

“Resting Space”

Delivered to the Unitarian Universalist Church of Roanoke on Sunday,
August 30, 2026 by the Rev. Jen Raffensperger

Part I

In Motion

When my oldest nephew was very young, he flapped. You’ve very possibly seen this in little kids, or even older kids, or honestly even grown adults. When he got excited about something - a new game or toy, a favorite song coming on the radio, a favorite meal, building a sandcastle, a friendly animal - he would flap his arms in a kind of little dance.

We all thought this was great. There was such a perfect encapsulation of joy in that motion! It was contagious, too. When we saw him flap, we couldn’t help but smile, get a little excited ourselves. Even if I, personally, was not excited about playing the same game again for the 17th time, I could still receive a sense of joy and connection from this little human, simply by letting myself be fully in the presence of his joy and excitement.

“There can be no screaming match here. If we keep yelling over everything and everybody, we will miss it.

So, stop. Really, stop. Go read. write. rest. take care. paint. cry. dance. love. sit in the rain. grieve. reconnect to the source of your strength. cook at home. call your elders. pray. love. be transformed.”

Our reading today is from Octavia Raheem, a yoga teacher for many years and now dedicated to using rest as a principal practice to educate others on how to navigate change. As vital as we understand change to be, and as unavoidable as we know it is, it can still unsettle us. When we do not know what to expect, we can place too much energy in looking forward. And that takes us out of when and where we are, right now. When we

anticipate that something is going to happen, but we don't know what or when, tension builds within our bodies. If you, like me, sometimes enjoy a good horror movie, you'll know that this tension is often used in a very effective manner to build up to a jump scare: We know something is in the basement! It is *clear* something is in the basement. *Now the basement light isn't working! Why are you still going in the basement?!*

That moment of jump - when the thing in the basement is revealed, when our friend who has been acting a little strangely opens the door on a bunch of our other friends planning a surprise party - that is a time of release. The tension within our bodies, felt in our neck or jaw, our back or shoulders, lets go. There's a physical response too - perhaps laughter, nervous or otherwise. Perhaps we rush to hug the people who surprised us - with their consent, of course. Perhaps we even clap or flap our hands with delight!

This way our relief, our lack of tension, is shared.

Sometimes when you take a busy person in a busy world - as I suspect many of us feel, much of the time - and tell them they should pause, that can feel unattainable, even foolish. Why would we stop now? Maybe we just got started. Maybe we finally found that flow state. What do you mean, stop?

“Go read. write. rest. take care. paint. cry. dance. love. sit in the rain. grieve. reconnect to the source of your strength. cook at home. call your elders. pray. love. be transformed.”

Raheem lists many ways to “stop” the worry, the unsettled expectations, the way we keep grinding and moving and feeding the machines of commerce and fear...and they aren't all about not moving the body. Paint, cry, dance, cook, make a phone call. Hug someone who wants to hug you. Pet your dog or your cat. Ride a horse. Ride a bicycle. For some of us, cleaning is a relaxing, centering activity. (If this is you, please share with me your secret!) For some of us, we might do a craft. I often find my best times of meditation are while I am walking - on the greenway, maybe, or in a deliberate practice

like a labyrinth - but sometimes even parking farther from the store where my errands take me and walking a little bit longer across the parking lot can ground me in the middle of a busy day. Can quiet me. Can transform me.

“Pray. love. be transformed.”

Transformation is one of our central shared Unitarian Universalist values. And while it's tempting to think about this value in broad and far-reaching terms - the transformation of our society to a more equitable one, the transformation of our community to one where all are housed and fed - if we focus too much on too many things that are beyond us and beyond our knowing individually, we will build that tension within ourselves. We will feel nervous and afraid. And our own bodies and spirits will start to fray, like a worn piece of cloth that our fingers can't seem to stop worrying.

When we feel frayed, when we feel scattered, we must return to ourselves. We must transform the way we are. Our busy brains will thank us. Our blood pressure will thank us. And our spirits will find a way to connect with others in a way that transforms us from someone who radiates tension to someone who radiates care.

Part II

Stillness

Last month, when I was sitting on the plane that was going to take me to San Francisco, I was very proud of myself for the thorough preparations I had made for the flight. I had downloaded a bunch of episodes of my favorite podcasts. I had a few audiobooks downloaded, and a few favorite albums for good measure. And just in case, I also had two actual books in my backpack. I like listening to things when I fly because the earbuds also help dampen that external noise. What I didn't remember until the moment I was buckled into that plane, however, was that I had recently upgraded my phone, and did not have wired earbuds for the new one. (I rarely use wireless ones because too often I forget to keep them charged.) I sat there,

looking at the now-useless wired earbuds curled up in a side pocket of my purse, and I laughed. Nothing for it but the books, I thought!

It had been a long time since I had done nothing on an airplane to pass the time but read an actual, physical book. And it was...really, really great. The book I chose to read, *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us*, by Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, was a heavy one. I would read a chapter or part of a chapter, then close the book and turn my head to look out the window, still marveling at the sight of the tops of clouds. I would just...sit. And be. And think. Sometimes I would cry.

Above all, I would be still.

“Listen. We are descending into quiet. Being thrown into it, really. I hear a sound so striking in its silence that it has displaced us all. It has put us in our place.

Human.

Be. Still.

We can no longer outrun this without collectively slowing down. We cannot profit from this without the bottom meticulously falling out. We cannot package, sell, or otherwise capitalize on this without paying with our very own lives.”

We can no longer outrun this without collectively slowing down.

Perhaps that is one of the reasons that you come here on a Sunday morning. Perhaps you have your own meditation practice, or a time you set aside when you will not engage with screens or electronic devices, or perhaps you write morning pages, or like to sit and watch the sunset, or the sunrise, from your porch or a favorite park bench. Maybe you like to

people-watch at the park or the mall or the beach, not feeling the need to move or interact, but rather to take some time to simply be.

To be still.

The current state of our society is, in almost every respect, antithetical to the idea of stillness. Of pause. We are encouraged to share our every opinion, optimize our every moment, consider the efficiency of every meeting, every meal, the mantra of “more” claiming every stray particle of our attention... if we let it.

This anti-stillness is so pervasive that we can sometimes not notice the way we are carrying it in our bodies. We have learned to ignore tiredness, the circadian rhythms we toss aside in a wash of artificial light.

“From our very first breath, we reach out
Co-regulation, not self-regulation, is in our nature.
We find our cues from the sun and the moon,
From each parent and caregiver,
We find our place in this great turning planet,
By turning to one another,
Generation to generation,
We awaken to the dawn, and fall asleep at the evening’s end.
Our life’s journey is part of something greater,
Something simple,
Something divine.”

The world communicates with us every moment of every day, if we allow ourselves to receive it. The days are growing shorter, now, as we climb down from the height of high summer and approach the autumnal equinox, the coming harvest, the gentleness of light as it steps off the center stage for the rise of the comfort of dark. Something simple, like this exchange, like this turning of the year, grounds us. Helps us to pause when we might be tempted to be caught up in the rush of the world. Helps us to pause when that rush makes us feel tense, makes us feel angry, makes us

reactive, makes us feel like we can no longer contain the emotions arising within us.

Stillness feels like a radical notion at times such as these. But it is not radical. It is our birthright. It is the rest that the cycles of life and living require of us.

Part III

Transformation

Since late August of last year, my life has transformed in more ways than I could possibly have imagined. One of the largest, quietest changes was the death of my mother last October, after many years of slow, steady, quietly declining health. It was all so quiet, in fact, that as I went through the rituals of death - saying my goodbyes to her, planning for the funeral Mass her Catholic faith required, writing the obituary, finding the photographs, relying on the strength of this community to hold a gentle space while I was not able to be present to my duties, obligations, and great joys of being your minister - it was easy for the grief of that loss to feel tidy, somehow. For it to feel contained.

Another large change in my life in the last year was the unlooked-for but very welcome arrival of romantic love, such a balm against the troubled, turbulent world. This love felt the opposite of quiet or tidy; it felt seismic and bold, able to be perceived even through the chaos and hurt and loss both of the larger world and my personal sphere of experience.

Grief and love do not exist without each other; they are as interdependent as light and darkness. Each is proof positive of the existence of the other. Grief is an expression of love's loss, a diminution of love's presence; new love expands that loving presence, buoys the heart that grief weighs down.

During my summer vacation and study leave this year, the quietness of my grief had the time and space - at last - to become more loud and less tidy.

In large part this was because of the gift of expansive love within my life and world; it threw into sharp relief both what I had lost in the past and what I now stand to lose in the future. Every new love is a future loss. Every loss arises from deep, abiding love.

We are not fully human without them both.

The rest I was able to receive during this summer's pause allowed me to feel them both. The rest during this summer's pause allowed me to feel more fully human.

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Love, grieve. Cry, dance. Be transformed.

The spiritual challenge of transformation is that it will come unbidden. It will surprise us. Transformation is a fancy word for change, and change is not always gentle or easy and it is always coming. The spiritual gift of transformation is that it will both strengthen us and soften us. Change will make us tender in our hearts and firm in our spirits. When we become bold enough to make room for the light and the dark, for the grief and the love, the known and the unknown, we become grounded in the world. We become fully present. We can witness our own hurt and anger and frustration, and even stop them in their tracks. We can witness the joy and excitement of another and affirm it, mirror it, share it - grow it.

There's a very popular expression, "Hurt people hurt people." It's popular for a reason: when we are constantly assailed by bad news, constantly being instructed to panic, we feel wave upon wave of hurt. The hurt of others. The hurt within ourselves. If we are not intentional about countering

those messages, those waves, we will be swamped by them. The counter to this is: "Healing people heal people." Notice I said "healing" not "healed." The work of healing is never truly done. Healing and hurt are also entirely interdependent. There will be more of both.

But we can cultivate our own approach. We can heal ourselves, and others, better when we are together. We can find a space for quiet stillness and a place for bold joy when we come together. Some days, we will have more to give, that others will need from us. Some days, our need will far outweigh what we have to give. It is why we need one another, to give the energy of Love to the value of Transformation. We will never change the world if we cannot begin by changing ourselves, by supporting one another on the journey that sacred transformation calls us to.

Love, grieve. Cry, dance. Be transformed.

So may it be.