

IN THE INTEREST OF TIME
SUNDAY MARCH 11, 2007
Mattatuck UU Society
Rev Carol M Wolff

OPENING WORDS -
CHILDREN'S STORY – Somewhere in the World Right Now
MEDITATION -
READING – David Moriarty

SERMON

Does anybody know what time it is? Do we ever really know what time it is?

Today everywhere in the United States (except for Hawaii and Arizona) clocks were moved ahead – in essence, losing one hour. It certainly seems that way doesn't it? Do you lament the loss or do you simply wait until fall when we can reclaim it so to speak?

We all deal with time in different ways – we waste it, wait for it, long for more of it, picture it like pages of a calendar or a linear march of numbers, days observed like globes that turn like the earth or squares to be filled systematically with hourly events.

However you deal with time, these two Sundays a year when we change our clocks seems a strange ritual. Do we really get that hour we lost today back in what this year won't be until November? Nothing we know, remains the same – time moves on before we can grasp it and every infinitesimal increment brings with it change. We age, we grow, our perceptions and attitudes are altered by every passing moment and event that serve to remind us we are alive and living within time.

Many aspects of time are about impermanency and loss of opportunity. We live going forward and barely grasp the power that time has over us whether it is that it marches on regardless of what we do, or we live trying desperately to hold on to that which is already gone. Time mostly affects us in the way that it refers to our growing older.

Like many important patterns in life, awareness of time is at first difficult to demonstrate. It is worthwhile to reflect a moment on the great differences resulting from such insights on the part of our forbearers. Neanderthal burials some 70,000 to 35,000 years old, in Europe show evidence of some kind of awareness of time – there seem to be systematic records of the sun and phases of the moon as well as animal migrations, salmon spawning and life times passing.

Onward through history the evidence of fascination with time and time-keeping has been left for us to decipher by places such as Stonehenge and the Pyramids.

Measuring time through the human life cycle is perhaps the most familiar. A young child learns the rhythm of life slowly but with great perception, which eventually changes over time as he grows older. Through expectation and memory we evolve in our search for personal identity trying to figure out where along time's continuum we fit in. Then we

become subject to the seasonal changes and yearly passings until we become motionless, outside of time and once again part of where we came from.

We say a child was conceived, was born and that she lived and loved, aged and died. Through the life of a human person, as through the life of all humans, personal identity becomes intelligible and communicable to others through the communal understanding of an ordering principle.

The same understanding or type of knowledge is also essential for a description of our relationship to the universe. This principle or knowledge is couched in terms of an idea called time.

Views held by individual scientists and scholars regarding which domains of knowledge are equipped to deal with this question tend to be dogmatic and often contradictory. A person's view of time is a method of discerning his personality. Tell me what you think of time and shall know what to think of you says one adage.

Knowledge and understanding of time is a human construct – we live within a duality about time that informs and guides our living.

[Insert – pgs 23-27 from “Einstein’s Dreams”]

Lived time we call Kronos, that which can be measured and recorded; the idea of time or Kairos, is what religions and philosophies seek to explore and understand. This duality of knowledge understood and knowledge felt is at the core of our development of a working dialogue between our rational and emotional faculties with respect to time that we have learned to live with.

According to Giordano Bruno, an author who has written about time, the creative activity of the mind consists of the search for the one in the many, for simplicity in variety.

“There is no better and fundamental problem”, he says, “that the problem of time in respect to which such a search may be conducted. It is always present and always tantalizing. It is the basic material of humankind’s rational and emotive inquiries.”

We think we know time. What we’ve done in the past stays done – we know we can’t unfry an egg. The present is palpably now. The future is down the road, not ours to see.

And yet every time we look in a mirror we see time in our faces and bodies. Age affects how we experience time. The observations about this are well known. I don’t have to tell you the years go faster as one grows older.

If anything, time forces us to sort out what is really important. As the author of the reading this morning says “In human time, everything counts.” This is most true as I have observed patients in Hospice care who know they are dying and have been given the gift of gently moving from death to life with awareness and some time to think. These people and their families live in a suspended kind of time that does not need clocks or schedules, just presence. It has always struck me that if the rest of us could in some way live that we’d all be a lot healthier.

That place is the meaning of time for me. That Kairos time gives meaning to our lives in a way that is different from words or music or linear time – it is something outside and yet inherently within us that we try to make sense of. Something outside of us and yet within – this is theological talk.

Is it possible there is a religious aspect to time what we have not yet explored? The Bible after all is where we find references to the kind of time we yearn for – that the kingdom is here on earth and yet also to come is one of the more familiar. The idea of “already and not yet” is one that we all live with and one in which we can find deep meaning.

It is the idea that we already have everything we need and yet must constantly strive for more – more meaning, more connection, more love in our lives. And even if we are fully sated with these things, there is that elusive future which holds the not yet in store. We live, therefore we age toward this goal of what life will bring and it is what keeps us going. Being able to live in time – to allow it to unfold – is one of the more difficult lessons in life.

Sometimes the already and the not yet are profoundly present – when someone lies dying for example as I mentioned. They are with us and yet not with us, they are living and yet we know they will soon not be with us – they are already dead and not yet dead.

It is a paradox that philosophy can address. And many of the ancient philosophers did. The other religious ideas about time that permeate history are that of eternity – again one that is not able to be grasped but has been discussed and philosophized about for centuries.

Our linear mind cannot conceive of something that has no beginning and no end. And yet this is the basic premise of every religion on earth that contains a God construct or some kind of myth of creation. Christian thought asks its believers to constantly strive to embrace a cohesive understanding of time past, present and future existing all at once – and we think UUism is hard!

This holistic view of time is of course represented by the life of Jesus Christ who as a divine being, existed before he lived in one time, died in another and continues to live in the future guiding his believers to an eschatological future when all will be revealed and all aspects of time will disappear and be as one in a heavenly abode.

But we live with a different understanding of time – we strive to live in the present moment embracing what IS and not concerned with what will be for we have a belief in the finite nature of life and prefer to limit our knowing to this life which is all we believe we have or can know. We cannot and in fact will not speculate on what comes after – for we simply can never have that knowledge.

But oh how desperately we strive to find it – to predict, to plan, to futurize our lives – to try to figure it out before it's too late.

In the Adult Ed class called “Building Your Own Theology” meeting currently here, the participants are asked at the very beginning to start a time line of their lives. They are asked to start with their birth and end with when they think they will die – a very provocative exercise because it causes us to frame our lives and to see exactly where

we are on that time line as well as how much time we have used up and how much we perceive as being left for us to do all that we hope to do.

Along this time line are placed our significant places, persons and experiences that have mapped our lives in the way we have lived it.

This can often be a revelatory exercise that brings us up against some very deep realizations about time and how we perceive it. We are asked to ponder religious influences and our place in communities as well, all which inform how we prioritize and spend our time as well as how those influences have shaped the way we have spent our time.

The last part of the time line asks you to think about important decisions you may have made that had an impact on your life time line. This reminds us that we are choosing creatures, that time doesn't always have control over us even though we often feel that it does.

Our choices as well as those things of joy and sorrow that happen to us all create significant ticks along the line. Most of all this gives us perspective and causes us to reflect theologically – and here we define theologically as “that which invites us to ponder the ultimate or what has meaning for us.”

Finally, the class members will construct from this a “master story” – they will discover themes that summarize their life endeavors and help them create a credo of their most cherished values and beliefs.

Time can be a metaphor for all of culture but it is time in a physical sense. We need to be talking about time in a non-physical non-clock sense which, as I mentioned, is Kairos or holy time, spiritual time. The Mexican author Carlos Fuentes has a view on this. He says:

“the final question of time is whether we shall live together or die together. The West has been in love with its successive linear image of time....it has condemned the past to death as the tomb of irrationality and celebrated the future as the promise of perfectibility.” He says, “Our denial of the past has led to the degradation of morality and the denial of lessons of the past. Denial of the rights as well as the reality of other cultures is another of the consequences of Western time concepts.” As Fuentes says (and this was in 1981): “We shall know each other or exterminate each other.”

The author of the book that quotes Fuentes goes on to say:

The future of the United States is a dream. Some make the dream come true, others do not. My point is that the future is not actually real to us. If it were, how could we do such terrible things to others and our environment? And how could our government and our businesses act so blindly, denying the reality of other cultures and in so doing, alienate the world because of cultural ineptitude?. To us, the future seems either extremely narrow or else very short term.

Observing my countrymen over the years, I have noticed two things which stand out: our warped and inadequate view of the past and future and our failure to acknowledge the reality of internalized time – our own time. Time is all we have in this life and it is my belief that life can be richer and more meaningful if people were to know more about time as it affects them personally. Then perhaps the

future would begin to take on some reality and we might begin to act more realistically.”

Much remains to be investigated about time as an organizing frame for life. Basic systems such as monochromatic and polychromatic time patterns are like oil and water and do not mix under ordinary circumstances. In a schedule-dominated monochromatic culture like ours, ethnic groups which focus their energies on the primary groups and primary relationships find it almost impossible to adjust to rigid schedules and tight time compartments.

This country could do much worse than follow the example of former Congressman Ben Reifel, a Sioux Indian, who taught his people technically how to be on time for school and buses on the reservation. Reifel realized that it is not enough to tell polychromatic peoples to be on time or to plan ahead. Time in this sense is like a language and until someone has mastered the new vocabulary and the new grammar of time and can see that there really are two different systems, no amount of persuasion is going to change behavior.

Human beings are such an incredibly rich and talented species with potentials beyond anything that is possible to contemplate that it would appear that our greatest task, our most important task, and our most strategic task is to learn as much as possible about ourselves. Our relationship with time is one way to do that.

I hope this will lead to lessening our tendency to subjugate or stamp out anything that is different. The human race is not nearly enough in awe of its own capabilities. My picture of the future is not so much one of developing new technologies as it is of developing new insights into human nature and how to become better people.

There are perhaps whole new dimensions to be explored and our future depends on our willingness to see them. Time as a construct is a human invention – that time is a universal experience that cannot be measured or contained is a religious and humanistic idea – it will serve us well to embrace the flow of time as a river that carried us from our birth to our death, but with the understanding that they are really the same thing. There is no beginning or no end – there is only this time, this place, this now-ness of our existence. Knowing that I would hope we would remember as the hymns title suggests “Our lives flow on in endless song.”