

“Let Go, Go Slow”
Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval
Unitarian Church of Montpelier
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The delivered sermon may have slight variations from this written manuscript. Video recordings of sermons can be found online at <https://ucmvt.org/category/whats-new/sermons-and-podcasts/>.

Reading “Counting, This New Year’s Morning, What Powers Yet Remain To Me” by Jane Hirshfield

The world asks, as it asks daily:

And what can you make, can you do, to change my deep-broken, fractured? ...

Today, I woke without answer.

The day answers, unpockets a thought from a friend

*don’t despair of this falling world, not yet
didn’t it give you the asking*

Sermon

As the calendar page turns onto the second quarter century of this twenty-first millenium, I am reflecting on what a curious thing time is. How is it the year 2025? Was the Y2K dilemma really that long ago? Has it really been a decade since we lost my dear father-in-law? The new year makes it feel to me like time is rushing forward.

Maybe it’s the drive to hang onto time that compels us to make new year’s resolutions, to show the world what we can make and do. I have had the urge to take on resolutions that will make me stronger, fitter, more mindful, and save the world.

I am being hyperbolic, but there’s something about a new year that seems to embolden the ego to hurry up and make grand plans.

This particular new year portends great change in the political realm. There is a physical bracing posture that many of us have taken up and a grasping at what we can do before it’s too late.

It is seductive to grip tight the steering wheel, press firmly on the gas pedal, and get on to the next destination as the world whizzes by. Yet, I think many of us long to ease this grip. To find release and relief in letting go.

Many of us, I believe, want to feel the slowing of time rather than rushed, pressure-filled days.

If we really want to go slow, we would actually get as close to the Earth's surface as possible. It is here that time, at least our human understanding of time, slows down. Einstein was right about gravitational relativity, and atomic clocks that scientists have set up around the globe show that time advances more slowly closer to the Earth's surface.

We, humans, need atomic clocks dialed into the microsecond to understand this. Other living beings, however, know this intuitively.

Right now in this winter season, turtles are buried in the river bed. Minding their own time, nature's time.

Back in 2019, while the congregation was in the midst of the Building for the Future Project - for those who weren't around then, this was a project to address the congregations' long-term facility needs - I received a book from Eleanor Ott, a church member who has since passed. Some of you might remember that the BFF Steering Committee had selected a mascot for the project, a turtle, which was meant to symbolize the slow, steady work of this project. Well, a short time after the turtle mascot was announced, a book showed up in the mail sent by Eleanor. The book was, *The Year of the Turtle: A Natural History* by David M. Carroll.

The Year of the Turtle is a chronicle of a year's worth of observations of the habitat and behaviors of turtles living in a swampy area called "The Digs" near the author and illustrator's home in New Hampshire. It is a beautiful book.

I especially love how the author describes the less observable and more mysterious season of hibernation for the turtle. Reflecting on the winter months to come for the hatchlings he has been observing, he writes:

"In silence and darkness they will wait, as the warmth slowly leaves the earth surrounding them. Cold nights, chill rains, then cold days and nights together will slow down the metabolism of these unmoving turtles, and their weeks-long sleep of warmth will slip into a months-long sleep of cold. The ground will freeze around them and hold them in place as though they were encased in iron. Unless the coming winter conditions are unduly harsh, they will survive this, seed-like,

until they are on the other side of the season of ice, when the call will finally come, and they will venture forth with the earth's springtime melting."¹

Turtle time is an all together different kind of time than we live by, isn't it?

Somewhere buried deep in the bed of the river just outside this church building there is a turtle with no concern for making or doing. Simply being and waiting.

It is difficult for me to fathom entering this kind of liminal space, yet I can sense the longing is there and that there is something important to learn about this kind of letting go.

Bayo Akomolafe is a writer and social thought leader who was born to Yoruba parents in western Nigeria. He speaks and writes a great deal about this kind of letting go and slowing down. I first encountered his work in early 2020 in a podcast interview in which he shared an African saying that has inspired his work. "The times are urgent; let us slow down."

This is pretty counter intuitive isn't it? If times are urgent, shouldn't we be speeding up and hurrying up to address all of our urgent concerns? With oceans warming and democracy as vulnerable as it is?

But, I think the wisdom that Akomolafe points to is like the wisdom of the turtle.

He writes: "[T]he call to slow down works to bring us face to face with the invisible, the hidden, the unremarked, the yet-to-be-resolved. Sometimes, what is the appropriate thing to do is not the effective thing to do.

Slowing down is thus about lingering in the places we are not used to. Seeking out new questions. Becoming accountable to more than what rests on the surface. Seeking roots. Slowing down is taking care of ghosts, hugging monsters, sharing silence, embracing the weird."²

I love this in part because I find this kind of slowing down to be so challenging much of the time. Lingering somewhere I'm not familiar with is deeply uncomfortable at times especially when the unfamiliar place seems dangerous or risky. Have you felt this way in unfamiliar places?

¹ David M. Carroll, *The Year of the Turtle: A Natural History* (Camden House Publishing, 1991), 149.

² <https://www.bayoakomolafe.net/post/a-slower-urgency>

This could be an actual physical place, like a ski trail you've never taken before, or it could be a figurative place of not knowing what comes next, or a historical, time-rooted space like the space between one set of political conditions and another.

And so, I appreciate Akomolafe's articulation of slowing down as going deeper, getting below the surface and being open to what is lurking there that might have something to teach us.

He also writes: "Slowing down is not a function of speed, [it] is a function of awareness...It's a function of presence...I'm asking us to listen... to witness, no not just to witness, to 'with-ness'; to be with land, and community, and ancestor, and progeny, and children in a way that isn't instrumental."³

Akomolafe is asking us to tap into a wisdom that only comes from being with. Not being with in order to do or to produce or to affect or change. Being with so that we might discover what has not yet been known or what has been forgotten.

He also talks of what he calls "fugitives spaces." There aren't just physical spaces, but a mindset, a way of approaching life in which we let go of expectations of productivity and allow ourselves to be with our dreams, our ancestral callings, our bodies as they are now.

The turtle in hibernation finds a fugitive space of sorts as it digs deeply into the soil and shuts down all basic bodily functions.

Carroll makes note of a spotted turtle on her way to her place of winter hibernation writing: "She will find a place, draw her life deep within herself, and wait out the coming and going of the ice."⁴

I love that - draw her life deep within herself. As she draws life deep within herself she is in an in-between place, a fugitive space unconcerned with what comes next.

The space between ending and beginning might be thought of as a fugitive space. With every beginning, there is an ending, and with every ending, there is the chance to grasp at what is ending or to let go. What if you were to let go and allow yourself to be with this in-between time and space? What if you lingered in this space without the impulse to rush forward?

³ <https://forthewild.world/podcast-transcripts/dr-bayo-akomolafe-on-slowng-down-in-urgent-times-encore-285>

⁴ Carroll, 161.

Akomolafe describes this fugitive space as sacred. In this time away from clock time, even in the midst of mundane, we can find the sacred. We can be in this space in solitude or in community.

In this space, we are not expected to have it all figured out.

What if we let go of the belief that we need to show up with all our answers in hand ready to show others what we can make or do? But ready instead to go below the surface and to be with?

If we let go of the driving forward toward clear-cut answers and final resolutions, we might recognize the powers that yet remain. We might see:

“Stone did not become apple. War did not become peace.

Yet joy still stays joy. Sequins stay sequins. Words still bespangle, bewilder.”

My invitation to you in this new year, this time of endings and beginnings, is to find that space where you can slow down enough to be with the powers that remain. The power of presence, of the mountain and the river, the power to create and the power to notice the joy that is still joy.

So may it be.