

LIVE ONE DAY AT A TIME...BUT LIVE IT!

I'm sure we all have a major summer tale to tell, don't we? One that stands out for me, as I engage my 41st September as a parish minister, concerns an intergenerational eco-adventure to Costa Rica, that we shared with our granddaughter, Corinne, to celebrate her 10th birthday.

There were countless highlights during this pilgrimage, but here's the primary learning I want to pass along this morning: it's about facing our fears head-on. Ever since, as a seven-year old, I was thrown into a swimming pool by some older, thoughtless kids, and nearly drowned, I've harbored substantial caution, if not fright, around water. Indeed, one of the reasons I failed to reach Eagle Scout status was because I couldn't pass the "life-saving" merit badge.

So I hold a healthy respect for deep water, especially raging rivers. So when Corinne eagerly chose to go on the river rafting escapade, each of us armed with helmets and life-jackets, sitting in our own make-shift, rubber inner-tube, I initially balked, then, with her "come on, grandpa," I agreed, but under one condition: a mutual promise. I would face my fear of turbulent waters, if she would vow to be willing to face her own personal frights along life's path. This was a solid and clear-cut covenant, since all kids and adults readily grasp the power of fear. So the deal was struck, between grandfather and granddaughter, confirmed with a heartfelt embrace.

I won't go into the scary details, but remember that in Costa Rica it rains 25 feet a year, plus the river was wilder than usual, and the hour long voyage, marked by 3 level difficulty, soon became a 4 ½ by late morning, due to torrential rains. During this

“interminable” jaunt, I capsized twice, swallowing more water and gulping for more air than I care to remember, and once I even lost my helmet...cascading among sizable boulders. Folks, it was not a safe trip, but I survived, so I recall.

As if to raise my anxiety-ante, the very next day we all went zip-lining through the tropical jungles, at 35 miles an hour and 650 feet above the forest. Corinne was among the youngest, I among the elders. Successfully enduring two of my worst fears—fear of water and fear of heights—I’m stand before you today, more resilient for these personal exploits, but, most of all, the loving bond between Corinne and me will never be the same; indeed, we now both claim a touchstone we’ll keep revisiting all our days.

So, how have you grown emotionally and spiritually over the Summer?

And as we journey this majestic and irrepeatable passage, the 50th anniversary year of this beloved Fellowship, culminating in a celebratory weekend, February 14-15, 2009, it seems most appropriate to focus upon the gift of time: how we squander or spend it. Let me start with a couple timely chuckles from the philosophy of New York Yankee great, Yogi Berra. When asked: “What time is it?” The former baseball player replied: “You mean, right now!” Or on another occasion, Yogi pined: “It’s déjà vu all over again,” and a final piece of counsel from the Hall of Famer: “Folks, when you get to a fork in the road, take it!”

The truth is that there isn’t any more important human task than becoming better friends with time, but in order to do so, we must explode certain myths that cause us unnecessary frustration and grief.

The first myth has to do with nostalgia. We live amidst a veritable nostalgia craze. People keep harkening back to the good old days when kids were polite, streets were

safe, America was boss, men were men and women were women, hamburger was 50 cents a pound, even considered healthy for your diet. This mentality is by no means limited to people over forty. An English professor assures me that one chief identifying characteristic of her new students is *nostalgia*.

Whether we're 17 or 77, whenever we look over our shoulder, it's usually to a happier, less complicated time. Now I understand such wishful thinking, since I've been known myself to go back in time; plus it's simply downright scary sometimes to live in today's world and even bleaker to envision the years ahead for our children's children. In some seductive sense, we're all tempted to scurry back to a safer, serener past. But, friends, beware!

Part of the appeal of the radical religious right is their enticement to yank us back to a time that existed before today's freer and more open society when you and I are called to make tough but personal choices. Remember, for folks with a rigid moral agenda, nostalgia isn't some parlor game. They have high hopes of a major social victory where old, simplistic virtues will be crowned anew. Where we will fall into step behind a traditionally masculine leader, a Charles Atlas kind of guy promising us again that we need only mail the letter and back will come the muscles that we can use to throw the bully off the beach and have some girl turn to us with eyes shining with sudden knowledge of just how special we are.

Don't get sucked in, my friends, for the truth is that any conceivable personal and political yesteryear is gone, forever. We can recall the past. We must learn from it. But we can't return to it, let alone live in it. Even our Summer 2008, grand as it might have

been, will soon be over. Furthermore, some broken relationships cannot be mended. And certain dreams are gone forever.

The mature religious person, you see, lives fully in the present moment, being utterly accountable in the *now*, the only moment we truly possess. Yes, remember, as Yogi Berra might say: “Nostalgia ain’t what it used to be!” So, live today fully, live only one day at a time...but live it!

A second popular myth is society’s push to save time. It’s true: “a stitch in time saves nine,” or as the mechanic on TV puts it: “you can pay me a little now or a lot later.” And I know, some of us are prone to waste time, even kill it sometimes. Nonetheless, saving time is only a 100% half-truth. There are holes in our obsession to save time.

Awhile back, when a preening French official descended from his Concorde into Washington, D.C., he bragged to Senator Tip O’Neill that he saved four, count ‘em, four hours traveling supersonically. At that point the Speaker turned and asked him, kindly, what he’d done with the four hours he’d saved. The official, as the story goes, was taken aback, smack dab into silence.

Saving time, it seems, has a lure that’s too rarely examined. From the Concorde to the microwave oven to a speed-reading class to the latest computerized toy, we value saving time more than the way we spend it and more than the values we may sacrifice to speed. For some people saving time becomes an end in itself. For example, I know there’s value in buying books through the internet, I do it myself; but what happened to the joy and worth of actually eyeballing, thumbing through, even smelling a prospective book upclose?

Frankly, I'm wary of the one-minute craze sweeping our land. There exist books on being a one-minute manager, a one-minute mother or father, a one-minute meditator. Or how about this one: "The 59-second employee: or how to stay one second ahead of your one-minute manager!"

Who are we kidding with all this one-minute appeal? Good parenting, good loving, good work, good learning, good community-building...most everything I call good in my life, takes a whole lot more time than a matter of minutes. My interest isn't in being a one-minute person, but in being a more-minutes one. Quickness rarely brings thickness to one's journey. The good life takes time—ample, caring, rigorous, flowing time. In fact, the good life takes all the time we've got...a lifetime if I'm not mistaken!

The ironic twist is that most of us, most of the time, have enough time to do well and enjoy everything we love. We don't need to rush. Life isn't a race. The Zen mantra that holds me in balanced stead is: "Hasten slowly, hasten slowly!" Yes, we've got to keep moving, but purposefully...with intentionality. You and I possess the time, if we really choose to take it. Why, the butterfly counts not months but moments and has time enough.

My mother was the oldest of four children, yet she was blessed to outlive them all, in fact, beat cancer, as she rounded into her 96th year. And I dare say, one of the secrets to Mary Flanagan's long and gratifying life was her sense of equanimity—enjoying what she had rather than whining about what she didn't have. She felt blessed by the time, the energy, the resources, the connections she possessed, however imperfect and limited.

Mom seldom looked back and rarely looked ahead, but she spent the bulk of her days looking *around*, even when her world became increasingly tiny, and looking around was at a small table in front of her sofa, and on the table were set photos of her beloved husband, two sons and their families alongside her bible. Mom no longer read my sermons, let alone had the energy to critique them.

Friends, we all get issued the same 24-hour suitcase. Some people just learn to pack it better. My mom was one of those really good day-packers!

Modern society's compulsion to save time is summed up in computer guru (and increasingly generous philanthropist), Bill Gates' statement: "I don't go to church, because it's an inefficient use of time." In one sense, Gates is right: singing and reflection, touching and being touched, being stirred to moral action and spiritual depth are technologically inefficient activities. But not *ineffective* ones. We can survive without religious community, but we can't live well without one, and living fully rather than mere survival, actually finding and spreading joy is the point of being here on earth.

While worship may not save time, it surely replenishes our souls with essential doses of purpose and peace. A beloved community such as our San Dieguito Fellowship exists to help us learn how to *savor* rather than merely save time...how to savor all our moments—be they glad, mad, or sad moments—to convert everything we feel or experience into a life of which we can be proud, a life that's both beautiful and compassionate.

On to the third myth, that perennial cliché: "Time will heal all wounds." Like all generalizations, this statement possesses a kernel of wisdom. But any healing process, be it of broken bones or broken bonds, can prove acutely obstinate. For example, when parents and their adult children fail to mend fences and go into a hardened silence, time

per se will hardly heal the breach. Similarly, the sheer march of time may lessen some of the pain from a damaged partnership, but the wounds often recede rather than get better. Frankly, healing, when possible, usually comes to the fair-minded, the forgiving, and the fortunate.

Time per se is neutral, as Martin Luther King, Jr. noted in his classic statement from the Birmingham jail where he wrote:

There is a strangely irrational notion that there is something in the very flow of time that will inevitably cure all ills. Actually time can be used either destructively or constructively. Human progress never rolls in on the wheels of inevitability. It comes through the tireless efforts and persistent work of people willing to be co-workers with the Creation.

King's words are not only relevant for the work of racial justice, but prove insightful for every personal, social, and spiritual struggle in which we humans are engaged. Time is neutral; it's what we *do* with our time that matters.

One final myth messes us up. Too many of us hold the romantic notion that there's an endless supply of time. This translates into the maxim: "Why do today what we can put off until tomorrow?" Again, there's some truth in this perspective. Of course, things take time. Plus there are those in our midst who might believe in reincarnation—the position that enables one to entertain an eternal flow of second chances. But the irony still persists: millions of people long for immortality who don't have the slightest notion of what to do with themselves on a rainy Sunday afternoon.

Maybe we are indeed as immortal as time. Maybe we will reincarnate endlessly, but we don't really know, do we? So, as long as I'm walking this precious and wonderful earth, I'll continue to hold the belief that time is both precious and short: too short to do everything I'd like to do but certainly long enough to accomplish the truly important

stuff. My life is always long enough, I find, to do justice, to love mercy, and to follow my God, to paraphrase the words of the Hebrew prophet, Micah.

My life is always long enough to spend authentic, intimate, playful time with my partner, my family, and my friends. And my life will prove long enough to make the world a bit lovelier for my having walked the earth. And we know that even youngsters who die tragically and prematurely often bless the world in unbelievable ways.

Yes, our lives are remarkably brief, given the universal scale of time. If the estimated age of the cosmos were shortened to seventy-two years, a human life would take about ten seconds. Yet look at time the other way. Each day is a minor eternity of over 86,000 seconds. During each second, the number of distinct molecular functions going on within our human body is comparable to the number of seconds in the estimated age of the cosmos. A few seconds are long enough for a revolutionary idea, a baby's conception, a wounding insult, a beautiful creation, a loving embrace.

Our Unitarian Universalist faith majors in living in the here and now, rather than waiting around for the hereafter; it encourages us to see our lives as infinitely precious, infinitely long...certainly long enough. My friend, who is dying of prostate cancer, in one of his moments of utter frustration and rage, raised his fist to the heavens and cried: "Okay, God, this is my worst mess, right, and, by the way, tell me; how much time do I have?" And an answer filtered his way: "Enough, George, enough to be and do and say some things you still need to be and do and say!"

Religions have always spoken about *redeeming* time. Nearly 67 years old, I think I finally get what that theological phrase means. We tend to be concerned with loading up

our time, but religion says: “Wait a minute! That’s not it. The purpose of life is to redeem time. Lots of people save and fill time; your mission is to savor and fulfill time.”

We *fill* time through driven activity, by staying mindlessly occupied or by being extremely efficient. But we *fulfill* time by making the very most of our moments—giving back excellence, love and joy to the Infinite Spirit that brought us into being. In filling our time we often shrink into self-absorption. In fulfilling time we transcend ourselves by serving purposes beyond our own egos, purposes that outlast our lives.

And our times, do they not, desperately need to be redeemed? For there exist worlds within and worlds without that need to be transformed. There are people waiting to be respected; people staring at us in need, other people we’ve forgotten, people we don’t yet know, and yes people right next to us...all sorts of people waiting to love and be loved by us. Yes, folks, that’s the still best way to redeem time, through daily loving and being loved.

Time’s a gift. Each day of our journey is unearned. None of our moments are guaranteed. Hence we’re summoned to be thankful for every extension we receive upon waking in the morning. I can’t think of a finer daily prayer than something simple yet heartfelt like this: “Thank you God, thank you Life...just plain thanks for yet another day of living and loving, come what may.”

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