

Just In Time

November 13, 2005
By Rev. Martha Niebanck
First Parish in Brookline

Meditation: *Sweet Darkness*

David Whyte

When your eyes are tired the world is tired also.
When your vision has gone no part of the world can find you.
Time to go into the dark where the night has eyes to recognize its own.
There you can be sure you are not beyond love.
The dark will be your womb tonight.
The night will give you a horizon further than you can see.
You must learn one thing, The world was made to be free in.
Give up all the other worlds except the one to which you belong.
Sometimes it takes darkness and the sweet confinement of your aloneness to learn
anything or anyone that does not bring you alive is too small for you.

Reading: *Selling Unhappiness*

Wayne Muller

We all receive catalogues in the mail with pictures of young, sophisticated women and men lounging about in natural cotton clothing, loose and soft on their sculpted bodies. ... They are having tea, one hand on the golden retriever asleep at their side. A picture of perfect happiness.

It is a picture, of course, of Sabbath time. You can taste the tea, smell the flowers on the breeze, feel the gentle support of an easy chair and the soothing company of a loving dog. The job is miles away, the factory is closed; someone else is handling things. They seem to be inviting us to join them, to become part of their lives. This, they seem to say, is how we were meant to be. Why not join us?

What they offer is the happiness of being young, at ease, perfect. Order this blouse, this cologne, this lingerie, this coffee maker, this bathrobe, this table setting, this rocking chair, and you will enter this picture. Troubles will dissolve, and life will be sweet. In the end they are selling this, and always this: Buy what we have, and you will be happy. ... Until and unless you buy what we are selling, you will never be happy.

If you want to be happy, you have to drive around in a very expensive car and you have to live in a Victorian mansion so large that you have to walk through an acre of perfect gardens just to get to breakfast with your perfect children who are always laughing in your perfect kitchen and then go off in your perfect clothes to lunch and opening nights and cocktail parties with everyone else who is young and beautiful and smiling with clean, white teeth, natural clothing, and the sleeping golden retriever.

But at the same time, you know that you are not going to lead that life. The lie is this: While they are promising happiness, they are really selling dissatisfaction. Our entire economy is predicated upon dissatisfaction. It is imperative that we recognize that our particular model of civilization is actually designed to produce suffering.

Sabbath is a time to stop, to refrain from being seduced by our desires. To stop working, stop making money, stop spending money. See what you have. Look around. Listen to your life. Do you really need more than this? Spend a day with your family. ... Just stop. ... That is, after all, what they are selling in the picture: people who have stopped. You cannot buy stopped. You simply have to stop.

Sermon

My message today is about time. Unitarian Universalist theologian, James Luther Adams urged us to think of *time* as a theological term, to know ourselves to be actors in history capable of holding a mental image of past, present, and future, as he put it—to “take time seriously.”

Herman Hesse, on the other hand, observed that “Seriousness is an accident of time. [Seriousness] consists in putting too high a value on (clock) time. In eternity there is no time. Eternity is a mere moment, just long enough for a joke.

Lest we become too serious I begin with timely observations of philosopher-comedian, Steven Wright (humor me and imagine his wild hair and dead-pan delivery):

I went to a restaurant that serves "breakfast at any time". So I ordered French Toast during the Renaissance.

"Anywhere is walking distance if you have enough time."

"I put instant coffee in my microwave oven and almost went back in time."

Years ago, when I was in my first year of student ministry I was preaching at the Doolittle Home, a UU retirement home in Foxboro. I preached a predictable sermon about Advent as the time for slowing down rather than speeding up with the frenzy of the holidays. I ended the service by walking to each sitting elder and shaking their hand. I got a polite response from each person until I got to Marge.

Marge always spoke her mind and she was fiercely opinionated unmitigated by the stroke that left her in a wheelchair and unable to read. She grabbed my hand with her dry bony hands, looked me straight in the eye and said "Martha, don't you dare preach to me about slowing down. If the residents of Doolittle Home get any slower we'll be compost. There is nothing I miss more than the frenzy of the holidays. Preach to us about waking up and staying awake! Teach us how to live."

I took Marge very seriously. I will *not* be preaching about slowing down. I *will* be preaching about paying attention, about staying awake to the dimension of time, about staying awake to the frames of time we use to experience time.

- The way we frame time matters. Consider the difference in the quality of time experienced at a baptism or a wedding as compared to a baseball game or a meeting.
- Einstein said, "Time is *what you measure with a clock*, but anything that can count more or less equal increments of any change is a clock too, including the earth and the stars. Change is not what you measure with time; time is what you measure with changes."
- Paul Davies, world-acclaimed physicist adds to Einstein: "Whatever we may experience mentally, Time does not pass, nor does there exist a past, present, and future. The notion of a moving time makes no sense...in spite of the fact that it dominates our language, thoughts, and actions."
- Novelist, Milan Kundera, reflects on the relativity of time in his novel, "Slowness:"

“I am driving, and in the rearview mirror I notice a car behind me. The small left light is blinking, and the whole car emits waves of impatience. The driver is watching for the chance to pass me; he is watching for the moment the way a hawk watches for a sparrow. ...He is caught in a fragment of time cut off from both the past and the future; he is outside time; in other words, he is in a state of ecstasy; in that state he is unaware of his age, his wife, his children, his worries, and so he has no fear, because the source of fear is in the future, and a person freed of the future has nothing to fear.

Speed is the form of ecstasy the technical revolution has bestowed on (humanity). As opposed to a (driver) the runner is always present in his body, forever required to think about his blisters, his exhaustion; when he runs he feels his weight, his age, more conscious than ever of himself and of this time of life. This all changes then a (person) delegates the faculty of speed to a machine: from then on, his own body is outside the process, and he gives over to a speed that is non-corporeal, non material, pure speed, speed itself, ecstasy speed.”
(*Slowness*: pp.1-2)

Let’s start with a simple experiment with how the machinery of our own brains influences our experience of time. Take a moment, if you will, to make a mental image of a pink elephant, now turn it blue; give it wings and let it fly. Visual images can change in a nanosecond.

Now, if you choose to continue, remember a time when you were feeling very satisfied. Take all the time in the next minute to full grasp that feeling of satisfaction... Now that you’ve got that feeling of satisfaction under your belt, shift your mind and remember a time when you felt surprised....

Perhaps you notice that the time scale for change between visual and kinesthetic processing is very different.

My hunch is that the visual image was instantaneous and that the feeling image is taking a longer time. TV and computers are keeping us in visual time for longer and longer periods of our waking lives, lost in the ecstasy of “light-speed heaven.” In this space we no longer need feel the pull of gravity but only rush of speed.

Richard Thieme, business consultant and member of the cyber *avant-garde* describes life in the machine of the web:

“My machinery is wired to move pretty fast, and all my life people have told me - bless their hearts - to slow down. It always comes from people who move more slowly, never from those who are faster, so once in a while I reply, no, YOU speed up. But then they think I'm rude.

...(W)e twitchers relish those moments when our brains or bodies twitch like the fingers of a teen genius at a game of Quake, lost in light-speed heaven.”

Poets and parents -- bound by biology the way a runner is connected to blisters and the bumps in the road feel out of synch with the ecstatic, cyber frame of mind. I surmise that this is the generation gap of the post-modern era. The old and the young at the beginning of the 21st century live in different dimensions of time.

Hear poet, Davis Whyte's voice as he describes his life in the corporate world. He is a man of my generation who yearns for the return of slowness:

“The great tragedy of speed ... is that very soon we cannot recognize anything or anyone who is not traveling at the same velocity as we are. We see only those moving in the same whirling orbit and only those moving with the same urgency. Soon we begin to suffer a form of amnesia, caused by the blurred vision of velocity itself, where those things germane to our humanity are dropped from our minds one by one. We start to lose sight of any colleagues who are moving at a slower pace, and we start to lose sight of the bigger, slower cycles that underlie our work. ... On the personal side, as slaves to speed, we start to lose sight of family members, especially children or those who are ill or infirm, who are not flying through the world as quickly and determinedly as we are. Just as seriously, we begin to leave behind the parts of our own selves that limp a little, the vulnerabilities that actually give us color and character.”

So on one hand we have the opportunity to experience ecstasy in speed that releases us from the pull of gravity like a rocket leaving the earth's atmosphere; and on the other we have the pleasure of slowness, that delights in connecting the past and future in time-the speed of returning to our senses, returning to earth.

My advice, if I have any at all, is that we pay attention to and make conscious choices about those frames of mind that generate our sense of time. I advise that

we know the difference between the feeling of being at a baptism or a business meeting and that we not confuse the two.

Just yesterday I attended a concert at Symphony Hall. My husband was on the stage, playing violin with the Newton Symphony Orchestra and I was sitting beside my future daughter-in-law and my 30-year old son, Alex. I have a hard time at concerts. I don't know how to listen and so my mind wanders, especially if the music is unfamiliar. I read the program and try to look engaged.

I feel the way I used to feel when my Dad brought me to church, a bored feeling of simply waiting for it to be over. When I was young I didn't know how to convert ordinary time into ritual time and so only encountered my own impatience in the pews of my childhood.

So last night I played with time frames as a way of entering concert time with the intentionality I bring to ritual time. I felt the shift as I watched my gray-haired husband playing the violin and simultaneously remembered him as a dark-haired young man yearning to play on this very stage.

I watched the largely Chinese audience become entrained in what was, to them, a familiar and nationalistic musical mood. I could have felt stranded in ordinary time as they transcended time together. I did not become swept up in their ritual, but stood on the edge of that river of time, catching the eye of a four-year old, who had not yet learned the ways of ritual time.

We began a subtle game of pretending not to look at each other and became entrained in our own, two-personned world—strangers, meeting in time, creating memories together, binding time with ritual play of hide and seek, peek-a-boo. I like to think that when that little boy is my age, should he find himself bored or at a loss in ordinary time, he will find a small child and catch an eye, make a connection, and remember us into being again—creating a very large orbit of time in the space between our generations.

As we near the end of our time together in ritual time, I remind us that clocks are not the only way we mark time. We mark time by noting changes—in ourselves and in the starry orbits of the earth through space.

And so I end with a prayer inspired by the words of both the deep ecologist John Seed and the science fiction writer, Robert Heinlein, author of the words at the heart of our final hymn:

“We call upon the power which sustains the planets in their orbits, that wheels our Milky Way in its 200-million year spiral, to imbue our personalities and our relationships with harmony, endurance and joy. Fill us with a sense of immense time so that our brief, flickering lives may truly reflect the work of vast ages past and also the millions of years of evolution whose potential lies in our trembling hands.” Lost in space, *We pray for one last landing On the globe that gave us birth; Let us rest our eyes on fleecy skies And the cool, green hills of Earth.*

Let us sing: “For the Earth Forever Turning.”