

NATURE AND THE SPIRITED LIFE

Fall Equinox Reflections by Rev. Dr. Ed Piper
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This is my favorite time of year: warm days, cool crisp mornings and evenings, clear blue skies in the daytime, and clear starry skies at night. Already the leaves on some of the maple trees are beginning to turn, harbingers of the brilliant foliage to come. We are especially fortunate that here in the Shenandoah Valley, the transitional seasons of fall and spring last for weeks. Who could ask for more? But fall is also a time for reflection—a time for imitating nature by storing our energy in ways that will sustain us during the dark and sometimes dreary months ahead. In his book *Seasons of the Self*, Max Coats writes:

I could not live only in Summer's Great Deception, as I could not live in Spring alone.
 I need to know of time and feel its passing motion on my face in some September wind.
 And know that life has time and time is life,
 And I, like days and seasons, am passing, being, and yet to be. [p. 46]

The autumn equinox is one of the two days each year when the hours of day are exactly equal to the hours of night—when **everyone on earth experiences twelve hours of each**. Imagine that: a day when the whole human race shares a universal experience! As Patricia Montley explains in her book titled *In Nature's Honor*, “On the equinox the sun rises due east and sets due west on the horizon, but each day from now until Winter Solstice in the northern hemisphere, it will continue to rise and set a little farther south. The nights will grow still longer and the days shorter. The gods of darkness begin their victory over the gods of light; the wheel of the year turns. Surely our ancient ancestors experienced a certain sadness, even fear, at the withdrawal of the sun since they depended on it for light and warmth. Yet in many places this was also a time of harvest, and if the crops were plentiful, they provided a store of food sufficient for the winter as well as grain and seeds for the next year's planting. Then it was also a time for celebration.” [pp. 253-54]

Autumn in the northern hemisphere is a time for celebrating the year's harvest. The “first” American Thanksgiving was probably celebrated around this time of year, when the harvesting of crops was by now complete. Not until later was the holiday pushed back into the month of November, where it seems oddly out of sync with the harvesting season. Governor William Bradford of the Massachusetts Bay Colony proclaimed Thanksgiving as a time “to thank Almighty God for ‘an abundant harvest of Indian corn, wheat, beans, squashes, and garden vegetables’ . . . as well as game . . . fish and clams.’ Gratitude was also to be rendered to the great Father who ‘has protected us from the ravages of the savages’”—the very same Native Americans who had taught the Pilgrims virtually everything they needed to know in order to survive in the New World. [Montley, p. 272] Had it not been for the helpfulness of the local Indians, the Pilgrim colony almost certainly would not have survived.

Autumn is also a time of reflection. The turning and falling of leaves reminds us of the natural cycle of life and death that includes but also transcends human life. In the Jewish faith, now is the time of the two most important holidays of the year: Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

Rosh Hashanah, which began yesterday, is a time to examine one's behavior during the past year, culminating ten days later in Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, when observant Jews seek forgiveness for their transgressions. "In the days when the Temple in Jerusalem was the center of Judaism, the high priest ritually transferred the sins of the people to a goat, which was then taken into the wilderness and thrown over a precipice, giving rise to the term *scapegoat*." [Montley, p. 257]

In the Wiccan tradition, the Fall Equinox (called Mabon) is a time to prepare for the period of growing darkness that leads to Samhain (All Souls or Halloween), the mysterious bridge between the living and the dead, and then to the Winter Solstice, when the cycle of nature once again begins to tilt toward light. In the words of Starhawk, "This is the time of harvest, of thanksgiving and joy, of leave-taking and sorrow. Now day and night are equal, in perfect balance, and we give thought to the balance and flow within our own lives." [*The Spiral Dance*, p. 208]

So there is a paradox that seems to be hard-wired into our experience of the Autumn Equinox: gratitude and celebration on the one hand, combined with somber reflection and the acknowledgment of our limitations on the other hand. I believe that the key to fully appreciating this time of year is also the key to leading a meaningful spiritual life in all seasons. Simply stated, that key is striving for **balance between opposites**: between light and darkness, between life and death, between celebration and repentance, between the seemingly endless variety of opposed forces within ourselves and in the world that surrounds us. We discover this balance not by denying conflict and paradox, nor by collapsing one side of a conflict into the other, nor by searching for compromise—although this approach often works as a practical solution. Rather, **we learn to live with the creative tension between opposites**. This is the goal of ancient wisdom traditions such as Taoism and contemporary approaches to therapy such as Jungian psychology. The starting point is to acknowledge that these opposites are real, and then use them as a source of energy for living life to the fullest. In the words of Max Coats:

If there is any sense to seasons it is this:

That time is timeless and time is Life.

Not Spring nor Summer, not even Fall is gone.

Each will be what it becomes, as Winter will be Spring.

The seasons play their walk-on parts, and we can hardly hear the lines, much less know all the plot, except the final line:

"Life abides."

[*Seasons of the Self*, p. 53]

GUIDED MEDITATION

In that spirit, let me now invite you into a guided meditation that I hope will help you acknowledge and accept some of the paradoxes in your own life.

Distribute the 3 baskets of stones. Instruct each person to take 2 stones. Start playing the Native American flute music. After everyone has their stones:

"Place one stone in each of your hands. It may be helpful to close your eyes if you are comfortable doing that." [15 sec.]

“Now I want you to think of a way that your life is **out of balance** because of an unresolved issue, a conflict, or a dilemma you are facing. This may be something that is immediate or it may be something you have been struggling with for a long time. [1 min.]

“Let the stone in each of your hands represent each side of this conflict or dilemma. Feel free to move your hands up or down to express whether one side or the other is weighing more heavily in your attempt to deal with this issue.” [1 min.]

“Now I want to invite you to ponder how you might bring this conflict or dilemma into better balance. Allow your hands to move up or down, closer together or farther apart, to express your thoughts and feelings about this dilemma. When you feel that you have reached a comfortable ending to your reflections, hold your hands in place.” [1 min.]

“Now open your eyes and look at where your hands are. This may help you visualize where you are in dealing with this issue, and the work that remains to be done in seeking creative balance in your life. Take the 2 stones with you and put them in a place where you will notice them. Let them serve as a tangible reminder of the importance of maintaining balance in your daily life. [Turn off music.]

HYMN # 100 “I’ve Got Peace Like a River”

Let me close with these words by Kathleen McTigue (# 707)

May the light around us guide our footsteps, and hold us fast to the best and most righteous that we seek.

May the darkness around us nurture our dreams, and give us rest so that we may give ourselves to the work of our world.

Let us seek to remember the wholeness of our lives, the weaving of light and shadow in this great and astonishing dance in which we move.