

THINGS OUT OF SEASON

Pilgrim Church, Duluth

May 7, 1978

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For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven:

A time to be born, and a time to die...

Ecclesiastes 3:2.

Sooner or later it is bound to come, that warm spring day that is warmer by far than all the days since winter began. Then one knows that winter is past, that "flowers /will/ appear on the earth" and that "the time for singing has come." Everything is made new, including oneself. All old and dying things are forgotten, for this is the season of promise.

Yet when that day arrives my mind has a way of looking back, rather unseasonably, to my friend Sergei. I cannot say that he was a close friend as that expression ordinarily is understood. I never spent much time with him or spoke with him very intimately. Over a period of about two years we happened to belong to the same church and were enrolled at the same college. Once in a while I saw him at the one place or the other. Yet it is clear to me now that no one of my own generation whom I knew in those days gave more lasting gifts to me.

Sergei's picture in my college yearbook is out of place both respecting space and time. Spacewise the editors gave it a special page. Timewise Sergei had belonged to an earlier class than I, but his college career was interrupted by civilian service that he pursued as an alternate to the draft. Timewise, too, the picture is strange because it was taken at the time of his high school graduation. Evidently it was the latest picture his parents could find.

On his father's side Sergei came from an old Quaker family. His mother had joined the Quakers too, but she was a Russian by birth, hence a first name that went rather strangely with his last name. The Quaker heritage ran deep in Sergei, but his Quakerism was more than heritage. Qualities of spiritual experience and of human concern were uniquely present and alive in him.

Sergei was a very quiet person as many Quakers are. His quietness came not so much from shyness as from deepness. There were still waters in him past all sounding. To change the image, there was a tap root in him that probed springs far below the surface where most of us live most of the time.

In his quiet, Quakerly way he was a leader. He had a way of gathering people up for purposes that mattered. As I look back I find that nearly all my remembrances of him have to do with being recruited for something, recruited so gently and subtly that I hardly knew that I was being recruited.

Sergei's leadership bridged a gap that opened up in those days and which still opens up in these days. Our time at college was one of those times of a "return to religion." People were preoccupied with their inward experience. Sometimes that preoccupation was accompanied by apathy and despair regarding the state of the world. An editorial in the student newspaper blasted the campus mystics whom they accused of contemplating their navels while ignoring the problems of the world. That prompted a furious letter to the editor from yours truly.

These polarities were unified in Sergei. It was he who gathered what was known as a "cell group", students who met regularly at the home of a professor for silent meditation and reading from the devotional classics. He recruited me for that. Yet it was Sergei too who organized a meeting in the neighboring community that was addressed by a rising political reformer of the day. He recruited me for that too.

Sergei put prayer and social action together. However, even that combination did not comprise the whole of him. He was a regular on the soccer team at a school where soccer was the major sport. And one day he appeared with a girl from North Carolina. I barely glimpsed her shy profile, her color high as she moved with some embarrassment among those strangers who saw her for the first time as Sergei's choice.

Soon afterwards Sergei appeared to recruit me for still another thing. I was sitting in the dining hall exchanging banter with another student when Sergei sat down opposite us. He remained silent until we concluded our bit of nonsense. Then he informed me that in June he was going to marry the girl from North Carolina. They would be married in her local church, or "meeting" as the Friends call it. Presumably it was to be a traditional Quaker wedding without benefit of clergy or groomsmen or any of the usual folderol. But it would be very much with the benefit of the two meetings to which the bride and groom belonged. According to established procedure an official representative of the groom's meeting should be present. Sergei asked me to be that representative.

I was excited at the prospect. I had never been to North Carolina. I had never attended a Quaker wedding. Indeed, I had attended only two or three weddings in my life. But what moved me most was the sense that I had received a high and signal honor.

Some weeks went by and then there came that very warm spring day. It was a Sunday. My roommates were away as I sat alone in the late afternoon reading the Sunday comics. I do not recall who brought the news or whether his clothes were rent, or whether earth and ashes were heaped upon his head. Only the news itself registered. Sergei and another student went canoeing that day on the Delaware River near Trenton. Caught in a wild current, the boat overturned. While the other student clung to the canoe, Sergei tried to reach a paddle. He went down in a kind of whirlpool and was not seen alive again. Fully dressed I went outside and began to run around the college track, around and around and around, faster and faster until I was exhausted.

After some days the other fellow in the canoe came by and said that he heard I was a friend of Sergei and perhaps I might care to contribute to a memorial fund. You could tell that he felt it inappropriate that he should be alive and I confess that I was inclined to agree. My mother told me that I should write to Sergei's parents, so I wrote something on the table next to the bunk beds in my dormitory room. I do not remember seeing his parents after that, but for a long time in my mind's eye I kept I had glimpsed so briefly.

That was in the spring of our junior year.

And now again when one of those sudden spring days arrives, a day of unseasonable warmth, full of the promise of life, I see those faces again and I think of death out of season. I wonder what might have become of Sergei had he lived, what he might have given to the world, and I think of death out of season. I see those faces again and I see him dropping by my room to recruit me for something in which I only half believe, coming by with barely a word, but with a knowing smile that hints without saying that life is more than myself and reality is more than meets the eye, that the neighbor lies in the ditch and that God goes with us down the road. I wonder at the mystery of my hearing him saying these things more clearly now than I did then, that his death gives me distance and distance gives me perspective. I wonder that with the passage of time he becomes not less, but more for me. I wonder at times and seasons.

While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.

That is the assurance God delivered to Noah after that vast and unseasonable flood. It is meant to be a word of comfort. We may not see it that way. We often protest against these grinding regularities. Oh, for a year without winter, for a day with no night! We feel that the cycle of seasons imprisons us. And so with the seasons within ourselves: the trauma of birth, the agony of adolescence, the midlife crisis, the burdens of age. We long for a way around these inevitabilities.

Still, there is comfort in the seasons. Like all creatures we find solace in regular patterns, even those patterns that tell us that what we have begun must also end. We are built for such patterns from the pulse in our veins to the logic in our thoughts.

Therefore, though we rebel against them, it is not the cycle of seasons that puts us to our greatest test. Rather it is the things that come out of season. Death is not the only such thing. Birth too may come out of season. Many a middle-aged Sarah has laughed at the thought only to find an Isaac on the way, sometimes to her joy, sometimes to her initial consternation, but always to the blowing of her mind.

All sorts of things in life may happen out of season. Sometimes like Jeremiah a mere youth must accept the assignment of speaking the hard truth to his elders. Sometimes in his professional prime a person may find his job cut out from under him. When Dr. Sundquist was here he alluded in his sermon to having to cope with an unexpected change in his story. He had turned down a better position at another place on the assurance that the graduate school where he was teaching was secure. Two years later the school collapsed and he found himself at the age of fifty having to put together a new career. Sometimes a person who has retired and is looking forward to a life of ease finds himself summoned back to undertake some task more demanding than he had ever tried.

Things out of season. They may come at us in so many ways. We may think that our situation in life has donned us in a bullet proof vest and then without warning cupid's arrow strikes us through the heart. We may suddenly take up some new interest that becomes so consuming that it leads

to a change in vocation, or residence, even to a change in lifestyle. We may find that although we try to go along in the same old way, people near to us are doing such unseasonable things that we cannot help but feel the impact. Again and again we find ourselves in the situation of that family in a funny story told by Jesus. We have just settled down for the night when a neighbor comes pounding at the door.

A minister I know wrote a piece in a recent newsletter in which he speaks of "celebrating the things we cannot change." He says that they "put iron in our souls" and bring out our resourcefulness. He observes that when many people moved to his area of rural New England they complained about the cold winters and the heavy snows. Then they took up skiing. Now, he writes, "They celebrate the very same kind of snowfall they were cursing a few years ago."

But what do you do when it snows in July? There our resourcefulness meets the supreme challenge. The things that happen out of season are not all bad. Some are the happiest things that ever happen to us. But either way they catch us off our guard.

For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven:

A time to be born, and a time to die;
A time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted:
A time to kill, and a time to heal

.....
A time to mourn, and a time to dance
.....
A time to love, and a time to hate.

.....
What gain has the worker from his toil?

Contrary to what many people think that was not meant to be a comforting passage. It is fatalistic, even pessimistic. The author suggests that the timing of our lives is beyond our control. We can only try to make the best of it. He knows perfectly well that the seasons may turn out to be quite unseasonable. The time to die may come before life has a chance; the time to plant may be delayed by heavy rains, the time to love may lead to grief. The writer knows that the timing of things in human life may defy all sense of reason and justice. He is a man who struggles to affirm his faith in God despite that knowledge.

We too must engage in that struggle. We go forward in the trust that there is a higher sense of timing than our own, a divine timing which we cannot comprehend but to which faith can always answer by calling out the best in us. The news that comes on a warm spring day may not prove seasonable. Yet in time it may point us to something more abiding than the swirling rapids: to the peace that passes understanding, to the righteousness that endures to all generations.