

**“Eternity Now”**  
**Unitarian Universalists of the Cumberland Valley**  
**Boiling Springs, PA • July 28, 2009**  
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**Reading #556 These Roses**

These roses under my window make no reference to former roses or to better ones;  
They are for what they are; they exist with God today.

There is no time to them.  
There is simply the rose; it is perfect in every moment of its existence.

Before a leaf-bud has burst, its whole life acts;  
In the full-blown flower there is no more,  
In the leafless root there is no less.

Its nature is satisfied and it satisfies nature in all moments alike.

But we postpone or remember. We do not live in the present, but with reverted eye  
lament the past, or, heedless of the riches that surround us, stand on tiptoe to  
foresee the future.

We cannot be happy or strong until we too live with nature in the present, above time.

**Reading #419 Look to this Day**

Look to this day!  
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 splendor of beauty;  
For yesterday is but a dream,  
And tomorrow is only a vision;  
But today, well lived, makes every yesterday  
A dream of happiness  
And every tomorrow a vision of hope.  
Look well, therefore, to this day.

**Sermon:** "Eternity Now" by Marc Renault

Even though I am 37 years old, I feel as though the first two-thirds of my life occurred before I was 8. This is when some of my fondest and richest memories were formed. Back then the summer lasted **forever**. I'd ride my yellow bike with the big banana seat down quiet suburban streets lined with old trees that interlaced their branches overhead. I remember games of Marco Polo in the community swimming pool, and days so hot that I would run from the shade under tree to the pool of shade under the next, not daring to spend more than a couple seconds in the direct sun. In winter, I remember making tracks through the snow. I'd walk directly toward a tree; I'd carefully put my left foot to the left of the trunk, I'd make a boot print to the right of the trunk, then wriggle myself around to the other side and continue walking so it looked like the foot prints had split around the tree. I hoped in my heart that someone would soon notice and stare in wonder. I remember routinely waking up before my parents on Saturday mornings, fixing myself a piece of toast, then turning on the TV to watch cartoons.

When I was a child I lived in the present and I lived an eternity.

But as we get older, time speeds up, and the question "what do you want to be when you grow up?" grows more and more serious. It becomes necessary to make plans for the future, to meet deadlines, to pay off loans, to constantly think ahead. And as our future takes shape, so too does our past. We live with the memories of our actions - triumphs, regrets, and an incredible amount of minutia. Our memories, to a large extent, define who we are.

So here's where I am today: most of my time is spent either in the future (worrying about things to come, planning how I'll carry through on commitments) or in the past (reliving past events, trying to remember where I put my car keys). How do we recapture some of the wonder of childhood -- the ability to be present, vividly in the now?

There are two things that keep us from being fully present in the now. First, we have amazing, unstoppable imaginations that constantly throw us back and forth between the past and the future. Secondly, our sense of time is heavily influenced by our culture.

## **THE FAILURES OF IMAGINATION**

Let me talk about our imagination.

Truth be told, it **is** actually a good thing that we humans have highly developed imaginations capable of contemplating the future. We wouldn't really want to spend all our time in the present. If we **really** had to live totally in the present, I suppose our outlook on life would be similar to a dog's outlook on life. (I'm so happy you're home! I never expected it! What a surprise!)

I recently finished the book *Stumbling on Happiness*<sup>1</sup> by Harvard psychologist Daniel Gilbert. Gilbert asks "What is it that separates humans from all other animals?" His answer is that humans are the only animals that think about the future. Not just in a mechanistic way, like a squirrel gathering nuts for the winter, but with deep contemplation. We can plan cities and compose symphonies. We wonder "will the weather be nice next weekend?" so we can plan on a picnic.

The first brains appeared on earth about 500 million years ago. Primate brains developed about 70 million years ago, and about 2 million years ago a brain growth spurt occurred in our human ancestors, doubling the size of the brain, and creating the frontal lobe. Our large frontal lobe is really what distinguishes human brains from other brains.

So what is the frontal lobe good for? Until recently no one was really sure. There's a famous story of a railroad worker, Phineas Gage, who, in 1848, had an amazing accident. An explosion launched a three-and-a-half foot iron rod under his left cheek and out the top of his skull, taking part of his frontal lobe with it. Amazingly, Gage lived and recovered in a couple months. However, his personality markedly changed, for the worse. Before the accident, he was said to be likable and well-regarded by his peers; after the accident, he was rude, obstinate, and in general, a very disagreeable person. Considering the fact that *he lost part of his brain*, these changes seem actually pretty minor. One change I want to highlight in particular: Gage's doctor wrote that after his accident, Gage would "devise many plans of future operations, which were no sooner arranged than they were abandoned."

In the 1930's doctors discovered that highly agitated psychotic patients could be calmed by surgically destroying part of their frontal lobe - the frontal lobotomy. The patients did indeed calm down, but there were also many unintended side effects. One of the most striking is this: lobotomy patients lost the ability to plan. Anxiety and planning - both are intimately connected to thinking about the future.

In the 1980's doctors studied a patient who had a motorcycle accident that had caused excessive damage to his frontal lobe. A doctor asked him to describe his thoughts when he tries to think about tomorrow. The patient replied,

"Blank, I guess... It's like being asleep... like being in a room with nothing there and having a guy tell you to go find a chair, and there's nothing there... like swimming in the middle of a lake. There's nothing to hold you up or do anything with."

This patient was living in a permanent present. Make no mistake, we are **not** designed to live that way. Our ability to contemplate the future - that makes us human.

Now here's the bad news: just because we **can** contemplate the future doesn't mean we do it accurately. Gilbert spends the majority of his book describing the ways our imagination fools us.

One flaw, is that our minds try to "fill in gaps" whenever possible. Our memories work by remembering just a few key moments, then fillings in the space between these moments with plausible guesses about what really happened.

For example, one time my brother and I saw a concert together. At one point there was some horrible feedback and the guitarists said, "what is that psychotic noise?" However, on the drive back, my brother recalled the guitarist saying "what is that **psychedelic** noise?" Each of us clearly remembered something different, and we each stood by the correctness of our own memories. One of us evidently did not hear the guitarist properly and the mind filled in this gap with a plausible guess. It is a shame that my brother will live with that false memory for the rest of his life.

The mind plays the filling-in trick with memories, but it also plays the same trick when contemplating the future. Suppose I tell you I plan to eat spaghetti for dinner tonight. What do you think my dinner will look like? Your imagination has probably filled in many details already. **My** imagination certainly has. We fill our future with totally unwarranted details. These future scenarios form the basis of our **expectations**, and our expectations play a key role in our satisfaction with the experience once we get there.

Suppose I have an extraordinary frontal lobe and my imagination is creating a beautiful scene of steaming spaghetti piled high, oregano sprinkled on top, meatballs covered with tomato sauce dripping down, fresh flakes of Parmesan cheese - and maybe to the side there's hot garlic bread with butter melting out of it... How will I feel once I'm in the moment of really eating my dinner? If the dinner meets my expectation, then I may be unappreciative, and if the dinner falls short of my expectation, then I may be dissatisfied.

Now, a spaghetti dinner is innocent enough, but what expectations does our mind create when we contemplate a new job? A new relationship? A large purchase? Our brain fills in gaps and creates a picture that will very likely be far different from reality once we get there. This filling-the-gaps flaw is the source of much anxiety - particularly so since we're never even aware that we're doing it.

Here's another way that our thinking about the future is flawed: We are very poor predictors of how we'll feel in the future, should certain events occur.

Here's an example: Suppose you own a particular stock and you are trying to decide whether or not to sell your stock to buy another. Which of the following two scenarios would you regret more:

(A) **keeping** a stock and losing \$1200, or

(B) **switching** the stock and losing \$1200? <-- 90% pick this. WRONG

We **don't** regret switching, because our brains constantly work to rationalize our actions. It's harder to construct positive and credible views of our **inaction** than it is to justify our **actions**. We'll forgive excess courage much more than excess cowardice.

*Our most consequential choices are often shaped by how we imagine our future regrets.* But, we are lousy predictors of what we'll regret. Truly, we regret inaction more than action.

We end up preoccupied with the future because (1) our human nature compels us to imagine the future, and (2) we do a poor job of it.

## **THE INFLUENCE OF CULTURE ON OUR SENSE OF TIME**

I have talked about how our imagination pulls us into the future and prevents us from appreciating the moment.

Now I'd like to discuss how our cultural sense of time also does the same.

I have often wondered what life would be like if I was a Sumerian shepherd living 4000 years ago. (Haven't we all wondered this?) I tend my sheep in the way I learned from my father, in the way his father taught him, in the way his father taught him, and so on... Each generation, learning from the one before it and teaching the one after. As far as I know, it was always this way - there was no "first shepherd" - and as far as I can imagine, it will always be this way - why should it be any different? As it was in the beginning is now and ever shall be.

It's almost easy to imagine life back then as an "eternal now". No past lost forever and no future yet to appear - just the now.

And then someone invented the clock. Time became a thing that could be measured and divided. Benjamin Franklin wrote "Time is money" and with the industrial age time became a commodity. How do you spend your time? Do you save it? Can you spare some time? Maybe I'll give you some of my time. If I'm not working overtime or in a time-out.

Time is important to us now because things change so rapidly. The Sumerian

shepherd's world was the same as his father's and grandfather's. But today, generations can barely hold on to each other. When my father was a child, they had no TV - they listened to the radio. When I was a child, the TV had two knobs - one for channel, one for volume. Now, my children have to deal with a television, DVD, VCR, amplifier, and converter box; I think we have 5 remote controls floating around the house.

All of us, in our lifetime, have seen how the technological revolution has dramatically reshaped our world. I remember explaining the internet to my grandmother in the late 90's. She nodded politely, but I could tell she didn't entirely follow me. Forty years from now, what will my grandchildren be explaining to me that is so simple to them but leaves me befuddled? Even now I think I'm starting to slip - Twitter - what is that?! Is this my fate? Am I destined to reach a point where I slow down but time and society race ahead of me at break-neck speed leaving me overwhelmed and irrelevant? The Sumerian shepherd never had such concerns.

## **WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT**

Well, I've come to the point in the sermon where I've described some of the obstacles we face to living in the present. Our brains force us to think about the future (and they trick us while doing it!) and the world changes around us so quickly we can never hope to put down a stake and say this time is our own. So what can we do?

### **Imagination**

After reading Daniel Gilbert's book on happiness, I was depressed (just kidding) -- he reveals all our flaws but doesn't give us much hope for rising above our shortcomings. However, I think there are a couple lessons to be found, a couple ways we can reduce the worry that comes from our poor prediction ability.

- First, recall the Zen story from the "Time for Children." Good luck and bad luck are all mixed up; there is just no accurate way to predict the future in all its detail. We must recognize that our expectations of the future are created out of largely unjustified details. Taking a humble view of our own ability to foresee the future allows us to relax and appreciate the present more. We don't need to be disappointed when the future doesn't match our imaginings; hey, we imagine imperfectly, that's OK. It's just to be expected.
- Second, we regret inaction more than action. If you're undecided whether or not to do something, strongly consider doing it! (should I take that trip? should I write that letter?) When you come to that fork in the road, take it! Even if your actions turn out badly, don't worry, your mind will trick itself into thinking everything's OK.

## Time

What are we to do about a culture of change that treats time as a commodity and threatens to overwhelm us? I believe we need to develop a habit of appreciation. Thankfulness slows time down. When we pause to appreciate a thing or person or event, that act of appreciation fixes us in a moment. We are, for just a moment, free from the driving forward flow of time. We live vividly in the now.

We need thankfulness for the people we meet, the trees that provide shade; thankfulness for sun on beautiful days and the rain that nourishes the plants. Thankfulness for received acts of kindness, and for opportunities to be kind.

We need appreciation for our meals, our family, our community, our beds, our homes, our cars, buildings, feet, hands, minds, hearts, souls. Auto-mechanics, postal workers, biologists, welders, pharmacists, landscapers, artists, and accountants. And not just a passing "yeah, yeah that's great" but we need a habit of taking time to think on these things.

In our family we have a tradition of giving thanks before dinner. We go around the table and each of us says something we're thankful for, or something that made us happy that day. You know what's neat about this, is that I'll catch myself during the day saying "Hey - that's great - I'll have to remember to share this at dinner tonight!" A habit of appreciation promotes a habit of appreciation.

The rose is perfect in every moment of its existence. Before a leaf bud has burst, in full bloom flower, in the leafless root - it is never less than perfect. Its nature is satisfied and it satisfies nature in all moments alike. We **must** develop the habit of appreciation, for there is perfection all around us, practically crying out to be known.

## CONCLUSION

I know that the future will come, and I'm sure it will surprise me. But for now, I have to confess, I still love making snow tracks look like they go around tree trunks. And now that I'm an adult, I love sharing experiences like this with my children. Look around, find beauty, and share it with those close to you.

Yesterday is but a dream, and tomorrow is only a vision. But today, well lived, makes every yesterday a dream of happiness and every tomorrow a vision of hope. Look well, therefore, to **this** day. Amen.

[ [1](#) Much of the material in this section is taken from Gilbert's book. ]

## **Prayer**

Spirit of Life, what are our lives in the vast expanse of time? Mere sparks that burn out the moment they are ignited. But the time that we have - this time is ours. May we cherish the moments of every day. Show us their importance and vitality.

## **Benediction**

If I endure until the spring,  
A whole new life is given me;  
For, on that season's soaring wing -  
I live one more eternity.  
-- Robert Jackson Stetson