Balance
Unitarian Universalist Church in Cherry Hill
Sunday, March 17, 2024
Rev. Margret A. O'Neall

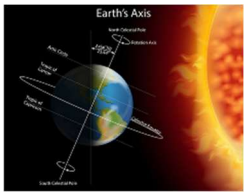
Jes Finnegan
Spring Equinox

Spring Equinox is also known as Ostara on the Wheel of the Year, named for the Germanic Goddess of Spring, Eostre. Sounds a lot like Easter, right? There are many similarities between the two celebrations, both with eggs, bunnies, and colorful blooms all symbolizing fertility and renewal.

Celebrating Ostara and Spring Equinox also brings an opportunity to look at balance in my life. At this time, day and night are of equal length and nature is balanced between the seasons. Life can tend to feel on a precipice as well at this time, we are eager to breathe life into all of the plans we have been dreaming of over winter. Things we have been waiting to create begin to flow almost effortlessly when we align with the seasonal energies.

Something about new life bursting forth, tender green shoots pushing through the dark earth, and all of the fertile energy stirs us to action. Spring Equinox is a waking up! As we get ready tumble into the bright new year, pause and reflect on where you'd like to have more balance in your life. When we create and give and serve from a place of balance, we do so sustainably. What will you create this year?

Rev Margret
Balance



Balance. Our theme for this month of March is balance, as we approach one of the seasonal balance points of the year. Living as we do on a tilted planet, our times of sunlight and darkness are unevenly distributed across our days, changing through the year, except on those days we name as Equinox – one in the fall, the point where the rhythm stills and then shifts toward darkness for the northern hemisphere, and the other in the spring, moving out of the dark winter season to usher in a time of light and warmth for our part of the earth. And so this is a balance point, a time to still and shift direction, and on the Equinox, we reflect on the meaning of balance – in our seasons, and in our lived experience as creatures of the Earth.

Balance. Living on this planet requires that earth creatures learn and practice balance as they move their bodies under the influence of gravity. There are countless videos of kittens and puppies tumbling about as they learn to use their legs; of lambs and foals and baby giraffes pushing up on their spindly stems to take their first staggering steps. Tumbling and staggering and learning as they go, we watch all the baby creatures figure out their relationship with gravity, and how to find their balance.

Balance. Humans are also earth creatures, and we also work on balance all our lives - as infants, first wiggling and rolling, and then pushing up with arms and legs to lift the belly off the ground, taking off to scoot and creep and crawl, then grabbing a nearby support to pull up to stand on little trembling legs – balancing at each stage, learning by trial and error, by flopping or plopping or falling, seeking that elusive balance point to move from horizontal to vertical, from stationary

to mobile. The progression in finding our balance is something we have in common with other land creatures and with each other, figuring out our relationship with gravity.

Balance. It seems I have been working on balance all my life. My relationship with gravity is precarious at best – I don't remember what it was like learning to crawl or to walk, but I do remember flunking out of ballet classes as a child, and struggling to walk the balance beam in gym class -- and everyone in the yoga studio soon learned that I claimed the spot by the wall since the tree pose completely eludes my fragile sense of balance. Riding a bike, climbing a ladder, sometimes just walking on a sidewalk without teetering into the street – all too often, gravity wins, the pull of the earth claiming me as her own.

Balance. Because the force of gravity is constantly drawing us toward the earth, maintaining balance is a physical reality in every moment of our lives on this planet. And balance is a metaphor as well, as opposites and polarities are part of our experience in the natural world. This week we come once again to a balance point in the year, the Vernal Equinox, when for just a moment on our tilted planet the hours of darkness are in perfect balance with the hours of sunlight.

The polarities of our planetary system are represented in the ancient Chinese Tai Ji image of Yin and Yang, symbolizing darkness and light, interwoven, interdependent, intertwined in the nature of the world. The Yin is the shadow: interior, cool, dark – the time of long dark, the shady side of the hill. And Yang is the counterpart: light, exterior, hot, bright – the season of long sunlight hours, the side of the hill on which the sun shines.

The presence of Yin and Yang is inherent in all of life, all of the natural world. These complementary forces are never static but in a constantly changing dynamic balance, similar to the flow of the seasons on earth. They are interdependent – neither can exist without the other. As described in Chinese philosophy, "The Tai Ji (Supreme Ultimate) diagram shows the relationship of Yin and Yang and illustrates their interdependence. Nothing is totally Yin; nothing is totally Yang. Just as a state of total Yin is reached, Yang begins to grow. Yin contains the seed of Yang and vice versa. They constantly transform into each other." There can be no shadow without light. As the earth turns, there can be no day without night. As the seasons move, there must be winter before we can move into spring. As the classics state: "Yin creates Yang, and Yang activates Yin."

The annual rhythm of the earth manifests the pattern of shadow and light, and we have seasonal rituals and traditions to honor our movement between the Yin and Yang aspects of reality. Each September, at the Autumnal Equinox, we enter the Yin time, the time of turning inward, away from the light. Yin time is a time to go yin-side ourselves, a time for slowing our pace, making the space in our lives for introspection, contemplation, perhaps meditation or prayer. The Yin energy calls us to relish the spiritual aspect of our lives, to explore the deeper possibilities that call to us beyond the rush of daily activity. We become in Yin time the bulb buried within the frozen ground, the dormant tree, the hibernating bear. In the dark we enter the dream time, a generative time in which something new may begin to emerge.

And as the seed of Yang is contained within the structure of Yin, at the Winter Solstice in December we make the shift, completing the descent into Yin as the seed of light begins to stir. The bulb, the tree and the bear sense the subtle shift as the bright seed of Yang begins to grow

within the darkness, activating the countervailing energy that soon will rise, brightening the dark and beckoning the return of the sun to warm our days.

And now the rising energy has brought us to the other seasonal balance point, the Spring Equinox, as the light has expanded to match the shadow energy and we hover in the space of duality. This week we rest for a moment at a balance point in the year, preparing to fully emerge from the time of shadow, moving into the days of long sunlight. We may feel our energy return, the air stirs with warmth, we find excuses to be out in the sunlight. Perhaps we begin something new, take on a new challenge, explore a new way to live our lives, as we find our way into the outward focus of Yang that moves toward its full expression in the season of summer.

As Jes said earlier, the Spring Equinox is celebrated in the earth-centered Wiccan traditions as Ostara. As described in an online article, "The energy is expansive and exuberant. It is the first day of Spring! Ostara takes its name after the Germanic goddess, Eostre/Ostara, who was traditionally honored in the month of April with festivals to celebrate fertility, renewal and re-birth. It was from Eostre that the Christian celebration of Easter evolved, as well as the naming of the hormone Eostrogen, essential to … fertility." Ostara lifts us toward the Yang energy of the warmth, the growing season, the release into the long sunny days of summer.

Chinese philosophy teaches us that "relative levels of Yin and Yang are continuously changing. Normally this is a harmonious change, but when Yin or Yang are out of balance they affect each other, and too much of one can eventually weaken or consume the other." When out of balance, the nurturing dreams of the darkness may devolve into a loss of hope; the brilliance of the light may draw us too much into action, fueling constant outward motion, until we lose touch with our need for inward focus and rest in our lives. And so we are reminded, in our life on this tilted planet, of the importance of the balance points, spaces of stillness that slow the rhythm, making space for the yin to give birth to the yang, giving energy for the yang to activate the yin.

Balance. In my own life experience, balance is not just about being able to hold a tree pose in my yoga practice. In my personal experience of yin and yang, balancing my own patterns of rest and activity has posed a constant challenge for me. Balance is a lesson I seem to have missed early in my life, as the messages from the world around me were all about activity, filling every moment, always taking on more, with attention never to give the appearance of being lazy or unproductive. I don't know exactly where those expectations originated, just that I clearly received them, as I filled my days with frantic levels of activity -- Brownies and Girl Scouts, tending the house and garden, sewing projects and piano lessons, chorus and orchestra, high school theater, clubs and activities that took up every moment; my young life was a bustling round of school and extracurriculars and pitching in to help at home. And then there was college and career and marriage and family and church, and just when some of those phases of my life were drawing to a close, I found myself in a new career of congregational ministry, where my attention is constantly required for countless tasks and activities, so that somehow I became busier than ever. To this day, it seems that every time I slow down a bit I get reminded of a deadline that must be met, or a task I need to be doing, and I recognize that I have become much more a human "doing" than a human "being," somehow losing track of how simply to be.

And so now, as I approach yet another transition in my life, making a shift this summer from full time ministry into something else, whatever that something else might turn out to be, I ask: What might it mean to create a new pattern of balance in my life? And what might that balance look

like, as I seek to release the old structures of expectation that have run my program from early in my life, to create something new, with a shape yet to be determined?

The differences may be subtle -- I have many hobbies, interests and passions, so there is no lack of opportunity to do things I love, but how will I set the stage to evolve into more being than doing? What will it mean to engage with an activity simply for the bliss it brings, and not out of a sense of obligation or responsibility? I understand that balance can be elusive – how do we keep a beneficial practice like meditation or yoga, or even long meandering walks in the woods, from becoming another obligatory activity, sandwiched into an already busy schedule?

This will require a new mental framework for me, calling to mind the equinox reflection by Thomas Rhodes that I offered earlier in the service – in the balance point, within our minds "the great web of neurons shifts, new consciousness arises, and for one precious instant experience and meaning exist together as revelation and epiphany. Within our hearts the great rhythm of our lives shifts; a new way of being reveals itself, and for one precious instant the nexus of the body and the seat of the soul truly exist as one." The shift in the balance point, a shift into a new pattern of balance, will require a shift in my consciousness, in the great rhythm of my life.

Right now, at this balance point of the year and in my life, I have more questions than answers, and there are a lot of busy activities in my schedule over the coming months, so for now perhaps it is enough that I am asking the questions. Creating a new pattern of balance will be a process of experiment, as I tumble and stagger and pick myself up, learning as I go, like one of those baby creatures figuring out their relationship with gravity, learning to find my balance in a new consciousness, in a new environment.

In the Sunday service two weeks ago, as we entered this month of the balance point, I talked about the cleansing winds of March, and offered a practice using our breath, the life energy of prana, to welcome change into our lives – exhaling to release what has been, inhaling to welcome a new season, with attention, intention, acceptance and gratitude. And so I will remind myself to practice – breathing out with attention and intention, releasing old expectations to make space for the balance I seek; breathing in with acceptance and gratitude as I explore a new consciousness, new life rhythms, balancing the yin energy of my dark and peaceful inner space with the yang connections in the bright and busy world. You are welcome to join me for a moment, breathing out to release, breathing in to accept something new.

This is not just my story – I imagine that many people share my quest for balance, moving through life challenges and changes, learning to be in a new relationship with the earth's gravity, a new relationship between our inner and outer worlds. The spring equinox has long been a time to embark on something new, and so I offer a poem by Emma Tuzzio, *Spring Blooms*, speaking to the rising joy of spring in our lives.

The balance tips toward the light.
Now is the time to start
A journey or a garden bed;
Plant with a happy heart

The seeds of dreams. Wake, senses, wake!
Smell the moist soil that brings

Forth juicy green from its dark depth.
Hear how the river sings;
The waters nourish and renew.

Feel gentle balmy breeze
Caress your skin. See sun's bright light
Awaken grass and trees.

Now taste the joy. And like the earth
You are refreshed and new
And full of energy to plant,
Begin, create, and do.

And so in this balancing time of Equinox, of Ostara, weaving the Yin and Yang of sacred darkness and light, new consciousness arises, and for one precious instant experience and meaning exist together as revelation and epiphany. Once again quoting from Thomas Rhodes, "The equinox shall pass, the revelation may be forgotten, and our actions will not always reflect our true selves. But through our gratitude we may remember who we are, reflect on who we may become, and restore the balance which brings equanimity to our lives." So may it be.

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