

Homily for the Search Committee
Rev. Meg A. Riley

Recently, I attended the memorial service of a woman who died young. She was the daughter of a colleague, who had a tragic accident while mountain climbing.

As I prepared to go to the service, I steeled myself to experience abject grief and loss, even anger about the unfairness of her early death. To my surprise, what I actually experienced was a joyful celebration of a life well lived. The crowd itself was one of the most radically diverse gatherings I've ever attended. For starters, the young woman was in the Army; and the service was at a Quaker meeting. So, not your usual gathering! There were people of every age, race, economic status, and physical ability imaginable. This woman was a veterinarian and it was clear that if they could have critters of every variety would have been in attendance, too, because they were present in many stories. The one eyed cat. The horse who wouldn't take its medicine. The gender-bending iguana. I left the service filled with hope and fullness, rather than depletion and loss.

What I had expected the service to mirror back to me is my deeply held conviction that life is too short, there's simply not enough of it. Though that belief is heightened by an untimely death, some part of me cried out even when my grandmother died, at 106—what! Already!

My belief that life is too short is rooted in scarcity, an underlying fear that I have very little, and what I do have could be taken from me at any moment. Scarcity manifests in my life in many ways, and I don't mean to brag, but I am a genius at creating it.

I can get into scarcity about having
enough time, enough money,
enough health, enough love,
enough justice, enough sleep,
a clean enough house, a warm enough day,
enough preparation for today's time with you.

The digital age has brought me to new frontiers of scarcity: Do I have
Enough charge on my cell phone,
Enough speed in my internet access,
Enough Facebook friends.

Am I alone in knowing scarcity? Do you know it too? We could spend the rest of our time together continuing and amplifying this list. It's easy to do because scarcity breeds more scarcity.

Rather than blowing on that flame, rather than making fear spread the way fear likes to do, let me take one of my specific fears and examine it more closely. I'll take one that strongly in me and also in our culture, an area where you as a search committee might also wrestle with scarcity: I'm talking about the fundamental belief that we don't have enough time, enough hours in the day.

Time is the most precious commodity we have. We all know that we are living on borrowed time, that we are mortal, and this may be why as a culture, we are so obsessed with NOT HAVING ENOUGH. We mirror this scarcity for each other so intensely, starting in the cradle, that most of us accept it and experience it as gospel truth!

How many of us have forced toddlers to ignore their impulse to savor each moment, have prodded them quickly from one task to another?

My own fear that there isn't enough time shows up when someone dies or when they get sick, but there's more to it. When I turned 50, and others began to talk to me joyfully about becoming a crone, I realized that whatever THAT meant, I wanted none of it. I had always embraced each year on earth as more interesting than the last, but suddenly it became clear exactly where this march through time was taking me, and I thought, No thank you! A friend pressed me to have a party, and finally, I decided to create a ritual which authentically marked how I felt about this transition. At some point, I climbed under the table like a two year old having a tantrum. From behind the floor-length tablecloth, I said to the gathered circle, "I'm not coming out till you convince me I **want** to be 50!"

Needless to say, they were a little startled, but my friends are willing people. Those who had already passed this threshold began to tell me what they liked about their fifties--and they were right, by the way. They have more self-confidence, less willingness to put up with junk from other people, more awareness that they had unique gifts they wanted to give the world. Eventually I began to believe their stories, and I missed seeing their faces, and I got bored, so I came out and felt good about crossing the threshold myself.

Sometimes we need other people who have already gone through what we're in the midst of experiencing to help us through. Allowing myself to embody my resistance, giving myself permission to act out with others present, created the possibility that I could be transformed and acquire some grace. Had I faked my way through a happy birthday ceremony, I would have been left alone in the middle of the night with my true feelings and I don't think I would have entered my fifties as joyfully. Scarcity breeds in isolation.

Old isn't objective. I have known people who hated turning THIRTY because it was 'too old'.

Actually, when my daughter turned **three**, I felt the pinch of scarcity about time. I had known she wouldn't toddle around forever. But I guess some part of me hadn't

really believed it, had thought I would always be rocking her to sleep, singing lullabies and smelling her sweet head. When she turned three, something deep in my cells said, "Whoa. She's going to keep walking away from me forever."

My daughter grieved getting older in her own way, too. I remember her saying sadly at dinner one day, "You used to CHEER when I used a spoon to eat all by myself! Now you get crabby if I DON'T use it! I don't want to be a big kid!"

So we're all Joseph and his overcoat, whether we're three or fifty or 106. We're all, every day, facing the impermanence of ourselves and everything we love.

We can accept change graciously and joyfully, wear our garment proudly every day, overcoat to button, bless our scraps until they cease to exist at all. Or we can be bitter, resenting each stage of relinquishment, living in memory of a better time, insisting that we are entitled to an overcoat and life is cheating us.

If Joseph had clung to his overcoat, he would have missed his nephew's wedding, singing in the chorus, the comfort of a cup of hot tea with lemon. In short, he would have missed his life!

Whether we choose to live our days as blessings or curses, we end up as nothing but a story, told by those who remember us.

What sustains me, in this daily process of relinquishment, is the company of others. Those who have gone before can coax me into spiritual maturity the way my friends coaxed me out from under the table. I am eternally grateful to Unitarian Universalism for offering me such company, people who ripen spiritually in ways which are authentic and creative. Unitarian Universalists bless coats, scarves, vests, and buttons and stories. We don't say, The Chosen People have overcoats! Find an overcoat and join us! We say, life is an ever unfolding adventure! Come and add your stories to the mix!

And then I invited the members of the search committee to share their stories of why they love CLF. I invite you to do the same, in the Forum section of this page.