

Come Out, Come Out, Wherever You Are

By J.P. White

(Delivered March 22, 2008)

The vernal equinox, that just passed on March 20th, is a date that tells us, at the very least, to come out, come out, wherever you are.

The equinoxes occur twice a year when the sun is located vertically above a point on the equator,

so the earth is literally split in half by light and dark. The name equinox is derived from the Latin *aequus* (meaning equal) and *nox* (meaning night) -- because at the equinox the night and day are equally distributed the world over.

As we welcome spring, people south of the equator are doing their best to welcome autumn. Our returning light is linked to their approaching dark.

For thousands of years, peoples everywhere have recognized the vernal equinox and thrown a party or offered a prayer in its honor -- for the basic reason that they will be soon be able to plant once again, and then, with hard work, ample sun, adequate rain and luck, their diminishing food supplies will get restored.

The date is significant in Christianity because Easter always falls on the first Sunday after the first full moon after the vernal equinox.

And it's no coincidence that the Egyptians built the Great Sphinx so it points directly toward the rising sun on this one day. And those wild Druids of Stonehenge fame, they took great pains with those giant vertical stones to honor this turning toward the light. It's a rhythm they express from dark to light that's inevitably sprung inside our very bones and stones. And it's a source of almost impossible strength.

From the ancient Taoist point of view, the idea of EQUAL NIGHT is very appealing. Why? Because in the spirit of the Taoist seeker, night and day are always equally balanced. They are never separate, but always looking at one another, eye to eye. Life is always in equinox, NOT PARADOX.

Here, in Minnesota, there's a sobering difference between the season of black ice and the fishing opener, between the season of long dark cold and "Did you see that FULL BODY TATTOO?" Whether we acknowledge it or not, the vernal equinox is more like the final reprieve that allows us to go on living in this frozen tundra...

The white blanket is cast off. The ice houses have returned to their summer pastures. The turkeys stand beside the road looking like they want to catch the #6 bus if they haven't been able to fan their way into courtship. We can smell the purple in the lilacs long before they actually bloom. Our hibernating inner selves once again get re-acquainted with our outer selves.

Said another way: The stakes are high RIGHT ABOUT NOW. We can't wait much longer FOR GENUINE HEAT. No matter where you reside, south or far north of the equator, you bump into this one simple law: Life is about sunlight and movement.

By this time in Minnesota, we have crept about

too long in extended darkness and not stretched our legs, and we are ready for movement. Life is, after all ABOUT putting a "spring" into your step. Life is found in sunlight. It's also found in listening to the still, small voices found ONLY in darkness.

So, what I what to offer you is a brief exploration of these two views of the equinox.

For the last few months, I've been offering a class here in the North room called the Poetry of Spirit and we have explored how poetry can be a conduit to the soul -- so if you want to spend time with your soul/spirit, that part of you which endures transgressions, extremes of season and fortune, sudden change, collisions and separations, then you need to read poetry or write it. (This method of soul exploration is NOT optional. It's a required course.)

Most of us learn something about intimacy with others. But few of us learn how to be intimate with our own souls. Why? Because it's both a beautiful and terrifying journey, full of risk, hazards, angels, demons, detours, and unexpected rewards.

This search for the soul is a journey worthy of a hero, a protagonist, someone whose job it is to advance the story. One definition of the art of the story is this:

You put your hero up into a tree.

Throw stones at him or her.

Then get him (or her) down from the tree or not. All for the purpose of revealing something tender, tough, stingingly funny, profound or disturbing about the human condition.

In life, we want to avoid all stones hurled by others or by ourselves because, well, stones hurt, and thus many of our inner secrets remain unrevealed for an entire lifetime and we pass through this brief life stunned and saddened by how little it has shown us.

And this ostrich-like quality of the human species is a good thing for artists because if it weren't for our collective repression, denial and unrevealed secrets, there would be... no plays performed, no poems written, no paintings painted, no songs sung.

We seek out art because we actually want to be changed by something we can't quite bring ourselves to face.

WE WANT THE INVISIBLE TO FIND US WHERE WE HIDE.
LIFE IS, FOR MOST OF US, EVEN UNITARIAN
UNIVERSALISTS... JUST ONE EXTENDED GAME OF HIDE AND SEEK.

We want the dark and the light to inform one another, and we secretly want to be immersed in that hushed, invisible exchange of equinox.

This secret exchange between light and dark is the engine behind every hero's journey, the one who must descend into the underworld and return with a vision for how the tribe will survive in the over-world, or NOT.

SAID ANOTHER WAY: WHETHER YOU'RE A BELIEVER OR NON-BELIEVER...IT'S ONLY THE DIALOGUE WITH THE DARK THAT MAKES THE LIGHT POSSIBLE.

Most of what we do in our brains is solve problems, but poetry (and art in general) is not about solutions -- which is where art departs boldly from science.

The scientist looks at mystery and sees an equation to solve. The scientist believes that in time most mysteries (if not all) will be revealed.

The artist looks at mystery and sees a riddle to be savored, explored and finally thrown back into the cosmos so someone else can find it, marvel at it, and hurl it back.

For the artist, the greatest questions will always go unsolved as aptly expressed by Gauguin's masterpiece entitled: Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where are we going?

The soul does not REQUIRE solutions. It seeks and embraces enigmas, mysteries, the things seen and unseen, that can't be fully unlocked. The poet, Rainer Maria Rilke, once wrote,

Be patient toward all that is unsolved
in your heart.
try to love the questions themselves.

Do not now seek the answers,
which cannot be given
because you would not be able
to live them.

And the point is to live everything.

Live the questions now,

Perhaps you will then

gradually,
without knowing it,

Live along some distant day

Into the answers.

The poet's job AND the hero's task IN EVERY GREAT STORY (and for all of us in this shared holy space) is to live life's questions and love them.

Pray that the road is long, the Greek poet Cavafy reminds us. Ithaca has given you the beautiful voyage. Without her you would have never set out on the road.

The hero's task (yours and mine) is not just to see the light and the dark, but to inhabit the equinox, and see where the two are fused beyond the duality we ascribe to them.

Which is why... in all great poetry, all great plays, all great art, the forward light energy is always in dialogue with backward dark energy.

A poem about bees by Jane Hirshfield will TURN on the twin gates of heaven and hell. A 5th century Chinese poem about the first day of spring will look to autumn. The king and the clown will share equal billing in a Dickinson poem. Opposites attract in life and art because they feed each other at the deepest possible sources of our longing for equinox.

When my friend Marion Hoppin, a Jungian therapist, was dying, I called her and said, Isn't it hard lying there in bed all day? To which she replied, "There are so many stories I haven't yet listened to." And she wasn't talking here about books on tape.

She was talking about the stories in her life she hadn't quite worked through, argued out, or lived with long enough. Was she going to solve them? Maybe not. Like Rilke, she was always in rehearsal for a bigger drama...

Be patient toward all that is unsolved

in your heart.

Try to love the questions themselves.

As a Jungian, hungry always for parallel views of any event, Marion viewed her approaching darkness as an opportunity to discover expanded pathways into own light. She wanted her approaching night to inform her days and she was patient and compassionate with her own limitations, sorrows, regrets and joys. She lived her life bravely and clearly, even at the end, in equinox. This is a worthy challenge for Unitarian Universalists, and for intrepid heroes everywhere:

To hold the dark equal to the light and call it good, all of it, the beginning, the middle, the end, the what is, here, gone, and returned again, thankfully, thank you light, thank you for seeking us out in all our hiding places, and thank you dark and the thick honey of this good life.