

Twelve Sleeps

Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda

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Spiral Staircase © 2019 Rod E.S.Q.

Perhaps one of the most popular ways for kids to count down to something – be it a birthday, the last day of school, a class trip... Christmas – is by sleeps. Today we can say “twelve sleeps to Christmas!” It’s a clever system – it gets around the ambiguity that comes when counting by days... if I say twelve days to Christmas, does that include today? Does that include Christmas

day? Is it twelve days *inclusive*? And inclusive of which days... starting when?

Counting by sleeps does away with that – you go to bed tonight... and after you do that twelve times, you wake up to Christmas!

There is a lot of counting down these days. During Advent, there is Christmas, of course. After Christmas, many folks are ready to count down the sleeps to January 1st, 2021 – eager to be done with the year 2020. [In the United States, and other places, some folks are counting down the days to January 20th.] Last week, we might have been counting down the days till a Covid vaccine was approved, now it’s a countdown to when it will be rolled out – a government official phrases it as “V minus 3” (three days to the vaccine rollout) – we might call it, “two sleeps”.

As those efforts take place, we might be counting the days to a time when regular in-person meetings sound more reasonable and routine. It gets a bit tricky, since exactly when that day might be isn’t entirely clear, but it’s increasingly sounding like it might be less than three hundred and sixty-five sleeps. Some folks these days will be looking to see when the Windsor-Essex Gray Zone designation gets lifted, and count down in anticipation.

There is something about counting down that builds up expectation. And sometimes, that can help in creating a sense of hope – looking forward to something, which often brings a measure of pleasure, even when the expected day, or moment, hasn't yet arrived. In some ways, it's a way of extending – maybe even multiplying – the joy of an occasion, when we know the time remaining for it.

Now, I've spoken before about the notion of *anticippointment* – which can perhaps be cynically described as expecting some degree of... preemptive disappointment, lest the expected moment not live up to expectations, and in some way immunizing us from a bigger letdown. A more... health-oriented definition could be worded more simply as an exercise in *managing expectations*.

That happens sometimes with the holidays. After the right number of sleeps, Christmas or New Year's Day arrives, and... it somehow doesn't always live up to the hype. Sometimes, it's the days leading up to it that seemed to hold the bulk of the magic.

One of the sad news this week, was the announcement that aviation pioneer Chuck Yeager died. He was the first person to travel faster than sound. As his life was being celebrated, news outlets recalled the time that, in speaking about his experience of that significant moment – when he broke the sound barrier – Yeager found it to be a rather... underwhelming moment. He's quoted as describing it as “a poke through Jell-o”, and that he somehow did not seem to feel particularly different than before he was slower than sound.

He was, of course, glad that nothing more significant happened – it mostly meant he was safe – during a mission where many things could have gone wrong. But the moment when he first flew faster than sound was mostly just another moment in the long journey of training, preparation, excitement, frustration, and anticipation, toward that goal. That's what he lived for in the months and years leading to Mach 1 – he

lived for the days that led to just another day in the process – even if some days are marked as more significant than others.

Perhaps that's the lesson about the sleeps that we might count toward those significant days in the future. After all, part of the point of sleeping is waking up to a new day – another day in the journey. Eventually some of those days will be marked more significant than others – maybe even historic. But the days leading up to *that* day, are perhaps even more significant, in having built up the space for those special days.

My friends, we've witnessed the historical moment when Margaret Keenan, from Coventry, was the first patient to receive the Pfizer Covid vaccine in the UK last Tuesday – at which point she asked the nurse “is that it?”. In Canada, a similar historic day may happen around *this* coming Tuesday. But for the most part, those will be largely ordinary days for most of us. We can still be excited about this, but not a lot will change in our daily lives on that particular day. There will still be several weeks, or months – several sleeps – of anticipation. But those days, and the sleeps in between will be important, as our situation slowly changes... quite possibly for the better.

And hidden along that story, my friends, are those significant days that led up to these recent special days. As soon as the virus was sequenced about a year ago, a lot of work came together very quickly to lead to the celebration in Coventry last Tuesday, and in the coming days. In fact, Margaret Keenan was not the first person to receive the Pfizer vaccine... she was simply the first to do so as a *patient*. Thousands of clinical trial volunteers had already received it months before, in otherwise unremarkable days – many days, and many sleeps, when much of the most significant advances were made, on days that are mostly unknown to us.

And so, my friends, it is unlikely that there will be a specific day when we can say, “there, the pandemic is over, and everything changes as of... now”. Even *if* a declaration by health authorities is made on a

particular day, it is likely that, just like an overhyped New Year's Day, not a lot will look different from the immediate days before or after. It will be the build-up to those days, and the sleeps in between, that will really matter.

My friends, it will be the anticipatory time of this great advent of the coming months, that will really make the difference.

And so, my friends, may we welcome each of those sleeps, and each of the mornings that follow them.

So may it be,
In Solidarity,
Amen

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Suggested Hymns:

Opening Hymn #226 People, Look East

Words: Eleanor Farjeon, 1881-1965, used by perm. of David Higham Assoc. Ltd.

Music: Traditional French carol, harmony by Martin Shaw, 1875-1958, used by perm. of Oxford University Press

BESANÇON

Hymn #409 Sleep, My Child

~)-| Words: Adapt. by Alicia S. Carpenter, 1930- , © 1990 Alicia S. Carpenter

Music: Welsh melody, c. 1784

AR HYD Y NOS

Closing Hymn #40 The Morning Hangs a Signal

~)-| Words: William Channing Gannet, 1840-1923, rev.

Music: William Lloyd, 1786-1852

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