

To Everything There is a Season
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There is nothing like a road trip to remind us of life's seasons. As the miles unroll beneath the car wheels, memories unroll, as well. The hum of the car engine harmonizes with the "ohm" vibration of all existence. Memories of other journeys bump into journeys ardently desired. I just returned from a road trip up the coast to Monterey, where I spent a week with several hundred Unitarian Universalist ministers at Asilomar conference center.

On this trip, the landscape dressed in pastels. The ocean used up all the color electric blue, leaving the sky to make do with a faded hue. Garments of gold and brown were shoved to the back of nature's closet to await another season. Eager beaver wildflowers preened in the median of highway 99, which I took all the way to Sacramento in order to visit friends. This was a bobby pin trip. I drove north along the straight edge of the bobby pin. The return along highway 101 was the curvy part of the road trip bobby pin.

Last Sunday at 3 p.m., I pulled into a motel parking lot and hurried to the lobby. With the magnetized plastic room key in hand, I tried to sound nonchalant though I could feel adrenaline with each insistent heartbeat. "What time does the Superbowl start? What channel is it on?" To everything there is a season – a time to disregard football and a time to surrender to it. Way to go, Packers! It was a treat to traipse around my old stomping ground – the beautiful central California coast.

In conversations intentional or on the run this past week, the seasons of life tugged for attention on the sleeves of my consciousness. Colleagues talked of illness, health, deaths of loved ones, the deaths of too many loved ones too close together, ministries begun, ministries ended. A minister shared his experience of being in the last group to legally test the effect of LSD as a doorway to peak religious experience. He was in a church basement in Boston on Good Friday. Rev. Howard Thurman's sermon was piped into the downstairs room where the seminarians sat, half of them having been given LSD and half of them having been given a placebo. That season of life is no more.

The ministers talked of energy and focus or of lethargy and distraction. I shared the seasons of my life – loss and treasure, doubt and drive. This afternoon, I will participate in the installation of Rev. Rebecca Benfiel Bijur at the UU Community Church of Santa Monica. I remember fondly my own installation here three years ago this month. The dining room at Asilomar is a gigantic room with a high pitched ceiling. The sound bounces around hard surfaces of glass and wood. I stopped, looked, and listened for a moment during the last evening meal. Hundreds of people were talking about the seasons of their lives between sips and swallows. The syllables merged to form “white noise” marked by a subtle cadence, much like the nearby ocean waves.

There is something about the California coast between Big Sur and San Francisco which draws into the open the spirit’s longing when faced with life’s seasons. This morning’s road trip from Ecclesiastes to 9185 Monte Vista Avenue in Montclair includes a California coast-inspired detour to the Beat poets. The phrase “Beat generation” was coined in 1948 in a conversation between Jack Kerouac and John Holmes. They were trying to come up with a phrase that would describe the mood of their generation – the generation who came of age during or immediately after World War II. “Lost Generation,” the phrase for the generation who came of age during or immediately after World War I did not seem to fit. One or the other of them said, “I guess we’re a beat generation.”¹

John Holmes wrote in a 1952 issue of *The New York Times Magazine*, “Unlike the Lost Generation, which was more occupied with the loss of faith, the Beat Generation is becoming more and more occupied with the need for it.”² Kerouac linked the word Beat with Beatitude, as in the Beatitudes of Jesus. The late San Francisco Chronicle columnist Herb Caen coined the term “beatnik” as a clever though somewhat insulting play on the word, “Sputnik.” For a fascinating read, see *The Beat Face of God: The Beat Generation Writers as Spirit Guides* by Unitarian Universalist minister Stephen Edington.

¹ *The Beat Face of God: The Beat Generation’s Writers as Spirit Guides*, Stephen D. Edington, Trafford Publishing, Victoria, BC, Canada, 2005, p. 2.

² *Ibid.*, p. 5.

After *On the Road* was finally published, a New York City radio talk-show host asked Kerouac what it was that he and this Beat Generation really wanted. “I am waiting for God to show me his face,” he replied.

Religiously inclined people have been glimpsing the face of God for millennia. King Solomon, who tradition holds to be the author of Ecclesiastes, glimpsed the face of God, according to Rabbi Rami M. Shapiro. Rami Shapiro is an author and poet whose liturgical poems are used in Jewish prayer services throughout America. He is also a business consultant on leadership and personal growth.

Rami Shapiro sees Solomon as the Hebrew Lao Tzu. “Ecclesiastes is a testament to the spiritual insights of its author, Solomon. It comes from his deep seeing into the nature of reality. Solomon looked and saw that all is empty of permanence; he also saw that human energies are largely invested in a pursuit of permanence – a pursuit that is doomed from the start. Ecclesiastes is his report of his journey to the heart of reality and his insights into how we should live, given the fact of life’s impermanence.”³

The Hebrew word most commonly translated as “vanity” could also mean “emptiness.” “Havel havalim” is the first sentence. It means “emptiness upon emptiness,” not “vanity of vanities” or “futility upon futility.” “Life is havel havalim – not vain and futile, as most translators put it, but empty of separate and permanent selves and open to constant change and surprise. In Hebrew, the phrase havel havalim literally means “breath of breaths.” In other words, life is not more substantial than a breath. It is fleeting, ephemeral, impermanent. The world is in a state of constant flux: everything changes; nothing stays the same.”⁴

On a similar wavelength, philosopher Ken Wilber puts it this way: “Emptiness embraces all Form as the lost and found Beloved.” Tomorrow is Valentine’s Day. We are loved. We are Lover and Beloved, Emptiness and Form. We do not need chocolates or roses or a sweetheart to know that we are loved.

³ *The Way of Solomon: Finding Joy and Contentment in the Wisdom of Ecclesiastes*, Rami Shapiro, HarperSanFrancisco, 2000, p. 2.

⁴ *Ibid.*, page 96.

At the ministers' conference at Asilomar, Rev. John Buehrens, former UUA president, said that ministers *pander* to congregations in their sermons. They tend to say what they think congregations want to hear. I had never quite thought of myself as doing that. Please let me know your thoughts on this matter of pandering. Pushed by Rev. Buehrens to speak truth to power (the power here being the congregation), I'll share Rami Shapiro's take on life and death, and then my own take.

“If you want to understand what happens when you die, you have to understand who you really are right now and forever,” Rami Shapiro says. “Who are we? We are God. And God is the whole of reality. Just as the ocean manifests as waves, so God lives as us. Just as a wave is nothing but the ocean extended in time and space, so we are nothing other than God present here and now. Just as the wave, when it dies, when it loses form, returns to its true state as the ocean, so we return to our true state as God.”⁵

I agree with Rami Shapiro, except for one thing. I see no reason to use the word or concept “God.” The processes he describes do not require the word or concept “God.” His counsel rings true, whether or not God is part of the picture: “Work at something you love, he says, and find satisfaction in what you do . . . That way, when work ends, you will have reaped its benefits already and can let it go without regret . . . The same is true of love . . . Labor and love for the intrinsic joy of working and loving. And let the rest be.”⁶

May we see through the illusion of separateness and permanence.

May we labor and love for the intrinsic joy of working and loving.

May it be so!

⁵ Ibid., page 104.

⁶ Page 142.