

The Summer Day

Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean—
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down—
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

—Mary Oliver

Sermon: A Short Season

A few weeks ago, I started to hear them, those harbingers of doom with their deceptively cheerful chirp. The crickets were making music in the summer evenings and we all know what that means. Every year when the crickets start their chirping, I am instantly nine years old again, dreading, counting, the sword of school beginning hung above my head.

It has been a long, long time since I was nine and yet the cricket's lively chorus still makes me melancholy. I know no one is going to come along and stuff me behind a desk and make me learn multiplication tables again, but it is hard to

see the summer go. It seems as if it just began. Wasn't Memorial Day just last week? Didn't the leaves come out recently? What happened?

Somehow, though the seasons are measured exactly the same, three months for each, summer is the shortest season. Part of this is due to the immense number of things we feel we need to pack into June, July and August. Have we attended the required number of festivals? Have we had enough Bar-B-Ques? Have we hiked enough, kayaked enough, swum or golfed or soft balled enough? Gardened, canned, pickled, built a deck? Got in enough boat rides? Gone to enough weddings or family reunions or outdoor concerts? In the back of our heads, those words are running, "You can't do this in January." To the point where the end of summer almost comes as a relief. "Can we stop now?"

The obligations of summer can leave us exhausted and when summer finally closes, when the last leaf is undeniably red and even the crickets have packed up their little fiddles, we may be secretly relieved. Relieved and yet somehow dissatisfied, as if we have somehow cheated ourselves of something. We have clutched frantically at summer and it has somehow escaped our grasp, leaving us like children who discover that the gems they gathered from the bottom of the lake are only grey pebbles after all. We want to go back and do it all over again, but do it right this time.

Beauty can be found in any season and, even if we shudder at the oncoming winter, we know beauty is there as well. But it is hard to beat the lush, incredible beauty of summer in Central New York. So one of the things I want to do in the summer has nothing to do with doing. I want to spend what days of summer are left absorbing all of it, the leaves, the flowers, the scents, the birdsong, the feel of the warm, enveloping air. It's easy to see why the original Spiritualists, living as they did, as we do, in this climate, called heaven Summerland. Perpetual summer, with all those we have loved, a sort of everlasting Fourth of July, that would be my idea of heaven.

But would we really find it so? Would we love summer as much as we do after three hundred years? After a millennium? Is summer all the more precious to us because we know it ends? Would anything really matter as much, give us as much delight, if there were no end to us, no end to time? Is it that summer will pass that gives it the intensity and thrill? Is it because we will all pass that makes us hold each other a little bit closer? Summer is fleeting; its blossoms and butterflies will be gone soon. We are more amazed by the beauty around us because it flies so quickly.

We know all living things end. This is the heartbreaking truth that makes our time together so important, so valuable. A lifetime can seem like a short season, a

blink of an eye. When we cannot say, carelessly, I've got all the time in the world to do, to be, that's when the reality that our lives are not infinite comes home to us. We mourn that our lives sometimes feel as brief as a Mayfly's and yet it is that very brevity which makes us seek purpose and meaning, which concentrates our attention. Art is created because, not in spite of, the restrictions that are put on it, the restrictions of an instrument, the restrictions of canvas, the restrictions of the human body and our lives, too, are art created within the confines of the span of life. Life is not infinite and, so we are made conscious of the quality of life we have.

But what is it that we are supposed to do with this most precious of commodities? How are we supposed to spend those fifty, seventy, one hundred years? Isn't this what we look to religion to tell us? Or reject religion because it presumes to tell us? Some of the answers are unpalatable and some seem too difficult or fantastic for everyday use. As with so much, it is the answers we find for ourselves that make more sense to us, not the answers we are given.

This is a seeker's church. We don't tell you what you are supposed to do. We invite you on a lifelong quest, a quest that may never stop but may, as we follow the way, give us better views, more enriched and deep lives, suggest better questions. But there may be some signposts to follow. Perhaps, like spending (and

isn't that a telling word) the summer, we should allow ourselves time and effort not in pursuit of the prizes the world seems to offer but in less tangible but equally important ways—getting to know ourselves, getting to know others, getting to know the world. And getting to value ourselves, others and the world. Without close attention to what is around us, we are not always able to accurately value the things that are right in front of us until those things have disappeared.

We fall in love with the earth every summer and yet development continues to cover the very landscape that we love. Where will we find the places where other lives can be lived in peace, lives that go on wings or paws rather than in cars? Where will we find places where the trillium and other wild flowers will delight us next spring? And how will we ensure that this earth is still a place of peace and plenty, not just for us but for our children's children's children.

We fall in love with the earth each summer, those of us who have leisure and means to enjoy it. For many, however, summer is not the season of joy and laughter. While some enjoy festivals, ice cream, fairs and family reunions, others find that summer doesn't change the cramped and miserable places in their hearts. Poverty, addiction, disturbance of heart and mind know no season.

And, while summer works its magic, hate has found many victories this year. We have a Confederate flag hanging two houses away from this church.

What should we do in response? How should we act? When should we act? Can we let this symbol of bigotry stand and go about our business? What harm does this do to people in this church? What harm does this do to people in this village? Who are we if we don't do something to counter this message of hate? These are questions that deserve our consideration, not in the distant future but now.

Because summer is so short and winter is so long, because life is so short and we don't know what lies on the other side of it, the events that have marred this summer seem all the more egregious, unnecessary, perverse. Summer's beauty spills all around us but for many the temptations of hate blind them to the joys of the world. When hate becomes the only enjoyment in life, when denigrating others is the only way some people can feel that they, themselves, are worth anything, things are badly wrong. What do we offer that can set things right?

As we feel summer slipping away, we feel more than ever the precariousness of life. We feel in our bones that life is precious and simply to live is a miracle. How can we not want others to share in that feeling?

As we sense change in the air, we seek something permanent, something that can see us through the hard winters ahead. For this church, for U-U's in general, the answer has been love, universal love. It is the first

word in our affirmation of faith. Love is the doctrine of this church; love is what we teach. How are we to teach love?

Teaching love is often misunderstood. It can be interpreted as an unquestioning acceptance of everything that everyone does, as if all actions were as worthy as all people are. Clearly, that is not the case. We need not lose our critical faculties, our ability to tell right from wrong, when we love. Those of us who have had something to do with raising children are pretty clear about the distinction between loving them while not loving everything that they do. And we are all, equally, children of the universe.

And so our challenge is to add to the total of love here in the world. First and foremost, we need to affirm those whose humanity has been denied. We need to be clear that we understand what the Confederate flag stands for and that the message of racism is not something that can be tolerated. We need to be clear that we stand with those whose lives have been blighted by racism. But we need to do so in such a way that we do not lose our own humanity in the process. We need also to understand that we ourselves are not pure, that no one is. And we need to leave the door open to reconciliation, remembering that the most hateful person is really only making his or her own hell on earth, because a heart full of hate has no room for joy. Our goal is to make a heaven, here, now, to make earth Summerland.

These are hard times for loving. Hate and more hate are the impulses that are encouraged, escalating people to violence. Greed and more greed are excused and even praised. The tough and the selfish are exalted rather than the humble and the kind. Because of this we need love more than ever. Because only in love can we find the motive force for good in this world. Only in love, not in the luxury of self-righteousness, not in hate, not the desire for personal gain, can we find can we find the spirit that will truly make this a new world, a good world, as close to heaven as mortals can create.

As summer slides into fall, we face the changing season. But we always face changes. Every day we face changes in our lives—our health, our relationships, our general circumstances. As well we face changes in the world around us. Because change is constant, each day we face the challenge not just of living, but of living a life of integrity, a life in which we try to become the best humans we can be. As summer slides into fall, we face the end of one season and the beginning of the next. We face our own mortality, the brevity of each life. We know that we are finite, fallible, but we also know that we are given the gift of choice. Within the limits that we have, it is up to us to decide how we will use our time here. Shall we choose to live in Summerland or in perpetual winter? And so as Mary Oliver asks, “Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”