

Service Delivered by Rev. Sarah Tinker
at Essex Church, 21st March 2010

Fresh Breeze, New Shoots

Hello everybody and welcome to Essex Church where this community known as Kensington Unitarians meets each Sunday morning and for other activities during the week. This community is created by all those who walk through our doors so whether you are someone who has been here for many years or someone who still feels quite new, whether you are an occasional visitor or someone who has experiencing Unitarian worship for the first time you are all welcome here today.

Let us take a moment now to gather ourselves, to bring all aspects of ourselves fully here, now. We come from different directions to this place, we bring our joys and our concerns, that are unique to us and to our life's journey. But here we join together in a shared time of worship – may the troubled find peace here with us, may the weary find rest, may those who feel blessed find ways to share their good fortune with others and may the divine light of life and love be with us now.

Chalice Lighting:

I light our chalice this world wide symbol of our Unitarian and Universalist faith in recognition that today marks the spring equinox when day and night are of equal length here in the northern hemisphere. The equinox is often seen as a point of balance – may it encourage us all to help create a more balanced world of justice and love for all.

Prayer:

Let us join now in a time of prayer and reflection upon life's changes and transitions.

May the divine spirit of life and love be with us now in this our time of worship and bless our togetherness. May our hearts be softened and our busy minds be stilled, may our bodies be at peace within themselves as we turn our thoughts and prayers to our world community. Throughout history, the story of our planet has been a story of change, a great unrolling narrative with its multitudinous characters and settings. To be alive is to move and to move is to change.

May our thoughts be with the places in our world where changes are enforced and bitter, where life is tough and there can be little illusion of control for the people who live there; let us think too of the many places where change is held back, repressed, where the search for freedom is seen as rebellion, where free speech is denied, the places where people do not dare sometimes even to be themselves. May all such places be touched by love and understanding, may fear diminish and peace expand.

In our own hearts and minds may we also be filled with peace and love, so we are better able to accept the changes in our own lives, challenging and painful though some of them are. In the midst of our transitions may we be granted all the strength that we need and may that strength be something we pass on to others who we meet along the way, for it is perhaps in our common humanity and in the sharing of our paths in life that we find the meaning and purpose that sustain us and guide us, now and always. Amen

Address:

I start this address with a warning to all the people who still feel quite new here today – for people who have been members for a while this warning comes too late. It's said – whatever you do when you join a church – don't tell them that you're good at anything because before long you'll be in charge of it – be it coffee making or accountancy or decorating or curtain mending. When I was a member of a Unitarian congregation up in Sheffield I foolishly expressed some interest in both gardens and education and then ran the children's group for ten years and spent a lot of time pulling up weeds. When I came down to London I denied all ability in garden maintenance. So the fact that our church gardens both front and back are now filled with the colour and delight that only spring bulbs can bring is entirely due to the efforts of others. In fact I do like gardening but I'm not a keen gardener. Keen gardeners will be out in their gardens most days, keeping up with those endless tasks, keeping an eye on things. Whereas whole weeks can go by for me if the weather is not welcoming – and I'll just leave nature to get on by herself. And the good thing about fair weather gardening is that nature can surprise you.

I've never forgotten the time one spring when I opened the compost bin and found a pile of prunings from plants I'd cut back in November. One was a branch from a willow tree and what a delight it was to see it covered in buds, still alive and growing after all these months, just like these we have here. I told this story to a real gardener who laughed and told of the year he'd

used willow cuttings as pea sticks to support his pea plants. The peas were spindly and poor but the pea sticks, made out of willow all started to sprout leaves and to flourish.

There's a powerful symbol for us in this tenacity and determination of the natural world and also in its reliability and inevitability. We know and trust that spring will follow winter, that daffodils will bloom, that days will lengthen. This winter though has been a testing one for many people hasn't it. It has seemed to go on for far too long – daffodils by all accounts are blooming at least a month later than they did last year. Yesterday was the spring equinox – the day when day and night are of equal length – one ancient ritual involved people getting up before dawn on the day of the equinox to perform a ceremony in which they symbolically pulled up the sun to ensure the arrival of spring. We humans in these northern lands are, and always have been, so dependent on the warmth of the sun to warm our soil and help our crops grow and to keep our spirits lifted. We notice when spring seems late or early in its arrival.

A writer called Helen Cohen compares the halting progress of spring with our own inner processes when she writes:

'So in our individual lives, change comes slowly, haltingly, grudgingly. Although we may feel deeply the need to discard old habits and tired patterns, still they clutch at us, crippling our tentative new steps, freezing us in movements that we once found comfortable but which we have now outgrown. Even as we yearn to be set free, to set ourselves free, we feel the temptation of the old and familiar. However painful and limiting, the old ways seem at times safer than the uncertain paths ahead. These transitions can be difficult: one step forward, the next one backwards; yes, no; I will, I won't. And then one day the spring is here, no longer to be denied. Leaves and blossoms have all burst out and no longer fear the frost. We can move freely at last, enjoying movements and rhythms that before we could only vaguely imagine.'

Anyone who has spent time with growing children will remember the times when they literally seem to have grown overnight. And it is the same throughout the world of nature. The process of life has been going on underground, in the dark, in the night, below the surface, deep in the nourishing earth – it seems that all is still, frozen even, but life itself suddenly bursts forth and we know that the time of waiting has been worth it, and will in due time bear fruit.

The piece we heard earlier on from the Secret Garden speaks powerfully of the endless winter we may sometimes experience in our emotional lives. And this is reflected back to us in the world around us. E B White the great American essay writer, most famous for his children's book Charlotte's Web, E B White describes it thus in his essay on the "intoxicating nature" of spring:

"There is a stanza in Robert Frost's poem 'Two Tramps in Mud Time' that describes an April moment when air and sky have a vernal feeling, but suddenly a cloud crosses the path of the sun and a bitter little wind finds you out, and you're back in the middle of March. Everyone who has lived in the country knows that sort of moment--the promise of warmth, the raised hope, the ruthless rebuff.

There is another sort of day that needs celebrating in song - the day of days when spring at last holds up her face to be kissed, deliberate and unabashed. On that day no wind blows either in the hills or in the mind, no chill finds the bone. It is a day that can come only in a northern climate, where there has been a long background of fridity, a long deficiency of sun."

So what can be learnt from a late spring? Patience perhaps, faith perhaps – perhaps we can learn that there are some things in life that won't be hurried, that we can't control, that will do things in their own time and that it is not always for us to know what that timescale is. Zen Buddhists have a saying – 'you can't push the river' – the river is flowing quite well on its own, in its own time, at its own pace. All we can do is watch or float along with it, or if we wish try and determinedly swim upstream against the current. And spring is happening in its own good time, though not at the pace we might have chosen for it this year. At least the weather gives us something tangible to complain about, some shared problem that links us all, a way of connecting. We have all been shivering together.

And we can rejoice together too. I was lucky enough to be out walking one day last week and it was a proper spring day, a day when everyone should have been given the day off and told to get outside and enjoy the long awaited return of the sun. You could smell the earth and hear the birds and see signs of new growth everywhere. William Wordsworth wrote a beautiful poem about just such a day called 'A Change in the Year':

*It is the first mild day of March;
Each minute sweeter than before,
The redbreast sings from the tall larch
That stands before our door,*

*There is a blessing in the air,
Which seems a sense of joy to yield
To the bare trees, and mountains bare,
And grass in the green field.*

The mountains and the fields experience four seasons a year, even if at times they do arrive somewhat early or late. But in our own lives we can get stuck in a particular inner season. Like the uncle in 'The Secret Garden', winter can sometimes seem to last an awfully long time. And the inner climates we have been born into vary tremendously. Just as in our world some people may live in the frozen north, others in temperate zones, others still in burning desert, so our inner worlds vary too. What can we do but honour our own experiences, acknowledge and bear witness to the variety of experience of others and encourage ourselves and one another to keep moving and growing and changing and learning, inside or out, and to remember the truth that we and our planet and all the beings we share this world with, are alive - and that life is a gift, whatever the weather.

Benediction:

There is, I believe, a faithful force that is born in us, that is greater than us, that calls new seeds to grow in once barren places. This force is loyal to us and loves us and is with us always, even when life is cold and cheerless and spring is taking a long time to arrive. May we all find some inner sunshine in the week ahead that will fuel our growth and exploration and help us to find the joy of being alive. Amen