

Boxing Leaves

A sermon delivered at
First Parish in Needham
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Thursday of this week was the first day of autumn. Summer slipped quietly into fall, and we have begun the season that our reading this morning calls “life en route to death.” Despite this moniker from our hymnal, autumn has always been my favorite season. Fall always makes me think, makes me take stock. It makes me contemplative and slightly melancholic. It brings to me questions of life and of the passage of time. Even more so than the turn of the calendar year, Fall signals to me the cyclical nature of our existence. And, in recent years, Fall has brought to me memories of a sculpture I made while studying abroad in Florence Italy. I want to share with you that piece of art, the thoughts that accompany the image and my best attempt at explaining why this sermon is both a hello and a goodbye.

The sculpture is a wooden frame of a cube. Two foot by two foot by two foot, it is no small object. Inside, strung on the finest fishing line, are more than a dozen copper leaves. Each one different in shape, color and size. The professor’s assistant, Peter, bought the wood for me from some Italian lumberyard or art supply shop, I never really knew which.. The transparent line came from the studio, as did the copper. Once part of an Italian plumbing system, the rusting pipe had been cut in two for me, and I spent many an afternoon pounding the half cylinders into submission. Submission, in this case, meant hammering the greening pipe that once transported who knows what under the streets of Florence thin enough and flat enough to cut out the shapes of autumn leaves. The studio was set up inside an old palazzo, but inevitably overflowed into the partially tented Baroque courtyard at its center. As the light would fade beyond the studio I would shape leaf after leaf. The light is different in Italy, a trite thing to say, I know, but true. I would sit on the high stools and polish up the leaves, every one to a slightly different hue. The punch of a hole, some drilling in the white painted frame, stringing the leaves like so many Christmas lights, and my project was done. The assignment had been to unite a geometric shape and some image of nature. A square and leaves. The leafbox.

At the time of its creation, I thought the leafbox was a commentary on what I missed in the US while studying abroad. I missed the changing colors of Fall in Williamstown. I missed my family and leaves always brought back childhood memories, both good and bad. When I was a kid and my grandmother was dying of Alzheimer's, my parents, brother and I spent many weekends in central Massachusetts. The old family farm was our destination, apple picking and leaf jumping our pastimes. I remember going to visit my grandmother after she had been put into a nursing home, and slowly becoming so uncomfortable with her fading memory that my brother and I simply stopped going into her room. I can no longer recall the last time I saw my grandmother alive. One year, in the Fall, while waiting for my mother and father, my brother and I collected acorns for the squirrels, piling them into stacks a foot or more high, so the animals would have less to do for the coming winter. That Autumn I knew, in a deeper way than I had known from being told in elementary school, that falling leaves heralded winter for the world, and that they were heralding as well a winter for my grandmother. I understood deeply the notion of life en route to death.

The leafbox was created in the Fall of 2001. I was a native New Yorker studying abroad like so many other college kids. I understood the leafbox then as a call to home, to the images of my childhood, so missed when I felt alone and lonely in a foreign land. I thought of the leafbox as a way to capture the memory of the family farm, which was being sold, and my grandmother who had finally died a few years earlier. When I saw her in her coffin at the service it was the first time I had seen her since I was a child, and I would not have known her. My grandfather had died years before that, and this woman I barely recognized and certainly did not know, felt like the last link I had to a past I had never known. I did not have to explain the genesis or direction of the leafbox as part of the assignment, so I simply did not think very deeply about it. I knew even then, though, that this particular piece of art was the first one I felt truly compelled to make. I had produced many other projects over the years, but this was the one I felt existed before I gave it form. It is said that Michelangelo believed the marble blocks he began with already contained a sculpture that only awaited uncovering, he had but to excavate what was already there; what he, in his genius, could already see. The leafbox was not a production so much as a discovery.

I shared a picture of the leafbox in a ministry class last year. I had to dismantle the project before flying back to the States. I brought home the copper leaves, their color has been dulling day by day, but I have not put the project back together yet. As I passed around the photo in class that day, I spoke about the footage we saw in foreign countries of the terrorist attacks. While certain things were censored here, my waking dreams and my nightmares after that September day in 2001 were filled with images I could not shake, bits of news clips we had been shown on BBC World News and on Italian television where censorship is decidedly limited. I explained in class that beginning school back again in Massachusetts had me visiting the leafbox over and over in my mind, though I knew not why. One student asked if I had not considered the piece as a reaction to that footage, as an attempt to stop time? It seemed so obvious as he spoke, for what else is boxing leaves then an attempt to halt the natural cycle? An attempt to stop winter from coming, to stop the emptiness from entering the sky and my grandmother's eyes. To stop my past from fading completely from view. To stop death.

I think my friend was right. Boxing leaves and piling acorns is an attempt to stop time from moving forward in its natural way. It is an attempt to have control, a control that in fact we do not have as human beings. In an essay on nature, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, "We cannot bandy words with Nature, or deal with her as we deal with persons. If we measure our individual forces against hers we may easily feel as if we were the sport of an insuperable destiny." But, if we stop fighting against it, he says, "we shall find the peace of the morning dwelling first in our hearts, and the fathomless power of gravity and chemistry, and, over them, of life, preexisting within us in their highest form." If we stop fighting, if we accept that there are certain things beyond our control we can shed our tears, we can mourn them, and we can find a sense of peace. Like the child in the poem by Elizabeth Bishop, we can let our flower beds be watered by "the little moons" that "fall down like tears from between the pages of the almanac." We can look back, but we cannot hold on to what is behind. We can remember, we can grieve, but we can not stay there. Robert Finch, an American born Canadian poet of the 20th century wrote: "But now in September the garden has cooled, and with it my possessiveness. The sun warms my back instead of beating on my head ... The harvest has dwindled, and I have grown apart from the intense midsummer relationship that brought it on." Things begin to grow colder in autumn. After the equinox, a day of equal sun and moon, we move into months where the night

outweighs the day. Finch speaks of end to possessiveness. The leafbox, piling acorns, the human worry Emerson notes about “insuperable destiny” all carry a sense of possessiveness. Of refusing to let go and acknowledge the power of time and the limits of our own abilities.

These past few weeks I have been struggling to recognize the limits of my own abilities. Fall for me has come to mean a time of taking stock. Of looking back into the almanac of the past year that I have written. It has come to be a time to look at where I have come from, and where I feel called to be going. For a long time ordination has been a large part of the notion I held of myself. If that notion were leaves, I boxed it past when they should have fallen to the ground. It is so hard to let go of a sense of self that has been both comfort and guide. I have been possessive for many years of my identity as future minister. Through a deep and painful process I have come to understand that that self has fallen away, and my possessiveness has cooled. I will not be the intern at this parish for the next two years. This is the first and last sermon I will give here. I am letting go of the leaves I have held tight for so long. There have been and will be tears on my part. I want you all to know that this decision is something separate from this parish and all of you, who have been nothing but generous and loving. This decision is about looking at my life and understanding where I want it to go. It is facing my limitations as a human being, and determining how best I can move forward in a way, as John quoted to me, that my deep passion can meet the world’s great need.

A new publication by Skinner house entitled “In Nature’s Honor” gives a list of ways to celebrate the autumnal equinox. On that list is decorating your home for the season, bringing out the cold weather clothes and blankets, being hospitable, sending thank you notes, and preparing for the new year. What struck me about this list was the way it brings together past, present and future. Thank people for the way they have been to you, the things they have done for you. Celebrate the present—be hospitable, embrace the coming cold by getting out your winter things. And look to the future. Clean out the garage, the book suggests, set up new schedules that you can meet, declutter the house, wash and wax the car, even, it says. Learn something new. Fall can be a time for more than mourning, a time for more than tears. Leaves can teach us that lesson. They have, perhaps, a deeper message to share with us, beyond simply being beautiful, beyond acknowledging life on route to death. They can be a reminder of the power of the world

around us. They can be a reminder of the shifting that all life undergoes, and the shifting we sometimes need to undergo ourselves. On the equinox we experience equal day and equal night, and it strikes me that Fall can be a time of equal remembrance and change. The leaves alter during this time as they do at no other point in their lives. We too can alter. Our possessiveness can cool. We can allow the sun to beat on our backs, instead of straight down on our heads. We can recognize that no matter how many photographs we take, no matter how many poems we write, pictures we paint, sculptures we make, the circle goes on. Our pictures and paintings give way to others, and if we are not careful and conscious we may find ourselves holding on to things that no longer make sense. This is not only a time to clean the house, the car, the garage. This is a time to de-clutter ourselves. What are those things you have been grasping? What identities no longer fit? What plans no longer resonate? What do you feel called to instead? Fall might be the perfect time to ask these questions.

Maya Angelou said in the poem we read this morning, “we begin to stop in order simply to begin again.” We cannot contain time. We cannot box the leaves. What we can do is embrace the changes this season brings. And we can make our own changes. When we begin to stop in order simply to begin again, we need not begin again exactly where we were. We may face in nature a certain amount of insuperable destiny. But people have the capacity to identify and effect the changes they need in order to manage the insuperable destiny of life and death. I regret that discovering my own limitations and the changes that I need in my life has come in a way and at a time that will create difficulties for this church. I am sorry. I am also thankful for the role you have played in helping me discover that I cannot begin again just where I stopped before. I cannot cling to an identity that is no longer mine. Though the process is painful, those leaves must fall. When we decide to let go we are faced with a certain unknown. There is grieving to be done, and fear abounds. But it seems to me that at no point is nature more insuperable than when we let it simply slip forward without conscious examination of our personal almanacs. Look inside. Check to see if there is anything cluttering up your almanac, anything that can really be let in the next edition. Check, you may find there are some leaves that need to be unboxed. May you be able to do so with faith in the possibilities that may flower in the wake of those tears.