

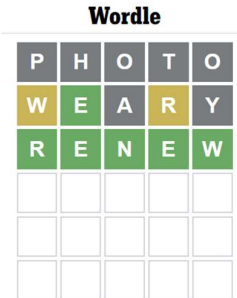
Half Full

Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda

Rev. Rodrigo Emilio Solano-Quesnel

20 March, 2022

Today, we're in a kind of... halfway time – and we take care to mark this time. We have now arrived at spring, and for the next half of the year, our days will be *at least* half daylight. Both religious and scientific traditions make it a practice to mark this time of equinox, sometimes quite precisely.



Wordle for Spring 2022
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And although we're not quite halfway through Lent, already the Easter spirit of resurrection is in the air – in starts and stops – with cold and warm weather alternating, as well as wet and sunnier days.

Starts and stops have been a hallmark of the past while... today, we were able have some folks in our sanctuary, and while it wasn't exactly half full, it was near the fullest it's been in two years, and what we did today gives us a sense of what it can be like to be halfway toward a fuller in-person presence, even as we keep other platforms available.

You've heard me say some version of this before – we've had partial attendance before... and we've seen the need to walk it back.

Nonetheless, it is significant that we had some more people attending in-person today – it has been almost precisely two years since we last held our last fully in-person-only Sunday service: more than two full cycles of 52 weeks... in fact 105 Sundays.

Last week would have been the 2nd anniversary since we last gathered together exclusively in-person. Today is the 2nd anniversary since that was no longer an option.

We mark this time.

We mark the time to honour where we are – and to contemplate how we *feel* about it. To become aware of the mixed emotions that come with budding optimism, as well as accumulated sadness and grief. To recognize the sacredness of this moment and of those past moments.

As of this month, the confirmed worldwide death toll for Covid-19 has now exceeded 6 million. And to some of you, that figure may hold a rather chilling significance.

In our own church community, we have seen the direct effects of the pandemic, including some among us who have been infected – most of you have recovered, to various degrees... and we also acknowledge that we'll no longer see at least one of our members, who has died from the disease.

Many others among us will have also lost loved ones, perhaps due to other reasons, and it has sometimes been difficult or impossible to be by their side during those hard times, or to honour their memory in the way we'd hope, or at the time we'd hope, or in the presence of those we'd hope could be with us.

These are real losses, and real sources of pain and sorrow. We honour them, as we mark this time.

Without forgetting the hardships... in fact, in conscious recognition of the hardships, marking the time invites us to take stock.

Taking stock is also part of Lenten practices. Last week I invoked a “review” of some of these, which often include some kind of fasting – sometimes literal, but perhaps more often, it's fasting in a broader sense of rehearsing what it's like to do without, or to be with less of something. One way that a Lenten observance – or many other traditions that include a fasting practice – make this a tool for spiritual growth, is in that a fast invites perspective into what is beyond the self.

A very practical example might be gaining *some* insight into what it's like for people who *involuntarily* do without food, or who cannot afford to get certain luxuries, or perhaps certain delights that we might be used to, but have temporarily decided to do without. In this way, a practice of doing without can help us better relate to the needs of others, and in this way develop deeper compassion.

It might also be a way for us to personally explore what else we have been missing. If a glass is half full with water, it might be an opportunity to remember that we also need air.

Perhaps giving up a certain food might open up space for other sources of nourishment we haven't reached for in a long time, which are better for us, and which we might well enjoy. This could mean different, healthier, tasty foods, or it could be other sources of comfort that we might now remember to cultivate, including activities, places... and people.

And perhaps the money saved by abstaining from a certain frivolous purchase may find a home in something more fulfilling in our lives – or in the lives of others.

Last week, I shared that the time saved by staying off of social media has often meant that I have *more* time than I realized for things that are more fulfilling than “doomscrolling” through other people's feeds. And sometimes these practices pay off, and become well-rehearsed habits.

A common theme in all these examples is an increased awareness of self and others. A clearer sense of what's important for ourselves individually and for our communities collectively, small and large.

Every once in a while, you'll hear a clever remark from someone who proclaims that they've “given up giving things up” or that they “gave up Lent for Lent”. These may be cute self-referential wisecracks, but I think that this approach may also be on to something.

It could be that sometimes we may feel worn too thin for doing without even more. The last two years have been a kind of extended Lent in many ways, and maybe we could do a bit less with doing without. To be sure, doing without certain ways of congregating has increased our awareness that there are other ways of doing church, not to mention that it has been a reminder that there have always been members of our community who cannot do church the way many of us are used to doing it. And now we've taken a practice of enhancing how more of us can access opportunities for worship.

And in taking stock we've also confirmed that having opportunities for in-person gathering is also something that we cannot discard altogether. Many of us sorely miss it, insofar as it is feasible, and there are parts of our community life that simply aren't the same without the in-person element.

Perhaps we can also abstain from abstaining, when we already realize that we need more of something important in our lives. Maybe we feel the need to "take up" something for Lent, or for the upcoming season. I've done that myself on a few occasions, realizing I could do with a healthier habit, where rather than do less of something, I already see that there is something I've found to be lacking in my life, and which I could do with more of, for the sake of myself and others.

Perhaps this might be a time to remember the intentions that came around New Year's Eve and give it another go if this year's theme hasn't quite taken hold – because personal growth and spiritual development takes practice, and it often takes more than one try.

If New Year's Day has come and gone, and you missed the beginning of Lent to enhance your spiritual practice, then *spring* is another time that reminds us that renewal is always possible. These opportunities are *always* there, as long as we remember to mark them and remark on them.

My friends, in this halfway time, we mark the time, to take stock and renew efforts for regrowth. As the buds in the trees and the grass on the ground make tentative efforts to bloom out and sprout up, these agents of nature can also be our cloud of witnesses, accomplices with us, as we seek the brightening daylight.

And maybe, my friends, this might be the time to take the cue from nature, to simply take the time to observe it. This can be as simple as looking out the window more often, to remember to lift the blinds (physical and metaphorical). If we are able to, perhaps step outside more than we're used to, and reconnect with the world that is out there. Perhaps it's the time to start something new.

We may be halfway there, my friends, and that half may well be plentiful.

So may it be,
In optimism, in grief, and in gratitude
Amen

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Suggested Hymns:

Opening Hymn #330 The Arching Sky of Morning Glows

~)-| Words: Mark Belletini, 1949- , © 1992 Unitarian Universalist Association

Music: Thomas Tallis, c. 1505-1585

TALLIS' CANON L.M.

Hymn #74 On the Dusty Earth Drum

Words: Joseph S. Cotter, Jr., 1895-1919

Music: Friedrich Filitz, 1804-1860

WEM IN LEIDENSTAGEN 6.5.6.5.

Closing Hymn #164 The Peace Not Past Our Understanding

~)-| Words: John Holmes, 1904-1962

Music: Alfred Morton Smith, 1879-1971, © Church of the Ascension, Atlantic City, New Jersey

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