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On the Far Side of the Equinox

READING - An excerpt (adapted) from the novel *Autumn* by Ali Smith

All across the country, there was misery and rejoicing.

All across the country, what had happened whipped about by itself as if a live electric wire had snapped off a pylon in a storm and was whipping about in the air above the trees, the roofs, the traffic.

All across the country, people felt it was the wrong thing. All across the country, people felt it was the right thing. All across the country, people felt they'd really lost. All across the country, people felt they'd really won. All across the country, people felt they'd done the right thing and other people had done the wrong thing. ... All across the country, people felt unsafe. All across the country, people were laughing their heads off. All across the country, people felt legitimized. All across the country, people felt bereaved and shocked. All across the country, people felt righteous. All across the country, people felt sick. All across the country, people felt history at their shoulder. All across the country, people felt history meant nothing....All across the country, people threatened other people. All across the country, people told people to leave. All across the country, politicians lied. All across the country, politicians fell apart. All across the country, politicians vanished. ... All across the country, nobody spoke about it. All across the country, nobody spoke about anything else. All across the country, racist bile was general. All across the country, people said it wasn't that they didn't like immigrants. All across the country, people said it was about control....All across the country, the haves and the have nots stayed the same. All across the country, the usual tiny percent of the people made their money out of the usual huge percent of the people. All across the country, money money money money. All across the country, no money no money no money no money....All across the country, the country was divided, a fence here, a wall there, a line drawn here, a line crossed there,

a line you don't cross here,
a line you better not cross there,
a line of beauty here,
a line dance there,
a line you don't even know exists here,
a line you can't afford there,
a whole new line of fire,
line of battle,
end of the line,
here/there.

SERMON: *On the Far Side of the Equinox*

On our last day together, my classmates and I, an assortment of different faith traditions, ended up in a chapel at Wellesley College. To my surprise, the familiarity of this old church undid me and I wept, sitting in an old wooden pew surrounded by stained glass windows, facing an altar, the organist playing some old hymn.

In that interfaith seminar, students from BU, Harvard, Hebrew College and Andover Newton had immersed ourselves in back-to-back religious rituals for ten days straight. Friday afternoon at the Boston Islamic Cultural Center. Saturday at Temple Beth Zion in Brookline. Sunday at a megachurch. Monday. A nighttime Zen gathering by a meadow. Then the Sikh Gurdwara in Milford, where we sat on the floor for hours. And the Lakshmi Temple in Ashland, where we stood for two hours, as a Hindu priest on a stepladder scrubbed, anointed and prayed over a statue of the god Vishnu.

A young classmate tried to articulate how unsettled he felt, much as he had tried to stay open during each visit, knowing that we all are one and knowing that whatever Mystery calls us to engage in rituals is one and the same Mystery. No matter. Many of us felt similarly shaken, out of kilter. It didn't matter that the religious teachings I grew up with differed greatly with my current UU understandings. After all those experiences so outside my own, sitting in an old church felt like a relief, a comfort. A coming back to center.

Marion wrote from England this week about relishing walking into an old church by the sea.

The silence was at ease with the ocean's battlings. The pews sat in an old peace, borne of years of ritual and faith. Dedication was writ in the details – the carvings in the wooden ceiling over the entranceway; the stained glass that traces the light as it moves through the day into the evening....

Two weeks ago, when journalist Cokie Roberts died, an NPR story told of her deep relationship to the Catholic church – her outspoken anger at it for any number of reasons and her abiding love of it, too. In the hard-driving world of news cycles, competition and opinion, she found there what she needed to restore her balance.

Not everyone has positive associations with places of worship, but many of us do have places we count on to hold us and help restore our equilibrium when life gets out of whack – when we struggle in our relationships or with our priorities...or when we struggle with our mortality and our doubt. "I'm going to be in my garden all weekend," says a workaholic neighbor. "I'm going to the barn," says a world-weary friend. "I'm going outside," says a tired mother. "We're going camping," says our hard-working daughter.

Living stirs us up. One week, the headlines hurl us into a tunnel of despair, and the next week they send us into orbit, giddy with euphoria. Neither is great for the spirit. Our well-being calls on us to notice when we're out of balance and to engage in mindful pauses. We need to know how to find that re-set button that helps even out the wild swings of our emotional pendulum.

When I first read the Ali Smith passage that Andrea shared, it reminded me of U.S. elections in the past few cycles, so close, the country always split in two. It turns out that the author was describing the aftermath of the Brexit vote in Ireland, but it could have been about the U.S. or France or any number of countries these days where people are pitted against each other.

You could say that the opposite extremes in that reading balance each other out, but that makes for no story of quiet, soul-feeding equilibrium! Rather, it describes the loud, argumentative, angst-filled times in which we live. Shouting the other down, hearing but not listening, needing to win at all costs, wears us out.

Should we root for our principles? Should we fight for them? Should we be willing to go to jail to defend our highest values? Yes! And to do that work, we need balance. A steady diet of outrage may feel good in the delivery, but it's not likely the road to enlightenment.

I often think of an image of balance from seminary. At some point in every class, instructor Ken Reeves would draw a line on the board, with an arrow on the left pointing to the word "Reactivity" and an arrow on the right pointing to the word "Thoughtfulness." Reactivity and Thoughtfulness.

His field was healthy congregations and conflict resolution. He'd describe a church in crisis, everyone mad or anxious or misunderstood, everyone lined up behind their story, and up would go the arrows. We always have a choice, after all, how to react: from the gut, saying whatever comes to mind in the moment, or from a place of thoughtfulness, informed by time spent in quiet reflection. Reacting from the gut is easier – it requires nothing but reflex. The other takes focus and work.

We've seen both reactive and thoughtful styles of leadership in the White House in recent years. We know they both look like. We also know from our own lives these ways of reacting. Where, in your story, do you want to be on that continuum?

Over the semester, Reeves would spin out tales of conflict and unkind behaviors and hurt feelings. Eventually he'd skip the words and just draw the arrows. I often see it in my mind's eye: Reactivity and Thoughtfulness. A choice for all of us.

Making time for spiritual practice helps bring us into balance. We might take a walk or gaze out the window, not for a few minutes but for longer – twenty or thirty or forty minutes, the longer and more often the better. Some of us meditate, which trains us to return, over and over again, to the mantra, the focus, the practice. Spiritual practice helps clear the mind.

I count on a practice of daily gratitude that helps keep me grounded. Once I start naming all I'm grateful for, it's hard to stop – friends and family members and ancestors and trees and art and colors and shapes and ideas....

Another practice I value, once or twice each day, is simply turning off the Internet signal. Just the act of clicking that key feels good. "Ah, one less thing pushing me!" Not that the Internet is pushing me, of course – I'm the one who's hooked. But when it's turned off and I reflexively go

to check email or the latest headlines, that little signal in the corner of the screen reminds me that I made a choice, that I deliberately decided to set Internet access aside and instead seek balance.

In Transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau's time, the post office brought similar distraction:

“In proportion as our inward life fails, [he wrote,] we go more constantly and desperately to the post office. You may depend on it, that poor fellow who walks away with the greatest number of letters, proud of his extensive correspondence, has not heard from himself this long while.”

Spiritual practice is different from relaxation. It calls for intentionality and discipline, especially in turbulent times like these that tempt us to stay revved up all the time. “Breathe,” says UU Rev. Lynn Ungar.

Breathe, said the wind.

How can I breathe at a time like this,
when the air is full of the smoke
of burning tires, burning lives?

Just breathe, the wind insisted.

Easy for you to say, if the weight of
injustice is not wrapped around your throat,
cutting off all air.

I need you to breathe.

I need you to breathe.

Don't tell me to be calm
when there are so many reasons
to be angry, so much cause for despair!

I didn't say to be calm, said the wind,

I said to breathe.

*We're going to need a lot of air
to make this hurricane together.*

Last week, the Fall Equinox slipped by without a whisper, sun and earth poised, tilted in the sky, in just a way to create a moment of balance between light and darkness. Twelve hours of daylight and twelve hours of darkness. This happens twice a year. In the spring, the days grow longer until the summer solstice in June. And after last week's Fall Equinox, we tumble into autumn. Every day we will lose about 3 minutes of daylight until the shortest darkest day in December.

Let us consider that equinox moment. Imagine the celestial bodies in peaceful balance. A quiet. I invite us into a meditation on the stillness of that moment. Close your eyes, if you like, and take a few slow, low breaths. Feel the points of contact between your body and the seat of the chair. Its back. Notice the feel of your clothing on your legs, your torso, your arms. Flex your calf muscles and release them. Tighten your arms, make a fist and release them. Feel the morning air on your face, coming into your body cool, and now warm on the way out. Easy, gentle. In...and out a few times.

Give your self a little shake. A shimmy. A big breath...and here we are! How refreshing to stop, even for a minute, to just be.

Long before today's many religions splintered off into their distinctive rituals, the ancients celebrated this time of year. Far more connected to the skies than we, they watched the sun and moon and stars and created the Fall Equinox festival of Mabon. For them, as they felt the light change and the days shorten, Mabon was naturally a time of balance and reflection. A time to go within and contemplate. Mabon was also a time of plenty – as the last of the harvest came in.

This time of year calls us to hold the mix of somber anticipation of winter...and gratitude for earth's abundance – the horn of plenty overflowing with squash, cabbage, carrots, beets, second crops of greens, apples, cosmos and zinnias; fall's cosmos, zinnias, golden rod and dahlias ablaze.

There's much to celebrate as we juggle the realities of life. We juggle making social change while nurturing our souls. We juggle navigating noisy conflict while inviting quiet. We juggle preparing for the darkness while celebrating the harvest. In relationships, we juggle setting boundaries and inviting connection. We juggle struggling with the angst of our differences while finding solidarity and hope in our common humanity. It's a balancing act.

Let us notice when life tips us off balance so we can make course adjustments and right ourselves, and let us be grateful for the places and practices that restore our equilibrium. Happy Mabon!