

Special Occasions

Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda

Rev. Rodrigo Emilio Solano-Quesnel

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Extra Fancy Olive Oil © 2023 Rod E.S.Q.

The cook and best-selling author Samin Nosrat is perhaps best known for her book *Salt Fat Acid Heat* – the title refers to four of the basic elements of cooking. She also hosts the Netflix series of the same name.

When talking about the basic cooking element of fat (which is also an essential nutrient), she spends much time talking about olive oil – which is among the oldest cooking fats, as well as one of the healthiest, not to mention very flavourful.

In a conversation about olive oil with one of her show’s co-hosts, they discuss an anecdote about one of their friends – a bride who received an expensive bottle of exotic olive oil as a wedding gift. Being that the bottle was so special, the bride sought to extend her enjoyment of it by using it sparingly, bringing it out only for special occasions, such as their wedding anniversary. Even years after her wedding, the bride would take out the exotic, expensive olive oil and use *just a bit* of it, saving the rest for the next year.

There’s an endearing element to this ritual, and it has a certain value as a practice to celebrate a special date, marking a special time.

Although... if you know anything about olive oil, you might remark that it doesn’t keep well over time – especially once it’s been opened. Year after year, this extremely refined olive oil would become increasingly rancid, and it’d eventually be no better – in fact, measurably worse – than any ordinary bargain oil you’d get at the local grocery store.

Anniversary celebrations aside, if the purpose was to enjoy the oil to the fullest extent of what it has to offer, she'd have been better off using it right after it'd been opened, adding it to every meal that called for it.

Now, I have to admit that I see a bit of myself in this story. And maybe you've found yourself in similar situations. I think of those times when one might have gotten something really special, and followed an instinct to save it – one might even say, *hoard* it – lest we run out of it too soon and not get to enjoy it in the future.

And I've been heartbroken many times, when I've finally had to resign myself to throwing out special treats or foods that I'd been saving up for the right time – a special occasion – only for it to be wasted, never to have been enjoyed *at all*.

Yes, a measure of restraint can be an indication of virtue – having too much of a good thing at one time can be sign of vice. And practicing some strategic temperament over impulsivity has its place in running a balanced and healthy life.

Yet hoarding, or dawdling on good things, can be a vice of its own, and there are some special things that really do call to be used *when you can*, regardless of whether or not the situation appears to “measure up” to its particular... specialness.

In fact, those special things, treats, foods, etc., may be quite helpful in reminding us that the ordinary times can be celebrated as well. As important as it is to mark and recognize times that are labeled as “special” – be it by tradition, practice, or the stories that come along with them – it may be just as important to remain mindful of the wonder that the present moment offers. And if we can add a nice treat to it, that might go a long way to enhancing the moment, and help us remember that “ordinary time” is precious in itself.

Now that the new year has begun in earnest (getting to the point where it might feel out of place to greet someone with the phrase “Happy New Year!”), the winter holiday season seems to be officially behind us (we don’t even have the Feast of the Epiphany left to celebrate). There will be *other* holidays, minor and major ones – days that might be marked by the calendar manufacturers: Groundhog Day (or Candlemas, if you want to be more traditional); Valentine’s Day (which, like many holidays, may bring its own baggage); Family Day for those in Ontario (a full stat holiday even); eventually some of us might begin some kind of Lenten observance in preparation toward Easter; and so on, among others that could be named.

For now, we’re in the middle of January. Some of us might recognize World Religion Day today, or prepare to honour Martin Luther King Jr. on Monday, especially if you have a US background or connections there. But for the most part, the latter part of January (and into February) simply doesn’t seem have the same spirit of celebration that often comes with December.

Last month, I offered affirmation and encouragement around the increased connection that many of you might partake in during the winter holidays, some of it even face-to-face. Sometimes, having certain special days in the calendar helps us to have a good excuse to get together, or reach out more than we might ordinarily do – it also helps that more people might have more time off, to travel or to set time aside for connecting.

And there’s no reason why some aspects of those practices can’t carry over into this time of the year. It might not involve the same level of extravagance that some of you might take over holiday times, and there might be less time and space for that anyway, but the spirit of connection need not dwindle away. If anything, there may be a greater call – and a larger need – to diligently carry it through.

I am aware that many of you already have a practice of regularly checking in with some of your family, friends, or neighbours, maybe

weekly or even daily, and that is a practice that can allow you to maintain the specialness of the moments that every day may offer, even if the calendar doesn't offer an "official" excuse to do so.

Or... maybe that practice has fallen off by the wayside, or you might be wondering about how to start it up in the first place.

I have spoken before about approaching the practice of new year resolutions a little differently. Rather than taking an attitude of rigid goals or specific tasks, I might instead think of the year as having a *theme*, and the theme of renewing connection has resonated with me lately.

While staying connected with my support network (or being part of that network for others) is not new to me, I've lately felt the need to pay extra attention to that area of my life. One practice that I've found very helpful over the past while is to schedule calls with people in my life that I haven't connected with as much as I've wanted. Now, long "catch-up" calls may feel daunting, but it can help if we agree to schedule future follow-up calls from the get-go, so that we are comfortable leaving some conversations unfinished. The calls I've been having with my friends and family tend to take about an hour – but there are other options.

The New York Times columnist Jancee Dunn suggests scheduling 8-minute calls, which make it likelier that her potential connections will be inclined to wedge in the check-ins into their schedules, without feeling obligated to stay longer, and encouraging more frequent follow-ups.

I don't know what might be *your* magic number, but exploring discrete morsels of time might be one way to make connecting, or re-connecting, a more manageable task (if that's something you struggle with).

Here, at our church, we have an established (and re-emerging) practice of holding some opportunities for connection, even if there isn't a

particular calendar date to honour (sometimes, it's precisely because there isn't a particular date to honour, which in turn offers more space and time).

In a bit over a week, we have an opportunity to be part of our soup fundraiser, and our auction will come up in a couple of months. Some of you are interested in hosting small-group dinners at your place. The dates when these happen don't necessarily hold particular significance – beyond the fact that each of us is setting them in the calendar and intentionally making them special out of our own accord.

My friends, whatever your intentions might be for this year, they don't need to wait for the calendar to give you an excuse. Sure, the calendar might sometimes make that easier, but living in “ordinary time” need not be a barrier toward finding special moments.

If anything, my friends, ordinary time may in itself be the perfect reason, the perfect excuse, for seeking out what is special about the here, and the now.

My friends, who knows when the opportunity might pass. And saving the special moments only for what we expect might be the special occasions might mean that we could miss out entirely, like a bottle of expensive olive oil that has been left out too long. Now is the time, my friends, for co-creating special occasions.

So may it be,
In the spirit of ordinary connection,
Amen

*Suggested Hymns:***Opening Hymn #353 Golden Breaks the Dawn**

Words: v. 1 from the Chinese of T. C. Chao, b. 1888,

trans. by Frank W. Price and Daniel Niles,

~)| v. 2 by John Andrew Storey, 1935-1997

Music: Hu Te-Ai, b.c. 1900,

~)| harmony by David Dawson, 1939-

LE P'ING

Hymn #77 Seek Not Afar for Beauty

~)| Words: Minot Judson Savage, 1841-1918

Music: Cyril V. Taylor, b. 1907, © Hope Publishing Co.

COOLINGE

Closing #356 Will You Seek in Far-Off Places?

~)| Words: Alicia S. Carpenter, 1930- , based on a text by Walt Whitman,

© 1976 Walton Music Corp.

Music: From J. A. Freylinghausen's *Geistreiches Gesangbuch*, 1705,

arr. by Norman Luboff, 1917-1987, © 1976 Walton Music Corp.

GUTER HIRTE