



# Unitarian Universalist Congregation of York

“High Summer: The Rest and the Harvest”

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It is a hot July night in 1981, and I am laying on my back on the forest floor. My clothes are damp, there is only a small corner of tarp under my head, and all around me I can hear the noises of the woods, most of which are completely mysterious to my suburban ears.

In 1981 I was nine years old. Never have I been more keenly aware, sleeping outside with other girls at summer camp, having been caught without our gear on the far side of the lake after thunderstorms tossed our tiny canoes - never before have I felt so very very small. Perhaps if I had my bedroll...but it was with my cabin's gear on the other side of the lake. Perhaps if I had a good friend with me...but it was my first year as a camper, at a camp that had been a part of my family's history since the 1950s, and I had a lot of expectations but not any friends yet. When I was nine I was pretty shy. All that family reputation was a lot to carry. Another reason to feel tiny in the face of it all.

Tiny and cold and pitiful: that's how I felt. Also more than a little scared. But after a while, I heard soft voices from the direction of our campfire, which our counselors had eventually gotten going even after the rainstorm. We had even managed to make s'mores, so clearly not ALL was wrong with the world. Since I wasn't sleeping and had no real hope of doing so anytime soon, I got up and went to the fire. I moved very quietly, and I sat close to the fire, drying and warming myself. After a few minutes, watching the sparks rise from the fire, I looked up.

For the first time in my life I could see the band of the Milky Way. There was all the warmth of the fire beside me, and far above me spun so many stars, so

many suns, so many other worlds as to make me, and my world, and my tarp-corner, feel very small indeed.

After a while, though, staring up at those impossibly distant neighbor-stars, I found myself feeling...at home. Still very small of course...but no longer the only one. Compared to all THAT, we are all pretty small. I was warmer, and dryer, I had s'mores in my tummy, and I had found companionship - in the soft voices, the sparks, and the boundless stars.

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One of my personal high holy days is July 2, not so long ago now. July 2 is the midpoint of the year. During non-leap years, July 2 is the 183rd day of the year - 182 days coming before, 182 days coming after.

Then just a few weeks ago, on August 1, we had the Gaelic festival of Lughnasadh, a celebration of the start of the harvest. It is approximately the midpoint between the summer solstice and the autumnal equinox.

All the work done up to this point in the year (in this hemisphere!) has prepared for this moment, for the coming harvest. The fields that rested in winter, that were turned and sown in spring, that have grown and flourished in summer with tending and care, are now ready for the harvest.

These are human celebrations - and human instruments. We name the time it takes for the earth to describe a single orbit, we learn the seasons and the best time to plow, to plant, to harvest, and to rest. However, we don't learn alone. All the chorus of nature joins in to show us where we are in the year, what work lies ahead, what has gone before. The high echoing sounds of the cicadas, the drone of bees, the feel of the sun and the rumble of afternoon thunder tell us when it is, even in the absence of calendar or clock.

We are part of something larger here - something that can, of course, make us feel quite small. Like looking up at the stars or considering another year

moving around the sun, it can all get a bit overwhelming. What am I, just one me, just one small being, to do? With all the work of that part of the year that has gone before me? With all that is to come?

In Naomi Shihab Nye's poem, we're asked to consider the small gestures and generousities that enrich our lives each and every day - both when we receive them and when we give them. And in our chalice lighting, we heard words from Ursula Goodenough: "We should be able to figure out, with a great deal of work and good will, how to share the Earth with one another and with other creatures, how to restore and preserve its elegance and grace, and how to commit ourselves to love and joy and laughter and hope." From our poet Nye we hear, "This is the world I want to live in. The shared world. Not a single person in that gate - [...] - seemed apprehensive about any other person. [...] This can still happen anywhere. Not everything is lost."

Now that is a lot to hold! Are humans expected to figure out how to share, preserve, and honor the Earth and cultivate love and joy and laughter and hope? AND are we also expected to create a shared world with other humans, who are the ones who messed up the Earth so badly?!

Well, speaking as a representative human, I certainly would like to try.

Looking at the work of this year, and of our own lives, this can seem like a truly daunting task. How am I supposed to go experience the wonder and joy of nature, to honor the Earth and all it provides, when I am stuck smack in the middle of the 24-hour news cycle? When I am being asked daily to panic about new things and to ignore the things I panicked about the day before? How am I supposed to do any of this and all the thousand other things I need to do to care for my own family and myself and my community? What sort of harvest am I supposed to glean from all this!? I'm just one tiny person!

That's an interesting word, tiny. It feels like what it is, small and maybe a bit cute. We do that sometimes, conflate smallness with cuteness. And another

dangerous thing we do is conflate cuteness and smallness with weakness. Small things can be very strong indeed.

We are talking about harvest. Are you, my Unitarian Universalist brethren, ready for the parable of the mustard seed? A parable, after all, is just a teaching tool. And the stated reason that the mustard seed is used to illustrate the power of faith in the Christian scriptures is, it is such a small seed that turns into something so large and magnificent. Depending on where the seed lands when it is scattered, it can grow to full flower or it can be choked on the path.

I'd like to invite us to consider another story, my family in faith - I'd like us to look at the impossible idea of all we are asked to do, to honor the Earth AND each other, to take stock of the work we have done and gather up what we have planted - and instead of thinking about a mustard seed I would like us to think about a dandelion.

Not just any dandelion! Not the ones in your yard where you don't want them, not even the ones that have gone all white and puffy just begging you to blow on them and scatter the seeds to the wind, even though they'll probably wind up in your yard. I would like to ask you to consider the task of the determined dandelion pushing their way up through concrete.

It's a little ironic, me using tales of growing things to illustrate any point whatsoever, considering how hard it is for me to keep a plant alive. But our dandelion is not just any plant. It is a tiny being determined to make its way in the world despite the obstacles placed before it. Maybe our faith is those tiny white seeds borne on the air.

My personal faith is not in an outside force that would guide those airborne seeds, but rather in the potential within the seeds themselves. The potential within every single one of us may be tiny, but it is powerful.

One of humanity's greatest science communicators, Carl Sagan, wrote a single novel among all his other work. That novel, *Contact*, is about many things - humanity's first contact with an alien civilization, the ways we have and lose contact with one another, the hopes and fears we all confront - and in it, he writes, "For small creatures such as we the vastness is bearable only through love."

It's the love in the face of vastness that Naomi Shihab Nye illustrates so joyfully in "Gate A-4." Written in a post-9/11 world by an American poet of Palestinian heritage, there is a vast fear dancing just beyond the edges of this poem. The reflection of the joy of human connection serves to remind us that we are each more than part of the problem - we each carry the potential to be part of the solution. Not in vast ways, perhaps - but a solution for someone, somewhere. We carry answers to questions we haven't even realized others are asking - and we'll never know if we stay too scared to reach out.

All this talk of nature, of the cosmos and of the earth, the grandeur of what we call nature - here is a question you may have the answer to, that I don't yet have myself. Why is it so hard for us to remember that WE are a part of that glorious nature we so admire? When I look at a sunset, or a mountain lake, or a sky full of stars, I fill with a sort of breathless awe. Yet how often do I fill with that same awe when I look at other humans? Not often enough, I'm afraid. But it is beautiful stories such as Nye's that remind me how wonderful we can be with each other.

We are small creatures in many ways. And in other ways we are larger than measure. And in lots of ways, size is immaterial - tell the dandelion pushing through concrete that she should be much larger, and I think you might hear her laughing.

We love one another. We love our world. At this pausing point in the year, my most important request - of all of you, of myself, of all of us together - is to examine the ways those loves are similar. May we behold the wonder of each

of us, all together. May the rest of the year be a fruitful harvest for you, and may we close the year in peace. So may it ever be.