

Remembering the Future (*part two*)
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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
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Reading – Ecclesiastes 3:1-13

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

² a time to be born, and a time to die;
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;
³ a time to kill, and a time to heal;
a time to break down, and a time to build up;
⁴ a time to weep, and a time to laugh;
a time to mourn, and a time to dance;
⁵ a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together;
a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;
⁶ a time to seek, and a time to lose;
a time to keep, and a time to throw away;
⁷ a time to tear, and a time to sew;
a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;
⁸ a time to love, and a time to hate;
a time for war, and a time for peace.

⁹ What gain have the workers from their toil? ¹⁰ I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with. ¹¹ He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. ¹² I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; ¹³ moreover, it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil.

Reading – from *Our Only World* by Wendell Berry

The second reading includes three brief related passages from an essay by Wendell Berry: "On Being Asked for a Narrative of the Future" which appears in his collection *Our Only World*

There is in fact much at hand and in reach that is good, useful, encouraging, and full of promise, although we seem less and less inclined to attend to or value what is at hand. We are always ready to set aside our present life, even our present happiness, to peruse the menu of future exterminations. If the future is threatened by the present, which it undoubtedly is, then the present is more threatened, and often is annihilated, by the future.

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...Maybe we could give up saving the world and start to live savingly in it. If using less energy would be a good idea for the future, that is because it is a good idea. The government could enforce such a saving by rationing fuels, citing the many good

reasons, as it did during World War II. If the government should do something so sensible, I would respect it much more than I do....

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...a large problem may be effectively addressed by the many small solutions that, after all, are necessary, no matter what the government might do. The government might even do the right thing at last by imitating the people.

Sermon

I grew up in Baldwin, New York, on Long Island. When I was about ten years old, my grandmother, who lived in a neighboring town, was visiting family in St. Louis when increasingly disturbing symptoms took her to the hospital. My father of course flew out right away.

It became clear that Gram had suffered a serious heart attack; and within a few days she died. But my father and his mother had time to talk before she passed. The one thing I recall Dad's relating about their conversations is that she – likely sensing she might be dying – wondered about what “the boys” would do when they grew up – the boys being me and my two older brothers. I still carry a picture in my mind's eye, imagining her in a hospital bed, Dad by her side, having this conversation. And I realize that I treasure this, this simply knowing that she was curious about our future. For I know now better than I realized then that her wondering was grounded in her love.

Just about twenty-five years later Dad lay dying from cancer – too young (as with my own passing years I increasingly realize...). He, too, wondered about his grandchildren's future, grandchildren who at the time ranged in age from about two to thirty two – and his wondering was likewise grounded in love. But some of our conversation also circled around the future of our country and of the world. The nuclear arms race was still full speed ahead in 1987, and Mom and Dad had in retirement been helping to lead the Charlottesville chapter of Physicians for Social Responsibility, an affiliate of International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War. So Dad naturally was curious as to what the future would hold in relation to the arms race in particular.

Well, if Grandma were still alive she'd be almost 130 years old, and she would indeed have seen how her three grandsons had led their professional lives and become fathers and grandfathers. But now she'd be curious about her great-grandchildren... and great-great-grandchildren.

And if Dad were still alive he'd be almost 100, and he would not only have seen his grandchildren become adults with their various careers and interests, but would also have seen that the Soviet Union had collapsed, leading to the dramatic cooling of the arms race between the two super powers... but that many other global crises, wars, threats to peace, terrorism, climate change above all, had arisen in the meantime... and that there were still far too many (one is, after all, too many) nuclear weapons at the ready.

It seems to be one of the most natural things in the world to be curious as to how things will “turn out” whether in our personal and family lives or in the course of history. The reality of course is that each of us, whenever we live and for however long we live, live only in the middle of the story, our personal story and the world story. So when it is

our time to “exit stage left”, some things will indeed have “turned out” – but there will be way more loose threads than neatly tied bows.

I suppose one mark of human maturity has to do with coming to terms with this reality.

As for me, I now wonder how our new grandson’s life will evolve, what he will do, what sort of person he will become. But, the best case is that I’ll see him only to his thirties, mid-century... whereas he and his generation – maybe including other grandchildren – may well live into the next century. Even so, I wonder... though I will not know... what their lives will be like after I’m long gone, what they will do with their lives. And just as my father was curious as to how the arms race would play out, whether it could be ended... well, I still worry about that, but, as we all do, also worry and wonder about many other issues in our nation and on the planet, above all global warming and climate change, which already is not just about climate, but has influenced and often worsened already huge challenges including hunger, political instability, and much else.

Well, last week as many of you recall, I spoke about “Remembering the Future” mostly in terms of our personal lives. I noted the ways in which we can improve the odds, as I put it, on our future physical health and spiritual well-being – through diet and exercise on the one hand, and such things as spiritual practices, reading, meditation, prayer, community on the other hand.

Today – what about “Remembering the Future” when it comes to our nation and to the world?

To begin with, as I said last week, by “remembering the future” I don’t and can’t mean literally remembering what will happen – a contradiction in terms unless you believe in time travel or are blessed with pre-cognition. Rather, I mean simply remembering or keeping in mind that there will be a future, that there will be days and years to come, even though we can’t know how many of those days and years we will live to see.

This said, humans did not evolve to think much less plan many generations ahead; even so, some humans have managed to be more forward thinking than others. Though there is no hard evidence that the Iroquois literally had a “seventh generation” philosophy in their deliberations, they did think in that direction. Here are words from an Iroquois text:

Look and listen for the welfare of the whole people and have always in view not only the present but also the coming generations, even those whose faces are yet beneath the surface of the ground -- the unborn of the future Nation.

Meanwhile our own Congress can barely manage to pass what are called stop-gap spending bills to keep the government functioning for another maybe seven weeks at a time... maybe seven days.... hardly a dent in seven generations.

What are we to do?

To begin with, Wendell Berry, who for a long time has been promoting what is called the fifty-year farm bill (good luck in congress with a fifty-year bill for anything!), reminds us as we heard in the reading that often things that are good, truly good, in and for the *present*, are good for what we call the future as well. He noted, as we heard, that things to do, for example, to avert the worst of climate change are actually things to do that are good anyway – right now.

Well then, how are we to decide what those things are? Well, it seems to me that we must first ask who are we to *be* in the present? This of course is a question in good measure about values, about the ethical and moral grounding that will support and guide whatever we *do*. And the good news is that we need not look far for this grounding. We just have to notice what we already have:

Which is above all ancient wisdom traditions that can ground and guide us, traditions that can indeed be applied to current circumstances, to any circumstances:

We have Hebrew prophets who warned of the disastrous consequences of adding field to field, and with the disastrous consequences of not caring for the poor.

We have the teaching and example of Jesus, exhorting us to love our enemies and to care for the most vulnerable and marginalized among us.

We have the Buddhist “Eightfold Path” grounding us in right thought and right contemplation and then inviting us to right speech, right action, and right livelihood.

I could go on, offering comparable ethical wisdom from Islam, Hinduism, Taoism, Confucianism, and indigenous traditions as well.

And we have our own Unitarian Universalist wisdom tradition and principles, naming quite simply the inherent worth and dignity of every person coupled with an affirmation of respect for the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part and with an exhortation to help create a world community of justice and peace.

So... to offer just one recent example (bringing us back to “what shall we do in the present” with an eye to the future regarding the huge issue of global climate change): Drawing on our UU principles, at this past June’s Unitarian Universalist General Assembly, a resolution of immediate witness was voted and passed encouraging all congregations to support the upcoming global Climate Change Conference being held in Paris beginning November 30.

But... How do we “support” an international conference? Well, to begin with and not unimportantly, simply by becoming aware of it, learning about it, paying attention to it when it takes place, and talking about it with others. In short, we have a critically important opportunity for one of those “conversations about things that matter” that really does help to make change. How? Quite simply because such conversations not only inform, they can influence and inspire, they can therefore spur us to action both personal and shared.

Another example: There are Unitarian Universalist congregations who have committed themselves to reducing their carbon footprint by 50%. Could we do that?

More to do? Talk with members of our Green Sanctuary/350 group – there is plenty to do, much of it as simple as contacting our state rep or senator and asking them to support a climate action bill that will enhance our lives now as well as into the future.

Change after all does so often begin with personal and local and present commitment and action.

And as Wendell Berry wrote, though we have no reason to count on it, eventually the government might even follow the good example of individual and local actions and changes.

A final reflection about my grandmother and my father.

I said at the outset that they wondered about the future of their grandchildren, and that my father was curious about the world’s future, particularly in regard to the nuclear arms race. But here’s the thing. They didn’t only wonder.

They each had spent their adult lives caring about, helping, and nurturing their children and grandchildren; and they each had set powerful examples to us – the next generations – through their own lives grounded in universal values of compassion, kindness, love, perseverance, honesty, integrity... And as I said, my father along with my mother not only bemoaned the insane folly of the nuclear arms race – they were among those who worked to end it.

Remembering the future? Wanting to help shape the future beyond the years that we will live to see? To help shape our communities, our nation in the direction of greater kindness and understanding, more justice and more peace, more balance and harmony within this interdependent web? To help create the sort of world we would like our grandchildren and great-grandchildren to be living in?

Simple: We must live *now* with the kindness we would like to see. We must live *now* supporting ideals we cherish of justice, peace, equality, freedom. We must live *now* *using* less and *loving* more.

All these things we can of course actually do... today... every day.

So may it be.