

Remembering the Future (*part one*)

Rev. Ken Read-Brown

First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)

Unitarian Universalist

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Reading – Ecclesiastes 1:14

The words of the Teacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem,
Vanity of vanities! All is vanity,
What do people gain from all the toil
 at which they toil under the sun?
A generation goes, and a generation comes,
 but the earth remains forever.
The sun rises and the sun goes down,
 and hurries to the place where it rises.
The wind blows to the south and goes around to the north;
 round and round goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind returns.
All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full;
to the place where the streams flow,
 there they continue to flow.
All things are wearisome;
 more than one can express;
the eye is not satisfied with seeing,
 or the ear filled with hearing.
What has been is what will be,
 and what has been done is what will be done;
 there is nothing new under the sun.
Is there a thing of which it is said,
 “See, this is new”?
It has already been,
 in the ages before us.
The people of long ago are not remembered
 nor will there be any remembrance of people yet to come
 by those who come after them.
I, the teacher, when king over Israel in Jerusalem, applied my mind to seek and to
search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven; it is an unhappy business that
God has given to human beings to be busy with. I was all the deeds that are done
under the sun; and see, all is vanity and a chasing after wind.

Reading – from *Hannah Coulter* by Wendell Berry

Wendell Berry's novel, *Hannah Coulter*, is written in the voice of the fictional Hannah Coulter, an old woman looking back on her life and the life of her rural Kentucky community. In this passage she is commenting on one of the families in particular in her community, the Branch family:

Compared to nearly everybody else, the Branches have led a sort of futureless life. They have planned and provided as much as they needed to, but they take little thought for the morrow. They aren't going any place, they aren't getting ready to become anything but what they are, and so their lives are not fretful and hankering. And they are all still here, still farming. They are here, and if the world lasts they are going to be here for quite a while. If I had "venture capital" to invest, I think I would invest it in the Branches.

Sermon

Our first reading this morning, the opening verses of "Ecclesiastes", is not particularly uplifting – all is vanity, nothing new under the sun, unending repetition. Reminds me of an old Doc Watson song:

The sun comes up, the sun goes down,
the hands on the clock go round and round,
you just get up and it's time to lay down!
life gets teejus don't it?

As for Ecclesiastes, as the book unfolds it doesn't at first get much better. Actually it gets worse. In chapter two, the Teacher laments that for all his toil under the sun, who knows whether those who take up his work after he's gone will be wise or foolish; so he "hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun."

Well, fortunately for us the readers millennia later, this is not the whole of the message of the book. Indeed, the author of Ecclesiastes, whomever it might have been, ends up in a place not unlike that of Wendell Berry's fictional Branch family and Hannah Coulter – in other words not unlike Wendell Berry himself, who elsewhere (in a brief essay in 2013 "On Being Asked for 'A Narrative for the Future'") has written that though we can't know the future, and will likely be surprised by it, we can prepare, or, using his word, we can make provision for it.

Berry here also carefully notes the difference between "provision" and "prediction". We cannot with much accuracy predict the future, he reminds us, but we can most certainly make provision for the future. Which of course is always something we do today, in the present – the only time we ever actually have.

Mundane example: Next week I intend to (but can't guarantee that I will) talk about "Remembering the Future" when it comes to the wider world in which we live. As for today, taking little thought for the morrow – or next week – I'm going to talk about what it might mean to "remember the future" in relation to our lives as individuals, in our families, and in local community.

First, what do I mean by "remembering the future"? How – unless we are time travelers like Marty and Doc in "Back to the Future" – how can we remember what hasn't yet happened? We can't; but the best we can do is not trivial: it is to "remember"

or to keep in mind that since there will be days and years to come (with or without us...), we can by how we live today make *provision* for what *may* come and we can even influence however often unpredictably how what will come will be – in relation to the relatively trivial as well as to the very important.

On the relatively trivial end of the scale, though not altogether unimportant, when it comes to eating, we know from trusted science how this or that food will quite likely affect our health; more directly we know from past experience how this or that food – or amount of food – will affect our comfort and well-being, for better or worse, and sometimes just in the next hour or two!

When it comes to running, and in particular to preparing for a race, I know from almost fifty years experience what preparation (a sort of provisioning, after all) is necessary to run a 5K or a five mile or a marathon. So I make *provision* for the upcoming race by preparing with my run today and the next day, with just the sort of training I know from past experience will likely (even though never certainly) result in a pretty good race.

All this said, here is what seems to me a critical insight, already implied in what I've been saying. And though I believe this applies for certain in our personal lives, it applies more broadly as well, even globally (though more on that next week... probably).

All that I do when it comes to provisioning for my personal health to begin with – diet, exercise, an annual physical, and so on – is only (significantly, but only) improving the odds on future good health and maybe longevity. There remain no guarantees as to what the future may bring in terms of health, but I know I can improve the odds in relation to the “whatever may come” over which I have no control.

Further, quite aware that life almost certainly will continue to bring a share of suffering and grief of one kind or another, along with daily challenges small and large, I make provision for that as well by tending to my spiritual life – certain sorts of reading, meditation, and so forth.

So, just as Hannah Coulter would if she could “invest” in the Branch family, we are investing in ourselves when we make provision in various ways materially and spiritually. Past performance no guarantee of future returns, as the ads for mutual funds put it, but we can improve our own odds just as Hannah Coulter saw that the Branch family had improved the odds of healthy land and healthy community for what we call the future... through their hard work, their provisioning, in the present, day to day, year to year. Hard work yes, but also good, even joyful, work.

Now... as I reminded the children earlier today when I shared some of the plethora of acorns an oak tree has been shedding in our yard this fall, nature surely knows about improving the odds for future health and survival.

Annie Dillard in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, writes of what is perhaps this primary way that nature improves the odds – namely, quite simply, through fecundity on an almost unimaginable scale. She writes of the “teeming evidence” of “birth and growth”, noting how in late June around Tinker Creek...

Creatures extrude or vent eggs... spores dissolve or explode; root hairs multiply, corn puffs on the stalk, grass yields seed... everywhere watery cells divide and swell, swell and divide.

Annie Dillard goes on and on in this vein, alternately amazed and sometimes appalled by the manifest fecundity in the natural world, fecundity which improves the odds but even

with millions of seeds or eggs or acorns does not and cannot assure the survival even of a species, and certainly not of any individual within a species.

With this in mind, then, I'm moved next to consider "remembering the future" not only in terms of our personal health and well-being, but also in terms of the health and well-being of those closest to us, children and grandchildren if we have them, nieces and nephews, dear ones however we are related, as well as our immediate community of neighbors, friends... and church.

How do we "improve the odds" for the future of these people – children above all – and communities we love?

Well, a certain sort of "fecundity" applies here too.

And mostly not through a plethora, an abundance which can become an over-abundance of admonitions and moral and ethical guidelines we drill into the heads of our children and others. Rather, don't we do most of our "improving the odds" for those closest to us through the many, the uncounted, ways in which we live each day, setting as good an example as we can of how to live in relation to one another and to the wider world, to the earth?

For, whether or not we are conscious of it, we are each throwing off acorns every day, all the time, with at least as much abandon as this year's oak trees. We can't know where each acorn of love and care and kindness on the one hand... or of inattention and thoughtlessness on the other... will fall – but we can be assured it will fall somewhere, will be noticed by someone, will help to heal or hurt, will teach something to those around us who will follow us, and teach that something for good or ill.

So, we would do well to pay attention in the present to how we are behaving and what we are doing. Because whatever we are doing, however we are behaving, how we are *being* in the present does affect and teach others and will therefore profoundly affect what we call the future. Think of someone in your own life, particularly when you were growing up, but any time, whose very presence and way of being influenced you for the good...

Well, you can be that – you probably are – for someone else.

Back to "Ecclesiastes" for a moment. It is, reading the whole of it, a somewhat maddening book, full of apparent contradictory pieces of advice. For example, the Teacher tells us on the one hand to eat and drink and enjoy the gifts of this world, but he says elsewhere that "sorrow is better than laughter" – since we learn more from sorrow and mourning than from song and mirth.

However maddening and contradictory, though, I tease out a few pretty important things from the whole of the book.

First, I appreciate that in reading the words of the ancient Teacher or Preacher, I feel I'm in the presence of someone who looked life square in the face, this mix of joy and sorrow, the uncertainty of our lives, the vanities of our lives... and tried to figure out how best to live, sometimes thinking one thing, sometimes another. In other words, I appreciate his honesty – it frees me to hold contradictory opinions too in the midst of this mystery we call life.

Second, this Teacher does indeed enjoin us to enjoy ourselves, eat and drink, take pleasure in the gifts of life, because... well, quoting Wendell Berry again (from the same essay I quoted earlier), it is not only "sound biblical advice" it is "good sense and good manners.... (for) To fail to enjoy the good things that are enjoyable is impoverishing and ungrateful."

Third and finally, the Teacher of Ecclesiastes advises us to do our work as best we can, even though there is no predicting how our work will turn out... or whether a wise person or a fool will pick up our work when we are done.

The Hindu *Bhagavad Gita* says precisely this too. Do your work, your duty, as it is meant to be done, but without attachment to the fruits of your work – whatever your work is, earning your daily bread or striving for social justice or peace. It's not that we don't or shouldn't have goals, not that we ought not plan; but anxiety about results does little or no good, simple as that.

Small example: When I was twelve years old or so I played in a piano recital given by my teacher, Ray Koos. The piece was one that just about all beginning piano students learn, Beethoven's "Für Elise". I was doing fine... until I wasn't... until I missed a note. My recollection is that it was all down hill from there, as anxiety about how it was going quickly took the place of attention to the present playing. I'm not sure how the rest of the piano playing went, but I do recall that I was in tears. Anxiety about how I was doing did me less than any good.

Finally this morning, then – a word about remembering the future when it comes to our lives in community here at Old Ship. The conversations we are having concerning the future of our parish house, including today's conversation at noon, are all about what we can do *now*, in the present, in order to improve the odds for this congregation continuing well beyond when most of us will still be around – and not merely continuing, but continuing as a healthy congregation both spiritually and financially, continuing as a congregation that nourishes the spiritual lives of its members and that blesses the wider world with gifts of service and work for justice and peace.

Whatever decisions we eventually make, there will be no guarantees. But we will be striving as best we can, with concern but no need for anxiety, to *provision* for the future, to improve the odds for the health of this congregation – yes for us, but given the brevity of our lives, more importantly for the next generation and the next.

So may it be, for our congregation as well as for each of us and our dear circles of love and care and concern. As we all try to remember, in the words of Albert Camus, that "Real generosity toward the future lies in giving all to the present."

Yes, so may it be.