

Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda, March 19th, 2017.
Interim Minister the Rev. Fran Dearman

“Six Years past Fukushima: Equinox, Equilibrium, and Earth-Centred Religion.

This service offers a reflection on the Tohoku earthquake of March 11th, 2011 and the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster which followed. The sermon is offered in heart-warm honour of those who died at the time of the earthquake and tidal wave, and the consequences of the catastrophic collapse of the nuclear power station in that area. The environmental costs and the human tragedy are ongoing.

Let us be mindful of all those affected, and the ongoing efforts to restore the environment in that area. Let us especially be mindful how journalists covering the event at the time noted a remarkable ‘equanimity’ among the people swept up in this event—the decency and courtesy with which so many persons responded to the calamity and offered aid and comfort to those afflicted.

Olinda has a special reason to be mindful of events in Japan, because the noted academic and environmental journalist and activist David Suzuki, (b. 1936 in Vancouver), third generation Japanese-Canadian, came to Ontario in 1945, aged about nine, when his family were released from internment following the Second World War. I am told that Suzuki attended the old three room church across the road, here, where the parking lot is now; subsequently Suzuki attended elementary school on Mill Street, then Leamington High School.

n.b. With thanks to Karen Miller for permission to share her poem on the Shinto Sun Goddess Amaterasu, whose emergence from the cave where she had chosen to hide herself personifies the return of the Sun in the turning cycles of the year. The text of the poem will be found with the Bibliography, at the end of this script.

“Equinox: This day are day and night of nearly equal length, throughout the world.”

When I was in Alaska at summer solstice, just before the end of the school year, it would be so light, I could read a newspaper by natural light at midnight, it would be so warm, I could go hiking at 10 pm in a sleeveless t-shirt.

When I was at Alaska, at fall equinox, after school began, the birds would fly south: beautiful white swans, who spent summer in the far, far north, on the tundra; tall cranes, as tall as a person, who rasped and croaked as they flew over, ancient birds—there is a legend in China that the Daoist sages, reduced to wisps by their old age, would ride around the world on the backs of cranes; and Arctic terns, acrobats, who fly to the other end of the world, to the Antarctic, in search of southern summers during northern winters, the longest migration in the world.

When I was in Alaska at winter solstice, just before Christmas, it would be dark until 10 am. Folks would go to school or to work in the dark, with stars and the moon overhead. The sun would rise around recess or coffee break, and we'd stop to watch it spill its light over the Chugach Mountains to the east. And at Christmas there were only "Five Hours of Daylight"

When I was in Alaska at this time of year, at the spring equinox, the birds would come back, bringing spring with them—first the seagulls, then the geese. And the ice would begin to melt, and the rivers would open up. The snow would leave the big Parkstrip where planes used to land. Folks would start thinking about playing softball there. People would start flying huge colourful kites on that grass, they were so very pleased to see the sun and feel warm again.

Equinox means that just like tomorrow, and again in the fall, all around the world, we have one whole day of equal day and equal night for everyone on the planet. A day for fair shares.

Imagine that you are way up north, in the state of Alaska. Imagine that you are walking along wooded trails, in the Anchorage Botanical Garden, in the hills at the foot of the Chugach Mountains. The trees are spruce—dark and ever green. Mist, rain and runoff feed ice-rimed streams, rushing past mossy boulders. Deep in these woods your path leads you on towards a huge rock, a rock the size of a small house—a glacial erratic, wandered far from its brothers, swept up by a surging glacier in eons past, then dropped here, all alone, when the glacier retreated and cast aside its toys. There is a wooden railed fence around the rock, to discourage climbers and protect the thick growth of moss and lichen that cover the rock like a living shawl.

And if you were in Japan, across the wide Pacific, that rock would likely be the inspiration for a Shinto shrine. There would be small scraps of white cloth tied to the rail around it, fraying witness of prayers and hopes and fears reaching out for connection with the spirit of life.

The rituals of Shinto practice would see some spirit enshrined here—the spirits or *kami* that are said to dwell in mountains and waterfalls and great rocky boulders. There are thousands upon thousands of *kami* spirit deities recognized in Shinto tradition: some great, some small; some good and helpful, some evil and malicious; some heavenly, some earthly; some more powerful than humans, some weak and pitiable.

Some *kami* are associated with natural objects—earth and sky, sun and moon, mountains, rivers, rocks and trees. Some *kami* are said to foster growth and fertility and the vital business of harvesting and storing the rice crop. Some *kami* dwell in wind and thunder, some in animals, and some are ancestor spirits, heroes of old, and former emperors.

Tomorrow, Monday, is equinox, the point of equal day and equal night. It's a crowded time in the multi-faith calendar. Your Iranian neighbour might be planting grass seed in shallow bowls of earth. Hindus celebrate a spring festival at equinox. Bahai's and Zoroastrians celebrate New

Year. Jews celebrate the fast of Esther and the feast of Purim, and remember how the courage of Esther and Mordecai saved their ancestors from the destruction that wicked Haman had planned for them—so many Hamans, and only one Purim, as the saying goes.

For Buddhists and Shinto followers in Japan, Equinox is Shubun-sai, a day for visiting graves, cleaning and adorning the graves, and remembering ancestors.

Equinox reminds me that the turnings of earth model some values I admire, like fairness—equality. At the same time I must recognize that the earth can be very unfair. The rains fall equally upon the just and the unjust.

Wednesday is UNESCO World Water Day. And the waters of the world, indifferent to human good and evil, surely made their mark upon Japan six years ago—earthquake, tsunami, then a volcano. And then the threatened meltdown of a nuclear power plant. Accordingly, let us be mindful of that tsunami and Japan.

As one with deep roots on the west coast, I am well aware that the experience of tsunami could be mine one day. My own city of Victoria rests upon the great ring of fire that rims the Pacific Ocean.

Columnist and author Gwynne Dyer would remind us that the East Coast of Canada also is vulnerable to great waves. In his column of November 3rd, 2004, Dyer wrote about a large chunk on the side of an old volcano in the Canary Islands that is poised to crash into the sea anytime in the next thousand years. The splash would likely race across the Atlantic and hit hard.

Dyer writes, ‘Worst hit will be harbours and estuaries that funnel the waves inland: goodbye Halifax, Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore and Washington, D.C.’

So don’t think this couldn’t happen to this country, on both the east and west coasts of Canada, some time in the next thousand years. But probably not this afternoon.....

Shortly after the series of disasters hit Fukushima and Japan, six years ago, I was listening to CBC Radio’s Sunday afternoon “Cross Country Checkup”. The reports were vividly descriptive of the extent of the devastation: half a million people sleeping on the floors of gymnasiums; rural areas inaccessible; the Red Cross and *Médécins sans Frontières* with little or no infrastructure to support their efforts. Woe to the frail and the aged and the heavily pregnant and the injured and the disabled. Woe to those who will not leave them.

The foreign journalists reporting on the situation in Japan were profoundly impressed with the equanimity shown by the people who were impacted by these radical enormities—how calmly the people conducted themselves, how kind and courteous they were to one another. Where did

this grace under unimaginable circumstances come from—where and how did these people find such courage and strength and gentle generosity with one another?

Folks were in dire straits. Yes, Japan needed money and resources and trained teams to help out. And yes, Japan needed folks to remember them beyond the next Hollywood scandal. I knew Canada will be generous. Money is a sincere affirmation in our culture. And may it be so.

Mindfulness is an affirmation also. This morning, as a way of honouring those who lost their lives in this calamity, those who still live with the consequences of that trauma, those who try to repair the wounds, let us be mindful of Japan. Let us call to mind a cultural element unique to Japan, namely Shinto ritual.

Shinto is their way, for the past two and a half thousand years, of showing respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which they are very much a part—our own UU seventh principle and sixth source. We who did not grow up within that culture and do not live within that culture are unlikely to truly understand and experience Shinto as they do; but we can, with respect, attempt to grow into some understanding of that culture. Perhaps we can learn from this ancient way some thing new to us that will help us in our own search for understanding and the making of meaning. Let us call to mind Shinto as a spiritual teaching from an earth-centred tradition.

So what do we know about the Shinto tradition?

First, we've already mentioned the spirit deities or *kami* that are perceived to dwell in the fabric and forces of nature. There is an attractive resonance with the Gaia theories here. We humans might find it helpful and healthful to think of the elements of nature as if they were somehow alive, or at least a home to life, and to respect nature accordingly.

Next, Shinto is a form of nature worship specific to Japanese history and culture. There are stories and writings and various schools of thought. But Shinto is more about practice than belief. Shinto observance is tolerant of other traditions; worshippers move easily between Shinto and Buddhism. Shinto is not about morality, but about observance of ritual and behaviour to maintain harmony. Shinto has no founder, no scripture, no body of law, with only a loosely organized priesthood.

Shintoism embraces a range of enthusiasms. For example, the Japanese creation story came to link Shinto worship and ancestor worship with emperor worship and commitment to the state; these links were more or less broken at the close of the Second World War, but remain problematic. Some see the Shinto tradition as still politically dangerous, especially when key political figures offer worship at shrines honouring the war dead, including persons executed as war criminals. Others claim that Shinto lifted up a long tradition of peace and harmony, which was suppressed during times of imperial ambition.

Four affirmations are identified in Shinto. One: Tradition and the family are lifted up, so Shinto rituals are commonly called upon for celebrations of birth and marriage. Two: Nature is sacred, loved, and worshipped; to be in nature is to be close to the gods. Three: Physical and ritual cleanliness is important; followers of Shinto bathe and wash frequently. Four: Followers honour the *kami* divinities and also ancestral spirits.

Shinto is more about practice than belief. What sort of practice?

Shinto recognizes many places as sacred. For example, I invite you to think of some mountain or spring or waterfall that is special to you—somewhere you feel close to some sense of the holy. Now imagine, over the years, naming a *kami* or spirit that you thought of as dwelling in that place. Imagine building a small shrine to honour that spirit. Imagine building a *Tori* or gateway, so that when you stepped through the gate you felt that you were stepping from a finite world into an infinite world of the holy. Imagine striking a bell, to draw the attention of the holy. Imagine tying a white ribbon to the twigs of a bush with your hopes and fears wrapped up in that scrap of cloth. Imagine leaving a folded paper crane there, folded rather than cut so as to show respect for the tree spirit that gave its life to make the paper. Imagine cleaning the shrine in a ceremonial manner at set times of the year. Imagine presenting offerings and prayers. Imagine dancing there.

There is one practice that I can speak of personally, and that is *Misogi*, because I used to train with the karate class at the University of Victoria. Our karate class did *Misogi* three times a year. Very early in the mists of the morning we would gather by the lake, or by the ocean. We would train together for an hour or so. Then we would walk into the water and train a little longer, waist deep or deeper. Then we would withdraw to the edge of the water, kneel in the shallows, and relax into the meditation pose. We became one with our environment.

I found *Misogi* very beautiful. The *Misogi* ritual was experiential, like dance, like silent walking. There was no need to tie down the meaning with words; the meaning was in just being there. Then we went for hot chocolate and doughnuts. I found that very meaningful also. Spirituality is about connection and connection is about community and there is a profound connection when sharing doughnuts with people you've shivered with. Folks who have visited Japan speak of doing *Misogi* there, and often mention stepping under a waterfall. Whether they share hot chocolate and doughnuts after *Misogi* in Japan I do not know.

I do know that it feels right some nights to keep looking out the window at the moon in the night sky. And when we notice the moon, perhaps we could be mindful of the ones we love, and even of those we do not love, and know that we are all bathed in the light of the same moon, even half a world away.

I believe that by stepping into nature one becomes, literally, grounded, in humility. I believe the capacity to be alone with one's thoughts in nature is a vital part of learning to know oneself, and be at peace with oneself. I believe that humility and literal groundedness open a door to

reverence, wonder, and awe. I believe that the recognition of our own vulnerability amid the beauty of the natural world is a corrective to arrogance.

Equinox reminds me of equanimity. Equanimity—from the Latin *aequus* meaning even and *animus* meaning mind—equanimity, by which we understand mental composure, evenness of temper, especially in misfortune.

The Rev. Jim Anderson, a UU community minister in Tacoma Washington, shared some of his thoughts on equanimity in a sermon at Tacoma in Washington State.

Jim worked for many years with Tacoma's Catholic Social Services, with the poorest of the poor, the most vulnerable of the vulnerable. Jim needed all the equanimity he could get.

Jim wrote: "I have been thinking about equanimity for some time. It seems that equanimity is an essential factor in managing most life situations. ... equanimity lays the groundwork for an effective solution."

Jim continued:

Equanimity is an essential part of Buddhist practice. It lays the foundation for compassion, wisdom and effective conflict resolution. It creates a mind that is without hostility, looking for the best interest of everyone, and open to all possibilities. Buddhist equanimity means paying attention, here and now. It means being aware of your inner emotions, breathing, posture and how they are affecting the situation. It means being aware of the other person's emotions, breathing and posture and what they might mean. It means then using those objective observations to decide the best plan for an effective resolution, regardless of power, status, ego or embarrassment. Equanimity results in an aware, unattached, impartial, non-judgmental, and non anxious inner calmness. It creates an inner strength and integrity based on larger principles tested by the bonfires of life.

Jim suggested that Universalist and Unitarian principles can be a foundation for equanimity. We respect worth and dignity. We work for peace and justice. We model this in our own actions, speaking respectfully and listening carefully.

There is one background experience that is common to all forms of equanimity. It is the profound experience of oneness and wholeness with the universe. It is the oceanic feeling. With the oceanic experience you experience the all. You don't think it or feel it. You are it. Eternity is now, nothing is still to come, everything is already here.

For theists it is the experience of being one with God. For pantheists and humanists it is the experience of being one with nature and the universe. The Zen Buddhist may call it *Satori*—Enlightenment. I thank my colleague for sharing these thoughts.

In conclusion, it occurs to me that some of the practices of Shintoism, especially seeking wholeness with nature, would help support an evenness of mind, a sense of equanimity, in hard times. Like that great big rock in the Anchorage Botanical Garden, the plaything of glaciers come to rest under a living shawl of thick green moss, I too could find a stillness, and rest in an evenness of spirit, even in the face of hardship. I could be mindful of the world around me, reach out in compassion to others, and consider how we are all held in the embrace of a universal wholeness.

May it be so.

Bibliography:

Gwynne Dyer, “Crawling from the Wreckage”, 2010, page 315.

Marie Kondo, “The Life-changing Magic of Tidying Up: the Japanese art of decluttering and organizing”, 2014, especially pp188-189 where Kondo describes a brief ritual of greeting a house on entry or returning home, taken from etiquette and rituals associated with entering the sacred precinct of a Shinto Shrine.

The story for all ages read out preceding this sermon was “If Not for the Cat”, 2004, Haiku by Jack Prelutsky, paintings by Ted Rand.

Several websites and may be found on the events around Fukushima.

Website on Shintoism out of Ontario: <<<http://www.religioustolerance.org/Shinto.htm>>>, and others on the same topic. Also the BBC Religion website re Interfaith holy days.

I thank the Rev. Jim Anderson for permission to make reference to his “Equanimity Sermon”, delivered to the Tahoma Unitarian Universalist Congregation, Tacoma, State of Washington, October 17th, 2010.

The definition for equanimity comes from the Oxford Concise Dictionary.

I thank Karen Andersen Miller, who has given permission for the sharing of her poem engaging Shinto tradition re Sun deity Amaterasu, as follows.

Amaterasu Omikami: Queen of the Rising Sun

Written by Karen Andersen Miller in 1995, edited 2012.

Behold the Shaman Queen,/ Born divine,/ Goddess of the Sun, /
Queen of Heaven, All enlightened one.

Center of the universe,/ Celestial divinity,/ Keeper of growth and beauty,/ And all mystery.

Plunged the Earth in darkness,/ Light returned in Spring.

For you we weave the web of life,/ We honor dance and sing.

Heavenly Kami,/ We give thee three,/ Treasures of Earth Sky and Sea.

The Tree of Life,/ And jewels to wear,/ A mirror to reflect.

Shine upon us day and night,/ Bathe us in your sacred light.

Great Mother of the Sun.

Written by Karen Andersen Miller in 1995, edited 2012.

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