

THE RITE OF SPRING

A meditation by Galen Guengerich

All Souls NYC

Sunday, May 10, 2020

Five days ago, we passed the halfway mark from the vernal equinox on March 19 to the summer solstice — the longest day of the year — on June 20. The natural world is well on its way, at least in the northern hemisphere, to another seasonal triumph of life in summer over death in winter. Mother Earth has given birth once again — flowers up from cold ground, leaves out from wizened branches, warm sun down from winter's chill air. Spring is busting out all over.

We feel like busting out as well. Especially since the winter of our discontent turned out to be more discontented than usual, we're eager for release. We want to cast off our late-winter gloom and get on with the business of normal life once again — whatever that may now mean.

It's easy to see why the rhythms of human life are attuned to the seasonal rhythms of Mother Earth. The earth is the source of all life, including human life. Its plants and animals provide the sustenance on which we depend completely. It's also the final destiny for all of us — the ultimate form of democracy. In every way and in every season, Mother Earth is both our source and our destiny.

But our lives as individuals turn out not to be seasonal or cyclical. The prophet Isaiah in the Hebrew Bible likens us not to the sun or the stars, or even the moon or the earth, but to flowers and grass. "All flesh is grass, and all its loveliness is like the flower of the field," the prophet says. "The grass withers, the flower fades... Surely the people are grass."

We should feel honored by the comparison. As I often say at the close of memorial services, "Loveliest of all earth's flowers is the undying spirit of humanity. Like flowers on the river's edge, we bud and bloom, unfold our season of usefulness and beauty, and then scatter our treasures to the wind, and bequeath our promise to the future." While there may be few things more ephemeral as flowers, there are few things more beautiful.

Even so, this spring has presented us with an unsettling juxtaposition. The promise of new life in springtime has overlapped fully with the winter of our coronavirus discontent. We careen between delight and despair. It's hard to attend properly to both feelings at the same time.

This clash reminds me of Igor Stravinsky's revolutionary ballet "The Rite of Spring." Musically groundbreaking and politically prescient, the ballet premiered in Paris in May of 1913 — just a year before the start of what came to be known as World War I. The ballet begins with a bucolic springtime ritual: the adoration of the earth. The

music, however, is anything but bucolic. As Leonard Bernstein once said, “The Rite of Spring” has “got the best dissonances anyone ever thought up, and the best asymmetries and polytonalities and polyrhythms and whatever else you care to name.”

The ballet also subverted the idea that Parisian ballet was the epitome of civilization. As the ballet continues, the pastoral adoration of the earth descends into the primitive violence of human sacrifice. From civilization to savagery in thirty minutes flat — a path Europe would tragically follow in the next five years. Scandalously then, but not surprising in retrospect, the premier of “The Rite of Spring” ended in a full-scale riot.

Whether on the ballet stage or in the natural world, the rite of spring is an opening up, a peeling back of the hard husk. Sometimes we like what we find, and sometimes we don't. Sometimes opening ourselves to the truth about our lives leads to ugliness and dissonance, and sometimes it leads to beauty and blessedness. The goal of living, in springtime and in every other time, is to accept ugliness as part of the ebb of life, but also to seize beauty as part of its flow.

Kate Bowler is an acquaintance of mine who teaches the history of religion at Duke Divinity School in North Carolina. Five years ago, when she was 35 and a new mother, she learned that she had incurable cancer. In her best-selling memoir, *Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I've Loved*, she describes her experience of celebrating life while under the shadow of death.

In a recent interview in the New York Times, Kate describes how she finds meaning amid all the terrible things that are happening today. She says, “The trick is to find meaning without being taught a lesson. A pandemic is not a judgment, and it will not discriminate between the deserving and the undeserving...”

She continues, “The second I saw all these nurses and doctors going out there trying to save somebody else's life, I realized it's such a window into how gorgeous it is to be a human being. And the more we see fragility, sometimes the more we understand what an incredible miracle it is to have been created at all. So [I'm] just having a higher and higher view of our gorgeous and terrible humanity.”

She adds, “We're learning right now in isolation what interdependence feels like and what a gift it is. And the more we're apart, the more we realize how much we need each other.”

There's nothing more fragile than a butterfly, or a flower, or a breath, or a life. At the same time, there's nothing more beautiful than a butterfly, or a flower, or a breath, or a life. There's nothing more ephemeral than beauty — nor more durable. Even amid what's terrible, and especially then, experiences of beauty sustain us.

This afternoon, I will be leading a memorial service for Dr. Lorna Breen, who was medical director of the emergency department at New York-Presbyterian's Allen Hospital in Harlem. Dr. Breen led Allen Hospital's emergency response to an overwhelming influx of coronavirus patients, and she herself became infected by the virus. In the end, the cumulative burden of her own suffering and that of her many

patients proved too heavy to bear. She died about two weeks ago of suicide at her family home in Charlottesville, Va.

Even at the best of times, however, Dr. Breen's work was always daunting and often difficult. One source of respite for her came from her love of music. She was a cellist in the New York Late-starters String Orchestra in Brooklyn. Surrounded by disease and often by death, she found solace in reaching out to others who shared her love of music, gathering with them each week, and letting the strings of her cello resound with the music within her and around her. She found peace there, and joy, and hope.

Her love of music reminds me of a poem titled "Transit" by the contemporary American poet Rita Dove. The poem was inspired by the life of Alice Herz-Sommer, who survived a Nazi concentration camp in Czechoslovakia. Rita Dove writes:

This is the house that music built:
each note a fingertip's purchase,
rung upon rung laddering
 across the unspeakable world...
I won't speak judgment on
 the black water passing for coffee,
white water for soup.
We supped instead each night
 on Chopin — hummed our grief-
soaked lullabies to the rapture
rippling through. Let it be said
 while in the midst of horror
we fed on beauty — and that,
my love, is what sustained us.

My admonition on this crystalline spring morning is that we should do the same. Let it be said of us that, even in the midst of horror, we fed on beauty.

Let it be said that we paused to see budding flowers and emerging leaves. We listened to heartbreaking songs and stirring symphonies. We tasted bitter greens and sweet berries. We feasted on the beauty of life.

Let it be said that we feasted on the beauty of a helping hand, an encouraging smile, a listening ear. We helped turn the tide on what is terrible in our lives and our world by embracing what is wonderful and beautiful.

Today is the first day of the rest of your life. Make the most of it.