

“Harvest Home”

A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull
First Parish Unitarian Universalist
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How good it is to celebrate harvest in its multitude of evidence. Consider the harvest that we know this morning – the faces of our children, new faces in the pews, new members committed to joining the pilgrimage that is Unitarian Universalism, including one who began that trek at birth. Harvest happens in many ways, each a form of grace in our midst, each cause for gratitude, for Thanksgiving.

Day by day we set our tables of Thanksgiving as we know the blessings of being together around those tables – tables of worship, tables of learning, tables of gathering to learn and listen to one another, and yes, tables that hold that which sustains our physical selves, tables that hold enough and often more than enough. It is a time of harvest, a time of celebrating it all as we set our tables inside and out.

“Above the grain field stubble
a lift of cranes
like a great table cloth
shaken

muses Utah poet David Lee.

Earlier this morning, Jim and I gathered the corners of another tablecloth, lifted it into the air, and settled it onto the floor of our chancel. Why onto the floor? Jim promised our children and I promised you that a story was forthcoming. As we worship here, our children are amid a lesson of what we call “Spirit Play,” with props and all, about a people who celebrated and dined around something other than a table. It is a story that comes to us from another holiday of harvest, that holiday of recent origin known as Kwanzaa. Kwanzaa is Swahili for “first fruits” and refers to the first fruits of a cultural harvest among those of us who are of African origin.

At the end of December, families celebrate the principles held up by Kwanzaa’s creator, Dr. Maulana Karenga, as principles by which “Black people must live to ... rescue and reconstruct our history and lives.” Over a span of seven days, seven candles are lit, each illuminating one of Kwanzaa’s seven principles. I know, the ring of seven principles recalls the shared principles of our Unitarian Universalist faith; many within our faith celebrate also these other principles. Throughout Kwanzaa, special foods are prepared; songs are sung; and stories are told illustrating principles such as unity, collective work and responsibility, and purpose. All invite reflection at harvest time, whether that time is marked by a harvest of grain, of culture, or of faith. Each is ripe with lessons for living in community that is open and inclusive, community in which there is a place for everyone, an equitable place for everyone.

What does this look like? Recall again this morning’s tablecloth billowing upward and coming to rest on the floor, the ground. Such would be the dining space for the people of Shango Oba in the story told by Dorothy Winbush Riley to illustrate the Kwanzaa principle of *Nia*, Swahili for purpose. It is the central principle for the fifth day of Kwanzaa and apt for us today as we set new places for new members.

Let's listen in to the sounds of the village of Shango Oba. Let's catch the aroma of a succulent stew simmering on an open fire. In this village, people live for celebration. All they do is celebrate. They sing; they feast; they dance; they stay up far into the night celebrating whatever it is that is deemed worthy of a festival, and whatever includes just about everything. Nothing daunts their habits of celebration...almost nothing,

“The rain fed the river! We must celebrate!” cried the villagers. “The sun has gathered up the rain! We must celebrate!”

All the feasts of celebration were held in an area of the village known as Oba Yumi Square, rather like the Cohasset Common at Lobster Roll time or on Farmers Market days. But in Oba Yumi Square, there were goats and chickens, slain by the men and cooked by the women. In this festive public space, the children ran and played, laughing and shouting. They reveled on yet another occasion when adults remembered how to play and invited them to play freely.

Once the food was prepared, it was the job of the village elders to ensure that it was fairly apportioned. This was done through the tradition of everyone sitting in a circle on the ground. Everyone was fed. Everyone!

After many years, one of the villagers – a young man named Jacob – found his way to America, where he studied at a great university. He became eloquent and erudite and grew confident in his mastery of carefully chosen disciplines. Blessed by academia and the amenities of Western civilization, he returned home. He returned of course to the wondrous sounds and smells of yet another celebration brewing in the village square.

After so many years away, Jacob had forgotten the traditions of his village. “My family, I mean no disrespect, but why are you eating your food on the ground?” he inquired.

“How would you expect us to eat: standing up or sitting in a tree?” asked a village elder.

“No, don't be ridiculous.” said Jacob, “ ‘Civilized people sit at a table.’ ”

His response took them aback. They considered the matter. A decision was made, and a table was brought to the village. Of course the table had edges. In fact, it was just large enough to seat eight people.

You can imagine that for feast after feast, the villagers quarreled over who those eight should be. Some said the young men should sit at the table, for it was they who brought it into the square. With no patience for such arrogance, the women claimed it should be they who sat at the table, for they had prepared the food. “Such a sense of entitlement,” thought the elders, shaking their heads. Confident that age bestows privilege, they came forward with their claim.

All who lived in Shango Oba forgot their purpose, thinking only of who the select few would be from celebration to celebration. Finally, Jacob's father called him aside, saying “Look what you have done. In the name of civilization; there is no purpose, no unity, no community.”

Later that night, under the sliver of a moon, Jacob took his ax and chopped the table into many pieces. He picked up the pieces and laid at the door of every villager a remnant of the table. In the morning he went to the village elders and explained what he had done. “I want to see unity and harmony in Shango Oba,” he declared. And there was a feast that very day to celebrate the end of the table.

(adapted from Dorothy Winbush Riley's story, “Shango Oba”) in *The Complete Kwanzaa: Celebrating Our Cultural Harvest*)

As we lift our tablecloth and rest it on the ground, how many might sit there? Might we stretch those edges and expand the circle of our feast?

What is our purpose, but to “welcome all to our inclusive spiritual community” and to affirm and live the principles of our faith? This morning we welcomed new members into this community of faith and practice. Let us again and again lift our tablecloth skyward and settle it onto an ever expanding space that is sacred, an ever expanding space that is our grounding in who we are, how we live, and what we celebrate. On this day of welcoming, let us give thanks and pray that this congregation, like the village of Shango Oba, never stops celebrating a harvest in which all are welcome at a table that knows no edges.

Amen.

Sources:

David Lee, “November Idyll: After the still life: – Leviticus 7:12-15, in *Orion*, November/December 2007.

Dorothy Winbush Riley, “Shango Oba,” *The Complete Kwanzaa: Celebrating Our Cultural Harvest*, HarperCollins Publishers, New York, 1995, 214-16.