

“The Old Man’s Calendar”

How to Live a Good Life

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Reading

Today’s reading comes from the opening lines of a sermon preached by the third minister of our First Parish, Ebenezer Gay, titled “The Old Man’s Calendar.” The occasion was his 85th birthday, August 26, 1781. His text was from the book of Joshua: “And now, lo I am this day four score and five years old.”

The numbering of our days so as to apply our hearts to wisdom, is not computing the definite sum total of them to know how many they shall be; but the just reckoning them to be few and uncertain, and in consideration thereof, to live them religiously. Yet, to keep an account of those which are past, may be a help to the better improvement of those which may be to come; especially in our old age, when the latter must appear very few indeed, compared with the former, and of the last importance to be spent well and wisely by us. The observation of our birthday is to little good purpose, if we do not then with religious seriousness consider, how many years old we are. There is not in this assembly more than one person who can adopt the words of the text, and say, *I am this day fourscore and five years old*. Yet all the aged here may, with him, receive instruction therefrom, to remember, as it becometh and concerneth us, how old we are. Forgetfulness is a common infirmity of old age: the decay of memory is the first of their mental faculties which men feel, and are willing to own and do complain of. In some it is to that degree, that they are not able to tell how old they are. But all that can count the number of the past years of their lives, do not apply this knowledge to the good uses it might serve them. That such of us who are old may so remember this, as that our minds may be deeply impressed, our affections and actions duly influenced, by the consideration thereof, is the design of the present discourse.

Sermon

Ebenezer Gay, our third minister, preached “The Old Man’s Calendar” in August of 1781 (which, interestingly was at the time of the 100th anniversary of the building of our Meeting House).

As I mentioned earlier, he preached the sermon on the occasion of his 85th birthday in the 64th year of his ministry. He had been a leader in the midst of the theological controversies of his time and place. He led this congregation as well as his contemporary and younger ministerial colleagues away from deterministic and pessimistic Calvinist doctrines, and instead in the direction of acknowledging a more “benevolent deity” and the potential for goodness in the heart of every person, as well as affirming that we could reason our way, with the assistance of scripture, to religious understandings and toward living a good and decent life, a life worthy of God’s grace, as they understood it.

But most of Gay’s life and ministry was not spent polemically. He was above all a pastor, and this sermon, though it certainly reflects indirectly his theology of reason and free will, his belief in a benevolent deity and in the potential for goodness within each person, more

directly is a sermon of practical wisdom for his parishioners, wisdom about living and dying preached from his perspective of eighty-five years.

Now, Gay, though liberal by the measure of his time, still of course accepted in broad outline the Christian plan of salvation, of this life as preparation for the next – one hopes in heaven. This worldview or belief system may or may not be ours. Yet, if we draw back the veil of Gay's Christian language and assumptions, I believe we can discern his actually pretty straightforward presentation of universal wisdom, wisdom which reflects a profound understanding of the reality of our human situation – whether in 1781 or 2019.

Well, it was the practice of the preachers of Gay's time and place to divide their (long) discourses into conveniently numbered sections. This no doubt helped both preacher and listeners keep their place over the course of an hour... or two. In this case of this sermon, which runs to almost thirty printed pages, there were seven points – seven lessons, if you will, that Gay drew from his experience of being 85, an age not reached by very many in 18th century New England.

Each one of Gay's sections began with words something like, "Remembering how old we are..."

Remembering. Throughout his sermon, Gay was calling his listeners (and today is calling us) to an awareness of how they (we) are situated in time. Well aware that most of those who would hear or read his words were younger than he, Gay was advising us to notice where we are in our life's journey, whatever our age might be.

And so, he began – first lesson:

"Remembering how old we are, the goodness of God in prolonging our days should be greatly admired and thankfully acknowledged by us." It was, as I've said, far more rare in Gay's time and place than it is in ours to live to great age. As Gay later noted, "To God our escapes from death belong, and should be thankfully ascribed, when the arrows of it are constantly flying so thick about us." And Gay had indeed seen many of his family members and dear friends meet early ends from one cause or another – he knew whereof he spoke.

Even so, why be thankful just for lasting longer than others? Well, for Gay the goodness of living to an advanced age was quite simply expressed. The longer we live, the longer we have to prepare for the next life, the life of "perfect felicity." (If we believed that there were no life to come after death, Gay said, then perhaps it would be better to die before the sufferings that old age often brings come upon us.)

What do *we* think? After all, we probably have varied opinions about a "next life" and we may also have varied opinions about the wisdom of prolonging through medical heroics this life when it becomes increasingly filled with suffering. So we can have interesting and important conversations about all this. But when we do, we might miss what seems to me to be the most important thing about Gay's first assertion:

He has begun with gratitude – which may indeed be at the heart of his sermon and at the heart of how to live a good life. I've known people, as I expect you have, who suffered terrible things in their lives and yet were deeply grateful for what they had – even content, even happy. Gratitude in such a person seems to keep such things as bitterness and envy at bay. More than this, gratitude can welcome in the richness of life's gifts. So, it may indeed be that a good life begins and ends with gratitude, with the deep knowing that we did not make ourselves, that we are part of something larger however we understand it – and that it is a wondrous and great gift to be part of it all.

We could do worse than to meditate upon and practice gratitude, whatever our age.

Gay's second lesson: **"To remember as we ought how old we are, bringeth death... in a near and affecting view to us."**

Of course the younger we are the more years we may think we have ahead of us. But the reality of life's brevity is no less true at twenty than at eighty; it's just easier (and probably more natural) to ignore or deny this reality. Gay put it this way, with his typical gentle wit and irony: "There is no man so old, but thinks he may live a year longer."

But all the world's religious traditions and philosophies affirm that to live a good and full life we need to be aware that life does not go on forever. And if we shut out this central reality, we will shut out much of the richness of life and many of the opportunities in life.

So, if the first lesson calls us to be grateful for all the days that have been ours, the second lesson calls us to be aware of the days we have remaining, and to realize they might be fewer than we would choose to think. So, as the proverbial last autumn leaves fall, we can meditate on the truth that, yes, all things do come to an end... and knowing, really knowing this, we may learn a deeper savoring and a better use of the time that is ours. Which leads to the next lesson.

The third lesson:

"Remembering how old we are, and therefore have not long to live, we should review our actions, and repent of our sins."

Well, if you don't much like the idea of meditating on the brevity of life as the leaves fall, you may like even less the invitation to "repent"!

"Repent" is not a word in quite such common use any longer, and perhaps even less so among Unitarian Universalists than for those of more conservative inclination. But "repent" is really not such a terrible word. Most simply it means to feel badly about something we have done and to resolve to do better. More deeply, in the original language, it means a change of mind and heart to a different way of being in the world. In any case, Gay is suggesting that each of us – again, no matter our age – would do well to look at our lives and acknowledge where we have gone wrong and in what spirit we've been living.

And, in so doing, we may discover to begin with what a relief it is, after all, to admit we are not perfect, maybe not even perfectible. Yet we can know at the same time that we *can* improve, we can become more kind, more compassionate, more generous. For Gay, such repentance and improvement was about earning our way into heaven (so a good man, he wrote, dies repenting!); for us, the desire to be a better human being might just feel as though it is of intrinsic worth – after all, as you have heard me say more than once, how else would we want to strive to live and to be?

Gay's fourth lesson:

"Remembering how old we are, our hearts should be loosened from this world; our affections to, our cares about, and pursuits after, the things of it, be moderated."

Why should we want to do that? What's wrong with the things of this world?

Nothing actually. Indeed, Gay acknowledged that the "love of the world" is "deeply rooted in the hearts of men." What he was talking about is what he called an "inordinate love of the world... such as excludeth the love of the Father and obstructeth our following the Lord."

How do we translate *that* for contemporary Unitarian Universalist ears? Well, to begin with it may not be exactly loving the world *too much* that Gay was talking about, but rather loving it in the wrong way. The Buddhists call it grasping, an expression of the kind of desire that is never satisfied. This, then, returns us to gratitude, which in a way suggests the opposite of

grasping. For gratitude for what *is* suggests a relaxed way of being in the world, enables us to let go of always wanting more and maybe then to let go into what Gay calls “following the Lord” – living a good and decent life (about which more in lesson six).

Another way of looking at this “loosening our hearts from the things of this world...”:

As we get older that our sense of self naturally expands. A baby is a completely selfish creature – as a baby needs to be. Yet as we grow up and then into and through adulthood, our circle of concern naturally expands, to family, to friends, and as we mature to community and to all humanity and all life; we can, in other words, grow into becoming less attached to our individual well-being and more concerned with others and with the whole.

Now, of course no matter how old we are, sometimes we *need* to be intensely concerned with our self, our health, our personal well-being. But all the spiritual traditions of the world preach the wisdom of also finding a sense of place in a much larger scheme of things, the wisdom and in fact the comfort that comes with knowing we have a place in an infinitely large cosmic web of being – whether we call this God, or with the Hindus call it Brahman or call it the Tao or Great Spirit, or the scientist’s interdependent web of life, the cosmos by any name – and so, loosening our hearts from an inordinate grasping which tends to narrow and constrain our experience and our lives.

Gay’s fifth lesson:

“Remembering how old we are, let patience under the infirmities and afflictions of these our evil days have its perfect work in us.”

Here’s a tough one (as if the others were easy. And certainly for many of us (and probably for all of us at one time or another) way easier said than done. I, for one, know how impatient I am with no more than the common cold (not to mention a broken elbow and months of physical therapy!)

And why not? Why not be not only impatient, but justly angry at ill turns in our fortunes?

Well, maybe anger is sometimes appropriate, and is certainly natural at times. But when anger goes on and on it can do us in. Eventually, the health of our soul demands that we recognize that some things can’t, after all, be changed; our souls need to learn the “serenity prayer,” that prayer for the strength to change what can be changed, the patience to let be what cannot be changed, and the wisdom to know the difference.

To put it slightly differently: We will only learn something from our circumstances if we have the patience to stop and observe what our circumstances are, to pay attention – whether that be the to good and beautiful things in life, or to the challenges and even tragedies of life, or, in the spirit of Gay’s sermon, to the infirmities and difficulties of age.

Patience. Not always easy, to be sure. But it was his counsel to us, and wise counsel too.

Gay’s sixth lesson:

“Remembering how old we are, let us wholly, and more closely, follow the Lord to the end of our lives...”

There’s that “follow the Lord” again. And then Gay said “Let our days to the very last of them be filled up with religious virtue.” How might we translate this? Well, what Gay was talking about here is, to begin with, made possible by decent “repenting.” We name how we have fallen short, or lived in too narrow a spirit, and we go on from there to, as I would put it, strive to live according to our best nature, to live heeding the impulse for good that I believe rests within each heart (as Gay, too, affirmed), to live in harmony with others, in harmony with the earth.

Or we can put it this way, following the progression of Gay's lessons: We repent, we strive to let go of our grasping, to drop our petty concerns, to let go into the world as it is, let go onto this beautiful earth sailing around the sun, let go into the spinning galaxy. *This* is where we are; and isn't it this cosmic creation – not the consumer culture – to which we would choose to attune our lives? Isn't it our sisters and brothers and all of life – not the "I'll get mine" ethic – to which we would choose to attune our lives?

That, in any case, is how I would translate "follow the Lord" and let our days be filled with "religious virtue."

Finally, Gay's seventh lesson:

"Remembering how old we are, we should be willing, when our time cometh, to die."

The philosophers say it, the spiritual masters say it. Of course, of course, of course part of us, maybe a big part of us, rebels against it – and this rebellion is part of an appropriate affirmation of life.

But at a certain point the human spirit is nourished no longer by resistance, but by acceptance.

I've seen this in others over and again, as perhaps many of you have. I don't entirely understand it, but I've seen it.

And since our lives are, after all, full of smaller deaths and losses, we can practice on those (like it or not), and as we do we may discover that to the extent we accept these smaller losses we have made room for new life, and may in the end be more prepared to accept the final loss.

So, how to live a good life according to "the old man's calendar"? Ebenezer Gay, one of our spiritual forebears, speaking to us from over two and a quarter centuries ago, with words that live still, preached gratitude, preached realism about the brevity of life, preached honesty about the ways in which we've lived our lives, preached letting go into a larger sense of self, preached striving to live according to our deepest and best knowing, in harmony with forces larger than our selves (God in his language, perhaps in yours), preached, in the end, profound acceptance.

This new year, then, and always, we are invited to gently practice the art of living a good life according to "the old man's calendar."

So may it be.

Benediction

May we go forth with gratitude and acceptance, patience and love in our hearts, resolving, whatever our time of life, and regardless of what has gone before:

to be among those who bring life and light,
love and compassion,
to a world in need of all this and more.

So may it be. Blessed be. Amen.