

Harvest  
October 4, 2015  
UUMSB  
Rev. Carol Allman-Morton

There are lots of public safety, public health, and justice questions we may have about gun violence, especially of the type that happened in Oregon this week. Even though we hear the statistics about crime going down, it is also true that there has been an average of one mass shooting per day in the United States so far this year. We could talk about the statistics around gun violence and the potential for justice-making, and I think we should. But today in our worship service, I want us to think about how we handle what comes our way, our resilience, what gives us hope.

It is a time of harvest. You may have noticed the Jewish harvest festival Sukkot in full swing in the last week. Folks built Sukkahs, or booths, outside their homes to eat and share in meals together, celebrating harvest. Sukkot comes of the heels of the Jewish New Year and Day of Atonement. After coming to grips with our frailties and failings, it is a time to celebrate with gratitude. Right after Sukkot comes Simchat Torah, or the time when the Torah scroll is turned back to the beginning of the Bible. Last week of was also the Muslim holiday of Eid al Adha, or the festival of sacrifice, which includes the tradition of giving a third of an animal to relatives, and a third to people who cannot afford to slaughter an animal. In modern times that often translates into meaningful donations to charity. Our Christian neighbor congregations are today celebrating World Communion Sunday, which is an opportunity for denominations with strong differences in theology and practice to break bread together in the defining sacrament of their faith. In the Northern Hemisphere, we are harvesting our crops and storing up food for the winter, whatever that may look like where we live.

There is a farm on campus at Amherst College that is in its third season. They have a truly amazing output and are working 16 cultivated acres this year, up from first four and then 12 acres. Students work at the farm with two professional farmers, Tobin and Pete, and they use lots of volunteers to help with harvest, including sports teams and clubs. Biology and environmental science classes do research there, and there are lots of opportunities for academic and real world interactions. My office volunteered to help pick tomatoes last week, and we picked over 1,100 pounds in an hour and a half. They put out tons (literally) of food. As much fresh food as the dining hall can process goes there, then they sell to local restaurants, host a faculty and staff farm share with more than 100 families, and they donate to the local survival center, and even with all that, if they had more pickers and processors, they could have put out more food this year. Going down that row of tomatoes with my colleagues, it seemed that 1000s more pounds of tomatoes were lost to the compost because they just weren't picked in time. There is also a pick your own garden that anyone can go to, anytime, and not all the tomatoes were picked there either. The dry summer seemed to be just what the tomatoes wanted this year. Our own backyard postage stamp garden had an impressive output, at least 25 pounds. In other years, farms have the opposite problem, and struggle to keep crops producing. Farming is risky.

In books and movies, in folk tales, in our culture, we have stories we tell about how people who do good things will be rewarded, people who do bad things will be punished and in the end, mostly, things will work out. The story of Job is all about when that narrative fails and we have talked about that some together over the years. Inequity all around us. It is hard to watch people we love suffer. With all the veggies and abundance coming into my home this fall

I have been thinking about harvest and how for so many of us there are times of plenty and times of need. Do you remember the Biblical stories of the gleaners? I thought about them a lot when I was picking tomatoes. It is part of Jewish law to leave some produce in the field for the gleaners, people who are very poor, without land of their own, to come through and get enough to eat. This practice continued in western culture, captured in the famous 19<sup>th</sup> century French painting by Millet of three gleaners in a wheat field. The modern day food pantry is a similar idea, for a non-agrarian society.

We know things won't always, or maybe even often, be fair, not just in tomatoes but in every aspect of our lives, so how do we prepare for the peaks and valleys, for the unexpected? How do we share with one another? How do we let go of attachments to the way things "should" be? To stories we tell? To assumptions? To fear of asking for help? Sometimes when I get overwhelmed thinking about our climate, or failures of compassion, or the future, I go for a walk near the Amherst farm. When I look out at the acres of newly re-energized agricultural land, when I see thoughtful students with dirt up to their elbows, and acres of tomatoes, at one of the most prestigious schools in the country, I am hopeful.

I got to try out a helpful meditation at General Assembly, the annual meeting for our denomination, this June and wanted to share it with you today. To begin, I invite you to sing the song Spirit of Life with me. If you have not sung it before, or need the words in front of you, it is song number 123 in your gray book. Let's sing together.

### **#123 Spirit of Life**

Words by Carolyn McDade

Spirit of life, come unto me  
Sing in my heart, all the stirrings of compassion  
Blow in the wind, rise in the sea,  
Move in the hand, giving life the shape of justice.  
Roots, hold me close; wings, set me free  
Spirit of life, come to me, come to me.

Let's sing it again and as we move through the song, listen for a couplet that is has meaning for you right now, if you are able, close your hymnal. <sing>

Did you pick one? Now hold your couplet in your mind, and sing or say it over and over to yourself as we listen to the song in quiet together. <music>

Carolyn McDade wrote this song as a prayer in a moment when she was feeling burnt out in her justice work in the 1980s and it has become an anthem sung all through Unitarian Universalism.<sup>1</sup> As you repeated your line, what came up for you? Was it trying to tell you something? How might that message help you in your day today, or this week?

I have spoken before about my faith in the long term, in Theodore Parker's vision of the long arc toward justice. "I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways; I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends toward

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.uuworld.org/articles/carolyn-mcdades-spirit-life>

justice.”<sup>2</sup> And yet, some days it is so much easier to hold that faith than others. Some days I can go into a field with my colleagues and pack vegetables in the sunshine and have faith that we can figure out how to do better. Some days I wonder how people can live without compassion for others, without seeing other people as valuable and important. How do people with such different values move forward together? Helping the universe bend toward justice is hard work. Being a resilient is hard work, holding ourselves open, being willing to ask for help, is hard work. Sometimes all that we need spiritually is ready for us to pluck and enjoy. Sometimes we come through the field needing the help and generosity of others. Sometimes we can't find the field. Spiritual practices and community help us to bend and not break when we are faced with tragedy and suffering, when we are trying to figure things out, and when we need hope. There is a spirit of life, a spark and connection that makes us who we are. We have the potential to do amazing things, love one another, find water on Mars, dance, build communities. And we have the potential for great callousness and harm. May we find all we need to make loving and compassionate choices. In the face of injustice, may we have a web of strength and relationship to support us.

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So may it be.

Amen.