

“And for My Next Act ...”

Donna Morrison-Reed

For twenty-six years I was a Unitarian Universalist parish minister; ten years in Rochester NY followed by sixteen in Toronto. That's twenty-six years of monthly Board meetings. That's twenty-six annual canvasses, not to mention quite a few capital campaigns. Every spring as the flowers poked their heads out of the ground, I delivered an Easter sermon before heading off to the annual meetings. For every one you attended, I had two: the St. Lawrence District annual ministers meeting and then the St. Lawrence District annual meeting. In my first parish there was the New York State Convention of Universalists; in my second it was the Canadian Unitarian Council, again, two meetings, the ministers of Canada and then the annual meeting of the congregations. Likewise the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association followed by the UUA General Assembly.

Do you love meetings? Linda must love meetings. I don't. But always, there is a down side to every up, and certainly I loved the ministry and congregational life, every facet of our lives coming together, engaged and interacting from birth to death. I had a blast putting sermons and services together. I loved the people, even the people in the meetings. I empathized with their problems. I enjoyed the projects. And I found the politics stunning. I believe in the institution and it felt like I was making a difference.

And yet, as the years rolled by and my own kids grew up and left home I found it harder and harder to get excited ... about the next annual canvas, the next retelling of the story of Norbert Chapek on Flower Communion Sunday. I even grew tired of one more chorus of “Let it be a Dance.” It didn't feel like a dance for me any

longer and the people around me could tell. I started falling asleep during meetings.

Only now, almost five years later, am I able to see what was happening from a broader perspective. Easter had arrived. It was time for death and resurrection.

Have you ever found yourself standing at that Easter moment? A job you used to enjoy loses its patina? A friendship or a partnership begins to feel old and stale, rough around the edges or even ready to explode? Your not-yet-finished thesis is telling you that you *are* finished. It has a strange affinity to slogging through mud. You feel tired just thinking about it.

As our children grow, we applaud each milestone, all the growth and the change. But there are two Easter “truths” in amongst the celebration that we often forget.

First, every birth is also a death. The birth of the two-year-old *is* the death of the one-year-old. And, of course, the reverse is just as true. Every death is also a rebirth. This *is* the Easter moment. Death *and* resurrection.

And second, growth and change, birth and death, never stop. We don’t “grow up,” and that’s the end of it. Growth is one word for it; aging is another. They are the same thing. The growing/aging process is embedded in life itself. Being alive means always in the midst of change. *Every* moment is an Easter moment.

These are the messages of Easter. Don’t hold on too tight to what is, for life is an unstoppable, unending cycle of death and rebirth and death and rebirth that does not finish when our bones cease elongating or we graduate from university.

Let’s take that first point. Every birth also includes a death. When the one-year-old learns to walk, we all applaud. We cheer. I know what I am talking about. I

have a little nephew who started walking last November at ten and a half months. You would think we were in the presence of the next Albert Einstein.

And when baby wants to be picked up and carried again? “Oh, you’re mommy’s big boy now; too big for carrying.” “*Too big* for carrying? When did *that* happen?” *There* is the loss. Yes, walking is a really useful skill; yes, mobility means adventure; yes, it feels great when everyone is watching me perform; and yes, there is no other option in the long run. Let’s face it. Mom is not going to be carrying you down the aisle at your own wedding.

But we forget that the birth of walking could just as easily be called the death of carrying, maybe not immediately, but soon, very soon. And baby wants to be carried too. In truth, we all want to be carried sometimes. Baby doesn’t understand that yesterday he wasn’t *too big* but today he is. Where did yesterday go? What happened? Yesterday died.

Easter is a dramatic, symbolic portrayal of this truth. Life never stands still. It is always dying, just as it is always being reborn. Life moves. We call that movement *time*. We divide it into little units. We mark its passage. We tie our rituals to her cycles. And yet, how often on our birthdays do we take even a moment to say good-bye to the year that is gone? First grade at age six; high school at fourteen; graduation at eighteen. Go too slow, stop for a moment to smell the roses, and there is something wrong with you. You failed!! It’s okay for our two-year-old to hang back from daycare – for a day or two!! But we would be institutionalizing an eight-year-old who was still resisting grade one. Read *The Tin Drum* by Gunter Grass.

We forget that going to school is not just a big step forward. It also marks the death of something precious. The diminishment of something valuable:

unstructured time for imagination; my own projects, accomplished in my own way, at my own pace. The right way to build a magic castle with my plastic hammer and saw is the way I choose to do it. Now the right way is the teacher's way. Sitting in a little chair at a little desk in a little row until a little bell releases me from doing exactly what the teacher wants. Feeding her the answers *she* defines as the right ones in exchange for little A+s on something called a report card. Yes, now I am a big girl and everyone I care about is so proud.

But no one seems to notice the loss.

Jesus notices. Yes, his big moment is at hand. Soon, very soon he will be sitting at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth. But he is not in such a hurry that he forgets. He sat in the garden of Gethsemene. He stayed awake all night. He felt the agony on the cross and he cried out "My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?" as his life as a mortal human embedded in time slowly slipped away. He knows every resurrection is also a crucifixion.

Hether you think of Jesus as a man or a god or a process, every year Easter reminds us that change is unstoppable; the *only* constant is change. We are part of that cycling reality, flowing down the river of time with barely a moment to mark its passing, the death of "what was," that idyllic time when I was carried by mom; those magic moments before life was captured by grade one.

And your life? What are the losses? In the rush of moving forward, have you taken time to acknowledge them?

Both Carl Jung and Hinduism divide life into thirds. In a woman's life they are sometimes named: Maiden, Mother and Crone. The first third is what we might call "growing up," all the necessary preparation for becoming an adult in the twenty-first century in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada. It is a process that includes

physical growth, hormonal maturation, the acquisition of life skills and competencies, and all the cultural learning that goes into being a responsible, contributing member of one's own society.

The second third is the productive phase: having and rearing children, marching along the trajectory of one's career, fighting life's battles and succeeding within the sphere of one's own calling.

I am a bit of a textbook case of the mathematical idea of thirds. I actually began working as a Unitarian Universalist minister on my twenty-seventh birthday. And at the age of twenty-seven ministry was new and exciting. I remember being shown the church office in Rochester for the first time. "What's all that junk in the corner?" I asked. It must have been three feet high. They looked at me as if I was crazy. "That's your mail." They had been without a minister for a little while; my first on-the-job training. This is the stage in which we are energized by the goal of "making it" according to our particular interests and society's standards and needs. It can be fun; it is certainly exhausting: on-the-fly responses; juggling a million balls in the air; ascending to the height of one's energy, power and opportunity.

But that is not the end of the story. Almost exactly twenty-six years after becoming a Unitarian Universalist minister, I crossed over into the third portion of my life. My husband and I dropped our youngest off in Ann Arbor Michigan for graduate school. We sold our house and both retired from the ministry. Twenty-six years of preparation; twenty-six years in the ministry: according to the mathematics of thirds, I will be dying on September 15, 2031.

If life is, indeed, roughly divided into thirds, then, in amongst all the little deaths and rebirths there are four great divides: birth, entry into the first third; adolescence, that transition from childhood to adulthood; then the shift from active

adulthood into what Jung called “the age of discretion” or “the afternoon of life”; and finally, our own death, the transition out of being alive. Four great chasms to be crossed, four periods of particular challenge, when it almost seems as if we are being asked to jump into the great unknown. Four terrifying nights in the “Garden of Gethsemene”; four huge death and resurrection opportunities. Erik Erikson coined the term “identity crisis” to describe the plethora of challenges that await those moving from childhood into adulthood. Jung writes: “Achievement, usefulness and so forth are the ideals that seem to point the way out of the confusions of adolescence. They are the lodestars that guide us in the adventure of broadening and consolidating our physical existence; to strike our roots in the world.” (*Collected Works*, Volume 8, paragraph 787)

But what of that next great divide between the morning and the afternoon of adulthood? This transition calls for the opposite approach. It involves, in a sense, the giving up of that place we fought so hard to achieve. Our bodies begin to urge us to slow down and let go. I felt bored. I began falling asleep during meetings. That three foot pile of junk in the corner no longer whispered “opportunity”; it began to feel like a burden. The politics became tedious. Water communion Sunday signalled dread instead of adventure. Here we go again, I sighed. Something inside was calling me into the great unknown.

And in your own life? Where is Easter calling you? What is ready to die? What is waiting to be reborn? I am doing a workshop this summer at Unicamp, a weekend dedicated to exploring that question.

Jung points out that it is the same fear manifest when the adolescent has trouble jumping into adulthood, and when the adult has trouble jumping out of the active hustle and bustle of life. I am stereotyping here: when mom has trouble letting the

kids grow up; when dad has trouble facing retirement; when we hide from the approaching Crone with little tucks here and a bit of dye there; when we cling to the tasks and the titles we fought so hard to achieve, that define our very being.

Jung writes: “For a young person it is almost a sin, or at least a danger, to be too preoccupied with himself; but for the aging person it is a duty and a necessity to devote serious attention to himself. ... Instead of doing [so], many old people prefer to be hypochondriacs, [misers, pedantic nit-pickers], applauders of the past or else eternal adolescents – all lamentable substitutes for the illumination of the self, ... inevitable consequences of the delusion that the second half of life must be governed by the principles of the first.” (*Collected Works*, Volume 8, paragraph 785)

What is the challenge embedded within this transition from Mother to Crone? James Hollis writes: “The exiled Indian prince Gautama undertook his journey and came at last ... to see. In seeing he became a Buddha. ... The secret of living well, according to all the great mythic systems, is to live in accord with the will of the gods, in harmony with the Tao. In so doing, we align ourselves with wisdom greater than our intelligence, and rhythms greater than our transient motions.” (Hollis, *Tracking the Gods: The Place of Myth in Modern Life*, pp. 64-65) Our task is “to transform loss into “letting go” [and] ... to replace acquisition with the capacity to relinquish.” (Hollis, p. 65) Jesus on the cross is not too harsh a symbol for the magnitude of the challenge. Let us face our fear as we confront the abyss, the chasm, that exciting leap into the great unknown.

Could this be our Western enlightenment dis-ease, this inability to slow down, step back, turn inward to reflect upon life. The goal might be called “wholeness” or “wisdom.” That objective distance cannot be achieved as long as we define

ourselves by our title. I'm a mom. I'm a minister. As long as we mistake our competencies for our very being.

My husband's father retired from his career in chemistry and started digging around in family genealogy; my father still puts on a suit and tie and goes into the office every morning, unable to imagine what he would do if he stopped.

Easter has come once again, calling us to welcome the great cycling nature of life. "Without the dark, there is not light." It is a dance. Jesus was reluctant, but he embraced his fate. Today we celebrate Easter, the truth about being alive. Death and resurrection over and over and over again.