

The River of Time

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Ten years ago my wife and I were teaching the toddlers class at First Parish in Concord when one of the parents called me at work one afternoon. I had a particularly warm and close relationship with her two year old son Christopher. She told me that she had asked Christopher who he wanted to arrange a play date with and he emphatically suggested, "Let's have Jim over, I want to play with Jim!" She said that he was quite disappointed to learn I had a job which meant that I was not available to play most afternoons.

A toddler generally doesn't experience the past or future as we do, but they live in an eternal now, with everything being in the present or not being in reality at all. Most of us have forgotten this way of being, with each new experience representing the sum total of all of our experiences. To say toddlers have a limited sense of time is to ignore their vast absorption in the current moment, which can expand infinitely to encompass all time and space in a smile! Toddlers often concentrate better than we do, intensity with their concentration having no goal or meaning beyond becoming completely absorbed in the activity of the moment. Perhaps with our help and support, some of our toddlers will carry this powerful uninterrupted concentration into aspects of their own adult lives.

A few weekends ago my oldest sister Peggy was commissioned and installed as the Minister of Congregational Health at the United Congregational Church in Middletown, RI. So after a busy Sunday of preaching and meetings here I raced down to RI for her 3pm service of installation. I arrived about three minutes before the service was to start and slipped into the family pews with some of my nieces and nephews and their toddler age children. We immediately began to play together. So of course my mother turned around from the front pew to see who was causing the commotion and summoned me to sit beside her during the service. She said, "James, you are agitating the toddlers, come sit by me." I'm 50 and mother still says, "If you can't behave please sit here!" One of my nieces later told me that the toddlers had been anxiously awaiting my arrival because they knew I would be real with them.

I especially like playing with toddlers around the edge of their feelings of safety and joy! My grand niece Courtney spent the first two years of her life as the coddled youngest girl in this extended clan. Then three of my nieces and nephews, including Courtney's mother, had new babies in the first three months of this year. So Courtney has been displaced from her role as the baby but is not yet old enough to keep up with the preschoolers who are her older siblings and cousins. So following the service she and I play together. We play a game of liberty and safety, running away from the grown-ups but never allowing mom or dad to be far from sight. We play monkey see – monkey do, each trying to find a more outrageously silly action which the other might refuse to imitate. We find thrills and joy at the edges of safety, and after her four year old sister Kylie persuades me to throw Kylie up to the ceiling and catch her again to squeals of delight, this becomes Courtney's measure of freedom and risk taking at the edge of profound safety. Yes I play with toddlers, not just because it is so much fun, but because in our play they have something to teach me about life.

We conventionally conceive of time as something external to ourselves. Yet we know from modern physics that time and space, energy and matter are all parts of the same continuum. A four dimensional mobius strip, ever turning, moving ever forward, and yet coming once again back around to where we began. We are inextricably interwoven into a sphere of space and time that shapes and is shaped by our very experience of reality. Pain, joy, anxiety, passion and boredom are all aspects of our relationship with time. We go to work out of a sense of obligation and then discover that it becomes central to our sense of being and meaning making in our lives. We decide to relax and enjoy ourselves, and become bored with the repetition unless we engage in the essence of the moment! The unique value of any experience is lost unless like the toddler we can absorb ourselves fully into the living of this very moment.

Are we able to recognize and acknowledge in our living that we live our lives in the midst of this flowing river of time, with eddies and side waters, flowing ever onwards and returning to the sea of being from which we have come forth? As Jacob Needleman in his book *Time and the Soul* writes: "The events of our lives are so tightly interconnected, and our lives as a whole proceed within such a vast network of purposes which we do not see, that no ordinary man or woman is able to know the real turning points of his or her life, the real crossroads where meaningful change can take place." I

would generally agree with Dr. Needleman except at moments such as these, when these two graduating seniors and their families are painfully aware that they are perched upon the precipice of a major change in their lives and their relationships.

Edric speaks of beginnings and endings, of feeling disconnected and of being accepted just as he is. Callista speaks of falling even more in love with the world than she already is. As they live into their lives they will take freedom and safety to a whole new level! Everything will be different and in some ways more difficult, but they will both be okay, I am certain of that, because as their parents remind them they have been well grounded in their families and in the loving wonderful community at First Parish. We celebrate and honor this momentous time with them, but as we do so, can we recognize and celebrate that this is also a momentous moment in the time of life for each of us here today? Hug your children dearly to you for the time soon passes and they move on.

Hinduism historically divided each person's life passions into four stages of life. The first stage was as the student, which today can easily extend into one's twenties, when each person should be passionate about learning and becoming without a need to be a productive contributor to the society as a whole. Then comes the role as a householder: which can include getting a job to be a productive member of society, building a family, and generally becoming part of the fabric of the community, deeply interwoven in the lives of others. This period can now extend for forty years.

Somewhere along the way however our life becomes more stable, predictable, and we begin to have the wherewithal and hunger to give back. When this becomes the dominant theme of our work and our life the Hindus call this stage the Generative stage of life. Hindus feel that you can measure the wealth and wellbeing of a community by what portion of its people have the hunger and the wherewithal to make being generative as a major means of their connection with life. Then the final stage is as the Sage: with no responsibilities except to explore the unexplored realms of mind and spirit which the student, householder and generative saint were to busy engaging everyday life in order to slow down and just be. Each of us still spends a time as student, as productive member of society, as generative mentor of the next generation, and hopefully also as sage encountering the wisdom of the ages past. How we balance these different aspects of living remains our question!

Robert Grudin writes: “Like toddlers, who with fierce instinct seek alternately their own freedom and the safety of their mothers’ arms, we go through life spicing our security with liberty and buttressing our liberty with security. We are like kites, which would fall except for the strings that hold them to earth; like tops, whose stability is impracticable without motion. Our lives are, at their best, patterned to accommodate this antithetical but complementary balance of desires. This balance is evident in much that we love and admire: in nature, in religion, in great art and the laws of the great republics. It should be copied in our attitude toward career and retirement, the design of our houses, our relationships with loved ones and the living pattern of our day.”

When my children were young, whenever we crossed a stream or a bridge across a river, one of our favorite games was Pooh sticks from A A Milne’s stories of Winnie the Pooh. We would each find a small piece of wood and drop it into the stream from the bridge. Then we would run along the stream to see whose stick got stuck in an eddy or backwater, or behind a sunken limb, and whose stick safely made it down the stream and round the bend out of sight. Everything is temporary, provisional, and certain to pass away! While we often face this fact with anger or regret, or even denial, such is the nature of our lives in the midst of this stream of time. Good, bad or indifferent, this too will pass away as we move on. We make deep commitments in our lives, and while they last we hold on to them dearly, treasuring them for the jewels that they are, and yet when the time comes to let them go, we must let them go! We must learn to mourn the past while reaching out to future possibilities with sublime joy, trusting in the emergence of another good moment, another time, another opportunity to build a life. For this is the great secret, we are not mere pooh sticks floating in the river of life, we are an integral part of the river of life itself.

As I dashed out of here a few weekends ago heading to my sister’s commissioning, as I turned onto Warren Street I noticed one of our most active lay leaders, who evidently had herself stayed too long after the service and so was walking home alone, as she stopped to smell the lilacs newly in bloom. It is possible and admirable in the midst of this crush of time to stop and smell the blooming lilacs! We must take nothing for granted, our time is uncertain and short, so for us gathering rose buds while we may remains our joy and our salvation. Max Coots writes, “When I was very young, my yesterdays were few. Tomorrows came on endlessly and even cold

December days were Spring to me. Then a world of timelessness was served at breakfast with my orange juice. When I was very young and every world was conquerable. Even now, sometimes, the child in me pretends that nothing ends, especially in the Spring. Now I am not so very young, and time runs faster than it did. I am much more mortal than I was at ten. Day after day my yesterdays pile up and my tomorrows dwindle down. I know there is too little time for everything, and knowing this, today's more precious than all the past that was and the might-yet-be can ever be."

In learning to navigate this river of life, we must learn how not to become snagged on a sunken limb, or worn out and bleached through by the flow of experience which is already in our past. Those of us who remain vibrant and alive, even in the midst of cancer, disease, weariness, and old age, must be able to remain buoyant upon the river, bobbing over the eddies and whirlpools of life, and becoming one with the flow that is our life, whether it is as we would have chosen it to be or otherwise, catching that wind that arises from the center of the universe, we must learn to flow with the river, learning never to fight against the inevitable. So that in the real world of our lives we make of it a dance, through the good times and the bad times, bending like a willow in the wind, and bobbing like a Pooh stick in the stream, learning to become one with the river of our lives so that it is a dance indeed!