

## Awakening

*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.*

As spring gives way to summer and the budding natural world awakens, refulgent and green, I recall this poem by Hafiz:

*What is this precious love and  
laughter  
Budding in our hearts?  
It is the glorious sound  
Of a soul waking up!*

Awakening, Merriam-Webster tells us, means waking up from sleep or a rousing from indifference and inaction or a moment of sudden awareness. All of which, like the budding of love in our hearts, seems a glorious and desirable thing. Except that, sometimes, it is not.

Have you ever been roused from sleep, unwilling to leave either the dreams you were inhabiting or the comfort and safety of your bed? Have you ever been metaphorically asleep to some unwanted truth and resisted its call to action or awareness? Have you ever been awakened to one new awareness only to shut down, saying *enough already*, when another new awareness followed it?

As story tells it, a Hindu initiate of Vedanta had just awakened to the illusion of separation between beings. "God is all, and all is God," he proclaimed and ventured joyfully into the day. He was following a path through the jungle when an elephant and rider approached from the other direction. The rider shouted at the man to step out of the way, but the man kept walking, knowing he was God and the elephant was God, and assuming this to be a test of his newfound awareness. From atop the elephant, the mahout shouted louder and more urgently as they drew closer on the narrow path, until suddenly the initiate was knocked into the ditch, bruised and confused.

Seeking an explanation, he returned to his teacher, who said, *Yes, it's true – you are God and the elephant is God. But why did you not listen to the warning of the mahout, who is also God and was telling you to move off the path?*

Spiritual awakening is not a one-time event. Nor is it a blissful status achieved for all time. It might be better understood as a lifelong process, a way of being that continually disturbs our indifference and continually enlarges our awareness, sometimes uncomfortably.

The spiritual teacher Anthony de Mello once said the first step to awakening is to acknowledge that we don't want to wake up and are likely resisting it. "The second step," he said, "is a readiness to understand, to listen, to challenge your whole belief system. Not just your religious beliefs, your political beliefs, your social beliefs, your psychological beliefs, but all of them."

"... In order to wake up," he said, "the one thing you need most is not energy or strength, or youthfulness, or even great intelligence. The thing you need most of all is the readiness to learn something new."

If there's one thing we've been asked to do in the past year and a half — day after day after day — it is to learn something new. To let each new awareness open us to another and another and yet another, even when we haven't wanted to keep opening. To listen, to understand, to challenge our beliefs and consider them from new angles. How do we make ourselves ready for that?

I take inspiration from the natural world just outside my door, watching the dirt where I have transplanted gifts from the gardens of friends and from our old house. Remembering bulbs and root bundles tucked into pockets in the soil here, I've been waiting for new shoots to appear.

For the plants, of course, the dirt all around them is different. The patterns of sunlight and rain have been changed. A few have met their end to the hunger of squirrels and rabbits or to my improper planting. But most, I have been delighted to witness, have learned how to awaken to a new season in this new place. Each in its own time has reached its roots down to claim what it needs from the darkness below. And each in its own time has stretched new shoots into the daylight to declare what it needs from above. The fiddleheads have loosened their tight fists. The hostas have opened the ears of their leaves. The lilies have slipped their slender proclamation points into a brand new sentence still in the making.

Reaching back into the Old English origins of the word "awakening," I find these roots: "to spring into being, arise, originate." Knowing nothing comes from nothing, I search back to ancestors and old teachings in my own origins. I reach inward to the knowledge carried in old bulbs and root systems buried in my bones. And I stretch up and out, toward the light falling on my small patch of soil today, letting the buds of my heart open to love and to laughter — and also to tears. Like this I am making myself ready, day after day, to learn what it is to live here, to love now, to offer my own new shoots to the garden and seasons unfolding around me.

*By Karen Hering on behalf of this month's theme team: Ahmed Anzaldúa, Drew Danielson, Ray Hommeyer, KP Hong, Ruth MacKenzie, Laura Park*

<sup>1</sup>Hafiz, *The Gift: Poems by Hafiz, the Great Sufi Master*, trans. Daniel Ladinsky (New York: Penguin Putnam, 1999).

<sup>2</sup>Anthony de Mello, *Awareness*, (New York: Image Books, Doubleday, 1992).