

**Holy Time**  
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**U.U. Congregation of the Outer Banks**  
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It will happen any day now; I look forward to it about this time every year. There's a day, usually sometime in October, when there's a noticeable change in the light. Something about the color and the angle change; there's a clarity and a golden quality to the light which tells me: It's Fall. I can't tell you what causes it—I expect it's a combination of changes in the trees, the color and density of the leaves, and the direction of the sunlight as the Earth slowly tilts our Northern Hemisphere face away from the sun. It's not something I watch coming on; I just notice one day: the light's changed; Fall is here.

Walking beside the marshes in Festival Island Park one evening this week, I noticed that the grasses have begun to grow pale in the cool twilight air. The soft flags and cattails are silver and golden, and the smaller birds are all over them in a way I haven't seen until just recently. The trees have started to suggest the color that's coming on fast. And the squirrels are on the move, digging and burying the treasures they may or may not remember where to look for later.

At the edge near the concert shell where the boardwalk pokes into the Sound, I walk out from under the trees and see flock after flock of birds—ducks and geese to my untrained eye, but I know some of you could set me straight on the details—trailing ragged chevrons across the sky.

We set a date for the Fall Equinox. But for me Fall starts when the light changes, and the air smells like drying grass and wood smoke. The star that gives us warmth and light, the planet under our feet do not know or care what day of which month we think it is. The measured hours of daylight may correspond more or less to the timetable we build around our planet's travels and turnings, but the *seasons* happen when they happen—when it is *time*.

The mountain and maritime forests don't suddenly wake up one morning thinking: Shoot, it's half past October and we're not *dressed*! The wheeling flocks of birds someone is going to tell me the name of later aren't shouting to each other: Come on, hurry up, we have to get down to the Outer Banks, for Pete's sake—we're going to be late for Hunting Season! The squirrels do not wake up the kids when the bell on the Courthouse in Manteo rings nine o'clock and say: Hey, get up! Eat your breakfast and get out there and start hiding those nuts and seeds!

They all live by a different kind of time from the calendar or the clock. The stars of the Universe and our own Sun and this planet whose life includes us, they measure a time that moves in circles and cycles, a time that spirals from a beginning to an ending so distant from each other, so much longer than our own fleeting moments that it deserves the name *Eternity*.

*That's* the time the seasons and the creatures who are fully immersed in them are living in.

What about us?

We humans are fascinating and unusual creatures, maybe even unique so far as we know. We have the capacity to turn the living Universe into a web of symbolic representations in our minds, and then to use those symbols to break it all down into units we can measure and compare and recombine and analyze. This give us immense power to adapt ourselves to the physical world and to mold that world around us.

Sam Keen, whose words Gwen shared a few moments ago, points out that the ancient Greeks had two words for time: *Chronos* and *Kairos*. *Chronos*, chronological time, is the time of clock and calendar, the measured moments humankind uses, or perhaps imposes on ourselves and on the world that falls under our dominion. It's linear and quantifiable. *Kairos* time, to use Keen's words, "is organic, rhythmic, bodily, leisurely. . . it is the inner cadence that brings fruit to ripeness, a woman to childbirth, a man to change his direction in life at just the right moment." I would add that *Kairos* is the time the emerging Universe and the life in it are measured by. I would call it sacred time, holy time.

The thing about human beings is that we live in *both kinds* of time.

Breaking the Earth's rotation and our annual revolution around the sun into seconds, minutes, hours, days, and years gives us countless gifts. It lets two people travel great distances and arrive at the same place at the same time; it makes it possible to regulate and manage the unbelievably complicated collections of individual actions that make up a school, a factory, a city, a civilization.

The clock tells us when to get up in the morning and when to go to bed; it tells us when to take the kids to school and pick them up; it tells us when it's time for work or class or the concert or the flight to see the ones we love. The calendar tells us when to watch the Homecoming Parade and when to stay away from the bridge; it tells us when to go to the polls to vote and when to pay the taxes that make our life as a coherent and caring country possible; it tells us when our children were born and when our parents died.

The clock and the calendar give us dinners together and working political systems, football games and the world of commerce; they even give us gatherings for worship of religious communities of every kind.

The dangerous thing, though, is that the clock and the calendar don't just tell us when to be somewhere or do something. They tell us a story about who we are. They say we're a creature subject to deadlines and expectations measured with mathematical precision, a creature whose life is governed by something independent of the rhythms of the sun and moon and the seasons of the earth, or the cycles of our own bodies' natural lives. The story they tell is not a lie, but it is not the whole story.

Our intellectual capacity to mark and measure everything arises within bodies that live in the other kind of time, holy time. The seasons move in us as well, even if we've forgotten how to listen to them. Between the landmarks of birth and death we share a life that's not measured by minutes or years, nor even by breaths and heartbeats, but by the ripples and eddies created as our lives touch and intertwine with the lives all around us, and with the cascade of Life that flows through us and around us all. Think about it:

When is the correct time for you to speak the truth about a love that's quietly grown in your heart? When is it time for me to make a change that's been developing slowly in my life?

When is it time for us to move from feeling supportive toward this or that cause or community to finding where we are being called to take the risks of solidarity?

When is it time for me to change my relationship with an attachment or an addiction that is costing me too much in time, in health, and in the hurting hearts of people who love me? When is it time for the baby to be born? When is it the right time for a person facing the approach of death to let go of a life they have loved and lived as best they possibly could?

No clock or calendar can tell us anything useful about any of these questions. And these are the kind of questions that create the real shape of our lives, our true lives.

We human beings live in both kinds of time. We *need* them both.

So, what does all this have to do with us, here and now? Well, it's worth taking the time to ask what it is that we're really doing here in this hour we set aside to be together in this particular way. Unitarian Universalists have danced for many years around the question of whether we're actually gathering for worship, and what that might mean. It helps, I think, to remind ourselves that the English word "worship" comes from two Old English words, *weorth*, meaning value, and *scipe*, meaning a quality. Worth-ship in its ancient roots means acknowledging and exploring that which has the quality of worth, of value. We gather to consider together that which is of ultimate worth—whether we think of that as a deity, or as Life, or Love, or Spirit, or the scientifically revealed and not-yet-fully-understood foundation and source of all existence. Whatever the descriptions or names we use, if what we're doing together is worship, then in this time together we explore and consider and invite ourselves to feel the presence of that ultimate reality.

And whatever you call that, however you describe or experience it, it is not on the clock. As Robert Fulghum says, "sacred time is the dwelling place of the Eternal." So at our religious gatherings, and at ceremonies like weddings and child dedications and memorial services, and in rituals of many kinds, we invite ourselves into holy time.

We use visual signs, sounds, and symbolic words and movements to signal ourselves that this is a time set aside. We ring a bell and light a flaming chalice, and the sound and the sight call us to enter that sacred, clockless, dateless time which is the larger rhythm of the living Universe. In

this time together we are invited to allow ourselves to feel that flowing stream of time that is beyond the measure of gears, pendulums, or digital calendar apps.

Paradoxically enough, we gather at an appointed –10:30 Sunday morning—to let go of the measurement of minutes—for one hour—more or less. We gather to remind ourselves that in the midst of the crowded minutes of our lives, which are quite real and which demand and deserve our attention, we also live here—in the largest reality possible.

Sam Keen reminds us that the great transcendent experience, which you'll hear more about from Dennis next week, may or may not happen in this time set aside from the clock and the calendar. That's not the point, though it is always a welcome possibility. The topic of the day isn't really the point, either, though it's always nice if it's something interesting, inspiring, or moving. One thing that always matters, though, is that we gradually grow more and more accustomed and skillful at holding all the connections, complications, fears, hopes, and commitments of our everyday lives side by side with the reality of the unmeasured time in which the power of Life and Love moves.

The holy time we spend together here reminds us and helps us learn how to make room in our everyday experience for the movement of the circles and the cycles and the seasons of life outside the clock and calendar. That movement is the deepest, most powerful rhythm of our own life. In it we are sustained, strengthened, comforted, healed, and transformed.

So may it be for each of us and all of us, as we find our hearts in this holy time, in this precious and holy place.