

**Thomas Jefferson Memorial Church – Unitarian Universalist**  
**“Fried Green Tomatoes: Dealing with Life’s Incompletions”**  
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I’m curious...How many of you have ever eaten fried green tomatoes?  
And how many of you have ever *cooked* fried green tomatoes?  
Who’s *harvested* a green tomato?

I was raised in Tennessee, and my mom was raised in North Carolina, and her mom was raised in South Carolina. We ate fried green tomatoes. My mom would slice green tomatoes, dip them in eggs, then pat them in cornmeal, then lay them in a pan of oil to fry. I used to think there were two kinds of tomatoes---red and green. When I was a teenager, I learned that there are not. Instead, the green tomatoes are the ones that never got ripe. Instead of letting them get frozen in the autumn, we brought them in and cooked them to soften them.

That’s what I want to talk about today. The green tomato moments of our lives. The plans we made that never ripened. The creative impulses that never completely bore fruit. The times that seasons change, whether we are ready or not.

I’d like to quote from one of the great influences of our modern day...Garrison Keillor. On his show, *A Prairie Home Companion*, he sang this song as a take off on the popular song, *Turn, Turn, Turn*:

For everything turn turn turn  
there is a reason, turn turn turn  
And there’s time to get it done before November  
A time to mow  
A time to rake  
A time to clean  
A time to wax  
A time to mulch  
For goodness sake  
A time to stuff newspapers in the cracks

Sometimes in life we have things that are incomplete. Summer projects that just didn’t get done before fall came and school started again. The trips you meant to take while you had the free time. The foods you wanted to cook while summer produce was in season.

Maybe this year’s change of season meant a change of location for you. Maybe you left behind relationships to go on to others, or left behind projects to go on to others. And maybe you weren’t ready. But had to go anyway.

Then there are other kinds of incompletions that might be a private pain---such as a pregnancy that ends in miscarriage or abortion; or a break up with your same-gender partner; an addiction treatment program terminated by insurance. Because our society makes these hard to talk about, the pain of these incompletions is often deepened.

Illness often brings a change of season before we are ready. When a terminal diagnosis comes, one is suddenly aware of creative projects that might not get done...things one meant to contribute to the world, and wondering if one still can ... Whether you are the one with the diagnosis, or your loved one received the diagnosis, you may have to do things you didn’t think you were ready to do.

When I worked as a chaplain in the hospital, I often sat with people who were dying. Some felt resolved about the life that they had lived and were fine with the passage ahead of them. But others were trying to figure out things that hadn’t gone well and relationships that weren’t ready to be left behind. Often, this was because their children or grandchildren were not in safe housing or healthy relationships. In other words, they weren’t ready to go until they knew that the vulnerable people who relied on them would be okay. Things were not complete.

Other kinds of incompletions exist in our church lives. Throughout the denomination, congregations and fellowships grow and change. Sometimes these are long-awaited, wished-for changes, but other times, change rolls in when committee chairs are out of town, or the copier is broken, or the congregation is exhausted from the loss of a loved one.

On the international scene, we often hear of incomplete attempts at giving aid and troop removals which never quite finish.

So, we see that incompletions happen in many large and small ways, in our personal lives, religious activities, and on an international level.

These incompletions in life are a problem if we get stuck or if we feel inadequate. They can be losses that often go unrecognized. And when these losses are unrecognized, they may go undealt with, and then our grief accumulates. Consider the areas of your life: financial, spiritual, physical, social. Maybe you have incompletions in your life which are unresolved.

I think the story of the fall equinox can shed light on our incompletions.

The earth and sun change relationship to each other, so that the amount of daylight changes over the course of the year. As you know, the Fall Equinox, which means the day and night are about equal in length, usually happens around the 20<sup>th</sup> or 21<sup>st</sup> of September. Then, for the next three months, the amount of darkness increases, as we are experiencing right now, until Winter Solstice, which is around December 21, we have the shortest day and the longest night of the year. Then the days and nights start to rebalance toward equal until Spring Equinox. From about March 21 to about June 21, the days increase in length. Then, around June 21 is Summer Solstice, the longest day and shortest night of the year. After that, the days get shorter again, until darkness and light equalize again at the Fall Equinox and the cycle continues.

I'm not offering this as a science review, but as a story. It is a story about balance and change. The characters in the story are the sun, and earth, and we animals. The timeline of the story moves from expansion to contraction and back again. The setting of the story is the cosmos, but is also our hearts. The plot of the story is how we respond to the changes. Each quadrant of the year has a different mood. There is a quadrant of hope and planting, a quadrant of letting things grow, a quadrant of harvest and pulling inward, and a quadrant of hibernation and waiting.

I offer you this story of the Fall Equinox as a way to take another look at things that seem incomplete.

I want to offer three pieces of hope for us as we face the incompletions in our lives.

The **first** piece of hope is **faith** that when we not ready, we will be able to proceed anyway. To help you see this, let me use a gardening metaphor.

There are some really talented gardeners out there. I know some gardeners who mix compost like other people mix cocktails. They know how to space each type of seed the way a nursery school teacher knows how to help the children lay down for their naps. They know how to plot out exactly what day to plant the peas, according to the moon and sun. They know when to put in the squash, beets, and spinach to maximize germination. They would be embarrassed not to have their potatoes in by St. Patrick's Day.

But I know some other gardeners whose lives are so chaotic, that the best they do is to squeeze in a moment to go out in the yard, scratch up some dirt, throw down some seeds, toss on some water, and hope.

Sometimes we are like the gardeners who have time to plan and tend. Other times, we are like the gardeners who know that it is better to throw down some seed than wait for perfect conditions and plant none at all. I think the lesson is that although we would like to always act in alignment with the seasons, we sometimes just don't. We would like our lives to proceed in a sensible fashion of expansion and contraction, but we sometimes feel out of sync. We have to act even when we don't feel ready.

For example, the cancer diagnosis comes, and even though we don't feel ready, we figure out how to say the things to our loved ones that we had never figured out how to say before. Or, in our Unitarian Universalist denomination, the Boston headquarters doesn't provide the leadership we need, and even though we don't feel ready, we have to figure out how to proceed in our congregation anyway. Or, the national government won't address global warming, and even though we're not sure how, we try to develop action locally.

I wonder if the Nobel Prize Committee or even Barack Obama struggled with this question this week. Was he really ready to receive that prize? Was it time already? Couldn't we wait and see how his leadership turns out a little longer? But, the committee decided to give the prize, and Obama decided to accept, and go forward with faith. He used it as a call to further action.

So, the first suggestion I want to offer to you today is faith in our readiness. **Faith** that when the seasons are changing, but we don't feel ripe, that we have faith in our ability to figure out how to proceed. Faith that when we don't have time to plan and tend, that the seeds will grow anyway. Faith that like Luke Skywalker, we will find a deeper force that carries us.

Now I want to suggest a **second** piece of hope---when things come to an early end, that we can practice **acceptance**. We learn to improvise to accept things the way they are, even when they are not the way we want them to be.

There is a book called *Necessary Losses* by Judith Viorst. The point of her book is that all of life requires losing things, leaving things behind, letting things die. She argues that when we lose things ---like our mother's protection---we gain wisdom and maturity that enhance our ability to approach life. So, our losses, when we accept them, give us a gift.

Another reason to accept incompletions is that we might gain new perspective later. For example, I have a friend who likes to color mandalas. She draws the pattern, and then begins to color it in. She goes around the circle, filling in the pattern with her crayons. Sometimes she runs out of time and has to leave it unfinished for a while. The other day, she took out some of her "unfinished mandalas" to show me what she was working on. When I saw them, they looked like marvelous, complex, colorful patterns to me. I couldn't tell they were unfinished! So, part of composing a creative life is trusting that just because all of our plans don't come to completion doesn't mean that something beautiful hasn't been completed. If we spend our mental energy on the thing that didn't happen, we are missing precious moments to be thinking about the things that are happening.

But, accepting incompletions is not always easy. We may need practice. In yoga practice, we do active poses---sidebends, backbends, twists, forward bends--- and then we finish with a non-active pose called Shavasana, where we lie flat to rest. The name of this pose, Shavasana, is the Sanskrit word meaning corpse pose. A yoga teacher once explained that we are practicing for death. We are practicing to gracefully let go. We can trust new seasons, because we know that the incompleteness of each season is completed by the whole cycle.

I'd like to move now to talk about a **third** piece of hope---transformation. Here's where those fried green tomatoes come in. It doesn't work to eat a green tomato---it is just too hard to bite into and not digestible for our stomachs. So, we have to transform it by cooking it. These types of incompletions may not be ripe, but they can be cooked, salvaged, re-visioned--- **transformed**.

In the year 1900, a Universalist minister named Marion Shutter published a series of sermons about how to make sense of Darwin's *Origin of the Species*. In his sermons, Rev. Shutter explains that God does not act suddenly, but continuously. He believed that the continuously unfolding evolution of nature is reassurance that God dwells in nature. So, it is part of our Universalist history to find solace in transformation.

The point of transformation is that a ripening that we wanted can be accomplished in another way. Such as getting a diploma over the course of eight years instead of four. Such as getting equal marriage rights on a state level instead of a national level. Such as finding a new mentor when another has gone away.

So, I am leaving you with three suggestions: **faith** that we can be ready even when we feel incomplete, **acceptance** that we can let go of incompletions, and **transformation** of unripe things into digestible things.

My wish for each of us, whether we are feeling complete or incomplete right now, is that we allow ourselves to change and be changed, so that we can unfold with life, and let go of what we need to let go of so that we can be ready to accept what comes next. What I wish for each of us is that if it is our time to plant, that we plant. If it is our time to tend, that we tend. If it is our time to harvest, that we harvest. If it is our time to rest, that we rest. If you do it incompletely, that you be at peace with the incompleteness and give gratitude that you have done something.

*As we heard from Annie Dillard when we opened, "We are here to abet creation and to witness to it, To notice each other's beautiful face and complex nature, So that creation need not play to an empty house."*

Blessed be.

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