

First Plant a Tree
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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
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Reading

Our reading consists of a few excerpts from an opinion article titled “Our Moral Footprint” which appeared in this past Thursday’s New York Times. It is by Vaclav Havel, former president of the Czech Republic, and, we might say, contemporary prophet:

We can’t endlessly fool ourselves that nothing is wrong and that we can go on cheerfully pursuing our wasteful lifestyles, ignoring the climate threats and postponing a solution. Maybe there will be no major catastrophe in the coming years or decades. Who knows? But that doesn’t relieve us of responsibility toward future generations.

Whenever I reflect on the problems of today’s world... I always end up confronting the moral question: what action is responsible or acceptable?

We must return again and again to the roots of human existence and consider our prospects in centuries to come.

Either we will achieve an awareness of our place in the living and life-giving organism of our planet, or we will face the threat that our evolutionary journey may be set back thousands or even millions of years. That is why we must see this issue as a challenge to behave responsibly and not as a harbinger of the end of the world.

The end of the world has been anticipated many times and has never come, of course. And it won’t come this time either. We need not fear for our planet. It was here before us and most likely will be here after us. But that doesn’t mean that the human race is not at serious risk.

Sermon

Today I offer a little perspective on our situation:

Have you heard that there are some folks planning to build the world’s slowest computer? Their idea is to use this computer as part of a clock, a clock which will be powered by seasonal changes, a clock that will keep accurate time for the next... 10,000 years. This clock will tick once every year and chime once a century. Every thousand years the cuckoo will come out!

Who are these guys? And why are they doing this?

Well, some of you remember Stewart Brand, the creator of the Whole Earth Catalogue. And a few of you may know of Danny Hillis, one of the inventors of parallel processing. They are two of the creators of all this. And as part of their effort to build this clock, about ten years ago they founded a nonprofit organization called the Long Now Foundation, not only to raise funds for the clock, but to raise awareness in the human species of the need to develop truly long term thinking. (We humans who these days tend to think a quarter ahead, or maybe a year – and who think “long term” is five years!)

So – 10,000 years: “Long term” to say the least.

Now, at this moment, some of you may be thinking that we have more than a few problems that demand *immediate attention*. You may understandably be wondering why Stewart

Brand and Danny Hillis and others are spending time and money (the clock will cost millions of dollars) in order to get us to think 10,000 years into the future?

Well, one pretty good reason comes through the mouth of the eight-year-old son of Pulitzer Prize winning author Michael Chabon. In an article about the Long Now Foundation and the 10,000 year clock, Chabon reports that when he asked his son about the future, his son replied that he didn't think there would be one... And when Chabon showed his son the plans for the 10,000 year clock on the Long Now web site, his son asked, "Will there be people then?"

How poignant is that!

But if we do think that we have more immediate concerns than building a 10,000 year clock, we might well ask ourselves: Why bother doing anything now, immediately, to stop the war or reduce global warming... or why bother doing anything at all... if we don't believe in at least the possibility of the future – and the really long term future at that?

I was at Nantasket Beach this past Monday – you may recall that it was one of these gorgeous (yet worrisome) summer-like fall days we've been having. The beach was not crowded, and from the bench along the boardwalk I could see fifty yards away a young woman kicking a ball with her small daughter. It was clear, too, that pretty soon her daughter would have a little sister or brother. I did the simple math. These two children could well live into the next century, and their great-grandchildren could live into the twenty-third century.

Which means that we are already *touching* the distant future, if only we had eyes to see.

As Paul Hawken writes in his book *Blessed Unrest*, reflecting on the 10,000 year clock and the Long Now, simply by having and loving children parents "are betting, whether they know it or not, on the Clock of the Long Now." Betting on all the generations until 12,006. Indeed, Hawken wonders how you can have children if you *aren't* willing to bet that "somebody will be there to cry when the Clock finally runs down." And if you do have children, he wonders, isn't it our responsibility to do our best to be sure that somebody *is* there.

And notice the name. Not the "Long Future Foundation" or the "Clock of the Long Future"... But the Long *Now*.

The point is that there is really no such thing as the "future." There is just a continuum of "now" – and our so natural human hope, is that the "now," the precious, irreplaceable "now" will last for a long, long time.

(There is a blog on the Long Now web site. And one of the entries on the blog makes a suggestion for a much cheaper alternative to the Long Now clock. This would be a wrist watch that will keep accurate time indefinitely. When you look at the dial it simply reads: "Now.")

Altogether this brings to mind the wonderful saying from Mother Ann Lee, the founder of the Shakers. It is posted on the wall of one of the buildings in the Shaker village at Canterbury. Perhaps some of you have seen it there:

Do all your work as though you had a thousand years to live and as if you were to die tomorrow.

Meaning: Get to it! But take the time to do it well! And if that is the spirit in which the Shakers indeed did their work... well, we know the results. Chairs and tables, for example, that are both beautiful in their simplicity and utterly functional. Because the Shakers strived to make their entire environment as peaceful as possible, using the appropriate technology of their era to enhance the harmony of their lives. And, not incidentally, they made things to last.

Of course since the Shakers believed in celibacy for all who joined their community, one might well wonder what this says about their view of the future and the possibility of a “long now” for humans on the earth – whether one thousand or ten thousand years.

Well, an anecdote has it that some recent converts, believing that the end of the world was near, were “squandering their property in very un-Shaker-like manner.” But Mother Ann “reproved them sharply,” telling them “to go home and improve their farms, plant orchards and the like – in other words, to plan for the next thousand years.” (From *Shaker Communities, Shaker Lives*, by Priscilla J. Brewer)

In the same spirit, Mohammed is said to have told his followers that “when doomsday comes, if someone has a palm shoot in their hands, they should plant it.”

Here is another example of “long now” thinking: Some of you may know the story of the oak beams in the ceiling of College Hall at New College, Oxford. The story goes that sometime during the 19th century the trustees were at a loss as to how they would be able to address the dire need to repair and maybe replace the rotting beams. The college forester was consulted. He informed them that in 1386, when the hall had been built, oak trees had at the same time been planted in anticipation of this very need.

The trees were ready.

Yes, they had known to first plant a tree. *Now* – because the need is now and the need will be for hundreds of years.

Which leads me to one more example of “long now” thinking and acting, also having to do with trees. I hope you all know of the work of Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Wangari Maathai. She is one of my heroes – perhaps yours too – this Kenyan environmental justice and human rights activist. Among other accomplishments, her Green Belt Movement has been responsible for planting over 40 million trees over the past number of years. Forty million!

Not surprisingly, Wangari Maathai has thought a lot about trees. She describes planting a tree as “a combination of both ecological and spiritual” practice. She feels as though she is, in her words, “trying to conserve that which was created and has been destroyed... almost participating in the act of the creation.” As for the trees themselves, she speaks of the “wisdom” implanted “in their genome.” And she imagines that the trees might be saying, “Let me live, because when I live, you live.”

Yes, first plant a tree. For the Long Now.

So... weaving this all together, perhaps we understand more fully how the creators of the Clock of the Long Now are through their efforts encouraging us to have the kind of faith in the Long Now of Wangari Maathai, of the old Oxford foresters, of Mother Ann... indeed of any mother... encouraging us to at least begin to re-imagine a Long Now. (Which, interestingly, we may find leads to living with less anxiety in the “present now.” At least this has been my experience even just this week, as I’ve been musing over this idea of the Long Now.)

And you know, further reflecting on this Long Now idea and the 10,000 year clock, I realize that in recent years – maybe for most of my life? – like that eight-year-old boy I haven’t really had a great deal of faith in the possibility of a Long Now. Having been raised in the shadow of the Cold War and a near certainty that so many of us felt that nuclear apocalypse would overtake our childhoods, that we wouldn’t even grow to adulthood; and in more recent years coming to see and feel the depth of the threats posed by global climate change, loss of species diversity, and still the threat of nuclear war... I realize that my faith – at least my conscious faith – in even the possibility of a Long Now has been dim, perhaps has always been dim.

Yet I realize too that implanted more deeply than this lack of faith in the future must be something else. For we have had children. And we look forward to the possibility of next generations. Something in us knows – well, not that the Long Now is assured – but that surely it is possible; and that most definitely it is what we want and expect at our biological and indeed our spiritual core.

And, too, why else – whether or not one has children – why else would we go to the trouble of replacing incandescent bulbs with compact fluorescent? Why else buy a high mileage hybrid? Why else turn off the lights and appliances when not needed? Why else try to generate political support for wind and solar technologies?

Why else except that, paraphrasing the Shakers' Mother Ann, we might die tomorrow, and though we won't live a thousand years we can at least live as if our human species and life on earth will.

Why else except that it is the morally right way to live, as Vaclav Havel so eloquently reminded us – because it is about equity and justice for all people on the planet, and because it is about treating the interdependent web of all life on the planet as the sacred and irreplaceable reality that it is? How else *would* we want to live?

Do you remember that Ben Franklin, speaking near the end of the Constitutional Convention, is said to have commented on the image of the sun carved into the seat-back of a chair he had been looking at during the proceedings? He said that he had been wondering whether that sun was rising or setting; yet as they completed their work he came to believe that it was indeed rising on the new republic. He also said, if I'm remembering this correctly, that it would be up to us whether we would keep the new republic we had created. It was, after all, a fragile enterprise.

And so it is with us today of course. Is the sun rising or setting on the human enterprise, on life itself? Will we have a long now?

Well, just a few days ago my morning run took me past Derby Academy, and as I neared the foot of Burditt Avenue, where the view opens to Hingham Harbor, I anticipated seeing the sun rising. And I did. But first into view across the harbor were the graceful turbines of the windmill, Hull Wind II.

Seeing the sun side by side with the wind turbine I thought, echoing Franklin, that maybe the sun was indeed still rising on our Long Now, a Long Now that will be made possible by the hands and hearts of so many who are working for the common good.

Yes, maybe the sun *is* still rising on the Long Now of human history and of life.

But whether rising or setting (which is indeed in good measure up to us)... may the Long Now perspective help us to live more meaningfully, usefully, and peacefully in the present now.

First, plant a tree (or send a contribution to Wangari Maathai's Green Belt Movement, and they will plant a tree for you...).

So may it be.