

Equinox
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One of my favorite parts of this winter has been getting to know what animals are in my neighborhood by their tracks in the snow. I found out that our field is a deer superhighway, which will be very important to know for planting season. A neighbor mentioned that he saw a bobcat with babies in the fall. I saw their tracks in our field and now know one of their hunting loops. I also saw evidence they are dining on gray squirrels through the winter. I plan to hang out in the field some summer nights to try and catch a glimpse. We saw tracks from bunnies, moles, mice, and fox as well. We thought we might have seen bear tracks on a warm day, but decided later that it was just an enormous dog from down the road. There were definitely bear in our yard in the fall, they left behind evidence, but they must have stayed asleep all winter, or headed to different territory. I have loved getting to know the winter mammals outside my house, armed only with a pair of yard sale snowshoes, and google image searches to confirm track shapes and scat. As we move into spring, I am going to spend time with a bird book, and get to know our winged neighbors. I am rooting myself in my new home, trying to get to know the major players in our local ecosystem. I have paid closer attention to sunset and sunrise times than ever before. I regularly check the expected hourly weather temperatures to plan for our fire, and for walking the dog. My day to day choices are strongly regulated by what is happening outside. Before moving to our hilltop house, I have always lived in places where my choices were shaped by relationships to the people around me, rather than the outside. The questions I asked were more along the lines of, “will this bother my neighbor?” I am sure that many of you can relate, but living out farther from stores and other resources has meant that we have gotten to know our neighbors better and more quickly than anywhere I have lived since my childhood. Growing up, I lived on a small dead end street with five houses. The families has community snow blowers and did a lot of work with and for each other. I didn’t think about at first, but the house that we have moved to is similar. A long dead end street, and we have been so touched by relationships built with our neighbors over plowing, chicken eggs, community trails in private woods, and dogs everywhere.

On the equinox, the sun will rise and set directly in the east and west. I came across a suggestion online that this is a great opportunity to go outside to watch sunrise and sunset and really understand the orientation of where you live to the cardinal directions. I think that the authors just intended it as a fun activity, but what if we were to take that idea to the next level? Could equinox be an opportunity to more closely observe the environment around us (in a variety of ways), and to orient ourselves to our world more precisely?

Part of the work we do in community to better understand the web of life, and seek compassion and justice, is to observe patterns and hear stories from around the world. We try to look at the big picture, whether in local community work, or global movements. James Rasmussen, a member of the Duwamish tribe, on the Dwamish River near Seattle said in an interview, “Home is not only my relatives, my aunties, uncles and cousins, grandparents and nieces and nephews. They are the geese that are here and the salmon that are here and the otters

that are here. They are also part of my family, part of my home.”¹ This week, we might pause to better root ourselves, beginning with marking where the east and west are to where we live, and then expanding that to think about our corner of the web of life. Who and what else is there with us? Could we count the number of creatures that share space with us? Could we even see them all if we tried? What about the plants that surround us? What do we know about them? Were they planted by someone? When? Where were they first found on earth? Do they have any special meaning for us, or for someone else? What can they be used for in daily life? We could ask infinite questions. The point is not to get bogged down in trying to know everything about a particular location in the universe, but rather noting that, if there is so much complexity to a place we spend so much time, we can start to get a handle on how much it is that we do not fully understand about the web of life and our world. Hear these words from 600 years ago, from the Sufi poet, Mahmud Shabistari:

Behold how this drop of seawater
has taken so many forms and names;
it has existed as mist, cloud, rain, dew, and mud,
then plant, animal, and [people];
and yet it was a drop of water
from which these things appeared.
Even so this universe of reason, soul, heavens, and bodies,
was but a drop of water in its beginning and ending.

...When a wave strikes it, the world vanishes;
and when the appointed time comes to heaven and stars,
their being is lost in not being.²

If we are closely attentive to our relationship to the world around us, we have the possibility to gain greater understanding, perhaps greater knowledge, or perhaps better realizing what it is we do not know.

As a balancing point of light and darkness, of our position relative to the sun, we might also spend time this equinox thinking about balance in our lives, and in our communities. For our Christian neighbors celebrating Lent, many are in the midst of a spiritual practice to consider the balance of certain habits in their lives, in the lead up to Easter. We are also about one month from Earth Day, an opportunity for us all to advocate for balance on the earth. Bill Bryson in his book *At Home*, which was a historical look at what home has meant in western culture, writes:

Of the total energy produced on Earth since the Industrial Revolution began, half has been consumed in just the last twenty years. ... We are able to live as we do because we use resources at hundreds of times the rate of most of the planet's other citizens. One day—and don't expect it to be a distant day—many of those six billion or so less well-off people are bound to demand to have what we have, and to get it as effortlessly as we got it, and that will require more resources than the planet can easily; or even conceivably, yield. The greatest possible irony would be if in our endless quest to fill our lives with comfort and happiness we created a world that had neither.³

1 MICHAEL SCHUT, “Coming Home: Economics and Ecology”, *Anglican Theological Review* 91 no 4 Fall 2009, p 581-588.

2 from *The Secret Rose Garden: Mahmud Shabistari*, Translated by Florence Lederer / Edited by David Fideler

3 Bill Bryson, *At Home*, 2010, p. 451-2.

Balance is action that requires us to be mindful. Our faith tradition as a whole is a balance between our Unitarian and Universalist forebearers. They are sometimes referred to as the head and heart of our association. The great Transylvanian Unitarian Francis David back in the 16th century is quoted as saying “We need not think alike to love alike.” As a community of faith, if we get stuck in our heads, we have no grounding in spiritual practice and compassion. If we are overwhelmed with feeling, but do not have reason to make choices, we are also stuck. Balance is vital to us as individuals, as communities, and in the web of life. We have joined together in this community for a variety of reasons, but as Unitarian Universalists, our beliefs and ways of expressing them are individual to our experience. We think about theology and define it differently. But we join together because we do largely love alike...Love in the expansive, *agape*, caring for our fellow human beings sense. We do not have to describe our beliefs in the same way to know that world would be a better place if humans made choices based in loving one another, mistakes and all, if we were in attentive balance, and if we really understood our connections in the web of life.

So as we celebrate the vernal equinox, may we be attentive to cues in the natural world to help nudge us into reflection that is meaningful. May we grow ever more thoughtful and curious about the place we call home, right close by, and the larger world and web of life. May we be rooted in knowing as much as we can about our place in the web of life, and how much we have left to learn, honoring how much cannot ever be fully known. May the balance of day and night inspire us to work toward balance in our own lives.

So may it be. Amen.