it trying to do that right now? Do you notice?

Recommended Resources:

As always, this is not required reading. We will not analyze or dissect these pieces in our group. They are simply meant to get your thinking started, and maybe to open you to new ways of thinking about what it means to “be a people of renewal.”

First Thoughts:

renewal n.

1. the act of extending the period of time when something is effective or valid, the act of renewing something
2. the state of being made new, fresh, or strong again, the state of being renewed

synonyms: Rebirth, regeneration, rejuvenation, restoration, resumption, revitalization, revival, awakening, recommencement, refilling, reformation, replenishment, resurrection, recharging, reopening

Wise Words:

“In order to understand the world, one has to turn away from it on occasion.”
— Albert Camus

“It is always quietly thrilling to find yourself looking at a world you know well but have never seen from such an angle before.” – Bill Bryson

“If you want a new tomorrow, then make new choices today.”
– Tim Fargo

“There is nothing like returning to a place that remains unchanged to find the ways in which you yourself have altered.”
– Nelson Mandela

“We must be willing to get rid of the life we planned, so as to have the life that is waiting for us. The old skin has to be shed before the new one can come.”

– Joseph Campbell

“Renewal is something I do often with library books. With books I buy an extension of time.

--Soul Matters Member

I have no template for these days, which I call 'sabbath days.' I stay home. If the weather is good, I open doors and windows, let the fresh air and sunshine in or the moist air of rain. I nap, eat whatever is in the refrigerator, read, listen to music, watch the birds, journal. I light candles in the dark and pray. I fold laundry and move things around on the walls. I have a mantra that says "what you practice is what you have" and so all day long, I practice being present in the moment. When the past rises up I welcome it, embrace then bid it adieu. When future possibilities tempt me into a reverie, I pull myself back from the equivalent of mental cotton candy. I luxuriate in the freedom of being untethered.

----Soul Matters Member

“Like a welcome summer rain, humor may suddenly cleanse and cool the earth, the air and you.”

- Langston Hughes

“Every single cell in the human body replaces itself over a period of seven years. That means there's not even the smallest part of you now that was part of you seven years ago.”

—Steven Hall, *The Raw Shark Texts*

“The care of the Earth is our most ancient and most worthy, and after all our most pleasing responsibility. To cherish what remains of it and to foster its renewal is our only hope.”

— Wendell Berry

“To own a bit of ground, to scratch it with a hoe, to plant seeds, and watch the renewal of life - this is the commonest delight of the race, the most satisfactory thing one can do.”

— Charles Dudley Warner

“The thing is to love life, to love it even when you have no stomach for it, and everything you've held dear crumbles like burnt paper in your hands, your throat filled with the silt of it... Then you hold life like a face between your palms, a plain face, no charming smile, no violet eyes, and you say, yes, I will take you, I will love you again.”

-- Ellen Bass

Camas Lilies

Consider the lilies of the field,
the blue banks of camas opening
into acres of sky along the road.
Would the longing to lie down
and be washed by that beauty
abate if you knew their usefulness,
how the natives ground their bulbs
for flour, how the settlers' hogs
uprooted them, grunting in gleeful
oblivion as the flowers fell?

And you—what of your rushed
and useful life? Imagine setting it all
down—

papers, plans, appointments,
everything—

leaving only a note: “Gone
to the fields to be lovely. Be back
when I'm through with blooming.”
Even now, unneeded and uneaten,
the camas lilies gaze out above the grass
from their tender blue eyes.
Even in sleep your life will shine.
Make no mistake. Of course
your work will always matter.
Yet Solomon in all his glory
was not arrayed like one of these.
-- Lynn Ungar

XI

The need comes on me now
to speak across the years
to those who finally will live here
after the present ruin, in the absence
of most of my kind who by now
are dead, or have given their minds
to machines and become strange,
"over-qualified" for the hard
handwork that must be done
to remake, so far as humans
can remake, all that humans
have unmade. To you, whoever
you may be, I say: Come,
meaning to stay. Come,
willing to learn what this place,
like no other, will ask of you
and your children, if you mean
to stay. "This land responds
to good treatment," I heard
my father say time and again
in his passion to renew, to make
whole, what ill use had broken.
And so to you, whose lives
taken from the life of this place
I cannot foretell, I say:
Come, and treat it well.
--Wendell Berry

Videos & Online:

Tetley Renewal Stories - 4 videos about people who are focused on renewal in their community and making a positive change in the lives of others.

<http://www.tetley.ca/en/video/tetley-renewal-stories>

How I Brought a River, and My City, Back to Life, Aziza Chaouni

http://www.ted.com/talks/aziza_chaouni_how_i_brought_a_river_and_my_city_back_to_life

The Mosaic

<http://www.karmatube.org/videos.php?id=4369>

"I am homeless for 25 years, at the mercy of my talent," says Jim Power. Jim found a creative outlet in creating hand-crafted mosaic artwork that he started posting on lampposts in Lower Manhattan's Eastside. The stories in Jim's mosaics provided identity and renewal for people in the Eastside. When the city threatened to destroy his work, the community rallied around Jim to protect the "mosaic trail."

Renewal - A Reborn Colorado River Once Again Finds Her Path to the Sea

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TODV7FW746s>

Beware fellow plutocrats, the pitchforks are coming, Nick Hanauer

http://www.ted.com/talks/nick_hanauer_beware_fellow_plutocrats_the_pitchforks_are_coming
Ideas on renewing our economy.

This Invention Will Change the World

<http://trendinghot.net/invention-will-change-world-just-watch/> Renewing our earth home.

Washed Ashore Project

<http://www.karmatube.org/videos.php?id=4168>

Articles:

Humor as Tool in Non-Violent Conflict Resolution

<http://www.dailygood.org/story/769/humor-as-a-tool-in-conflict-resolution-michael-nagler-and-karen-ridd/> How we can renew tense situations with laughter that leads to peace.

A Quiet Cheer for Solitude

http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/10/opinion/bruni-a-quiet-cheer-for-solitude.html?_r=0

A reflection on our leaders and how they do not set the example for renewal.

Play, Spirit, and Character

<http://www.onbeing.org/program/play-spirit-and-character/143>

Many interpret play as a break from learning, but it's actually where learning can take place.

20 Frustrations in Life You Need to Let Go Of

<http://www.lifehack.org/articles/lifestyle/20-frustrations-life-you-need-let.html>

Renew your body and mind by letting go of what's holding you back.

Books:

Renewal: A Little Book of Courage and Hope by Eknath Easwaran

The Sabbath by Abraham Joshua Heschel.

Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal, and Delight in Our Busy Lives by Wayne Muller

Quiet by Susan Cain. For those of us who renew through quiet and retreat.

Saying Goodbye: How Families Can Find Renewal Through Loss by Barbara Okun and Joseph Nowinski

The Circle of Simplicity: Return to the Good Life by Cecile Andrews

A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life by Parker J. Palmer

Movies:

Renewal, 2008: This documentary captures the vitality and diversity of today's religious-environmental activists.

Groundhog Day, 1993: A selfish weatherman realizes that if he only has one day to live, he needs to live it to its fullest.

Away We Go, 2009: A couple renews by starting over and looking for a new place to call home.

Precious, 2009: A young woman seeks renewal from an abusive life to an inspiring life.

Up, 2009: An animated film about the renewal of a dream and the possibility of friendship across the generations.

Invictus, 2009: After years of apartheid and racism, Nelson Mandela emerges from prison seeking renewal for his country. The population of South Africa struggles in large and small ways with forgiveness.

SOUL MATTERS FACEBOOK PAGE

Join our Soul Matters Facebook group at: <http://www.facebook.com/groups/soulmatters/>

This is a great way to connect the dozens of Soul Matters participants and groups from congregations around the country. The goal is to inspire each other by sharing material related to the monthly themes (quotes, movies, books, personal experiences related to the monthly exercises).

So please sign up and share a post about where Soul Matters led you this month!

SOUL MATTERS PINTEREST PAGE

Join our Soul Matters Pinterest boards at: <http://www.pinterest.com/soulmatters2014/>

Pins and Pics for each of our monthly themes. Check them out and explore our themes in a more visual way!

**Next Month's Theme:
Grace**