



Longing

The life of a congregation is a rich community tapestry of people, programs, ministries and worship. We lift up the patterns of this tapestry at Unity Church with the threads of monthly themes woven through our worship and programming. These themes deepen our understanding of our own faith and strengthen our bonds with one another in religious community. We explore each theme in worship and in our newsletter; in covenant groups, guided writing sessions and Wednesday evening programming; and in our community outreach ministries, our literary journal and programs, and many other opportunities. The October theme is Longing.

Our word *Longing* is rooted in the Old English *langian*, which meant to yearn or to summon. More literally, it meant to grow longer, as if our own soul were stretching out from our feet like an elongated shadow at the end of the day, reaching toward the distant horizon.

This might explain why our understanding of longing has so often been hitched to the notion of progress – that forward leaning inclination to regard history and human development as linear, marching ever onward toward the future as if the past could be left behind. But theologically speaking, longing is perhaps better understood in the context of the natural world where time does not march but bends around the cycle of seasons, where life itself circles back, dust to dust, whether of earth or of stars. Not without its own movement or improvement, Nature has its own emergent progress that unfolds over time, each bold new blossom eventually bowing back to the ground as seed, then rising again in the spring.

These cycles create memory and longing in which we each participate. We are all, Kahlil Gibran reminds us, “sons and daughters of life longing for itself.”

The problem is it’s hard to carry our longing for the wholeness of life’s circle in a world determined to lay things out in a straight line. We want reachable goals. We want the bird in the hand. We want to know we’ve arrived.

Our consumer culture encourages this way of thinking. Have you felt the way so many advertisements cast their hooks into our deepest longing, reeling it in and hitching it, if they can, to one object or another, each and all of them coincidentally for rent or for sale? In our steadier moments, we know that these may be straight-line shortcuts that have little or nothing to do with the wider circumference of our true longing. But who has not been tempted by the suggestion that we can buy our way out of longing? It is the prodigal’s plight: pretending that purchases, possessions or progress itself could satisfy a longing

rooted elsewhere. We can go bankrupt trying to buy our way home in this way, while our homesickness of the heart just keeps growing stronger.

It has been said that longing is “the heart’s memory.” It implores us to remember not only who we are but also who we might become. Many ancient stories, including those of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, suggest that in birth we are torn from a larger unity to which we long to return. Mystics talk about longing for reunion with the Beloved. The poet Rumi writes about reeds cut from the reed bed and carved out as flutes that later sound the “pure hollow notes” of their longing for return. “Anyone pulled from its source longs to go back,” Rumi claims. “Intimacy and longing for intimacy, one song.”

What would happen if we remembered this ancient song of longing and belonging? What if we humans leaned into our longing in the same way that a plant reaches toward the sun?

*What would the world be like
if we all turned our faces
toward the light in this way?
If we let ourselves belong to our longings,
opened our ears to the voice that says,
You. I want you.
I need you.
Like this, the sun charms the shoot up
from the soil
and coaxes the bud to release its tight fist.
Like this, the wind lifts the seed from
the open bloom
and the soil calls the seed back home again.*

~ Karen Hering,
Consulting Literary Minister

Worship Theme Resources

BOOKS

Rilke's Book of Hours: Love Poems to God, translated by Anita Barrows and Joanna Macy

Wanting Enlightenment Is a Big Mistake: the Teachings of Zen Master Seung San Cold Mountain, by Charles Frazier

FILMS

The Singing Revolution (2006) A single nation. A million voices. The fall of an empire.

The Gods Must Be Crazy (1980) A comic allegory about a traveling Bushman who encounters modern civilization and its stranger aspects.

The Secret of Roan Inish (1994) Between land and sea there is a place where myths are real.