

Rebirth, Renewal and Balance
the Rev. Edmund Robinson
First Church in Boston
March 19, 2023

St. Patrick's Day, Vernal Equinox, Beginning of Spring

The last dregs of winter and with them the dark flotsam and jetsam of winter's waste, are swirling down the storm drains. We look back over the months just past and we are astonished. This is Boston, but we can count on the fingers of one hand the number of times our car has had to be dug out of a snowbank.

It seems only yesterday we were going into the dark of the Winter Solstice, lighting candles to beseech the sun to return, remembering the red and golden leaves shed by the trees. Since then, the earth has twirled along another quarter of its orbit and the seasons have advanced.

I am not promising that Old Man winter might not still have a few tricks up his hoary sleeve. I remember one April Fools Day, I think it was 1997, when we got tricked with about 18 inches of heavy wet snow and I had to move it all. But I think we are past the worst.

How about the pandemic? Are we past the worst of that? That's a tougher question to answer; people continue to contract Covid and some continue to die from it, but the combination of widespread vaccination and the immunity you get from having the illness seems to have slowed it down considerably. Governor Healy two days ago announced that the public health emergency declaration would be allowed to expire May 11. The Standing Committee of First Church has now made mask-wearing optional, several months after the City of Boston and the MBTA had adopted that policy. You are all welcome to wear masks or not as you wish here and I hope that we can all respect each other's personal decisions in this regard.

As we round the calendar's corner from winter to spring, I have three themes to offer for your contemplation this morning: rebirth, renewal and balance, for it is the start of spring, the celebration of St. Patrick's Day, and the Vernal equinox.

Rebirth literally means a second life. In a large part of the world, a large proportion of the people believe that each of us gets more than one life to live. You might be a person this time, but you might have been a cow in the previous life and a bird in the next one. In order to maintain this belief you must believe that there is some essence, some soul which outlasts the body and can migrate to different bodies after physical death.

The place where a large portion of people tend to believe in rebirth is South Asia, or the Indian subcontinent. Four world religions have their origins in this area: Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism and Jainism.

I took courses in Buddhism in seminary, and I remember one class taught by a scholar who had done field work in Sri Lanka. He said that if you followed the local newspapers there, every few weeks you would see some variation of the same story: a man has died in one of the small villages there leaving a large family behind. A few years after he dies, a young boy in a village 10 miles away goes

missing and is finally found at the house of the man who died. The boy knows exactly where the deceased man keeps his personal items and other things that suggest some memories have transferred one to the other.

My seminary teacher said that these types of stories might arise in the United States or other modern nations, but they would never get past the news desk. The editors in those countries would not generally print them because there was no base of people who believed in rebirth. Which is to say, papers are interested in circulation and thus don't print stories that are too much out of line with the beliefs of their readers.

I consider myself a quasi-Buddhist and there are many great insights with which the Buddha has gifted us, but I do not follow that portion of the religion which is based on rebirth or migration of souls. But if in a previous life I was a human in a society which embraced those beliefs, perhaps I'd feel differently.

Does rebirth in any sense actually occur in nature? In the New Yorker this week, there is a fascinating article about caterpillars by Elizabeth Kolbert, who often writes on scientific topics. ["A Little Known Planet," by Elizabeth Kolbert March 20, 2022] You may remember from your biology class that certain insects have three stages in their lives, larva, pupa and adult. For butterflies and moths, the winged stage is the adult stage and the caterpillars are the larvae.

Kolbert shows that many caterpillars undergo more stages as caterpillars before they reach the pupa stage, and this often consists of shedding the outer skin.

"Caterpillars... are constantly reinventing themselves. They emerge from tiny jewel-like eggs and for their first meal often eat their own egg cases. Once they reach a certain size, they sprout a second head, just behind the first. Then they wriggle free of their old skin, the way a diver might wriggle out of a wetsuit. (In the process the old head drops off.) In the course of their development, they will complete this exercise three, four, in some species sixteen times..."

The changes that the animal goes through in the caterpillar stage are amazing, but then in the pupa stage it is more amazing still:

"After running through its allotment of [caterpillar stages], a caterpillar ceases to be itself and becomes a pupa. It sheds its skin one last time and develops a hardened shell. Inside the shell, its body dissolves. Then from bundles of cells known as imagina disks, a new body takes form. Some disks develop into legs, some wings, some genitalia and so on. The creature that emerges retains almost nothing of its juvenile self except, weirdly, its memories."

Think about that. It undergoes almost a complete physical transformation, and the body parts are completely dissolved, yet there is something mental which survives from the caterpillar to the butterfly or moth. If there were to be a feature of the natural world which illustrated the Hindu-Buddhist-Sikh-Jain religious idea of rebirth, this would be it.

There is a Christian kind of rebirth as well. Evangelical Christians often talk about being "Born again." They are talking about a passage from the Gospel of John [John 3:1-21] where Jesus is talking to a Pharisee named Nicodemus. Jesus maintained that no one could see the kingdom of God without being "born from above." Nicodemus asked him how that was possible, could he as an adult and elderly

man reenter his mother's womb to be reborn? Jesus said that the rebirth he was talking about was a rebirth of the flesh and of the spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh and what is born of the spirit is spirit. ... The wind blows where it chooses and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the spirit."

My feeling about this Jesus passage is that he is talking about something far different than the rebirths which the Buddhists and Hindus are talking about. But I like the idea that we can't tell where our souls will end up any more than we know where the wind comes from. I remain a skeptical agnostic on migration of souls from one person to another.

I wonder if Jesus wasn't trying to be poetic in his exchange with Nicodemus. One of my favorite poems is Dylan Thomas' "Fern Hill," which is a fanciful remembrance of the poet's childhood in rural Wales. Let me give you one verse:

And honoured among foxes and pheasants by the gay house
Under the new made clouds and happy as the heart was long,
 In the sun born over and over,
 I ran my heedless ways,
 My wishes raced through the house high hay
And nothing I cared, at my sky blue trades, that time allows
In all his tuneful turning so few and such morning songs
 Before the children green and golden
 Follow him out of grace.

"[i]n the sun born over and over," this is a way of saying that for the poet in his recall of his childhood, each day was like a new birth. It is a beautiful metaphor. Could that be what Jesus was driving at?

We talk about rebirth as something that happens in the spring, but most of what happens in the spring is the seasonal cycle of nature. Animals, including humans, are pairing off and mating and the vegetation is just doing its yearly thing. The flowers appear in order for the insects to cross-pollinate them so that they can grow and survive.

In other words, actual rebirth is a hard sell in the Spring, but renewal is all around us. And we can help it happen. We can roll up our sleeves and get to some spring cleaning in our houses. We can water and tend the plants growing in our gardens. And we can try to transcend the old habits of mind which lead to depression, boredom and despair.

Here in the First Church in Boston, you have every expectation of renewal, because if things go according to plan, you will have a new minister by the time I pack my bags and move on. You will have many possibilities in front of you when your new minister arrives, but among them are not the possibilities of going back to the church you've known. Rhys Williams has passed on to the other shore, and Stephen Kendrick has retired, and your interim is going to another place yet to be determined, and so you are going to have to adjust to the style and the substance of a new clergy person.

I said a few weeks ago that Darwin's idea on evolution was basically that when the organism's environment changes, the organism has three choices: adapt, move to a different environment, or die. I am confident you will adapt to your new minister.

What do I mean by renewal? Look around you at the leaves unfolding and the buds appearing at the end of branches, of bulbs raising their heads to take in the sunshine. While the winter was mild in terms of weather, we have been through trying times in our life as a church.

I have been a parish minister for 22 years, and have been a member of a UU church for another 20. Before that I was an Episcopalian. If there is one thing I think I have learned about UU churches, it is that we don't carry the same product as most Christian churches. We are not selling salvation in the hereafter, we are not giving the person in the pews the magic token they are going to need when they get to the pearly gates. What we have in this church, if anything, is salvation in this life, in the here and now, a chance to put our shoulders to the grindstone and try to forge a new and more just and more pleasant world out of what we are given.

I worry about that the isolation of these pandemic years has done to our sense of community. Community in church life before the pandemic was very important, maybe it was the supreme value. But during the pandemic, we found ourselves able to maintain our sanity by individual exercises, by a more robust online life and the occasional pseudo-community of the Zoom screen. We have worn our masks up to this point and now have permission to doff them if we choose.

Let us ask ourselves, what needs are we answering in the community in which we're situated?

The final value that the calendar gives us is balance. The equinox occurs when the day and the night, the dark and the light, the winter and the spring are about equal. And this principle can be carried into the larger life.

We use balance as a good word, something we strive to have more of in our lives. If we think we are eating too much junk food, we might remind ourselves of the health benefits of a balanced diet. Too much coffee, too much alcohol, too much of this or that, all our vices of excess can be thought of as imbalances. Whether we realize it or not, this type of thinking is grounded in ancient Greece, where the Temple of Apollo at Delphi famously bore the inscription *Meden Agan*, nothing in excess. Nothing in excess, everything in moderation.

At one level, our idea of balance comes from our idea of justice. The ancient Greeks conceived of justice as a blindfolded lady named Themis, who carries a set of scales. We see this figure on thousands of courthouses to this day. Libra is the Latin word for scales, and the particular type of scale Themis carries has two pans. Lanx is the Latin word for pan, and a two-pan scale is thus libra bi-lanx, which is where we get our word balance. Libra of course is also a constellation and a sign of the zodiac. Do we have any Libras here this morning? Did you know that Libra is the only sign of the zodiac named after a thing instead of a mythical person or animal?

Where an injustice had been done, the scales would be out of balance. Themis wore a blindfold so that she could not see the identities of the parties who came before her seeking justice.

When we're thinking about balance, it's a good idea to ask what kind of balance we're dealing with, for there are two main kind and it helps to keep them separate. A static balance is a balance outside of time. The two-pan scale weighs a static balance. The quantities are put into each pan, and the answer comes out the same every time.

The dynamic balance is where two or more sides of the complex change as time progresses. The coyote and rabbit populations on Cape Cod are dynamic balances; when one is up, the other is down. The progression of the seasons is a dynamic balance: at any given point on the earth's trail around the sun, you can say whether the day is shortening or lengthening and what sort of season is coming or just past.

Why do I bring up this distinction between static and dynamic balance? Because it seems to me that we have a tendency to think of all balance as static, and that is not the way nature works.

Let's get down to the personal level. One of the biggest problems of old age is balance, physical balance. The ability to walk across a room, to hop, to ride a bicycle. Most of us are endowed at birth with these marvelous intricate mechanisms in our ears that work with a corresponding part of the brain to let us know what our body is doing in space. They tell us when we are lying down and when we are getting up and anything in between. And as our bodies get older, these systems start failing, and we start falling, and we reach for canes and walkers and scooters, whatever we need to get us where we want to go.

I used to have pretty good balance. I have a picture of me in my 30s showing me riding a unicycle, a skill I acquired in my early teens. Riding a unicycle is sort of like balancing a broomstick on its end. If you feel yourself falling one way, you try to get the wheel under you to stop the fall. It's like balancing a broomstick, that is, if you were sitting on top of the broomstick.

Balance. How do you get it, and what do you do if you don't have it? For physical balance, it's very important to know how much you have now. It is no shame to lose some of the balance you had when you were younger, what you need to know is whether you can safely walk and what assistance you need to do so. You need to know whether you are safe on a ladder.

I think, I hope, I'm still safe on a bicycle. I took a tumble on a bike in 2007 and the hand sprain kept me from playing banjo for six weeks.

Personal balance may look like a static thing. You may have been to yoga class and can do the tree pose – stand on one foot for three minutes; this may look like you're standing as still as the weights in a two-pan balance. But your foot and your brain are furiously calculating all the time while you're in the tree pose, ascertaining where your center of gravity is and whether it's moving. Little pulses come down your leg to help you trim your leg and abdomen and buttocks just like an expert sailor trims the sails.

So even when we're not moving very much, the balance we maintain may really be a dynamic balance rather than a static one.

We're talking about balance because it's a virtue but also because it ties into the equinox. Let me set the context. The ancient Celts had four holy times during the year, called Celtic Quarter Days. They coordinated roughly with what our modern calendar would call November 1, February 1, May 1 and August 1. In November there was Samhain, the Celtic New Year, which tied in with All Hallows Eve, All Saints Day and All Soul's Day. In February there was Imbolc, which became Christianized as St. Brigid's Day. In May, the Celtic Holiday was Beltane, which became Christianized as May Day. And in August, the Celtic holiday is Lughnasa, which has no Christian equivalent.

Four Celtic quarter days, each three months apart from each other. But where does that leave the equinoxes? The two equinoxes in March and September fall exactly halfway between the solstices. And it appears that the Equinoxes had some ritual significance to the ancient Irish, because of the solar observatory at Loughcrew. The front of the Order of Service shows what the illumination looks like. Here's what the website for this ancient Cairn says:

"The phenomenon occurs twice a year in March and September and basically means that day and night are of equal length. The ancient burial grounds of Loughcrew have always been a celestial spot for celebrating the phenomenon. Since the passage tombs are perfectly aligned with the Equinox sunrise, the beam of sunshine passes through the dark closed tombs, creating a breathtaking view."

I have been known to sit up at night on the equinox trying to balance an egg on its end. There may be a lot more whimsy than science in this exercise, but it is peculiarly satisfying to me. Sometimes I have gotten a dozen eggs to stand on end for 10 or 15 minutes at a time.

And there is one other aspect of balance that I ought to mention before I close: balance is a word we use to describe the amount of funds which may be in our bank or brokerage accounts. And that relates to the balances of funds which are in the church accounts. I am told that a pledge campaign will shortly be under weigh here when we have a clearer financial picture of where we stand. Please keep the church in mind as you plan your expenditures for the balance of 2023. I expect we are going to need help from each of you according to your abilities to get this fine old church back on her feet again after the difficulties of the past three years.

We are two days away from spring and it is a season of spiritual rebirth and natural renewal. When you get out to coffee hour in a few minutes, walk outside and take a deep breath. The robins are hopping on our lawns and the geese are headed north and the blooming flowers are favoring the world with their amazing scents. Let us each seek to attain that balance which banishes misfortune and lets us turn right-side up.

Amen.