

Harvest, Like Grief is a Season, Not An Event  
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UU Congregation of the Susquehanna Valley

We gather this morning with the very real nip of fall in the air. Yesterday's pride event in Bloomsburg was nearly perfect: warm enough to be quite pleasant but not too warm when the sun was out and the wind was still, and not so cold that we were wishing for parkas and mittens when the clouds and breeze moved through the park where we were.

We naturally associate fall with the time of harvest, as it is the time when growing plants put forth their fruits and seeds in an effort to propagate their species, and the time when humans try to gather up all those fruits and seeds to better insure the propagation of our species.

Fall is also associate with death and, naturally, grief. In the weeks both fore and aft of the fall equinox, plants stop making chlorophyll and allow their leaves to dry up and drop away, to decompose and become nutrients for next year's growth cycle. Chestnuts and walnuts fall to the ground and shed their thick outer husks to reveal the nuts within. Beans dry in their pods and wait for the harvester to scoop and thresh them to be stored for winter. The green corn turns to that dry, rustly pale brown, as it, too, awaits the machine that will turn it into silage and feed for cattle and other meat animals.

The magic of the season is that it is just that – a *season*. There are many weeks during which various crops mature and are ready for harvest. Which is good, because we would be unable to harvest them all if they all came ripe, say, on the second week of September. There would not be enough people, machines, space, or hours to harvest and process all that food.

Whether it is nature that makes that so or seed scientists who selectively breed plants to stretch the growing season, I do not care to know. I am fine believing that it is part of nature's order.

And extended seasons of harvest have been the rule down through the ages as well.

According to Biblical scholar Michael Morrison of Grace Communion International, harvest season in Ancient Israel lasted for the better part of the year.

Wheat and Oats were harvested in May

Barley in April

Peas and lentils were both picked in late April and early May

Vetch was harvested in mid-April and again in mid-May. (I learned that common vetch is the humble fava bean)

Chickpeas were brought in in June, with the first crops of grapes.

July was the season for Flax and Sesame, and the first part of the Millet harvest, which stretched into early August.

Grapes, depending on the variety, were harvested in June, July, August, and September

Figs came ripe in August and September, as did pomegranates.

Olives, again, depending on varieties and topography, were harvested in September, October, and November<sup>1</sup>

There were more months of harvest than there seemed to be for planting. To be fair, grapes, figs, olives, and pomegranates do not need to be planted each year, but still, that is a very long season in which to harvest all the kinds of foodstuffs the people needed to survive.

The harvest came in manageable stages so that nothing was wasted or lost.

I think grief is like that as well – all of the feelings of grief come to us in stages, not linear stages, to be sure, but in pieces and parts, nonetheless.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://archive.gci.org/articles/harvest-seasons-of-ancient-israel/>

Because if we had to manage all of those emotions at once, we'd never be able to cope.

In an interesting parallel to the extended seasons of harvest the ancient Hebrews were also quite adept at grief. There were actual *professional mourners* whose job it was to wail loudly (for pay) at funerals. The wealthier a person was, the more elaborate – and loud – was their funeral. (Jesus wept at Lazarus' death.)

In a time when health care relied largely upon the casting out of demons, death was a pretty regular thing, and so people were good at grieving.

In the Hebrew scriptures, prophets and poets regularly cried out to the divine for relief from their grief, or revenge for the death of a loved one. The psalms are filled with the wailings of people beseeching the LORD for comfort in their grief. There text referred t are great swaths of text referred to as the Laments.

These folks knew how to be sad and mad and empty and hurting and all the rest.

And like the harvest, they knew not to try to get it all done at once.

It's a season, not an event.

I am talking about all this today to begin preparation for the time of the year when the veil between the living and the dead is its thinnest – recognized around Halloween and All Saints Day. Many cultures in the Americas celebrate this season as a time to connect with those who have died and to bid them farewell on whatever their next journey may be. Some traditions include an embodied afterlife, while others ritualize the letting go of the grief of those who remain living, to peel off their layers of sadness and let them go at this time of the year.

IN a couple weeks, we will have a service on October 30 in which we explore some of the rituals people engage in around death and grief, and

we will create an altar here in our worship space and online where people can share pictures or images of beloved people who have died in the past year.

In the afternoon of that day – and the details are still being hammered out – we hope to have a collective service to remember those who have died during the pandemic years and whom we have not been able to gather and mourn in community. You all know people who have died during these past few years. Some have died of covid, and some of other things, but the overarching thing that lingers is that we have not been able to share our grief in community as we remember them. I want you to think about those we have lost and think of those you'd like to honor during that special service.

And again, I am aware of the grace that the universe has built into these processes – both harvest and grief. They happen over the course of time, not all at once. Some of them need to be addressed annually, in fact. And that's ok. That's part of the natural process that is being alive.

And I am grateful that human beings are creatures that live in community. Together, we can bring in the harvest, together, we can gather the grapes and the figs and the pomegranates. Together, we can grieve and feel our deep sorrow, leaning upon each other for support when we feel weak and without hope.

Look around you right now, if you would. Look at the faces on our screen, see all the people who continue to attend services even after many, many months of physical distance. Think about how grateful we are to see those faces each week. Feel the presence of the people around you. This congregation is like the ant colony in our time for all ages – we each do our part, and we make sure that we take care of each other in the hard times. Hard times can be times of hunger, or times of sadness, times of sickness, or times of deep pain. We are in this together. For the long haul.

And we will help each other feel our grief, and to let it go.

I will close this morning with another poem from her collection “Sonnets in Autumn.”

If I can let you go as trees let go  
Their leaves, so casually, one by one;  
I I can come to know what they do know,  
That fall is the release, the consummation,  
Then fear of time and the uncertain fruit  
Would not distemper the great lucid skies  
This strangest autumn, mellow and acute.  
If I can take the dark with open eyes  
And call it seasonal, not harsh or strange  
(For love itself may need a time of sleep),  
And treelike, stand unmoved before the change,  
Lose what I lose to keep what I can keep,  
The strong root still alive under the snow,  
Love will endure--if I can let you go.

Life, and love, is a never ending process of gathering up and letting go, and  
by caring for each other, we make it all easier to bear.

Amen.