

## Where Did All the Time Go?

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### Readings

from *Time and the Art of Living* by Robert Grudin:

Freya Stark, remembering her maternal grandmother:

She carried about her that best of grandmotherly atmospheres – a sense of amplitude in Time. No hurry ever came near her. A whole series of episodes in my childhood show her peacefully reading, or dressing, or brushing the long white hair that could still touch her knees, while a babel of agitated voices urged departing carriages or trains. She always had a book in her hand and never seemed busy; she would put it down and her arms would open to enclose any human being, but particularly a child, who needed refuge there; what she gave was affection pure and simple, deliberately free from wear and tear of understanding or advice. (from *Traveller's Prelude*)

Love, which more than any other emotion exists in all four dimensions, is impossible without the gift of time. It cannot exist amid haste and confusion; or between people who parcel their affection into short periods. The most impassioned actions and assurances, when punctuated by days of coldness or distraction, are as puny in their own way as limp handshakes and pats on the head. We love only when we love across time, when love offered is love remembered and love promised.

from Isaiah, chapter 61:1-4

The lord has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners... to provide for those who mourn... to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness... They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations.

### Sermon

Yup, it is December again. December 2 already!

Where *did* the time go? Didn't we just put our decorations away? Cart the tree off to the dump? Breathe a sigh of relief on January 1?

Time is *such* a strange thing.

Of course time's many paradoxical qualities have often been noted, by philosophers as well as ordinary folks. How is it, for example, that an hour or a day or a week can seem to move at glacial pace if we're a child waiting for Christmas or an adult looking forward to a vacation... and yet we can at the same time be astonished at how quickly a year or a decade... or even a lifetime has passed?

Where did the time go? Weren't our children playing in the backyard just the other day? Weren't we singing them to sleep just a few nights ago? And now they are far away, living their own lives...

Where did the time go? We ask it of a day. We ask it of a life.

And as we wonder at the many paradoxical qualities of time, we may find ourselves even more flummoxed as we contemplate the very nature of time itself. Even physicists (maybe especially physicists) find themselves in a labyrinth of mystery when studying the nature of time. Brian Greene, in his book *The Fabric of the Cosmos*, writes “Time is among the most familiar yet least understood concepts that humanity has ever encountered.” And he notes that our bafflement as we consider the nature of time long pre-dates Einstein and the conundrums of the theories of relativity and the mysterious interweaving of the space-time continuum. Centuries ago, for example, St. Augustine famously posed the challenge of understanding time this way: “What then is time?” he wondered. “If no one asks me, I know. If I wish to explain it to one who asks, I know not.”

All this said though... and whether or not we feel we understand the nature of time... most of us would probably say that time is something we want to make good use of. So as time seems to fly by, we may bemoan what we call wasted time. Conversely we feel a sense of satisfaction if we feel we have used our time well – whether it be an hour, a day... or a lifetime.

But what does it mean to have wasted time on the one hand, or to have used our time well on the other?

Is it just about efficiency?

Perhaps you’ve heard the story of the airline pilot who announced to the passengers that their aircraft was completely lost, that he and the crew had no idea of where they were... but they *were* making great time.

Maybe you’ve heard, too, of the efficiency expert hired to make a report on the New York Philharmonic Orchestra. He attended several concerts and then submitted an analysis which made the following points (at least so the story goes...)

For considerable periods, the four oboe players have nothing to do. Their number should be reduced and the work spread more evenly over the whole of the concert, thus eliminating peaks of activity....

All twelve first violins were playing identical notes. This seems unnecessary duplication.... No useful purpose is served by the repeating on the horns a passage which has already been played by the strings....

It is estimated that if all redundant passages were eliminated, the whole concert time of two hours could be reduced to twenty minutes and there would be no need for an intermission.

(from *A Treasury of Humor* edited by Eric W. Johnson)

Well, we probably don’t need these tongue-in-cheek reminders to know that making good use of time is *not* just about – and maybe not much about – efficiency narrowly understood. For we know that “making good time” makes no sense at all if you don’t know where you’re going. And we know that the beauty of a symphony has very little to do with how many notes are played or how quickly and “efficiently” they are played.

In the same spirit, in our own daily lives we probably realize that checking items off on a to-do list may or may not suggest a good use of time. It depends on what’s on the list. It depends on what larger purpose the list serves. It’s not just about so-called time management, because all the time management tips in the world won’t amount to the proverbial hill of beans if we aren’t clear about what we’re using our time for in a larger or deeper sense. An old saying gets at the point pretty succinctly: No one has ever heard of someone on his deathbed wishing that he had spent more time at the office. (However efficiently and productively that time might have spent, we could add.)

What then? How do we want to spend or use our time?

Or maybe there is a better way of asking the question: How do we want to live in time? Is there a way of living in time so that at the end of the day or a decade we have a better idea of where the time has gone, or at least a more satisfying feeling about time's sometimes all too quick passage?

Well, it seems to me that the answers to such questions are as close as our beating hearts and as close as one another.

One example may suffice. When children light candles here in memory of their dad – as three young children did last Sunday – and the rest of us are brought into utterly complete presence, open-hearted presence, entirely *here*... well, we know we are living in time as we ought to, we know we have risen to some essential quality of heart, attention, and love at least for those shared moments.

And know this too. Though there was of course a unique power to *that* moment with *those* children last Sunday, we had prepared for that moment – whether we had realized it or not – on all the preceding Sundays... for years, decades, maybe for the life of this congregation. We had, as one of you suggested to me this past week, been growing our community heart all this time, whether we realized it or not.

For each week when we light our candles of joy and sorrow and concern we are using and growing our community heart. We do this for weeks, for years, and something among us deepens over time. We light the candles and then later on we talk with someone after the service whose nephew is in Iraq or whose great-grandchild was just born or whose father is in the hospital or who has just become engaged or who has experienced some terrible loss or who has simply expressed gratitude for the beauty of the falling leaves. And something among us deepens over time.

Our community heart grows with each candle, with each open-hearted, present-centered, compassionate conversation over all these weeks and years together. So, when the terrible thing happens to one of us, the rest of us can be more fully present, open-hearted. And isn't *this* the way we want to be in time, this open-hearted, present-centered way of living... isn't this where we want our time to go?

You see, just as a symphony orchestra cannot be made more efficient, nor can it be transcendent in its musical performance the first time the players gather, neither can a community heart (any more than our individual hearts) be somehow implanted efficiently or instantly. Week by week it grows, year by year.

It's a pretty good use of time.

And though we are only together in this Meeting House for about forty hours each year (just one work week you might say)... it is not about the length of time we are together, but (I apologize for the cliché) the quality of the time. I return to one of my touchstone Emerson quotes, printed on your order of worship today:

There is a difference between one and another hour of life, in their authority and subsequent effect. Our faith comes in moments, our vice is habitual. Yet there is a depth in those brief moments which constrains us to ascribe more reality to them than to all other experiences.

We know what Emerson meant. An hour or just a moment of silently holding a grieving friend with our loving attention... a moment of autumnal splendor... or of symphonic beauty... these moments or hours have not only more depth, but more authority. Such moments or hours can open our hearts yet further to life and to one another – and they can transcend (fortunately) what Emerson calls “our vice,” our inattention, our closed-heartedness.

And yes, here, in this hour each week – and at other times when we gather in smaller groups, sometimes just two of us talking, being present for each other – here we create such sustaining moments. We grow our hearts and our shared heart. We can learn to live more fully in time the rest of the week, can discover how we might better give meaningful shape to our to-do lists, how we might better account for our days and years.

On the Christian calendar we enter the season of Advent today. Traditionally understood, Advent is a season of waiting, of expectation – culminating of course in the birth of Jesus, the Christ in Christian terms.

The *opportunity* of the season has to do with the value of cultivating an expectant attitude to life, open to the beauty of simple waiting, simple presence.

The *danger* of the season, though, is that we may think we know what we are expecting (comes every year after all!) – in orthodox Christian terms, we may believe we are expecting a savior coming from somewhere else to save us; and orthodox or not we might all have a little bit of that hope that someone else will fix things for us, repair the world, heal our broken-hearts. When, as someone once said (might have been Annie Dillard), the one or ones we have been waiting for may in fact be... us.

But not the “rushing around” us. Not the “too busy to notice” us. Not the “efficiency, clock-time, digitally mesmerized” us. Not the us more concerned with filling our time than with filling our souls.

Rather, beneath the rushing, beneath the busyness and efficiency or lack thereof (all sometimes just the way things are, not bad, just the way things often are on the surface of our lives)... beneath all this might arrive and might have been all along the loving us, the wise us, the heart-filled, compassionate us, the us who can “bind up the broken-hearted” in the spirit of that Advent reading from Isaiah, the us who can be present for a moment or an hour, present to the miracle of the creation, present with one another, present to a moment that is an eternity if not in its length then surely in its depth.

Of course, human as we are, we will sometimes feel that we have squandered time, wasted time, not made good use of all of our time, not paid good enough attention as time flowed all too fast. We will now and then find ourselves asking “Where did the time go?” – whether about a day or a year or a lifetime. We will sometimes confront the hard reality that we will not complete every task on our day’s or our life’s to-do list. What then?

Well, we can put the lists aside and recall instead the moments and hours which transcended lists, transcended clock time, because they had “more depth and authority,” because we were more present, because we were more open-hearted – like Freya Stark’s grandmother in the first reading.

For we do know about eternity in a moment. We do know about growing our hearts over the course of a lifetime, growing into our true Self as ancient wisdom would put it. We just have to remember – in this season of holy, expectant opportunity and always. So that this season and every season we just might a little more often know where the time has gone and know that it has been good.

So may it be.