

Life in the Shoulder Season

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Good morning and good Sunday. How are you today? Today is Sunday, November the 8th and the title of this morning's reflection is Life in the Shoulder Season. It begins with a quote from a book called *The Inner Game of Tennis*.

Every game is composed of two parts, an outer game and an inner game. The outer game is played against an external opponent to overcome external obstacles, and to reach an external goal. [The inner] game that takes place in the mind... [It is] played against such obstacles as lapses in concentration, nervousness, self-doubt... In short, [the inner game of tennis] is played to overcome all habits of mind which inhibit excellence in performance.

—W. Timothy Gallwey, *The Inner Game of Tennis*

It's good to know that there is an inner game that we can depend upon... especially when the outer game gets a little messy. It's messy. Life is confusing now. Different things are happening at once. It is warm again now but I shoveled snow from the walkway a few days ago. The grass is still green but I felt my car slipping on slushy roads on the way to Woodstock. Election Day came and went but the outcome is in question. Many of us have been waiting and watching to see how things are going to turn out. It could go one way. It could go another. Some state races are too close to call. This is life in the shoulder season. It's a time when two different things are happening at once.

Russell Banks describes this experience, this balance between different things. Banks writes,

I was situated at that moment in the turning of the northern year, when the end of winter and the start of spring overlap like shingles on a roof and the natural world seems doubled in thickness and density. A slight shift in the direction of the wind cools the air a single degree and suddenly a puddle of standing water is covered with a skin of ice that, seconds later, as the same wind parts the clouds and opens the sky melts in the sunlight.

Ice and water are so different but they are so near to one another.

Life is like this sometimes. It's like this most times, probably. We live life in the shoulder season. We live life betwixt and between. It may be uncomfortable but it is the way it is. So, maybe we can strategize about how we find new comfort—red fish comfort and blue fish comfort, coastal comfort and heartland comfort. We are looking for the balance that helps us to grow.

Life in the shoulder season... What can we learn from it and how? This is the question that led me to *The Inner Game of Tennis*...and to a film I like about a newly retired tennis star.

In 2005, a film called *Match Point* was in the theaters. It was a tale about Chris, a broodingly handsome tennis star named who has decided to leave the world of professional sports. He hoped to make a way of things in London. Chris very soon meets Chloe and Chloe falls in love. Chloe is also quite wealthy so Chris is interested. He's shallow. He accepts her invitations. He deepens the relationship and he soon meets the rest of her family...including Chloe's brother and more importantly, Chloe's brother's fiancée. An awful (and awfully interesting) train wreck of a story unfolds. It's terrible and it's terribly entertaining, I have to admit. It's suspenseful because it's hard to know exactly what's going to happen...so hard to know how things will unfold.

The opening scene of *Match Point* is set on the clay of a tennis court. The ball is going back and forth in slow motion. Neither tennis player can be seen in the frame. The viewer is carefully situated, we stare down the white tape at the top of the net. The opening words of the film are in Chris's voice. He says,

The man who said, "I'd [rather](#) be [lucky](#) than good," saw deeply into life. People are [afraid](#) to face how great a part of life is [dependent](#) on luck. It's [scary](#) to [think](#) so much is out of one's control. There are [moments](#) in a match when the ball hits the top of the net, and for a [split](#) second it can [either](#) go [forward](#) or fall back.

This is where we find ourselves right now, unsure of how things will turn out. Chris concludes the opening passage by saying,

With a [little](#) luck, [the ball] goes [forward](#) and you win or [maybe](#) it doesn't, and you lose.

That's how some of us have been feeling these last few days, like we are

suspended above the net. We're not sure where exactly the ball will fall.

Life is really like that. Far more comfortably, sports are really like that—a little bit out of control... That's one of the reasons why sports are so captivating. It's the "I don't know" factor. It's the "No one knows!" factor. That feeling, the experience...it can become seriously addictive. So, I'm not surprised that some sports fans end up **POURING** over statistics and the endless, seemingly meaningless details about the standings and the wild cards and the nature of the game.

Does anyone remember Lefty Gomez? Is anyone familiar with that person? Does his name ring a bell at all? I ask because it was Lefty Gomez who said that he'd rather be lucky than good. That's who Chris is quoting in the opening scene of *Match Point*

Left Gomez was a pitcher for the New York Yankees. He hobnobbed with the best of them—George Gershwin, Ernest Hemmingway, Marilyn Monroe. Of course, he did. He was playing with baseball's greats—Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig, Satchel Page, Joe DiMaggio.

Lefty loved Joe DiMaggio. He understood his social importance. Joe DiMaggio knew he was a role model. Lefty always said, "He knew he was Joe DiMaggio, and he knew what that meant to the country." I long for wholesome leadership like his...like what I imagine his to have been.

Lefty Gomez was always looking up. Even from the downside of things, when the sporting life was bleak, he would still find something good to say. One time, when the Yankees were on a losing streak, he said, "We lost fourteen straight. Then we had a game rained out and it felt so good we had a victory dinner."

Lefty Gomez was lucky enough to be a good man. He knew that life was complex, that there are good time as well as bad, that there are seasons of growth and generosity as well as seasons conservation. He knew about the shoulder seasons when both of these things are true. Both of these are alive in us. Deep within us, opposites combine. But how do you hold opposites together?

There is a healing prayer that is going around in the Facebook world. When I read it, I thought that it was lovely. I would like to share it with you. It reads:

I would be deeply humbled if everybody on my timeline that believes in the power of prayer would stop what you're doing, just take a minute, and post this.

"Lord, we need You! Please sweep through this nation and heal this land. Restore our strength, renew our minds, and cast out anything

that's not of You. In Jesus Christ's name we pray, Amen."

Pray for our country!!

Amen

[#FaithChallenge](#)

[#CopyAndPasteIfYouAgree](#)

I'm not one to copy and paste but I did want to say, "Amen." Then, I wondered about his politics and check out his page. When I learned that we vote differently, I hesitated but I wish I hadn't. I just had to think about what to do. So, I wrote,

...my old friend, I may mean my AMEN differently than you do but I still offer it in prayer that we meet in the Holy. Hope that's ok, brother. Every blessing and always yours...

He loved it. I hope that we find a way to really connect.

Maybe that's what prayer is for me right now...prayer for my old friends, prayer for my new ones, prayer for the healing of our nation... Maybe that what I'm trying to lean into...what I'm shouldering.

My dearest friend, Marshall, was ordained to the Unitarian Universalist ministry on October 26th...of 2003, I think it was. It's been a while. He worked at the UUA for many years. He's now back doing hospice work, which is where he began. Marshall Hawkins. Back in the day, we used to call him Hawk for short. My mom still does and it makes her feel cool to say it. For us (and for my mom), it was meant as an endearment.

I wrote a song for Marshall's ordination ceremony that took place in the in Jamaica Plains, outside of Boston...at the UU church that's right there in the center of town. I was inspired to write what I wrote by a series of skydivers that I watched from a distance doing their thing one day in western Massachusetts. They jumped out of the plane. They leapt into the sky. They walked out on the wind...and they flew—for a very short time—under the power of their own wings. Like I said, back in the day, we called Marshall Hawk. That was his nickname. So, somehow, the skydiving imagery seemed appropriate. It was a good fit. I wrote my best friend a song about the surprising familiarity of flight—like we forgot that we could do that. I wrote him a song about stepping out into the sky and praying faithfully to God that you've done what you have done for good reason. The song began with a little introduction...

We taxi down the runway moving too slow to fly
And the wings of this airplane carry me into the sky

How can this be familiar, these first steps above the Earth?
...from my life as an eagle?
...from inner visions at birth?
It's late October and I'm walking lightly
High over Boston's holy avenue
For to lie in your open arms for a while

I tried to write a song about the heavens, a song about that mythic, 'up there' place that I imagine when this realistic, 'down here' place goes off the rails. I tried to write a song about the heavens but I didn't do so well... because it's so much larger than me. I did my best but—oh, my God—God is a lot to write about. I found that I could do little more that show my humility. I wrote:

You are so much older than my name,
as if you marked the time
Time and over, once again
And after all this time, it's been the same
As if all your love runs through mine
And so much larger than the heart I have to offer
in this small life I live

The song goes on to describe the mechanical experience of ascension, the feeling climbing into the sky by way of fast-spinning propellers.

...and of the soundings: roaring engines
and the ache of this old plane ascending
we throttle up and climb this mountain in the air...

And up and up we climb, above the fights, above the fray, above the contention and the rancor and the debate and the debacle until we breakthrough into that which was beyond us and is more beautiful. We rise until...

...we're over the cloud-line now
it looks like the sure, soft soul of heaven
We check the boots and tie the helmet on for real

and we sail on the day
leaning shoulder in the wind
got my pack, my chute's inside, I'm diving out again...

The song is about getting back up again, after we have failed. Leaning shoulder to the wind... This is a gesture of gentle determination...and this is the season for it. This is life in the shoulder season. To live it well, we'll have to remember that life is composed of two parts. There is an outer game and there is an inner game. The outer game takes place on the court—the tennis court, courts of law, courts of public opinion. It is played against an external opponent, to overcome external obstacles and to reach an external goal. That's the outer game. The inner game takes place in the mind. It strives to overcome such obstacles as lapses in concentration, nervousness, self-doubt and self-condemnation.

These two games coexist. They overlap like shingles on a roof. Opposites coincide...within us and everywhere around us. A Venezuelan poet named Eugenio Montejó once wrote,

The earth turned to bring us closer,
it turned on itself and within us too,
and finally brought us together in this dream...
Nights passed, snowfalls and solstices;
time passed in minutes and millenniums.

We've been going through some serious challenges...and we will go through more but we can go through it well. We can do it elegantly...less by indulging the discomfort that two things can be happening at the same time but by beautifying it...and by embrace that which is beautiful.

I ran into Jess Stout at the Farmer's Market two weeks ago. I didn't say hello or anything. I just immediately started joking around with her. Never even shared an honest word. There was no "How are you?" or "How's it going?" or "How have you been?" I didn't ask about the family, even though I deeply care. It was all just jokes. I was just so happy and relieved to see her that I just felt like laughing. So, that's what I did...and it all ended so quickly because...you know, how deep can you go in the Farmer's Market? So, I had to circle back and ask her if that had been ok. A couple of days ago, we talked and had a laugh about it.

The point is that we're all going through a lot these days. We are in the shoulder season. Life is doubled in thickness and density. Different things are happening at the same time. So, patience is advantageous...as are gentleness and grace. We can take it easier on ourselves. We can see the good in the world around us.

May it be so. Blessed be and amen.

