

Looking Ahead
Rev. Ken Read-Brown
First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
January 24, 2021

*“The most important question we must ask ourselves is:
‘Are we being good ancestors?’”*
--Jonas Salk

Readings

From the "Great Learning" – a text attributed to Confucius:

Things have their root and their branches. Affairs have their end and their beginning. To know what is first and what is last will lead near to what is taught in the Great Learning.

It cannot be, when the root is neglected, that what should spring from it will be well ordered. It never has been the case that what was of great importance has been slightly cared for, and, at the same time, that what was of slight importance has been greatly cared for.

from *The Good Ancestor: A Radical Prescription for Long-Term Thinking*,
by Roman Krznaric:

If you asked a typical career politician to make a major policy decision based on looking 200 years into the future, they would probably laugh you out of their office. But for many indigenous peoples, this is a deeply respected cultural tradition. According to Oren Lyons, a Native American chief of the Turtle Clan of the Onondaga Nation, part of the Iroquois Confederacy:

We are looking ahead, as is one of the first mandates given us as chiefs, to make sure every decision that we make relates to the welfare and well-being of the seventh generation to come; and that is the basis by which we make decisions in council. We consider: will this be to the benefit of the seventh generation?

This seventh generation thinking, says John Borrows, a Canadian law professor and member of the Chippewas of Nawash First Nation band in Ontario, “is a significant principle of Indigenous Law” that ensures a healthy environment for their descendants, especially by restricting the exploitation of natural resources: “Living within our limits demonstrates affection for our children. It also shows our respect and love for the earth.”

Sermon

“Now” – it’s clear what that word means, isn’t it?
But maybe not as clear as it might seem.

For example, if I were to ask you “what are you doing *now*?” I can imagine several sorts of responses, all of which would be appropriate and true.

You might say, “I’m watching this morning’s worship service of course!”

Well, yes, but you might also tell me what books you have been currently reading, even though at the moment you are not reading anything; or you might tell me where you’re working these days, or what projects you have going. In other words, you might name “now” more expansively so to speak.

And if I asked you what you think about what’s going on “now” in the country or in the world or on the earth, your answer might relate to today’s headlines; but just as accurately might relate to a time-span of months or several years or even decades.

All this said, my first intent this morning is to invite us to expand our experience of *now*, to expand it beyond even years and decades to what many are calling the “long now.”

Perhaps some of you are aware that twenty-five years ago “The Long Now Foundation” (www.longnow.org) was created by visionaries including the likes of Stewart Brand (the *Whole Earth Catalogue* guy) and others. Its purpose is to encourage long-term thinking... *really* long-term thinking.

To give you an idea of just how long-term: The Foundation is currently overseeing the construction of a huge 10,000 year clock inside a mountain in western Texas. Designer of the clock, Danny Hills, wrote:

I want to build a clock that ticks once a year. The century hand advances once every 100 years, and the cuckoo comes out on the millennium... for the next 10,000 years.

Crazy, right? After all, we do have somewhat more immediate problems to tend to at the beginning of a new administration in Washington, crises that indeed must be tended to *now* – by which we mean... now this month, this year, these next two or four years.

Indeed, the pandemic, along with issues of systemic racism, white supremacy, economic inequities press upon us, not to mention the climate crisis which will only accelerate *now* – every day, every year, with inaction or not enough action *now*.

What, then, is the use of a 10,000 year clock or, with or without a clock, somehow thinking or imagining ahead 10,000 years? And can the concept “now” really include a 10,000 year span? What’s the point? And how could it possibly help us address these and other problems and crises staring us in the face?

Well, to begin with, think of it this way – as Roman Krznaric encourages us to do in his book: In the context of the five or so billion year history of the earth, not to mention the fifteen or so billion years since the “big bang”... ten thousand years is a snap of the fingers, blink of an eye.

So... if allowing our minds to reach in the direction of billions of years might enable us to think of 10,000 years as a “now,” then the seven generations worthy of our care and attention as named by many First Nations, as we heard in the reading, might much more easily begin to feel like a “now” we can and ought to tend to.

Here’s an exercise I took myself through a couple of days ago to help me *feel* seven generations.

First, up until just a few years ago, we had four generations of our family alive all at once – many people do after all

Next, I have a photo of a family gathering from the late 19th century - 1895. It is from my mother's side of the family and includes her father, Howard Yergin, when he was a child, as well as his father and mother, Vernon and Harriet, and his grandfather, Christian, along with great aunts, uncles, cousins, and so on.

Put all that together and we've got seven generations extending from some of those in that photo to our grandchildren. Some of those in the photo, by the look of them, were born in the early 19th century, and our grandchildren could certainly live into the beginning of the 22nd century. Three hundred years. Seven generations that I can now more easily imagine and think of as part of my personal and our family's collective "now".

Here's another exercise: This Old Ship Meeting House. Built in 1681, trees felled and beams raised by some of my ancestors, maybe some of yours. And here I am... here we are. If we can imagine that far back, how about that far forward? Now we're up to about a dozen generations either direction.

More... some of the oaks that became these beams when they were felled were six hundred years old, saplings almost a thousand years ago, when only the Massachusetts and Wampanoag and other First Nations people lived here. And we can still touch these posts and beams... maybe sense that span of time as we do.

All of this part of the long now in which we are living... now.

So too the scriptures I read almost daily, from the many traditions of the human family.

The reading this morning from the Confucian tradition? Well, Confucius lived about 2,500 years ago. So, when we hear those words, we are being spoken to from, what, a few dozen generations ago. Why not consider this part of our collective "now" too? And if that far in the past, why not imagine that far into the future? What will our descendants be reading from us... and maybe still from Confucius and Buddha and Jesus?

As for this particular reading itself?

Well, as you heard, we are invited by the reading to consider what is most important and what is less important, what is the root and what are the branches?

What are the great things that must be greatly cared for? Not the next quarterly report. Not the next election. At least not unless the financial well-being of the corporation and the politicians seeking our vote include in their visions and policies the well-being of the people and the earth *now* in the most expansive sense, including the seventh generation and more.

Elsewhere in his book *The Good Ancestor* Roman Krznaric writes of the need for intergenerational justice, for considering generations as yet unborn as if they are in the room with us, so to speak, as we make decisions relating to all the sorts of issues I've named this morning – from racial justice to climate justice. And Krznaric writes of the need to name what he calls transcendent goals for our individual and shared lives. And he asks us to engage in "cathedral thinking", engaging in projects the completion of which – like some of the great cathedrals – we quite likely won't see in our lifetimes.

Here I'm reminded of the words of Rabbi Tarfon, from about 2,000 years ago:

It is not your responsibility to finish the work of perfecting the world, but you are not free to desist from it either.

As for us, then, here at Old Ship, as we contemplate our future in mere months and years? As we plan, for example, for a new Parish House? (Not a new Meeting House – no worries! – a new Parish House.)

Well, it seems to me it is a fair assumption that since human beings have gathered in groups to tell stories, seek meaning, and make plans for as long as we have any record, this will also be the case well into the future of the long now, whatever else might be going on. And it will matter.

So we build not just for us, and not just for the next generation, but for at least the seventh. With this in mind, we will, for example, build a “green” building to do our part ecologically. We will build a building accessible to all since we welcome all. We will build a beautiful building, since humans have always and will always need beauty.

The invitation this morning, then, the invitation for our time, is suggested in the question Jonas Salk asked: “Are we being good ancestors?” His question gave Roman Krznaric the title for his book. May his question also give us our lives. For one can hardly think of a question better suited to helping us shape our lives, encouraging us to imagine how our descendants in the next generations of the long now will view us... whether or not it will look to them as if we had helped create a nation that would overcome the deep scar of racism and as if we had helped meet the climate crisis and create a sustainable way of life on the one planet we share.

Let’s hope they will be grateful. So let’s live in ways *now* as best we can, that will be worthy of their gratitude in the future of the *now* we share with them.

May it be so. Amen.