

"Change and New Beginnings"
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Big Sky UU Fellowship, Helena, Montana
By Lynda Saul adapted from a sermon by Rev. Robert Hardies

I don't know about you, but this time of year, I always long for the first signs of fall, I long for the change of seasons and the beginning of something new. This particular September, I especially long for the first mountain snow, to snuff out the smoky skies and usher in the bright crisp blue of Indian summer. That deep lazuli blue that promises us we're in Big Sky Country and headed toward a spectacular autumn.

I feel a little bit like that ground hog from Pennsylvania. The one who comes out of his hole every winter -- sniffing the air and twitching his whiskers -- and decides if he's gonna stay out for spring, or go back underground for a few more weeks. We Montanans engage in a similar ritual 'round about Labor Day. Have you started noticing yourself and your neighbors acquiring squirrel fever? Squirrel fever is where I scurry around harvesting the garden, canning, drying and putting food up for the winter, hauling and stacking firewood. Beginning those household chores that I put off during the glorious days of summer. The first taste of fall hit me hard this week with the turning leaves of the plum and flowering pear. The smell of ripening crab apples and the flocks of crows zeroing in to feast on the tart red apples. A certain quality of long afternoon light. A crisp wind at our face. If you don't already feel it, it will be here soon. Soon that first snow will throw a white blanket on the smoky haze and release the crisp change I'm longing for.

Now, why am I talking about the weather this morning? Usually, people talk about the weather when they don't have anything more interesting to talk about. But I'm focused on this transition from summer to fall for another reason this morning. And I guess the best way to say it is that, there are times in my life when my spirit feels like a smoky Montana sky. Do you know what I'm saying? When my spirit feels like a smoky Montana sky.

What I mean is that there are periods in our lives when a spiritual lethargy sets in. Much like the lethargy of late summer, when the smoke is so oppressive it's hard to muster the energy to live life fully. Our spirits get that way sometimes. They get lethargic. They get lazy. All around us, life is playing itself out with all its joy and tragedy and pain, but rather than actively participate, we watch it go by with hardly a notice. Nothing quickens our spirits. Nothing makes our pulse race. Rather than reveling in the glories and blessings of creation, we allow life -- the only life we'll ever have -- to pass us by. That's what I mean when I say that sometimes my spirit feels like a smoky Montana sky.

The image that comes to mind is of someone sitting on their sofa staring out to the smoky haze thru their picture window. It's a hot late August afternoon. Their feet are up, and they're sipping an iced tea and trying not to move so as to keep themselves cool. Occasionally the person will doze off in the drowsy heat of late August, while the cars and the people -- while life -- passes them by. Now, that's a fine way to spend a smoky August afternoon; but it's a lousy way to spend a life. And that's how our spirits get sometimes. A lethargy, a malaise, sets in. We let life slip away, failing to appreciate and be grateful for the blessings we've been given. Failing to live life to its fullest.

The poet Mary Oliver has a line in one of her poems, where she asks us: "Are you breathing just a little, and calling it life?" Are you breathing just a little and calling it life?

This morning is a spiritual wake-up call. The ripe crab apples, the crisp air we know is on its way is a wake-up call from creation. Reminding us that we can still be surprised by life. That we can still delight in simple pleasures, in moments of grace as common as the fall wind at our face. This morning is a challenge to all of us to engage in Holy Living. Holy Living consists of this and this alone: the thoughtful and passionate love of life [Inspired by Robert Solomon in his book, *Spirituality for the Skeptic*]. The thoughtful and passionate love of life. Now, there are two pieces to that. There's a thoughtful love of life. A love that is considered and reflective. A love that passes experience through the fire of thought, in order to discern the meaning and purpose of our lives. But there's also the passionate love of life. A thirst. A desire to drain the overflowing cup of life down to its dregs. A thoughtful and passionate love of life. This is holy living. And so I ask you: which describes the state of your spirit today? Do you partake in the thoughtful and passionate love of life? Or are you breathing just a little, and calling it life?

I know that there are times when I lapse into a spiritual malaise. Sometimes it's triggered by sadness or melancholy. But sometimes, I'm ashamed to say, it's simply a matter of spiritual laziness. Of inattentiveness to life's beauty. And so I'm grateful that periodically I receive wake-up calls. Experiences that grab hold of me and shake me and remind me once again to love life thoughtfully and passionately.

Not too long ago I spent a week rafting the Middle Fork of the Salmon River accompanied by 13 friends, both old and new. This was a trip I had done only once before, 23 years before to be exact. I had just moved out west from New Orleans to start a new beginning, a change. That early trip with frothy white water and roaring campfires, soothing hot springs and brilliant starry nights led me to a life long love affair with the west and to my avocation of river and wetland protection. This current trip let me relive that youthful zeal for all things new and the opportunity of change. But this recent trip also had its own thrill of newness, an experience that grabbed hold of me and shook me and reminded me once again to love life thoughtfully and passionately.

I was introduced to river snorkeling. Now river snorkeling for those that don't know involves the traditional snorkel, mask and fins. But given that the water flowing in the Middle Fork of the Salmon River was very recently really just old snow, it also requires a full-bodied wet suit. The water in the Middle Fork is the antithesis of the recent Helena sky. Nothing smoky about it. It's crystal clear and sparkling cold. And when you're in the water all suited up, face down, snorkeling along and go rushing by giant boulder - dodging ledges, eddying out behind smart car size rocks. Sneaking up on whitefish, rainbows and cutthroat you feel like a fish yourself. You can't believe how clear the water is – your nose seems like it's 2 inches from those river rocks - and sometimes it is! You occasionally raise your head and check in on your river snorkeling buddies, giving the thumbs up to your friends in the raft trolling along behind you, grinning from ear to ear beneath your mask, humming life is soooo good. And it's invigorating and it's thrilling and it's a bit daring – daring to try something new.

Now here was a wake-up call. Here was the perfect recipe for inducing the thoughtful and passionate love of life. The bracing wind at my face, waking me from our soul's slumber. The clear cold rush water surrounding me, reminding me of life's zest. After 23 years of working for the protection of rivers, this new way of seeing a river, felt like being a river, reacquainted me with the wonder of the world. And -- every once in a while, I'd snorkel upon -- a big bouldery surprise.

Spirit of Life, blow in the wind and rise in the sea. Spirit of Life, come to me. Come to me.

No, we don't have to go white water rafting or revisit a place 23 years later to encounter the Spirit of Life. One of the great LIES of the spiritual life is that it happens at some other time and in some other place, different from our daily lives. But it's not about where we are and what we see, it's about how we experience life. And, yes, river snorkeling is exhilarating. But stepping out your front door on the first morning of the fall can take your breath away, too. And sometimes catching a glimpse of your child tucked in asleep at night can break your heart wide open. It all depends on whether we are thoughtful and passionate lovers of life, OR whether we're breathing just a little, and calling it life.

So change is in the air, fall is here. Fall is a time when we get serious about life again. Serious about all the projects of our lives. The career project. The relationship project. The family project. The school project. Now is when we get serious about all that again. But this fall, I want to challenge each of us to get serious not just about the busyness of our lives, but about the quality of our living. I want us to get serious this fall about the soul project. The project of becoming thoughtful and passionate lovers of life. I want to challenge us to make that project a priority this fall. And I hope the Big Sky UU in its new location and its new time will be a focal point in that project. Each Sunday at worship, I

hope that the gathering here will inspire us to passionate living. I hope that words will remind us to live thoughtfully, to discover meaning and purpose in our life. So consider this morning a call to change and to a new beginning. A challenge to all of us to engage in the thoughtful and passionate love of life.

Because, from time to time in our lives, we do feel the bracing wind at our face and we realize that we've been sleepwalking through life. We've been dozing off on that couch again under the smoky Montana sky. And it's time to wake up. Life is too precious to live it half-heartedly. Life is too short to wait one day and another and another. And then to come to the end and discover that we've missed it. So begin today.

Live life passionately. Live it thoughtfully. And let all you do be done in love.

Amen.