

The Time of Our Lives¹
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Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church

Reading: Excerpt from "The Oar: A Summer in Three Acts" Chris Dombrowski²
(*The following is a short excerpt from a longer reading...*)

.. Mary dialed up the seventies *Puff the Magic Dragon* cartoon on YouTube. Luca seemed to be watching it contentedly as Mary and I went on sipping tea. Out of the corner of my eye, though, I saw his smile morph into a wince, and then a grimace, and before I could ask what was the matter, he began to sob uncontrollably.

It took about half an hour of Mary's patient soothing before we could decipher how the video had set him off. Luca gathered himself, dried his tears with the back of his hand and explained: "It said little boys don't live forever."

...I knew from the start as a parent that I would be privy to life at its most raw, but I hadn't known I'd be witness to the Fall itself, my son's realization of Time, the actual end of his innocence.

Sermon

We are people who live in time. Dale reminded me that Albert Einstein once said, "The only reason for time is so that everything doesn't happen at once." But it is one thing for a physicist to theorize about the meaning of time, and quite a different thing to wrestle with time's meaning as people who must live in it.

At some point in our growing up, we come to an awareness that our time is limited—we realize, like young Luca in our reading, that we will not live forever, and perhaps we grieve that knowledge. My UU colleague, Rev. Forrest Church stated that "religion is our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die."³ This time that we are alive is the time we have. If we are lucky, we may get 80 years or more. It sounds like a lot of time, but the closer we get to the end of it, the faster it seems to go by.

Annie Dillard writes: "What does it feel like to be alive? Living, you stand under a waterfall... The hard water pelts your skull, bangs in bits on your shoulders and arms. The strong water dashes down beside you and you feel it along your calves and thighs rising roughly back up, up to the roiling surface, full of bubbles that slide up your skin or break on you at full speed... What a racket in your ears, what a scattershot pummeling! It is time pounding at you, time. Knowing you are alive is watching on every side your generation's short time falling away as fast as rivers drop through air, and feeling it hit."⁴

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2 In *The Sun*, December 2010, p. 14.

3 *Love and Death: My Journey through the Valley of the Shadow.*, p. x.

4 From *An American Childhood*, in *The Annie Dillard Reader*, p. 198.

Of course, we also never know how much time we will actually have—which breath might be our last. Most of us don't think about this too much. Dillard says that for much of the time, we are asleep, dreaming, as the years slip away. But then, sometimes we remember. We feel our finitude. As if our life is like a weekend in the country, just one weekend, a weekend we cannot extend.⁵

The Buddha once asked a student, "How long is a human life?" The student replied, "It is so brief it seems but a day long." He then asked another the same question, "What is the true length of a person's life?" She answered thoughtfully, "It is the time taken to eat a single meal." And so the Buddha asked a third student, "How long is life?" "The time in a single breath," was the student's reply. "Exactly so," said the Buddha, "You understand."⁶

To remember that the time of our lives is limited, can be an awakening to the sacredness of time. "Every day is a God," Dillard says.⁷

Every day is a God. When I realize the preciousness of this time I am alive, I begin to wonder about how I am spending my time. Our generation is hyper-conscious of time in our day to day lives. We are surrounded by clocks—they wake us up in the morning, and tell us when it is time to go to work, to school, to dinner, and to bed. Some of us wear tiny clocks on our wrists, and younger ones of us check the time on our cell phones. And yet, all this consciousness of time most often just makes us rush around in a big hurry. The existential question of how we are spending the time of our lives is transferred into the modern world's quandary of feeling like we don't have enough time.

In the Harry Potter stories, we meet a very smart girl named Hermione. Hermione wants so badly to succeed at Hogwarts's School of Wizardry that in her third year of school she tries to take many more classes than her schedule permits. One of her professors gives her a Time Turner. It is a necklace with a magic hourglass in it. For every turn of the hourglass, you will go back one hour in time. Hermione is able to take a class at 9 a.m., and then when it is finished, use her time turner to go back to 9, and take a different class, and then use it again to take a third class at the same time.⁸

Doesn't this sounds like the perfect magical device to solve some of our day to day problems with time? How often do you find yourself saying, I wish I just had a few more hours, or days, to get everything done?

5 *Ibid.*, p. 199.

6 From *Kindness: a Treasury of Buddhist Wisdom for Children and Parents*, collected and adapted by Sarah Conover, p. 41.

7 In *Holy the Firm*, p. 11.

8 From *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*

But at the end of her year, Hermione actually gives back the Time Turner. Even though she was granted more time by the necklace, she was emotionally exhausted by the frantic pace she was keeping. She figured out that she must choose what was most important to her, rather than trying to do it all.

I struggle with that dilemma in my own life, as I imagine many of you do as well. One of my goals for my sabbatical last year was to find a better relationship to the time in my life and in my ministry. I was tired of being too busy. The Chinese character for “busy” is written with the symbols for heart and death. Think about that. Heart death.

Sometimes people wonder what ministers do with our time, outside of Sunday mornings. I had a schedule which filled up most of my days, except for Fridays, which was my weekly day off. I love all of the work I do in ministry, but there always seemed to be too much work and too little time to do it. So, during my sabbatical, I had a lot of free time, and I could take a longer view of my time in ministry. But I couldn't really put anything into practice until I came back to church last January. That was when the real transformation began.

One very concrete change I made was a resolution that my regular work of ministry would be done from Sunday through Thursday—a five day time period. Now, ministry is not a 9-5 job—and emergencies can call upon me at any time. But most of ministry is not an emergency. There would be plenty of room to respond to emergencies on Friday and Saturdays, if needed—and my Saturdays would also be available for special church events like the Fair, the retreat, weddings, and other one time events. But the ordinary work of ministry would usually happen from Sunday to Thursday.

I set aside Tuesdays and Thursdays to prepare for worship—to write my sermon, do a lesson, choose hymns, and so forth. Preaching experts say that preparation of a 20 minute sermon takes about 20 hours of time, and I have found that to be true. On Mondays and Wednesdays, I come into the office at church, and those are the days that I have pastoral appointments, schedule meetings, connect with staff members and volunteers, prepare for teaching, do adult education or groups, and take time for phone calls, emails, and any other projects. On Sundays, of course, I am here at church, and often stay for meetings or events after the services.

That is now my schedule for a typical week. But here is something I have learned. Even though I created a five day work week, on four of those days I was working about 11 hours a day. I hadn't really reached my goal of not being so busy. I had compressed my work into a more appropriate weekly frame, and discovered just how much I was overestimating what might be accomplished in that time.

During a meditation recently, pondering this trouble, the insight came to me: the issue is really not that I don't have enough time. Time is what it is. We each live 24 hours of day turning around to night, and 365 days in the turning of the earth around the sun each year. This is our time. The issue is not about changing the amount of time we have—that is impossible, except in fairy tales. The issue is that my time is filled with too many things to do. If I want to have a better relationship with time, I need to make better choices about what I am going to do with my time.

The Dine people have a practice that might be called, in English, walking in beauty. If we want to walk in beauty, we need the right balance of breadth and depth in our day to day life. If we are stretched too thin with activities, we can't experience a depth in living. If we are too busy, we can't experience joy and fulfillment. And the reverse is also true—if our time is too empty, we may feel lost and depressed. We need time to work and time to play; time to exert ourselves, and time to rest; time with people, and time alone; time that is structured, and time that is open and free. All of us need to find our balance in order to walk in beauty.

We also need this kind of balance in our church life. Those of you who participated in our October review of the ministry talked a lot about time. After a couple months of analyzing all the comments made during the morning conversations, our Committee on Ministry has published a summary this weekend. The biggest challenge people identified for our church was the feeling that there is too much to do, and not enough volunteer time to do it. And, on the other side, people wanted to have more time to make personal connections with each other. Have more fun with each other. You wanted more time for getting to know your minister, and for people of all ages to be together.

All these concerns seem to me to be very related to each other. If people are spending too much time doing tasks, there is too little time for human connection. The balance is off—and you want to be walking in beauty in your life at church. Now, it may take some time to find solutions to these challenges. Our board of trustees is taking all this feedback under its wing, and thinking about the steps that might be taken to find a better balance. But in the meantime, it felt important to acknowledge that we feel these pressures.

I should also say, these summaries are not going to be true for every single person. There are probably some folks who feel they have a beautiful balance right now, and others who wish they could find a way to be more active in the work of the church. (By the way, if you are one of those people—give me a call, and I'll try to help you find a niche.) But a lot of you feel this pressure about time and volunteering.

It is important to point out here, that we are not alone in this struggle with time. Despite all the progress that human beings have made, we have not necessarily progressed in our relationship with time. Research suggests that early hunter-gatherer societies only had to hunt and gather for about 20 hours each week.⁹ They appear to have had much more leisure time to create songs and poetry, paint animals in caves, play with their children, and dance the night away.

There have been times in more recent human history when factory laborers were working 14 hour days, seven days a week. With the rise of trade unions in the early part of the last century, working people fought for more humane working hours, and established the 40 hour work week. But those gains are being eroded, and in general, people are working longer hours now, than in the middle of the last century.

Another significant change, that affects churches as well as families, is that more women are now part of the paid work force. Everyone has fewer hours to devote to family, hobbies, entertainment, or church. One of my friends asked a very pertinent question: Why it is that, in a society where people presumably demand such a high standard of living, they do NOT actually demand more time?¹⁰

Even children's time has become more structured and busy. Only 21 % of today's kids regularly have free play time outside, compared to 71 % of their parents who had such time as children.¹¹ Such time outside has been shown to have a deep effect on their quality of life. A study by the American Medical Association concluded, "Children will be smarter, better able to get along with others, healthier and happier when they have regular opportunities for free and unstructured play in the out-of-doors."¹²

Last week we concluded our service with some words from Annie Dillard. She wrote, "How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives. What we do with this hour and with that one, is what we are doing." It matters how we spend our days, because it matters how we spend our lives. We must ask ourselves, is this the life we want to be living?

Right now, in my own quest to walk in beauty with my time, I feel like someone trying to learn to ride a bike—at the training wheel stage. There is something needed that is much deeper than merely rearranging my schedule or recruiting more volunteers for our church. So please forgive me that I can't give you stronger answers about this. I hope that my sharing about my own wrestling with the questions will trigger some insights and experiments in your lives as well.

9 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Original_affluent_society

10 Thanks to Kathleen Sands.

11 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2010/aug/16/childre-nature-outside-play-health>

12 2005 study, quoted in *op.cit.*, footnote 4.

All I know for sure is that when I am out of balance, when I am too busy, I am bringing death to my heart. And I believe the most important work of ministry, and maybe of life, is to pay attention to the heart, to awaken an open and living heart.

Maybe it is the poets who must help us find the way to live the time of our lives.

Mary Oliver writes:

I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?¹³

Closing Words

Rev. Kendyl R. Gibbons

We have such a little moment out of the vastness of time
for all our wondering and loving.

Therefore let there be no half-heartedness;

rather, let the soul be ardent in its pain, in its yearning, in its praise.

Then shall [beauty] enfold our days, and glory shall not fade from our lives.

13 From "The Summer Day," from *New and Selected Poems*, 1992, Beacon Press, Boston, MA, p. 94.