

Eternity in a Moment
Rev. Kenneth Read-Brown
First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
April 4, 2010
Easter Sunday

Meditation and Prayer

This moment is given us... this day is given us...

This season is given us:

Easter... spring... renewal...

Let us pause in this moment, this day, this season...

Even as we know all too well that the seasons of our spirits may or may not follow the seasons of our calendars...

Let us pause and seek the joy hidden in the moment and in our hearts;

seek the peace hidden in the moment and in our hearts;

seek the love hidden in the moment and in our hearts.

Yet whatever this moment hold for us... may it hold our prayers for renewal, our prayers for peace, our prayers for justice, our prayers for those who are without a home or who are hungry.

And may the prayers of our hearts this Easter Sunday
become the work of our hands...

So that none are left behind, all know they are welcome...

That all may know, soon or late, the ever-renewing spirit of life.

Reading

Luke 23:55 - 24:5

The women who had come with him from Galilee followed, and they saw the tomb and how his body was laid. Then they returned, and prepared spices and ointments. On the sabbath they rested according to the commandment. But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen."

Sermon

They don't live long
but you'd never know it –
the cicada's cry.

I think what the 17th century Japanese haiku poet, Basho, was saying is: The cicada just goes for it!

I don't know about you, but even though in the broad view of things we don't live much longer than the cicada, I don't always live with the spirit of the cicada, the spirit of living in the eternity which is right here, now, *this* moment!

Too often instead and if only unconsciously (which is part of the problem!) waiting around for a better time, the next moment, or maybe next week or *sometime* when I have a little *more* time, to live in the eternity that someone (not just the cicada) someone said was right here and now, a kingdom of heaven spread before us had we only the eyes to see – a kingdom that is within us and among us... and we just aren't paying attention.

The disciples of that “someone” famously failed to pay attention over and over again. To the extent that when Jesus was murdered on the cross they thought it was all over, that with their master's death *they* might as well have died, the mission had failed.

Once again they had missed the point. Missed the point here that the message was more enduring than the man.

“Why do you look for the living among the dead?” the mysterious fellow by the tomb of Jesus asked. And then as you may recall, as some of the disciples walked along the road to Emmaus, they fell into conversation with another stranger, who reminded them of their teacher. As they talked and later shared a meal they felt their teacher, Jesus, was among them again. Yet what was their “recognizing” Jesus in the person of this stranger other than their remembering that, oh yes!, the Kingdom is here and now! Right! We'd forgotten. (Again.)

So at that moment the message began to live again in their hearts, in their lives: Wake up to the Creation in which you live and move and have your being. Love one another. Now. Care for the stranger, for the outcast, for the poor and downtrodden. Here. In this life. Now. Eternity in *this* moment... not eternity... maybe in the next moment... or even some next life.

How might this message live again in *our* hearts? After all, the disciples were with Jesus all the time and still mostly missed the point. How do we get it? How might we learn to live here and now more often in the fullness of being, hearts overflowing with love?

Maybe it begins by remembering more often the nature of the human condition.

In this spirit, writer Og Mandino once suggested treating everyone you meet as if this was their last day; so, “Extend to them all the care, kindness, and understanding you can muster, and do so with no thought of any reward.” That's living – and loving – in the moment.

I would add, not incidentally, that treating *everyone* in this way, in this spirit, includes you – treat yourself with that same care, kindness, and understanding you offer others.

The reality suggested by Og Mandino is, after all, that whenever we or our loved ones leave this earthly life, it will be “today.” So how about living *today* – like the cicada, singing our song of life – as if we really knew this?

The Muslim mystics known as the Sufis say that you need to “die before you die.” One way to understand this is that if we can utterly absorb the reality of the brevity of our lives, absorb this, accept it as in a way having already taken place, preordained in any case... then we’ll have that concern or fear or worry out of the way and we can go about the business of actually living here and now!

Mother Ann Lee, the founder of the Shakers, once wrote: “Do all your work as if you had a thousand years to live, *and* as you would if you knew you must die tomorrow.”

Yes. Taking the time and care with everything we do as if we had all the time in the world... *and* as if our lives were about to end.

It is in this same spirit it seems to me that the Shakers affirmed that *all* life and *all* our activity ought to be understood and experienced as worship. How about that? As worship: *holy*, *sacred*. In other words, with our full attention and presence.

And by doing our “work” I believe Mother Ann and the Shakers meant not only the tables and chairs and so on which we know they crafted with such care, meant not only whatever *our* work or activities might be. I think they meant the spirit in which we live every part of our lives: Present to the wonder of the Creation, every flower and bird and stream, *and* present to and with and for one another. Here is a lovely simple old Shaker poem to this effect:

May I softly walk and wisely speak,
Lest I harm the strong or wound the weak;
For all those wounds I yet must feel,
And bathe in love until they heal.
Why should I carelessly offend,
Since many of life’s joys depend
On gentle words and peaceful ways;
Which spread such brightness o’er our days.

(New Lebanon, New York, 1869)

In the Gospels of Mark and Matthew, Jesus is reported to have said from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

So human, to feel the most profound desolation and despair at that moment.

In the Gospel of Luke, though, we are told that from the cross Jesus said of those who had crucified him, “Forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

So divine, we might say, to rise above his own suffering and forgive those who persecuted, indeed murdered him.

Well, our human condition is, it seems to me, manifest in those two sets of words from the cross.

We are on the one hand poor, weak creatures who will die and so are subject to suffering and despair.

Yet (very big “yet”) we have the extraordinary potential to rise to something higher and grander, to live as we know we can and ought and truly want to live, to make – as best we can, for we will in our humanness sometimes fall instead of rise – to make of all our life and work something sacred, something good and decent.

We have this potential.

And time – or the apparent lack of enough time – is actually not the issue. It is *not* a matter of whether we have enough *time* to learn to live in the present moment, to notice the coming of spring, to be good and decent, to offer “gentle words” and live in “peaceful ways.”

No, it is not a matter of time. It is a matter of choosing to turn our attention in the proper direction or with the right sort of focus within the time we have, within *this* moment, whatever it is we might be doing in this moment, whomever we might be with in this moment.

“Seek first the kingdom.” *First* the kingdom, this aliveness in the present moment. Holy. Sacred. *Then* everything else will follow.

And often we best seek the kingdom not by seeking something for ourselves, but by giving something to someone else. First and most importantly the gift of our full presence – with everyone we meet! From the playroom of our child to the bedside of a friend to the anonymous clerk. The gift of being present with full attention. Which is – of course – the gift of love.

In Abraham Verghese’s novel *Cutting for Stone*, a Mr. Harris, representing a Baptist congregation in Houston which has been generously helping to support a missionary hospital in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, arrives to learn firsthand about the work of the hospital. The Matron of the hospital shows him around.

Mr. Harris starts voicing concern about the theology of the Ethiopian Christians. Do they have the “right” beliefs? Speaking of the local priest they had met he says, “If he holds to the Monophysite doctrine that Christ had only a divine nature, not a human one, then...”

Matron cut him off:

“Stop! Mr. Harris, do stop,” Matron said, covering her ears. “Oh, how you vex me.” She came around the table, and Harris drew back as if he worried that she might box his ears. But Matron walked to the window.

“When you look around Addis and see children barefoot and shivering in the rain, when you see the lepers begging for their next morsel, does any of that Monophysitic nonsense matter the least bit?”

Matron leaned her head on the windowpane.

“God will judge us, Mr. Harris, by... what we did to relieve the suffering of our fellow human beings. I don’t think God cares what doctrine we embrace.”

Mr. Harris to his credit does get the message.

And it *is*, if anything is, an Easter message (among other things an Easter message which transcends conflicting doctrines about the meaning of Easter).

It is the message of a resurrection of the spirit, a reawakening of the soul to the beauty of a blooming daffodil and to the precious beauty of our fellow human beings. And just as the daffodil requires warmth and rain in order to thrive and reach toward the shining sun, so do we human beings require the presence and loving attention of one another in order to reach toward goodness and love. The gentle word, the healing touch, the check in the mail for Haitian relief.

For my message this morning is yes, about learning to feel joy and exaltation in the present moment. That’s part of it. (Remember the character Shug in Alice Walker’s novel asserting that she believed it upsets God if we pass a field dressed in the color purple and fail to notice.)

But... breathe it in... then give it away.

For the message is also about giving the gift of our presence for another human being in the moment, is about remembering more often to do what needs to be done for another in the moment, seeing the need and meeting the need in the moment. Casting our bread of love and service in the moment... and as the poet Richard Wilbur has written:

Betting crust and crumb
That birds will gather, and that
Once more spring will come.

To end as we began, then, with that brief poem from the old Japanese master Basho:

They don't live long
but you'd never know it –
the cicada's cry.

The cicada's life is so brief – but he doesn't sing as if it is...
Our lives are also brief. How do we sing? What is our song?
May our songs be a joyful presence amidst the miracle of creation. May our songs be love. May our songs be a blessing of the world with our gifts.

Alleluia!

So may it be.