

Summertime

Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver

June 16, 2024

Reflection on the Theme by Alexis Balkowitsch

I've never been completely sold on the adoration of Summertime. My heart lies in Spring and Autumn, those transitional seasons with riotous colors and unpredictable weather, when the world is waking up or letting go. The coziness of Winter isn't far behind—when the Earth encourages us to rest, even through the bustle of holidays and New Year's Resolutions. Summer, though...these days, Summer can be a little tough, with heat, drought, and wildfires a constant reminder of the fragility of our singular home.

Even as a kid, Summer always felt very bittersweet. Of course, this book-loving night owl loved the freedom to read whatever and whenever I wanted—and with no early mornings! But in the era before internet, social media, and cell phones, there was always a certain loneliness associated with summertime. I grew up out in the country, without a big family or a neighborhood full of kids. So summer vacation often meant long periods of finding ways to entertain myself, and missing the daily contact of my school friends. My adolescent brain frequently tried to frame this social dry spell as the perfect time for a Hollywood Rom-Com style Glow-Up. I'd return to school a few inches taller, however many pounds thinner was fashionable, and infinitely more organized—ready to take on the school year as the most enviable Straight-A Queen Bee. Spoiler alert: while Summer may seem magical, it is not *literally* magic.

But what if I do take a lesson from the long, lazy days of Summer? Stop, take a breath, enjoy the moment. And then I remember all the things that truly were magical about Summer. It's nothing big or impressive—no epic travel adventures or grand events. It's fresh plums from our small orchard, Mom's barbecued chicken, the smell of sunscreen and sun-ripened blackberries. And my favorite thing from my countryside childhood home—watching the stars for hours on end.

Those summer evenings remind me of a haunting poem by James Agee, which became one of my favorite art songs composed by Samuel Barber:

“Sure on this shining night
Of starmade shadows round,
Kindness must watch for me
This side the ground.
The late year lies down the north.
All is healed, all is health.
High summer holds the earth.
Hearts all whole.
Sure on this shining night I weep for wonder wandering far alone
Of shadows on the stars.”

So here I am now, a few decades later, and some things have certainly changed—my mom's no longer here to grill the chicken, I live in town where I can't see as many stars, I have to buy my plums from the store. But if I continue to slow down, stop, and look, the Essence of those things—the flavor of those memories—are still there to savor.

Gwendolyn Morgan, "Heart, Zendo" from *Flight Feathers*, Wayfarer Books, an imprint of Homebound Publications, 2022.

Her heart alone cannot
bear the sorrow of the world.
Yes, she has tried this practice.

This morning she drinks tea
by the river, stirs in wild honey, milk,
gladness. Under the eaves

in her room
she listens to the song of the rain
until the meditation bell rings.

Gratitude enkindles light:
a grateful heart
illuminates the space around it.

Summertime© by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert

Growing up in a family of teachers, summer was the time when we got to do things we loved - the adults around me didn't work as much, and I didn't have to go to school. It took me too long, probably, to learn that everyone didn't have that kind of schedule or luxury. Don't get me wrong, teachers work hard, and many of them take summer jobs just to make ends meet. But from a kids' perspective, it was kind of sweet. Things slowed down and time was expansive. We enjoyed leisure for its own sake.

The reading this morning was taken from a book that the staff of this church and I are currently reading by Oliver Burkeman – it's called *4,000 Weeks*. The title comes from the average human lifespan of eighty years, which is just over 4,000 weeks. The author calls this average human lifespan "absurdly, insultingly brief." And though the rest of the title has "time management" in it, he actually questions the notion of time management – questions, in fact, our idea of time as an abstract entity. He goes back to medieval England when peasants often didn't make it to adulthood, much less 80 years, but also wouldn't have worried about time. He writes, "Even on your most exhausting days, it probably wouldn't have occurred to you that you had 'too much to do', that you needed to hurry, or that life was moving too fast, let alone that you'd gotten your work-life balance wrong." He says all that is because, as far as we know, they didn't experience time as this abstract entity or as a *thing* at all. Here Burkeman writes, "If that sounds confusing, it's because our modern way of thinking about time is so deeply entrenched that we forget it even is a way of thinking; we're like the proverbial fish who have no idea what water is, because it surrounds them completely."

I like history because it reminds us that things weren't always as they are now. Like the peasants whose work was tied to nature and couldn't work ahead by milking the cows all at once and be done with it. Or our newest Federal Holiday that takes place this Wednesday, Juneteenth, that marks the two year delay between the Emancipation Proclamation and the arrival of Union Troops in Galveston Bay, Texas to announce that more than 250,000 enslaved black people in the state were free.

But rather than talking about time, I'd like us to simply experience this time we have together now. I've found some poems by our own members, like the one I read by Gwen Morgan earlier, and Black poets, as I anticipate the holiday this week. I was grateful to find this website called groundcontrolparenting.com by Carol Sutton Lewis. She writes a blog for parents to "help you raise confident, curious Black children." It's a great resource for those of us of any race who want to be sure to include Black voices in our learning, because even if you don't have children at home, we are all hopefully still parenting ourselves as we learn and grow and mature. I begin with a poem by Paul Lawrence Dunbar, one of the first African American poets to gain national recognition. He lived from 1872-1906. I'll read his poem and offer some silence, though not the full 90 seconds of meditation we did earlier. This poem is called *Summer in the South*. (and is in the public domain)

The oriole sings in the greening grove
As if he were half-way waiting,
The rosebuds peep from their hoods of green,
Timid and hesitating.
The rain comes down in a torrent sweep
And the nights smell warm and piney,
The garden thrives, but the tender shoots
Are yellow-green and tiny.
Then a flash of sun on a waiting hill,
Streams laugh that erst were quiet,
The sky smiles down with a dazzling blue
And the woods run mad with riot.

I guess I'm not done discussing time with this next poem, by one of our members, Gay Garland Reed. It fits with the book, 4,000 weeks. The poem is called *Forever*. (Gay Garland Reed, "Forever" from *Dragonfly Spirit*, Outskirts Press, 2017.)

"It'll last you forever," the salesman said,
as he touted the sturdiness of the pan.
Impressive!
But I am almost at the end of my forever,
I thought.

When I was young,
forever was f...o...r...e...v...e...r
A long time.
Too distant for my 20/20 eyes to see.
Too big for my imagination to embrace.

Now I'm bumping up against my forever
It is contracting.
Pulling into itself.

Who knew that time was so elastic?

Rita Dove is Commonwealth Professor of English at the University of Virginia. She was poet laureate of the United States from 1993 to 1995. She won the 1987 Pulitzer Prize in poetry. President Bill Clinton awarded her the 1996 National Humanities Medal, and President Barack Obama presented her with the 2011 National Medal of the Arts. This poem called *Vacation* treats both time and summer:

[link to the poem Vacation](#)

Yolanda Cornelia “Nikki” Giovanni is the author of numerous children books and poetry collections. She, is heralded as one of the nation’s premiere poets and is currently University Distinguished Professor at Virginia Tech.

[link to the poem Knoxville, Tennessee](#)

From Tennessee to New Hampshire, this poem is called *Summer Morn in New Hampshire* and is by Claude McKay who was born in Jamaica and moved to the US for college. His first book of poetry was published in 1912. *Summer Morn in New Hampshire* is in the public domain.

All yesterday it poured, and all night long
I could not sleep; the rain unceasing beat
Upon the shingled roof like a weird song,
Upon the grass like running children’s feet.
And down the mountains by the dark cloud kissed,
Like a strange shape in filmy veiling dressed,
Slid slowly, silently, the wraith-like mist,
And nestled soft against the earth’s wet breast.
But lo, there was a miracle at dawn!
The still air stirred at touch of the faint breeze,
The sun a sheet of gold bequeathed the lawn,
The songsters twittered in the rustling trees.
And all things were transfigured in the day,
But me whom radiant beauty could not move;
For you, more wonderful, were far away,
And I was blind with hunger for your love.

I hope you’ve enjoyed these summer poems. I have not written many poems myself – it’s not my skill to capture imagery in so brief a form, but I love that others have the skill and share it with us generously. I thought it would be nice to mark the change into summer with a different kind of experience today. So, I hope you’ve relaxed a bit into your summer, however it may unfold for you these few months. May your pace slow down and time become expansive. May you enjoy some leisure for its own sake. Our final poem is by member, Jennifer Pratt Walter, called Unity.

[link to the poem Unity](#)