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Beginnings and the sweetness of apples.

Taking Stock

You couldn't find a fresh apple around here the other day, not a real one from New Hampshire. The Other Store had apples from far away and said you had to drive up to Hollow Hill Farm for the real thing. What good fortune that our own Eleanor Jenkins, who lives in an orchard, happened by that day, a box of Baldwins in the front seat. There's nothing like the taste and crunch of an apple right off the tree.

Eleanor had had guests the previous weekend, friends who come every year to help pick, sort, clean, cut and press apples into cider. She has another houseful of guests this weekend, also annual visitors. They come to work, to make cider. Every year, they arrive and begin the familiar process yet again. They follow the same steps, pick apples from the same trees, collect them in the same baskets. They haul them up the same hillside, dump them into the same wooden crates, core them with the same knives. They stand in the same barn around the same press, breathing in the same sweet musty fragrance year after year.

Ecclesiastes wrote, "To everything there is a season." You might say, as we cycle through the seasons, that there's nothing new under the sun, that history repeats itself, each season bringing the same chores and traditions. Sometimes we feel the same year to year, too. No matter where we go, there we are. Some of our challenges can last a lifetime, and in our relationships, who doesn't return to the same squabbles over and over again?

And yet is anything the same? Certainly the people gathered around the cider press aren't the same as they were the year before. Everyone's a year older, made new by the events of the year that's just passed – changed by the times, grown by conversations and living through joys and disappointments. How can we not be changed by life, by death, by new babies, by elections?

This year's crop of *apples* isn't the same as last year's either – their appearance and taste, their very number, reflect this particular year's days of sunshine, its temperatures, rains and snow. Like many annual beginnings, the cider ritual begins both familiar and brand new.

Of course, everything began with an apple, right? The fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. With Eve's one bite of that forbidden fruit, the world changed forever. Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, is the traditional anniversary of the creation of Adam and Eve. Rosh Hashanah is about looking back and then ahead: God looks back and recalls all of God's creations, then determines their fate for the year ahead.¹

Jews celebrated their New Year – and Yom Kippur ten days later – over the past two weeks. They made time for introspection, self-examination and repentance and engaged in rituals such as

¹ http://www.chabad.org/holidays/JewishNewYear/template_cdo/aid/4762/jewish/What-Is-Rosh-Hashanah.htm

going to a lake or river and ceremonially casting your sins into the water. Sweetness was a theme. Prayers asked that all God's creations be granted a *sweet* new year – symbolized by eating apples dipped in honey. On the second night of Rosh Hashanah, another ritual was thinking about a *new fruit* you will eat in the new year....

We might bear in mind these rituals when we enjoy October's apples: reflecting on the past and then wishing for sweetness going forward. "A year is gone," writes UU Rev. Robert Weston in his poem, "New Year":

"It matters not when it began
for it has ended now.
There were other years,
And some began with a birthday
And some with a death;
Some with one day of the month and some with another.
Some began with a song and others with a lament,
But today I start another year, whatever the month or season;
It is what lies before me that concerns me now...."²

A new year begins today. This is true every day. Something is always beginning. Sometimes, beginnings can be complicated.

Thirty-two years ago, friends introduced me to a guy named John Tabor. He lived on the west coast, I in New York City. We carried on a long-distance relationship for a while and then decided to give living together a whirl – maybe this was the real thing. I found someone to sublet my apartment, cleaned it and packed up my things. I also made sure to lay in store several dozen Granny Smith apples – my lunch, part of my everyday routine. I bought enough to last a long time. We loaded everything into the yellow Subaru, a small basket of apples just behind the front seat, within reach, for the trip, and the rest of them in a bag in the way back. We headed west, camping and visiting friends and relatives along the way.

At the California border, Donner Pass, we were stopped at an agriculture inspection station. I rolled down the window, and the officer said, "Do you have any fruit in the car?" Uh-oh. As I was reaching back for the basket, thinking to hand over just those few apples that were left in it, John, son of an Eagle Scout, spoke up. "Wait a minute!" he called out. "We have a huge bag of apples in the back!"

I couldn't believe it. What did he think he was doing with my perfectly safe, healthy apples? On some level, which makes no sense at all but at the time felt huge, those apples were essential to what we were doing. And now this – it felt like our plan was in ruins. I found myself in tears. Stopped the car and got out, upset.

That smart boyfriend *got it* right away. An auspicious beginning, he rose to the occasion. "You know," he said, "this isn't only about the apples." Of course it wasn't. We were embarking on

² Robert T. Weston, "New Year," *Rejoice Together*, ed. Helen Pickett. Boston: Skinner House Books, 2000, p.105.

something big and scary. A new beginning, with a lot at stake. At that point, just about anything would have tipped the balance. I thought I needed those apples. Couldn't do this without them! How many of us have embarked on new chapters feeling that we don't have enough, maybe forgetting that, apples or no apples, we *are* enough.

This time of year, I confess to feeling a sense of “ritual envy” – Unitarian Universalism has relatively few rituals. Meanwhile, Islam is celebrating the beginning of its New Year with a month of remembrance, and Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are Judaism's most holy days, full of beautiful, ancient rituals.

Our culture celebrates the new year in the winter, though in many ways autumn is also a time of beginnings: the start of the new school year; the start of the official church year for many Christian and UU churches and fellowships. And let's not forget that football also starts in the fall. Talk about ritual. These days, the world is watching the beginnings of football games like never before.

You may remember Tim Tebow, the Denver Broncos' quarterback six years ago, who would fall to his knees in prayer after a great play, his finger pointing to heaven – a clear religious gesture. Last year, African American Colin Kaepernick became known for protesting at the beginning of a game during the national anthem. He did so to call attention to the oppression of people of color in this country. According to Professor Will Robin of the University of Maryland, “Kaepernick first started by sitting on the bench during the national anthem, and then he and [teammate Eric] Reid spoke actually with a former Green Beret and talked about what the next step would be in terms of this protest...they decided to kneel. [Eric Reid said,] ‘I remember thinking our posture was like a flag flown at half mast to mark a tragedy.’”³

This story illustrates a beginning, something new that's steeped in intention – taking action, seriously reflecting on it, making adjustments and then setting out again. In an NPR story yesterday, reporter Brook Gladstone said, “Kaepernick was so explicit about searching for and choosing the most respectful gesture he could. I read his gesture as almost a prayerful effort to have America...actually fulfill its promise.”⁴ What more humble, respectful gesture is there than kneeling?

Unitarian Universalism centers on living our values, our seven principles printed on the back of our order of service. A young faith tradition that has grown out of Judeo-Christian teachings, it draws from many sources. You can find a list of some of these sources in our hymnal, just before the first hymn, or on our website, you can click on Principles and Sources. One of the sources of this faith is “wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life.”

May we take a leaf from other faiths' traditions and appreciate their wisdom in this season of beginnings. Let our New England apples – the real thing – awaken us to our own beginnings and remind us to look honestly at things we have said and done and thought. Let us take stock. With

³ <http://www.npr.org/podcasts/452538775/on-the-media>

⁴ Ibid.

an eye to next time around, let us trust that we have what it takes for the journey. We have enough. We are enough. And let us infuse our hopes, going forward, with the sweetness of apples dipped in honey.

So may it be.