

Harvest Work
by Rev. Stephanie Shute Kelsch
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It seems most of us have a fascination with the celebration of fall. Of course that makes sense here at Second Parish this Sunday, given that we've just completed our first-ever Fall Festival. The concept and the success, however, come in part from a universal eagerness to feel like a part of harvest time. Now I'm pretty sure that if we were asked to actually participate in a farm harvest – doing the growing and tending and harvesting - we wouldn't find *that* quite as much fun as buying pumpkins or decorating pumpkin-shaped cookies or buying apple pies. We might find the rigorous demands of being tied intimately to the crops we were harvesting too much of a restraint. That is, if we were good harvesters. I'm reminded of the story of Louisa May Alcott, of Little Women fame. Her father moved her entire family out to a farm in the hills of Massachusetts called Fruitlands, planted a crop, and then got out of town to go lecture around the country about education. It was left to his wife and four daughters to harvest the crop when a series of severe storms blew in. Angry as I can get at Bronson Alcott for his irresponsibility, I must admit I might be tempted to absent myself when harvest time came around. It's hard physical work.

Still, though today we do most of our actual harvesting at the grocery store and not in the field, we still tend to feel a great nostalgia for the harvest time of the agrarian society we once were. Not only do we feel nostalgia for the products of the harvest, we also find the wisdom of the harvest instructive.

Just think about the basic insights of life that come from a book written in agrarian times: *The Bible*. We're still guided by words thousands of years old from the Hebrew Testament. Words like:

"Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity." (Proverbs 22:8)

Those who plow iniquity and sow trouble reap the same." (Job 4:8)

Or these words from the New Testament:

"The harvest is great but the laborers are few." (Matthew 9:27)

"...whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully." (Corinthians 2 9:6)

"Let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we will reap if we do not grow weary." (Galatians 6:9)

These ancient insights speak so deeply to us that they keep getting updated and offered to us anew. Contemporary poet and novelist Maya Angelou tells us that "If we don't plant the right things, we will reap the wrong things." Steve Covey, in his best selling book Seven Habits of Highly Effective People says, "Sow a thought, reap an action; sow an action, reap a habit; sow a habit; reap a character; sow a character, reap a destiny." Covey's talking about a lot of harvesting here.

The agricultural imagery and diction still speak to us, even though we live not in a farming culture or even in the industrial culture that followed, but now in a digital culture where computers seem to reign supreme.

While there's a beauty in that ancient, and I'd suggest fundamental, agricultural imagery still speaking to us – there is also a danger. People hear that they will reap what they sow and sometimes expect they *will* get out of something exactly what they put in. They expect a sort of justice, or a sort of control, that Life so often teaches us is not in fact always part of the picture. Believing that one gets what one sows, the individual may feel a sense of empowerment that can turn into a feeling of betrayal

when things go wrong because for most of us we don't hear this wisdom in an agricultural context. If you're a farmer, you *know* that you are only one part of the equation. You *know* that the weather, the soil, the seeds, the availability of water, the predators, the market are also present. In a culture grown increasingly focused on the self, in a culture that tries so aggressively to move away from the unpredictability of Nature, one might forget other factors in life - illness, chance, competition, communication breakdown, random acts of violence; one might expect sole responsibility, full control. And find oneself bewildered when unexpected factors interfere.

So why do we cling to agrarian wisdom? And why do we manifest our strong feeling for agrarian benchmarks in celebrations of seasons like the harvest? And can consumer-driven celebration truly satisfy us? What really IS our harvest work?

I can't answer all of those questions in the time we have, but I would like to spend some time on that last question as it seems to have implications for all four questions. What IS our harvest work? It's a question that needs attention, especially for us living here in New England where the fact that Nature *is* changing becomes evident all around us in the coloring and falling of the leaves, the dropping of the temperature, the withering of the flowers, the shortening of the days. Here in New England Nature offers us the gift of remembering the cycles of living as seen in the natural world. It opens our hearts to connect with some of that agrarian wisdom woven so deeply into our culture.

And that connection is a strong and real one and won't be out of date for a long, long time.

As soon as I use the term "cycles of living" I have linked humans and agriculture. In Unitarian Universalism it is expressed as our 7th principle: *Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are all a part*. But I'd suggest it is stronger than a principle worded by a committee. I'm talking about a gut recognition

of a truth of our lives. We look at the turning leaves and cannot help but think about how we ourselves change in seasons. Leaves may turn red. People may turn gray. No matter what we evolve into – and right now the most cynical curmudgeon might say that we’re headed towards becoming giant-thumbed robots who lack empathy – but right now we still retain a powerful physical and very human essence. Harvest still time speaks to us because of our still strong connection to our humanity and our awareness, if not full time engagement, with and to Nature.

But our harvest work has changed. It’s no longer physical as it was in a more agrarian time. It’s now spiritual, or emotional, or religious, or psychological – depending on your preference and outlook. But we are still sowing and planting. Think about the things that we work hard for and wait long years to see come to fruition. Think about the harvest we tend in family, in our children, in friendships, in church, in hobbies, in careers. Think about the harvests we hope together for in scientific research, regulation, politics, diplomacy. We may not be tilling the earth, but we are still farming something.

So what is our essential harvest work? Mitchell Burgess gives us an answer in today's Centering Thought. Mitchell Burgess. Writer for TV shows *Northern Exposure* and *The Sopranos*, so an individual who works in the context of modern life tells us our harvest work is **reflection**. In our reading, Hal Borland – well-regarded mid-20th century naturalist – calls autumn the “summing up without the finality of year’s end.” He describes gazing out on the “span of (one’s) world, contemplating in quest of the “eternal corrective.” It’s no surprise that so many cultures have harvest festivals that concentrate on the dead. Facing mortality is a powerful motivator for reflection.
(More on that in our November 1st sermon.)

Fall is an appropriate time to “take stock” – to consider our harvest; to assess what contributed to its success, what contributed to its failure – and still plan action. While the harvest results are fresh, it is a good time to consider - as Borland puts it – what might indeed be the “eternal corrective.” Capitalize that “e” or not as you see fit.

Harvest is only *one* season of the year. Winter follows – a time of hibernation and of planning. Then there's spring, a time of creation and building. Next comes summer, a time of nurturing and tending. But Fall... Fall, the harvest season here, is a time of reflection and assessment. A time of evaluation and decision-making. Our harvest work is to determine what we want our other seasons to look like, to gather what nourishes and respects where we are and what we can be. In agrarian times, the harvest carried more physical work. In these times, the harvest carries more mental, emotional, spiritual work. We live in a time when it is good to hear the Biblical wisdom as saying, "What you intend to sow determines what you hope to reap. Give thought to the intention and commitment to the work. And in all your reflection, remember we never plan nor work alone." Amen.