

The Dance of Time¹
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Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church

Opening Words

We sometimes think that time goes in a straight line from past to present to future. But there is a time that goes in circles: earth spinning around its axis, planets spinning around the sun, tides going in and out, the stars circling round the night sky. And our lives too are part of a great circle of life. All beings are born, and live, and die, and circle back to the beginning again, time after time. And so today, as the seasons of the year circle into the darkness, let us attune our voices to the great dance of life.

Today we shared a family ritual for the Day of the Dead, to remember our loved ones who have died. Our readings included a prayer, "Eagle Poem" by Joy Harjo², and "I Saw Her Dancing" by Marge Piercy.³ Our choir sang "Seasons of Time," from the musical Rent, by Jonathan Larson.

Sermon

My colleague, Rabbi Alice Goldfinger, fell on some ice in the parking lot of Congregation Bet Ha'am in December of 2009. Several months later, she was diagnosed with a brain injury, and was unable to work any longer. Recently, she started a blog called Brainstorm. In her blog, she describes one of the curious ways that her brain is different now. She writes:

I didn't notice that I no longer broke time up into chunks like minutes, hours, days. In, fact, I didn't notice there was such a thing as time at all. I still don't *feel* time. I don't *know* what day it is. I have a watch that tells me and I am learning to memorize that information in rehab. If you and I meet and begin to talk, I will be totally present. I have attained Buddha-hood; there is no before or after -- only now.⁴

Later, she asks, "How long is a year anyway? Is it before lunch or after? And is February leaves, snow, mud or sun? That is how I tell time. ... We are either in leaves or mud right now. it is hard to tell."⁵ "Soon we will stack logs for the wood stove. Put on socks and fleece, sit on the porch swing and drink tomato soup in the mugs the children made. I do not feel months, days or dates, but I haven't lost the seasons. I never knew how precious they were until I lost every other marker of time's passage."⁶

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² From *How We Become Human: New and Selected Poems 1975-2001*.

³ From *Available Light*.

⁴ <http://rabbibrainstorm.blogspot.com/2011/07/tohu-vavohu-chaos-and-shmay-os.html>

⁵ <http://rabbibrainstorm.blogspot.com/2011/10/addendum-jewish-men-and-power-tools.html>

⁶ <http://rabbibrainstorm.blogspot.com/2011/09/half-tomato.html>

We think that time moves relentlessly in a straight line, going from past to present to future. But our relationship to time is mysterious, located in a spot in our brain which can be damaged or destroyed. If that happens, then linear time disappears. But the circular patterns of time are still observable. All around us there is evidence that time moves in cycles: the earth spinning around its axis each day and night, planets spinning around the sun, tides going in and out, the stars circling round the night sky.

Some cycles are easier to notice than others. I was moved by Rabbi Alice's celebration of the changing of the seasons. Here in Maine, the autumn comes with bright colors and falling of the leaves. Winter is cold and snowy, spring full of mud and new plants, and summer warm and full of plentiful greens. These seasonal changes register in a deeper layer of our minds.

This summer, I was sitting at our campsite at Winslow Park, watching the sun rise over the water. It was a day without a lot of plans, so I could sit and watch the sky and water for a long time. I noticed how fast the sun seemed to move up the sky. I heard somewhere that you can estimate the time by holding up your fist sideways, and counting each fist width from the horizon to the sun as an hour. In a simpler world, it was enough to tell time by noticing where the sun was in the sky.

Curious about this, I discovered that actually, if you took a picture of the sun at noon every day for a year, you'd find that it wasn't in the same spot at all. Rather, you'd have a photo of an elliptical shape, like a lopsided figure eight. People call this path of the sun an *analemma*. It is formed from the fact that our orbit is not an exact circle, but an ellipse, and our planet is tilted relative to its orbit around the sun. So we have the seasons, and each day from June to December the sun rises a few minutes later, and a little bit further to the south, passing by due east on Equinox.

The natural world is full of these movements that follow their own intricate rhythms and orderly patterns. As I become aware of them, I begin to feel myself as a part of a vast dance with the sun, the earth, the moon, the stars.

Each day, the moon rises on average fifty minutes later than the previous day, and the high and low tides are changing at a similar pace. Winslow Park has a tidal beach, so we pay attention to the tides in the summer. You can only swim for about two hours before and after the high tide. One of our city friends just didn't understand about tides. We were planning to go swimming with her on a Wednesday. Two days before, she was visiting the beach and called us from there to make plans. "The sign at the beach house says high tide is at 2 p.m.," she said, "Shall we meet at 2 on Wednesday?" We had to explain to her that the tide would be later in two days, closer to 4:40 p.m.; that it changes every day.

Once, years ago, I created a moon calendar for my stepdaughter Stephanie, who was six years old at the time. I was curious myself about why the moon was sometimes seen in the morning, and sometimes in the evening, and I thought it would be fun to learn about it and share it with her. So I tracked it, and began to realize it was moving in a pattern.

The full moon rises at sunset and stays in the sky all night, setting at sunrise. Then, as the days go by, the moon begins to grow smaller, and it rises about fifty minutes later each day, until you can only see it in the morning just before and after dawn. About two weeks after the full moon, the moon rises unseen with the sun and sets invisibly with the sun. The night is dark. Then a day or two later, the waxing crescent appears, in the western sky, just after sunset, and sets soon after.

The stars also form a pattern to our eyes in the night sky. They circle around the north star, so that when people take a time-lapse photo, you see the lines in circles around the north star. Of course, it is really the earth that is moving, spinning on its axis pointing toward the north star. The ancients used to tell time by the stars. If you were to track the big dipper, you could watch it move around the sky during the night, and if you watched it over many weeks, you'd see it was in a different place in the circle, each month of the year.

We are creatures of time. Our ancestors were watching all these patterns, learning them and tracking them so they might tell their children, marking them so we would know how to plant and harvest and hunt, and dance our own dance of time. They were much wiser than most of us at reading the natural signs of time, though our scientist have followed in their footsteps. And so we mark with our machines the minutes and the hours and the days and the seasons and the years. We look back and we look ahead.

Our relationship with past and future brings us the awareness of our own mortality, that for us, and for all living beings, someday, time will cease. Often, we feel pain about that. We feel broken-hearted when those we love are no longer with us, or when something threatens their lives. Some animals grieve when their companions die, but they don't seem to anticipate death like we do. Our ancestors also wondered about death, and passed on to us their questions about what happens when we die, and their speculations and beliefs about it.

Some ancestors believed that there was another dimension that opened up after time ended—they called it eternity. There were many theories about what eternity might be like, some of which included endless misery or endless joy, depending on our actions during our time. Others spoke of a cyclical process of rebirth, that we end one lifetime and begin another, until we learn all that we need to learn. In our own era, all these beliefs survive, as well as more skeptical viewpoints that propose that as creatures of time, death is the end, that there is nothing of the individual consciousness that survives beyond time.

Consciousness itself is simultaneously familiar and mysterious. Rene DesCartes said, "I think, therefore I am." Jill Bolte Taylor was a brain scientist who had a debilitating stroke at the age of thirty-seven. A blood vessel burst in the left side of her brain. Because of her training, she was able to observe her own mind deteriorate as she lost the capacity to walk, talk, read, write, or recall any of her life.

But there was a surprise in this—as her left brain shut down, her right brain took over, and she experienced a different form of consciousness—an all-encompassing sense of bliss, a sense of timeless unity with the universe. Years later, after she recovered the skills of the left brain, she wrote the book, *My Stroke of Insight*, to describe her journey and what she learned.

She said:

To the right mind, no time exists other than the present moment, and each moment is vibrant with sensation. Life or death occurs in the present moment. The experience of joy happens in the present moment. Our perception and experience of connection with something that is greater than ourselves occurs in the present moment. To our right mind, the moment of now is timeless and abundant.⁷

During her stroke, Jill lost the sense of herself as a separate being, she lost the memories that identified her self to her self, yet she gained an experience of herself as the whole universe—there were no boundaries that separated her from everything else. She writes that one thing she kept from this experience was that she lost her fear of death. The experience of total peace and total connection was available at any moment.

When I was growing up, eternity was described as what happened to us after we died. But Jill speaks of eternity as something that can be experienced right now within our own minds. What she describes resonates with the Buddhist understanding of enlightenment, or Nirvana, that shifting of consciousness from time, to "all is now," from space to "all is one."

She writes:

The first thing I do to experience my inner peace is to remember that I am part of a greater structure, an eternal flow of energy and molecules from which I cannot be separated. Knowing that I am a part of the cosmic flow makes me feel innately safe and experience my life as heaven on earth. How can I feel vulnerable when I cannot be separated from the greater whole? My left mind thinks of me as a fragile individual capable of losing my life. My right mind realizes that the essence of my being has eternal life.⁸

⁷ Jill Bolte Taylor, *My Stroke of Insight: A Brain Scientist's Personal Journey*, (Viking, 2008), p. 30.

⁸ Taylor, p. 160.

In order to enter this experience of the present moment, which is also the experience of eternity, we must move from our left brain awareness to our right brain awareness. Jill says the way to do that is to quiet the chatter of the left brain, which speaks to us constantly in the story of our life.

Since Jill Bolton Taylor is a scientist, she brings a different perspective to what is sometimes perceived as the mystical. She helps our left brain understand and make sense out of the right brain, helps us to rationally get a handle on what the mystics speak of when they talk of being one with the universe, and finding eternity in the present moment. I find myself better able to understand why meditation is about quieting the inner chatter of the left brain.

I am usually a very left brain sort of person. I like the way the left brain organizes everything and notices patterns. I like how it tells a story from the memories of my life, and tries to make meaning and find the purpose of things. I like how it can see the patterns of the planets and stars and moon, and create calendars. I like to listen and read and write and talk. One of my spiritual practices has been to journal, and I can see that this is a very left brain spiritual practice, a way to tell a story and make meaning about my life.

But with the insights of Jill's perspective, I also feel more comfortable with that other process, that process of stopping the left brain, to experience "being." The process of letting go of the past and future to notice the abundance of the present moment. She says: "The feeling of peace is something that happens in the present moment. It's not something that we bring with us from the past or project into the future."⁹

The right brain has the capacity to appreciate the miracle of life right now: that we are here, that our cells work together to see and hear and taste and touch. The right brain is inherently grateful and nonjudgmental, compassionate and curious, awake to beauty and joy. The right brain is aware of the dance of life, of the whole of it, not attached to a separated small being, but joined to a flow of energy that is not divisible. William Blake has put it this way:

To see a world in a grain of sand
and a heaven in a wild flower,
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,
and eternity in an hour.¹⁰

Jill's experience gives me a greater sense of peace about death, and the question of what happens to people when they die. Part of the pain of grief is the worry we have for the well-being of our loved ones who are gone from us. So many people have said to me, "I just hope she is at peace," or "I just need to know that he is okay."

⁹ Taylor, p. 159.

¹⁰ The first lines of his poem "Auguries of Innocence."

After her stroke, Jill was left with a deep peace about death and an abiding sense of gratitude for the gift of life. She wrote, "Although I may lose these cells and my ability to perceive this three-dimensional world, my energy will merely absorb back into the tranquil sea of euphoria. Knowing this leaves me grateful for the time I have here as well as enthusiastically committed to the well-being of the cells that constitute my life."¹¹

Within each of our minds is the gift of time and the gift of the eternal now. We can learn to awaken our consciousness to these dimensions, and participate in all aspects of the gift of life. When we welcome these gifts, we are better able to participate in the dance that is life, that is going on in every moment, and all of the time.

Wendell Berry wrote:

We clasp the hands of those that go before us,
and the hands of those who come after us.
We enter the little circle of each other's arms
and the larger circle of lovers, whose hands are joined in a dance.
And the larger circle of all creatures,
passing in and out of life, who move also in a dance,
to a music so subtle and vast that no ear hears it
except in fragments.¹²

May the peace of the great dance of life be always with you.

Closing Words

Apple founder Steve Jobs died on October 5th. He was a man of many talents and many faults, but he found his spiritual center in Zen Buddhism. As his cancer advanced he had a lot of questions about death. In his final moments of being awake, as he lay dying, surrounded by his family, he looked at each of them, and then he looked over their shoulders, past them, and said "OH WOW, OH WOW, OH WOW."¹³

May we discover that WOW, at the end of all mysteries.

¹¹ Taylor, p. 160.

¹² From *What Are People For?*

¹³ http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/30/opinion/mona-simpsons-eulogy-for-steve-jobs.html?_r=1&pagewanted=all