

“How To Use Your Time”
January 6, 2008
Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
Bruce A. Bode

Poetry for Order of Service

For most of us, there is only the unattended
Moment, the moment in and out of time,
The distraction fit, lost in a shaft of sunlight,
The wild thyme unseen, or the winter lightning
Or the waterfall, or music heard so deeply
That it is not heard at all, but you are the music
While the music lasts.

(T.S. Eliot, from “Dry Salvages”)

Lighting the Chalice (in unison)

We come together, compounded of the ancient elements,
mud and fire within it we call life, vast waters, and something –
the intangible substance of hope –
out of which the human dream is made. (Loren Eiseley)

Opening Words

Holy and beautiful is the custom by which we gather on this first Sunday of the new calendar year.

Here we come to give our thanks, to face our ideals, to remember our loved ones, to seek that which is permanent, and to serve integrity, beauty, and the qualities of life that make it rich and whole.

Through this hour breathes the worship of all ages, the cathedral music of all history, and blessed are the ears that hear that eternal sound.

Responsive Reading

MINISTER: On this first Sunday of the new calendar year, we gather in our sanctuary to prepare our hearts and minds for the year before us.

CONGREGATION: We do not know what lies ahead of us in this coming year.

MINISTER: There may be challenges we have never had to face before.

CONGREGATION: There may be sorrows we have never had to bear before.

MINISTER: There may be kindnesses we have never received before.

CONGREGATION: There may be joys we have never glimpsed before.

MINISTER: What lies ahead of us in this coming year belongs to the unknown.

CONGREGATION: But we have stood before the unknown in previous years and have found our way.

MINISTER: And, now, with anticipation and wonder, fear and humility, once more we stand before the unknown, seeking again to find our way.

CONGREGATION: We depend upon strength and courage that may be more than we now know.

MINISTER: We depend upon resources from hidden springs to arouse and sustain us.

CONGREGATION: And we depend upon each other, for we do not journey alone in this adventure.

MINISTER: We walk together into this new year, strengthening, supporting, encouraging, and caring for each other.

CONGREGATION: One and all we commit ourselves to the unknown, ever searching out and enlarging the significance of life and being.

Reading

My reading on this first Sunday of the new year is from the biblical book of Ecclesiastes, a book quite different than any other biblical book, the only biblical book of direct philosophical inquiry, and one in which the author presents a kind stoical wisdom in the face of a diminished expectation of the world. In the passage I will read from the opening chapter, we find a writer for whom the world does not hold much sparkle, to say the least.

The words of the Teacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.

Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher,
vanity of vanities! All is vanity.
What do people gain from all the toil
at which they toil under the sun?
A generation goes, and a generation comes,
but the earth remains forever.
The sun rises and the sun goes down,
and hurries to the place where it rises.
The wind blows to the south,
and goes around to the north;

round and round goes the wind,
and on its circuits the wind returns.
All streams run to the sea,
but the sea is not full;
to the place where the streams flow,
there they continue to flow.
All things are wearisome;
more than one can express;
the eye is not satisfied with seeing,
or the ear filled with hearing.
What has been is what will be,
and what has been done is what will be done;
there is nothing new under the sun.
Is there a thing of which it is said,
“See, this is new?”
It has already been,
in the ages before us.
The people of long ago are not remembered,
nor will there be any remembrance
of people yet to come
by those who come after them....
...it is an unhappy business that God has given to human beings to be busy with.
I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun; and see, all is vanity and a chasing
after wind.

“HOW TO USE YOUR TIME”

Introduction

My topic this first Sunday of the new calendar year is “time” – how to use the time we have.

I begin with a little story I came across this past week on the passage of time in an individual life. It’s a story more directly relevant to persons about my age, but for those of you who are younger in years, this may be a story you will want to tuck away for future reference. Listen to this account of a woman in her mid-to-late fifties meeting a new dentist for the first time:

I was sitting in the waiting room for my first appointment with a new dentist. I noticed his DDS diploma [Doctor of Dental Surgery diploma], which bore his full name. Suddenly, I remembered a tall, handsome, dark-haired boy with the same name who had been in my high school class some 40-odd years ago. Could he be the same guy that I had a secret crush on, way back then?

Upon seeing him, however, I quickly discarded any such thought. This balding, gray-haired man with the deeply lined face was way too old to have been my classmate.

Hmmm ...or could he be?

After he examined my teeth, I asked him if he had attended Morgan Park high school.

“Yes. Yes, I did. I had a Mustang,” he gleamed with pride.

“When did you graduate?” I asked.

He answered, “In 1969. Why do you ask?”

“You were in my class!” I exclaimed.

He looked at me closely.

Then, that ugly, old, wrinkled s.o.b. asked,

“What did you teach?”

And now to balance the losses and perplexities of aging, here’s something else I came across this week that somewhat rectifies the losses of youthful splendor. It’s a little ditty by Archibald Macleish titled, “With Age Wisdom”:

At twenty, stooping round about,
I thought the world a miserable place,
Truth a trick, faith in doubt,
Little beauty, less grace.

Now at sixty what I see,
Although the world is worse by far
Stops my heart in ecstasy.
God, the wonders that there are!

I, too, remember at age 17 or 18 thinking, “What interest could life possibly hold at age 25 or, heaven forbid, 30?” I simply couldn’t imagine that life could sustain an interest in me that long. And the idea of having children of my own, of bringing them into this world and taking an interest in them – that was totally out of the picture. The future seemed to me at that time like a meaningless, circular enterprise, and the words I read earlier from the author of Ecclesiastes fit quite well, “Vanity of vanities! All is vanity.”

So now we come to the beginning of new calendar year, a traditional time of asking about time, of reflecting on what the new year may bring, how we are to approach it, what

value it holds, and how we should consider using the time that lies before us. What use should we make of the time we have, whether we are 20, 40, 60, or 80?

The art of disappearing

In approaching this question, I'd like to start with the poem printed in your Order of Service. The poem is titled, "The Art of Disappearing," and it's where my reflections for today had their origin.

When they say Don't I know you?
say no.

When they invite you to the party
remember what parties are like
before answering.
Someone telling you in a loud voice
they once wrote a poem.
Greasy sausage balls on a paper plate.
Then reply.

If they say We should get together
say why?

It's not that you don't love them anymore.
You're trying to remember something
too important to forget.
Trees. The monastery bell at twilight.
Tell them you have a new project.
It will never be finished.

When someone recognizes you in a grocery store
nod briefly and become a cabbage.
When someone you haven't seen in ten years
appears at the door,
don't start singing him all your new songs.
You will never catch up.

Walk around feeling like a leaf.
Know you could tumble any second.
Then decide what to do with your time.

("The Art of Disappearing" by Naomi Shihab Nye from *Words Under the Words: Selected Poems*, The Eighth Mountain Press)

This poem suggests that one's time is a very precious commodity, not to be wasted; and that it could easily be wasted, if one is not vigilant.

This poem suggests that there are important things in life that one should be about, and that one can be distracted from those important things by things of secondary importance.

And so to avoid wasting one's precious time, and to avoid being distracted from what is of real important by what is of secondary importance, the poem suggests one should carry the awareness of being like a leaf, a leaf that could tumble and disappear at any moment.

When you know that, like a leaf, you could tumble and disappear in the next moment, then you *wake up* to the moments you have and they become precious.

And when you have awakened to the preciousness of the moments you have, you will want to honor and protect those moments.

To do that, says the poet, you may need to learn a certain discipline, a way of making certain refusals in life. You may have to learn how to play a little disappearing game; that is, to cultivate the art of disappearing from those situations and circumstances that would distract you from the important things you should be about.

And, thus, for the poet, "the art of disappearing" has to do with disappearing from those situations and circumstances that would distract you from the important things that you should be about, because you are aware that you could disappear at any moment.

Actually, I would say that part of the art of disappearing is the awareness that, in one sense, you have already disappeared – the leaf has already fallen; you are already gone.

As in Buddhism, you have detached yourself from yourself. There is no self. "You" no longer exist. You no longer cling to this body *in time*, but rather you have identified with an eternal principle, a creativity that rolls through time but which is beyond time.

And when you have identified with the eternal creativity in this way, then, paradoxically, you become free. You become free to appreciate and love the moments of time in which you currently exist, and free to work on your tasks without being knocked off course by either praise or blame.

Thus, far from dissolving into despair at the knowledge that your present incarnation could disappear at any moment – it has already disappeared – you are awakened by this knowledge into a true knowledge of what you should be about and how you should use the time that is yours.

And, truly, that is an art, the ultimate art. It's the art of detachment, the art of letting go, the art of dissolving, the art of disappearing ... in which, as I say, paradoxically, you are awakened so that you can appreciate the moments of time that are yours, no longer being bound by time.

And, then, a secondary art is the art of disappearing from distracting circumstances without alienating the society and community of which you are a part.

I doubt that the poet is suggesting that we literally act on the examples given in the poem. I hope she isn't, because it doesn't strike me as very artful to tell persons that you meet that you don't know them when clearly you do.

Or, when someone you know suggests it might be nice to get together sometime to say, "Why?"

Or, to nod and make like an anonymous cabbage when you meet someone you know in the grocery store.

Or, to remain essentially silent when someone you haven't seen in ten years shows up on your doorstep.

None of these examples strike me as being particularly artful – I suspect most of us can and have done better with respect to the art of disappearing. So I don't take these examples in the poem as suggestions for concrete techniques in how to turn down invitations. The point is rather to know what your priorities are and to find some way to honor and protect those priorities.

Individual versus community

But whom do these priorities serve? Are our priorities and interests the concern of us as individuals only?

In regard to the use of our time, this poem raises the important question of the relation of individual needs and interests over against the needs and interests of community and society, and what one owes to each. That is, to what extent do your gifts and skills belong to you alone, and to what extent do they belong to the community who nourished you and enabled you to develop those gifts and skills? And how do you parcel out your time with respect to these?

This is one of the tensions that exists in the use of our time: How much do I live for what I like to do, and how much do I live for others and the community, and for what they may ask me to do or expect me to do?

This, of course, is a very large subject. And, for today, let me simply affirm it as a tension ... by which mean: the concern of individual and society is a polar opposition, not an absolute opposition. Like the poles of a battery, you need both poles to get any energy. The two poles belong to each other and are part of a larger unit.

Thus, the tension between self and other, individual and community, is not a tension to be broken or escaped, but rather a tension to be recognized, honored, understood, and lived out. It's a tension that is never solved and never should be solved.

Rather, it's a matter of seeking balance, of seeking to honor both poles of the equation, of maintaining the tension, and of meeting at the center. The holy place, as author Robert Johnson says, is not at either extreme pole, but in the center where the tension between the two poles is held.

If I may indulge a personal example: Tomorrow morning Flossie and I are planning to take off on a mid-year break of about two-and-a-half weeks. I've been working hard the last several months in this Fellowship and for this Fellowship, and now I'm going to take a break from this Fellowship. I want to go so far away that not even God can find me. I want to go to a completely different mental and psychological space.

But I do so in the knowledge of a planned return, and with the awareness of being part of a community. Thus, I go to the opposite pole, not to be rid of community, but to balance the polar tension of self and other, individual and community.

And with regard to the author of this poem that we are considering this morning, I'm assuming that the refusals she makes are not for the sake of serving herself but, rather, for the sake of serving the goals, priorities, and deep urges that she feels she needs to attend to.

In other words, she guards her time, not first for herself alone, but for the spirit of life, and for the life of her spirit, and for the connection between the two, which includes community life. Whether others in the community will in each case understand her disciplines and refusals – that's another question, and that's where the *art* of disappearing comes in.

Thus, how the tension between the individual and community poles gets lived out, and how time will be allotted, will depend on individual circumstances and aptitudes.

In the case of this poet, it would appear she has a clear idea of what calls to her and of how her time should be spent. For her, the problem is how not to get pulled away from what she knows she should be about.

I recall a similar thing with poet Mary Oliver, for whom the call to write poetry was clear from early on in her life. In order not to be distracted from what she knew to be her "real work," she deliberately took jobs that didn't siphon off energy from this work. She took jobs that were, if not boring to her, at least not interesting. She didn't want her energy to be taken away from what she knew she needed to be about.

Not everyone has such a clear sense of calling, or such a clear sense of how one's time should be spent, as these two poets. For example, I was talking some weeks ago with a young man in his mid-twenties, a person who, to this point in his life at least, did not have a clear sense of wanting to do *a* particular thing – no strong vocational sense – no strong inclination toward a particular major in college.

And so we had a discussion on: "What is it you really like to do?"

And with this person, it was no particular thing, but a number of things. Of no vocation could it be said, this is what I need and want to do. Rather, there were more general interests of being with people, of developing relationships, of being a companion to

others, of being helpful to others.

So our conversation had to do with trying to get clear on this fact. That is, to get clear that there was no strong or singular vocational pull, and not to get distracted thinking there should be.

Appreciating versus improving the world

The question of a vocational pull also brings up another tension with regard to our use of time. It's the question of whether one should be involved in trying to improve the world, or simply in living in the world and trying to appreciate it. Do you go after the world and try to shape and improve it; or do you let the world come to you and shape you, take it in and enjoy it, as you are able?

Author E. B. White puts the tension succinctly:

Every morning I awake torn between a desire to save the world and an inclination to savor it. This makes it hard to plan the day.

To save or savor. Is our real work simply appreciating "what is," or is it in trying to improve "what is"? Are we here to be the "eyes and ears of the earth," God-come-to-consciousness in human form; or are we here to try to develop and improve this planet, to be "co-creators with God," co-creators with the creative power present in all reality?

Again, one could elaborate on this tension at some length, but for now let me simply note that this is not an either-or proposition, but rather a polar tension that exists.

And, in terms of the use we make of our time, this polarity has to be worked out on the basis of individual proclivities and aptitudes. But if one is aware of this *necessary* tension, one should have a better chance of making the tension a creative one rather than a destructive one.

The universal versus the particular

And then a third and final tension of which I'll speak this morning is the tension that exists between the universal and the particular, the exterior and the interior.

When we think of time and our use of time, we can easily get blown away by the vastness of time and our own minuteness with respect to that. What are we in the vastness of time? And what could our little time possibly mean?

The contemplation of the vastness of things can absolutely wipe us out so that we feel that any thing we do with our time is completely meaningless and insignificant. Why should we care about anything? What does it possibly matter how we spend our time?

This is something of the perspective of the author of Ecclesiastes from which I read

earlier: “Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die.”

But on the other hand, if we leave the exterior vastness and move to the interior realm, we find that within us there is a call that says our time is important and should not be wasted. It’s important to do what you can. You don’t necessarily know what it will mean in the totality of things, but from within there is an inner call, such that when you obey it, you live in harmony with the creative will that rolls through all things. Writes Thomas Ald:

Build as thou wilt, unspoiled by praise or blame,
Build as thou wilt, and as thy light is given;
Then, if at last the airy structure fall,
Dissolve, and vanish – take thyself no shame.
They fail, and they alone, who have not striven.
(from “Enamored Architect of Airy Rhyme,” Thomas B. Ald)

A Jewish proverb puts it this way: “A person must have two pockets in which to reach. In the one pocket are contained the words, ‘For me the world was made;’ and in the other, ‘I am dust and ashes.’”

So on the one hand, you are an infinitesimal speck in the vastness of being – a little humility is appropriate. And, and on the other hand, as T.S. Eliot says in the quote I have in the bulletin, “...you are the music/ While the music lasts.”

The music is in you. It’s the same music that has been in the universe since it exploded with a whoosh out of the great silence. You are part of that music, fully a part of that creativity. And now you are privileged to hear and appreciate the melody of that music and to yourself make music that praises this music of the spheres.

So these are some of the tensions that exist with respect to our use of time: the tension between the individual and the society, between the desire to appreciate the world as it is and the desire to change and improve it, and the tension between the universal and the particular, the exterior and the interior.

Again, the idea in considering your own use of time is to recognize and honor these pairs of opposites as legitimate and necessary tensions in our lives.

Concluding thought on the use of time

But let me conclude with one thing with regard to the use of our time that is not in polar tension. If you are at a loss to know how to use your time in this coming year, I don’t think you can go wrong by being kind, by practicing lovingkindness.

“Kindness is my true religion,” says the Dalai Lama.

And Emily Dickinson puts it this way:

I had no time to Hate –
Because
The Grave would hinder Me –
And Life was not so
Ample I
Could finish – Enmity –

Nor had I time to Love –
But since
Some Industry must be –
The little Toil of Love –
I thought
Be large enough for Me –

(#478 in Johnson edition; see also #763 in Franklin edition)

The words of our closing hymn are also from Emily Dickinson:

If I can stop one Heart from breaking
I shall not live in vain
If I can ease one Life the Aching
Or cool one Pain

Or help one fainting Robin
Unto his Nest again
I shall not live in Vain.

(#919, The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, ed., Thomas H. Johnson)

Benediction

There is, finally, only one thing required of us: that is, to take life whole, the sunlight and shadows together; to live the life that is given us with courage and humor and truth.

We have such a little moment out of the vastness of time for all our wondering and loving. Therefore let there be no half-heartedness; rather, let the soul be ardent in its pain, in its yearning, in its praise.

Then shall peace enfold our days, and glory shall not fade from our lives.

(Dr. Kendyl R. Gibbons)

Extinguishing of Chalice

We extinguish our chalice
But not the light of truth,
The warmth of community,
Or the fire of commitment.
These we carry in our hearts
Until we are together again.

(NOTE: This is a manuscript version of the new year's sermon given by The Reverend

Bruce A. Bode on Sunday, January 6, 2008. The spoken sermon, available on audio cassette at the Fellowship, may differ somewhat in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)