

It's About Time

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Tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock . . .

It was a slow, deep, rich sound . . . Tick-tock, tick, tock . . . It was an ancient grandfather's clock in the library of the town New Hampshire where I grew up and it stood watch over shelves of books, the rich and musty, dusty smell of books, smells of paper and of leather – and of time. Tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock . . . the thought of the clock in that place brings me back though it has probably been 45 years or more since I sat there watching those hands slowly move across the face – the face . . . there was a rotating disk at the top of the dial with the face of the moon on it . . . it had eyes, and a nose, and a mouth with a slight smile and cheeks with a bit of a blush – and it turned to show its phases, marking time in its own way.

Tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock . . .

The writer sits, cross-legged on the floor, as he says. “Waiting for the break of day, searching for something to say . . . staring blindly into space . . . feeling like I ought to sleep . . . should I try to do some more . . . 25 or 6 to 4.”

Tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock . . .

25 to 4 . . . or 26 to 4, what does it matter, damnit? It's 3:35 AM glowing in blue on the face of the cable box across the bedroom reminding me of the rapid passage of the night. Why can't I get to sleep? Was it the espresso after dinner? No, it's the presentation in the morning in front of a City Council, or a corporate board . . . I can't get it out of my head. If they approve our proposal we will win this important bid. My mind runs through the material over and over again as it has a hundred times before . . . now it's 4:05 – tick, tock – 4:12 – tick, tock – 4:18 – tick, tock – God, please! I need to sleep or I'll be a basket case.

Tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock . . .

Time: A dimension allowing us to order events into before, now, and after. A measure of the space between events . . . but what is time really? Is time absolute, as Newton believed independent of space yet an integral part of objective reality – a stage upon which that reality plays out in sequence? Or is time simply a creation of the human mind, as Kant would have it? Did time have a beginning? What happened before the big bang? Is time linear, or are there

realities parallel to ours and we stand at a point where the thread of time intersects our here and now? If we could but travel faster than light could we not go back in time . . . back to that moment in the microseconds after the big bang when matter and energy decoupled, and time itself began? Did time begin? Was there “time” before the big bang? What was there before that initial singularity, compressed into a state of infinite density, burst forth with this universe as we know it? And what of the end of time? Will there be an end of time? And what will come after?

Tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock . . .

The late Unitarian Universalist Minister Max Coats who served congregations in upstate New York and was a prolific writer and poet reflected on time in much of his work, and penned these thoughts which he entitled, “This Year” from his collection “Seasons of the self”:

A year’s a year!

A string of kindergarten beads strung once-upon-a time:

*Of flighty minutes for clocks to tsk-tsk about,
And days in simple black-and-white conformity.*

For clocks and calendars it’s so.

My time is something else again:

*Minutes sometimes hours long,
And days of seconds or eternities.*

*On calendars the seasons march in apt procession across neat-numbered
months*

*For me, and others of my ilk, the seasons are not just holidays of green or
white.*

I sometimes sense some stronger seasons in myself,

Where time is rearranged as something clocks could never tell:

A time in some subjective order all its own

Where Winter sometimes starts in June and leaves grow gold in spring;

When light is long or short in spite of sun,

And Winter comes when grass is green except in me.

The village clock keeps time as time should be,

But I blaspheme Old Chronos with months I make and seasons centered in myself.

My year:

A year that is my life –

A life that is my time –

My time that ought to be eternity enough.

“Minutes sometimes hours long,
And days of seconds or eternities.”

I’m sure we can all relate to this. My mind goes back to sitting in class in school when I was a kid, watching the clock – tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock. Will this boring class ever end? Will the bell ring before the teacher calls on me and it becomes apparent that I didn’t read that assignment last night? I see myself standing in line in the grocery store, why don’t they open more registers? I only have five items, why is that person in front of me in the express aisle with a cart full? Is he a mathematician who can’t read or an English major who can’t count? Doesn’t he know that I’m in a hurry? I’m running out of time! I’m running out of time! I’m running out of time!

Running out of time.

This is an incredible funny notion, as was pointed out by Thich Nhat Hanh in our earlier reading. Why would we be in a hurry for time to fly by any faster? Why would we not wish to savor every second of our life before we come to that ultimate destination, that moment in time when time, for each of us, will run out? And what shall come after? This we cannot know, though philosophers and theologians have speculated on this question since some allegorical Adam and Eve took a couple of bites out of some metaphorical apple and, gaining abstract insight into the concept of “future”, became aware of their own mortality.

“But where is life?”, the Zen Master asks, “Life can only be found in the present moment. Therefore, each mile we drive, each step we take, has to bring us into the present moment. This is the practice of mindfulness.”

I have a real bad case of what Rev. Jan so aptly refers to as “Monkey brain”. Meditation, the practice of being intentionally mindful, intentionally in the present moment, is very difficult for me. My mind goes flittering off into a dozen, two dozen, two thousand thoughts of what I should have done, concerns of what I must do, and what shall be the outcome of whatever my mind has wandered into worry over. When I can do it, when I can be there in the moment – however fleeting – the peace to be discovered there is incredible. It was in reading these

mindfulness verses for everyday living in preparation for this morning, verses I found in Nhat Hanh's collection called, "Present Moment, Wonderful Moment" that I found some help in this, and the story of driving across Montreal and the license plate, "Je Me Souviens" – I remember – has helped me, almost forced me into a greater practice of everyday mindfulness despite myself. In the last few weeks I can no longer find myself at a red light without smiling, which is especially amusing when I catch myself imitating the white rabbit in Alice in Wonderland, inevitably late for my appointment with the queen who shall surely lop off my head when I arrive two minutes past the agreed upon time for our rendezvous.

Shall she really?

What are the "red light" moments in your life? What are those times for each of us, and how might we each set up reminders to call us back into the present moment, that moment where life is to be found, that precious time and place called "here and now"?

Robert Lamm, in the lyrics of the song that formed the inspiration for this service, laments over our preoccupation with running everywhere when so often we haven't stopped to think about where it is we are going, or even take a moment to realize where we are. And how often is this intentional? We live in a culture where we have created a million distractions to pull us out of the present moment and take us to some other place, some other time where we believe we would be happier. We create conveniences to take tasks we have decided are boring away from us to give us "more time". More time for what? At the beginning of the service today Denis requested that we silence our omnipresent electronic distractions that we might be fully present here in this time of worship. I will not ask for a show of hands, but I wonder how many of us simply switched them to "vibrate" lest an all-important text message or Facebook update go by unnoticed? How many people lose themselves in the diversion of so called "reality" TV rather than face the reality of complex family relationships or whatever other authentic experience of life seems too difficult to engage in? We are all aware of how text messages can distract people from vital tasks, such as paying attention to the road ahead, often with disastrous results. Yet, what greater disaster could there be than allowing ourselves to waste moments of that which is most precious to us – the gift of life itself? Perhaps this is why we as a society find it so difficult to solve the very real challenges that face us, whether those challenges are personal dilemmas or the greater maladies that plague our society today.

"I wish it need not have happened in my time," said Frodo, lamenting his lot and the responsibility which had fallen on his shoulders – the salvation of the entire world from an ultimate evil which desired power and control over everybody and everything – with so much resting on his ability to destroy the powerful ring which, as chance would have it, was found by his uncle and left for him to deal with.

*“I wish it need not have happened in my time,” said Frodo.
‘So do I,’ said Gandalf, ‘and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us.’*

While few of us are likely to be presented with such an awesome duty, like the young hobbit in Tolkein’s tale we all find ourselves in those times, fleeting or extended, where we wish to be somewhere, anywhere else. Whether it is as mundane a task as peeling garlic, washing the dishes, clearing snow from the driveway; the unfortunate but unavoidable circumstances of personal loss; or challenging the very real forces of evil in our world: forces which seek to sustain institutional injustice, deny basic human rights to those who are powerless, destroy our environment for personal gain, or perpetuate violence and war – what we are presented with in our time is not for us to decide, all we have to decide is what we are going to do in the time we are given.

Yes, we can spend time wishing we could change the past, and we can spend time worrying about what the future will bring. We can wipe it out of our minds by engaging in some distraction or fantasy, only to find reality is still there to deal with when we get back. We can numb our minds with drugs or alcohol as so many do giving us yet another challenge to deal with. But every moment gives each of us a new opportunity to be fully present in the now . . . the only moment that is real. We’re all familiar with the words of the Kalidasa, often used here as a call to worship. Imagine it only slightly paraphrased as this:

Look to this moment:
For it is life, the very life of life.
In its brief course
Lie all the verities and realities of your existence.
The bliss of growth,
The glory of action,
The splendour of achievement
Are but experiences of time.

For what has past is but a dream
And what shall be is only a vision;
Yet this moment well-lived, makes
The past a dream of happiness
And what shall come after a vision of hope.
Look well therefore to this this moment;
Such is the salutation to the ever-new dawn!

Does anybody really know what time it is? Certainly – the time is now, and when we call ourselves into awareness we have the awesome experience of life, life that is real. And if, when I find myself like the pretty lady whose diamond watch had stopped “cold dead”, I can call myself to mindfulness, take a moment to look at that red light in front of me as a reminder to smile, take a moment to appreciate the person in front of me who may seem dull or boring, or who may bring up things in me I would rather not think about – and remember the words of Mother Teresa:

“Every person is Christ to me, and since there is only one Jesus, that person is the one person in the world at that moment.”

If, when tempted to respond in anger I can see the other person and the situation as a bodhisattva – an enlightened teacher called into my life to teach me how to love –

If, when I catch myself looking at the clock, waiting for some time other than now I can catch myself and see the flower across the room, the miracle of another person, or appreciate the simple magic of a breath full of life-giving air and remember to smile I will bring myself joy and bring more love into the world.

It is a practice I intend to begin, and I invite you to join me and help me learn. It’s as easy as looking at that red light before you and saying –

Je Me souviens.

I remember, smile, and be filled with love.

Thus may it be.