



High Country Unitarian Universalist Fellowship

Summit County, Colorado

Celebrating life in community
in the beautiful mountains of Colorado!

July 23, 2017
Monthly Touchstones Theme
The Circle of Life

Sunday Services, 4:00 pm weekly
Fellowship Hall
Lord of the Mountains
Lutheran Church
56 Highway 6, Dillon, CO 80435
(Services are not held in the
months of October and May)

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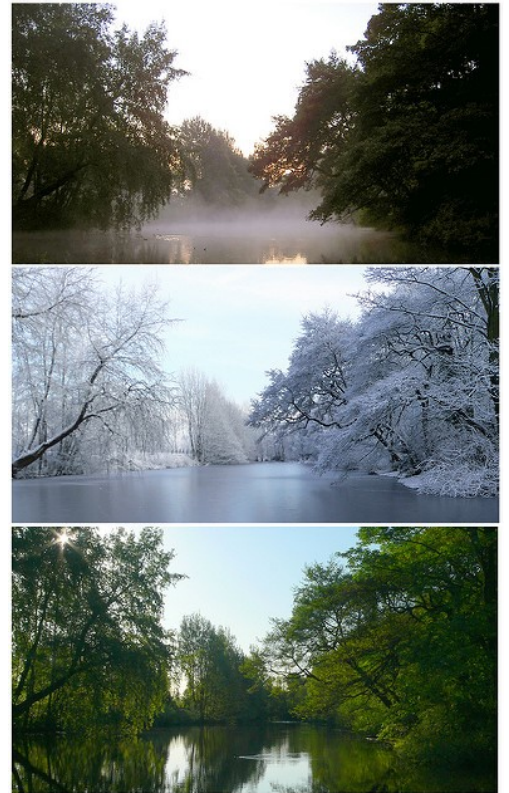
Tending the Circle of Life

Rev. Kirk Loadman-Copeland

Life seems to be linear as we move through time. We are born and add one year after another in our individual chain of being. Although, at some point our life will end, time will continue, and so we assume a never-ending straight line. But, in truth, our lives are lived in cycles of circles. Each morning we wake and begin again. As one day circles into the next, we are not engaged in the single, daily and seemingly meaningless task of Sisyphus rolling a boulder up a hill. Rather, we are held in a web of habits and rituals and relationships and tasks through which we make meaning. One of our ongoing tasks is to tend to the circle of life.

Seasons of the Self

Our days give way to seasons that arrive with anticipation or some dread depending on where they fall on our continuum from love to hate, or at least dislike. Some of us are spring people, or winter, or summer, or autumn people. Each season this far north is unique whether by virtue of aspen gold and honking geese or sweet corn and watermelon and other unique markers including holidays and holy days. In a way, all of our summer's eventually become one summer that has been crammed with our living.



The same is true of the other seasons, as well as the "seasons of the self" as Unitarian Universalist minister Max Coots called them, writing, "I sometimes sense some stronger seasons in myself, where time is rearranged as something clocks could never tell."

The Beginning is not the Beginning

As we consider the circle of life, it is important to remember that the beginning is not the beginning and the end is not the end. Our life does not work that way. We are born into the ongoing

Our Mission: It is the purpose of the High Country Unitarian Universalist Fellowship [HCUUF] to be a community filled with love, beauty, and compassion. We are committed to freedom of opinion, expression, and spirituality. We seek to be of service to each other, our families, our larger community, and our natural environment.

stream of life. A river of life flows through us, and we flow through that river.



The beginning is not the beginning. We are born into the middle of a story, into the ongoing cycle of life. Beloved parents, Beloved grandparents. Beloveds—flowing backward in time for generations. Even with our birth, there is memory of loss by those who love us. They bring forward with them all of that and it becomes part of our story, even if we do not realize it. It is in this way that so much that came before is alive in us. And all of this and so much more will become our legacy when the end that is not the end comes.

Our life is never our life alone. We share it with the beloveds: parents and grandparents, brothers and sisters, friends and lovers, partners with whom we share our life, our children and grandchildren, valued friends, coworkers and neighbors and others who are all part of the unfolding of our story in time.

The beginning is not the beginning. Rather it is a time of momentary pause when we were welcomed into the world, invited into the story to create our part with no idea of what part we would play over a lifetime of living and loving and laughing and losing.

The Poignancy of Loss

Losing. In the magnificence of life, there is loss. Loved ones now gone from our sight, but not gone. The end is not the end. They live in our heart. We tell their stories. We take courage from their example. They remain a part of the circle.

But for a moment, let us recall and reflect on our story. The love we shared. The beauty that we created. The good

works that we pursued. A story filled with so many beloveds. Photographs and memories.

A life can hold so much, and what it is and what it holds continues beyond the end that is not the end. How could this not be true? For the beloveds will continue to love us. Their tears will bless us. When they tell stories about us, they will smile and laugh. So we are not gone. The essence with which we were born continues, held now in other vessels that we may call mother and father, husband and wife, sister and brother, aunt and uncle, son and daughter, grandson and granddaughter, friend and friend, in-laws, and even some out-laws.



The beginning is not the beginning and the end is not the end. And this brings comfort beyond all knowing and being—because we loved and were loved.

Mark the Time

We tend the circle of life, in part, through love. We tend it as well by attending to important markers along the way. Unitarian Universalist minister Max Coots wrote, “When love is felt ...; when holidays and holy days and such times come; when anniversaries arrive by calendar or consciousness; when seasons come — as seasons do — old and known, but somehow new; when lives are born or people die; when something



sacred is sensed in soil or sky; mark the time. Respond with thought or prayer or smile or grief. Let nothing living slip between the fingers of your mind, for all of these are holy things we will not, cannot, find again.”

Year-in and year-out, Unitarian Universalist congregations faithfully tend the circle of life through celebrations, rituals, rites of passage, and more. As High Country approaches its 20th anniversary, there will be time to remember founders, to recount your history, and to make that anniversary part of the circle of life of your fellowship. As Max Coots noted, it is important to mark the time.

Tradition

While Unitarian Universalists are not traditionalists, it is charming how often a congregation will launch something new with the words “the first annual _____ (blank).” The event has not even been held and yet we assume its permanence and longevity. Perhaps we value tradition more than we admit.

Tradition is important, whether it is the tradition of a family or a fellowship. In commenting on the flow of generations, the French writer Antoine de St. Exupéry wrote, “...one hands down and another takes up the heritage of mind and heart, laughter and tears, musings and deeds.” He continues, “Love, like a carefully loaded ship, crosses the gulf between the generations” and then he concludes, let us “not neglect the ceremonies of our passage.”

Think about your own life. What traditions were handed down to you, and what traditions have you handed down? Some of these traditions are like down comforters in which we wrap ourselves. They give meaning to our lives, meaning that is bone-deep, even if we have no words to say what they mean. Without these we lose, wrote St. Exupéry, “all of us that is wordless and full of wonder.”

At Christmas, I tend the circle of life with a “cutie,” which is the brand name for a mandarin orange. Also known as a Clementine orange, they are grown in the San Joaquin Valley in California.



One Cutie goes in the toe of each Christmas stocking hung on Christmas Eve. While both of our daughters like oranges, the tradition is made special by my faithful keeping. I grew up with an orange in my Christmas stocking, as my mother did before me. For her, the tradition was poignant. Growing up during the Depression, an orange was a luxury that her family could barely afford, and, therefore, it was especially delicious.

I learned as an adult that the symbolism of the orange went back to a story about St. Nicolas, also known as Nikolaos of Myra, in the 4th century when, it is said, he gave three small sacks of gold to a poor family so that they would have a dowry for each one of their three daughters. St. Nicolas threw the sacks of gold into the house through an open window. One sack of gold landed in a stocking that had been hung by the fireplace to dry. I have not told my daughters about either story. In a sense, there is no need to. The mandarin orange in the toe of their stockings is symbol enough. Even if they do not carry on the tradition, they will never be able to hang a Christmas stocking without remembering the orange or remembering me.

Tender Mercies

We tend the circle of life daily in countless ways. Every encounter offers us opportunities to do so: a handshake or warm embrace in greeting, a smile at a passerby, the civility of please and thank you, calling a friend or loved to mind, or just calling them to connect, the thank you note, the sympathy card,

the bouquet of flowers, time made for conversation, the visit to the nursing home or hospital, volunteer work, and random kindness and senseless acts of beauty, and so much more. All of these are tender mercies, as we seek to bless and uphold life.

The Birthday Party

The poignancy of the circle of life is often revealed by its bookends, by birth and death. Unitarian Universalist minister Victoria Safford tells a story from the time when she was a young mother. She writes, "One afternoon ...[a long] time ago I brought my little baby out to visit a very, very old neighbor who was dying that year, quietly and gracefully, in her gracious home. We were having a little birthday party for her, with sherry and cake and a few friends gathered round her bed. To free a hand to cut the cake, I put my baby down right on the bed, right up on the pillow—and there was a sudden hush in the room, for we were caught off guard, beholding.

"It was a startling sight. There in the late afternoon light were two people side by side, two human merely beings. Neither one could walk, neither one could speak, not in a language you could understand, both utterly dependent on the rest of us bustling around, masquerading as immortals.

"There they were: a plump one, apple-cheeked, a cherry tomato of a babe, smiling; and a silver-thin one, hollow-eyed, translucent, shining, smiling. We revelers were hushed because we clearly saw that these were dancers on the very edge of things. These two were closer to the threshold, the edge of the great mystery, than any of us had been for a long time or would be for a while. Living, breathing, smiling they were, but each with one foot and who knows how much consciousness firmly planted on the other side, what-

ever that is, wherever that is, the starry darkness from whence we come and whither we will go, in time. Fresh from birth, nigh unto death, bright-eyed, they were bookends there, mirrors of each other. Radiant."

A simple birthday party to tend the circle of life. For the elder, perhaps a ritual celebrated more than 80 times, a ritual that became more poignant with each passing year because it held all the celebrations that had come before. For the babe, for whom everything was new, the end of the first year was still to come, and therefore the first birthday party to launch all of the cele-

brations that would follow. The power and beauty of the circle of life was illuminated for everyone to see, which is why Safford concluded: "Radiant."



Take Your Place in the Circle of Life

Today children may learn about the circle of life by watching the Disney movie, *The Lion King*, where Mufasa tells Simba, "You must take your place in the Circle of Life," or by listening to Elton John's song, *Circle of Life*.

My own introduction to this idea was Buffy St. Marie's 1967 recording of Joni Mitchell's song, *The Circle Game*. This was a significant time of transition for me as I was moving from high school to college. In the chorus, Mitchell wrote,

*"And the seasons they go round and round
And the painted ponies go up and down
We're captive on the carousel of time
We can't return we can only look behind*



*From where we came
And go round and round and round
In the circle game."*

I have often thought that however long my life might be, the gift of being a part of the circle of life has been and is so amazing in itself that the length of life is secondary to all of the beauty to behold in each moment.

I agree with Victoria Safford:
Radiant. The task before us is to complete our life before death ends it. Given this, let us be good stewards as we tend the circle of life, as we care for ourselves, for others, and for life itself.

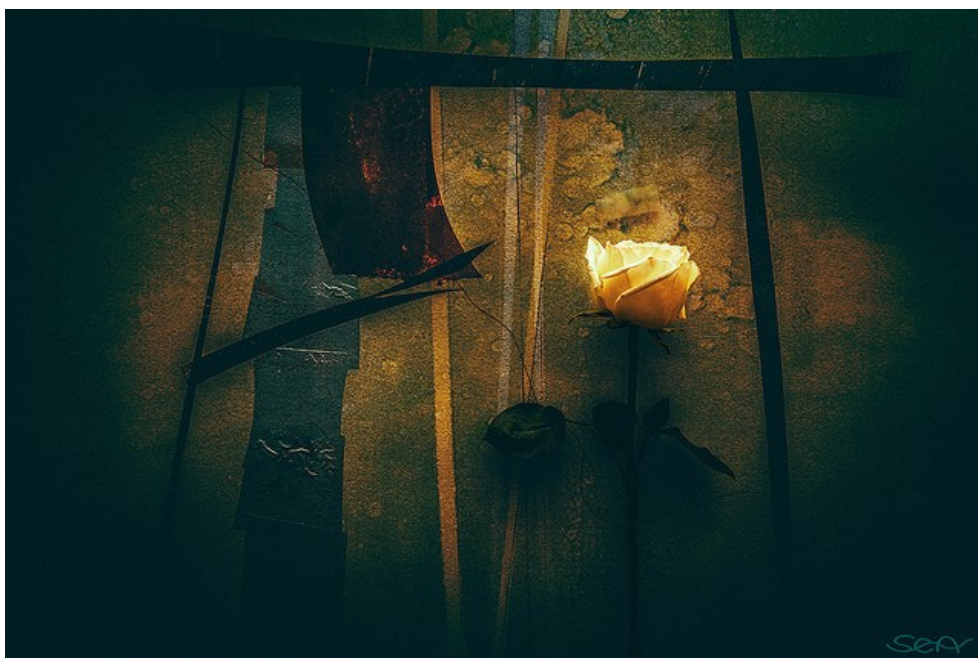
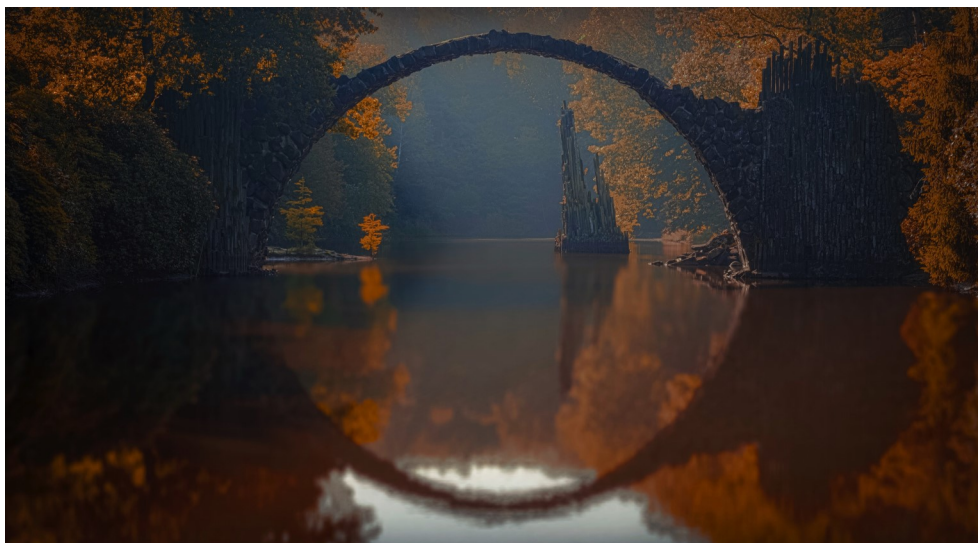


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