

Saving Daylight

Unitarian Universalist Church of Buffalo

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I find time to be a very confusing thing – sometimes it flies by, sometimes it crawls; sometimes it seems like there is plenty of it and then suddenly it runs out; sometimes I get to the end of a day and it seems like the morning was just a moment ago, or perhaps weeks ago. Maybe it is just me, but then again, maybe time has not always been so confusing.

Several centuries ago, Sir Isaac Newton postulated that time was a constant, a universal absolute, unchanging, flowing always and only in one direction at a steady, predictable rate. This is known as part of classical relativity, or the realist view of time -- that time is just as real and measurable as other objects in the world. For Newton, and perhaps for others of his time, this was also a theological position – Newton believed that time had a special existence -- universal and changeless – just as God was real, eternal, universal and changeless.

Although Albert Einstein's theory of general relativity replaced the classical theory in the last century, and we now understand that the time-space continuum bends and shifts as we approach the speed of light, even on my fastest days I am nowhere near the speed of light, so that I am pretty certain that Newtonian physics still rule my world.

Being a realist, thinking of time as real, and universal, flowing only in one direction, is crucial to our lives in modern Western society – we wear watches, the time blinks up at us from our cell phones, we make a point of showing up for appointments on time (or pay the consequences if we don't); we do our best to pay attention to the clock as we start and end the Sunday worship on time . . . but wait. What time is it really? Today, at least, my body thinks it is one time, the clock says another – whom do I believe? Does anybody know what time it is, or even what time itself is, really?

There was an exchange about time among people in my network on Facebook this week – one of my ministerial colleagues posted the note, “Just a reminder that Daylight Savings Time ends this weekend - I don't want you to be late for services on Sunday!!” I saw that and grimaced, but I did not need to respond, because someone else commented, “Wouldn't you be early?” My colleague, continuing to struggle a bit with this concept of time change, wrote back, “No, I think if it is a 10 o'clock service, it would be at 9am when daylight savings time ends but if you didn't change your clock you would come at 10 o'clock.” I just grimaced again – and I trust that they figured it out, and everyone got where they needed to be on time this morning.

OK, so I admit I make it easier for myself by remembering the simple rule, spring ahead and fall back. Fall back means we move the clocks back an hour. But good grief, why do we change our clocks at all? Whatever happened to time being universal and unchanging?? It seems that Benjamin Franklin was one of the earliest advocates for this notion that it would good for those of us in the northern hemisphere to adjust our schedules to take better advantage of increased hours of daylight in the summer. In his pamphlet "The Waste of Daylight," Franklin wrote: "Everyone appreciates the long, light evenings. Everyone laments their shortage as Autumn approaches; and everyone has given utterance to regret that the clear, bright light of an early morning during Spring and Summer months is so seldom seen or used."

So the idea of daylight savings time is to make better use of daylight -- for our sense of appreciation, as Ben Franklin proposed, or to save costs on energy, which is why it was first introduced in this country during World War I. Daylight savings was expanded around the time

of the second world war, reaffirmed in the energy crisis of the 1970's, and lengthened to cover more weeks of the year by the Energy Policy Act of 2005. It is not completely clear whether it actually works to save energy and conserve natural resources, but it appears that people do like the results of switching our clocks to make the hours of daylight more available in the summer, so it appears that our strange, hopeful, practical, challenging and confusing practice of saving daylight is here to stay.

Saving daylight. We are creatures of the light, conserving, appreciating, relishing, reveling in daylight, whether it is Ben Franklin's clear, bright light of a summer morning, the shimmering glow of an autumn afternoon, or brilliant sunlight reflecting off a new fall of snow. Light has a real effect on our bodies, on our emotions – the distress of seasonal affective disorder is a physiological effect of not having enough sunlight, and is one of the reasons some of us become snowbirds, moving to south toward the equator where we can get more hours of sunlight in the winter than we do here in the northern latitudes. Daylight becomes symbolic of vitality, physical and emotional health, symbolic of life itself.

We live on a planet that spins across spans of light and darkness, a planet that tilts as it revolves so that the lengths of dark and daylight are constantly changing. We are constantly, eternally, chasing daylight, across the hours, across the seasons, across the years. Twice a year we are provided the opportunity to be more aware of time and its passage, as we change the clocks to chase the daylight more effectively, noting one more signal of the seasons' turning and our movement through time. We name the units of measurement we use to divide this evanescent element we call time, dividing it into days, into weeks and months and years, accounting for our living in it and our passing through it.

If we had an endless supply of time, if we were immortal, it would not so much matter. But we are mortal, there is a finite measure of time available to each of us, so we live with the understanding that someday the now will be the "no longer." How do we live in the dual reality of being alive and knowing that we will not be alive forever?

A few years ago, two different and apparently unrelated books were published in the same year, written by two different men, each of whom was diagnosed with cancer and told that he had only a few months to live. One of them, Randy Pausch, was a computer science professor at Carnegie Mellon University who was diagnosed with untreatable pancreatic cancer that had spread to his liver. The other, Eugene O'Kelly, was the chairman and CEO of KPMG, one of America's Big Four accounting firms, who was diagnosed with glioblastoma multiform, an inoperable brain tumor. Both Pausch and Kelly were given several months of relatively healthy life before they died, and they wrote books during and about their final months of life, reflecting on their relationships, their values, their dreams and visions for their lives, and their hopes and dreams for the lives of their children. Perhaps it is true, as Samuel Johnson wrote, that "when a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully."

Eugene O'Kelly named his book *Chasing Daylight*, relating his relationship with approaching death to his memory of playing golf with his wife in late afternoons, as he said: "... late in the day, the course tended to be emptier. The sun was lower in the sky, making the shadows longer and the trees bordering each hole look more impressive and beautiful. It was a magical time to play. When we were out there, we felt almost touched by something, our senses heightened. It was as if we weren't just playing golf, but chasing daylight, grabbing as much time as we could."

Grabbing the last rays of light, of life, making the most of those final months, grabbing as much as he could of the final weeks and days of his time with those he loved.

O’Kelly set his sights on saying a good good-bye to those he cared about, devoting his final months to what he called “unwinding” his relationships in a process of closure. He sat down soon after his diagnosis and mapped out his relationships in five concentric circles, with his wife and children at the center, and his more distant acquaintances in the outer rings. Beginning at the outside ring, he sent notes and set up meetings or conversations with thousands of business acquaintances, neighbors, old college roommates, and then proceeded ring by ring toward the center, circling ever inward to those who were closest to him, weaving a fabric of connection and farewell that brought him a sense of peace and resolution as his illness advanced and his abilities diminished.

He began to look for those experiences in relationship that he identified as Perfect Moments, sometimes as entire Perfect Days, taking delight in companionship and beauty as he traveled his path toward the end of his life. The other man, Randy Pausch, was scheduled to speak in Carnegie Mellon’s series of “last lectures,” in which faculty members were invited to present what they would say if it were indeed the last lecture they would ever deliver. When he learned of his impending death, the assignment turned out to be more true than anyone could have imagined. He opened his lecture by telling the audience about his situation, along with a slide of the medical scans of his liver – saying “it is what it is, we can’t change it, we just have to decide how we are going to respond to it – we can’t change the cards we are dealt, just how we play the hand.” His lecture, which you can watch on YouTube, was upbeat, humorous, touching, inspiring. It was about dreams – his own childhood dreams and how he had achieved them, his guidance to the audience on how to achieve theirs, and perhaps most important, how to enable others to achieve their own dreams.

That is the essence, perhaps, of our human lives -- chasing daylight, grabbing time, dreaming and achieving dreams. Rev. Forrest Church once said that “Religion is our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die.”

Religion in this sense does not mean some set of doctrines that must be accepted, nor a set of rituals to follow, nor even the answer to what happens after death. Religion in this sense, religion as our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die, means the sort of connecting and teaching and loving that Eugene O’Kelly and Randy Pausch did. Religion in this sense means the search for truth, the struggle for justice, the creation of community and the weaving of a fabric of love. Religion in this sense means grappling with intense realities, connecting with dreams, facing the dance of light and shadow in our lives, living into a vision of what can be, and finding ways to help others with their own search, their own struggle, their own dreams.

Randy Pausch ended his lecture with a couple of caveats – he said, “Today’s talk was about achieving childhood dreams. But it’s not about how to achieve your dreams. It’s about how to lead your life. If you lead your life the right way, the karma will take care of itself. The dreams will come to you.” I think a central question of our human lives, as we live in the reality of finite time, knowing that we are mortal, is how do we chase the daylight, how do we lead our lives so that our dreams will come to us? How do we weave our webs of relationship so that we are

connected and whole, and so that we attend to the business not only of achieving our own dreams, but of helping others to achieve theirs?

I know that for me, the answer has something to do with a sense of purpose, a sense of legacy, a sense of participating in some larger whole -- something that was around before I came into the picture, and that will continue after I am gone, and to which I contribute while I am here. So for me, the question becomes, what will I leave behind when my allocation of daylight has run out, when my round of the chase has been completed and I leave the world to those who will follow?

I think Forrest Church was right, and that a central purpose of religion is to help us figure out how to live into that dual reality of being alive and knowing we will die. I know that it is in seeking and creating an answer to that question of purpose and legacy, in living an answer to that question, that the chasing and saving of daylight becomes real and intentional for me. If my own round of the chase is to have value, that value lies in living the best I can in the hours I have, with an eye toward what I can contribute or build that will have lasting value for others.

On this Sunday of saving daylight, as we relish the extra hour with which we have been gifted today, and as we come together creating a religious community in which we learn together how to live into the dual reality of being fully alive and being finite, I wish for us the joys that we may find as we weave the fabric of connection, and the sense of purpose we may find as we chase the light and shadows across the course of our lives. So may it be, and amen.

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