

"It's About Time"

By Howell Lind, Interim Senior Minister

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READING

For a January 1st, 1984 Sunday Service on "Time" at the Unitarian Church in Lincoln, Nebraska, a member of that congregation – Aura Lee Furgason – gave the following talk on "Einstein, Ziggy, and Me." Over the years, it has remained one of my favorite readings and I share it this morning with all of you.

"I am Aura Lee Furgason. I know a lot of people here, and those of you who know me, know that I am no scientist. If I do not read about it in TIME magazine, I probably do not know about it. However, just by living as long as I have, certain scientific truths are becoming clear to me. Albert Einstein and I have arrived at the same conclusion: time is not linear. Time does not start in one place, more inexorably forward, and then end, at a far distance from its beginning.

I always thought there was a natural, normal progression through life's relationships. First, I would be a daughter to parents, next a mother of children, later a grandmother of babies. But Einstein and I now realize that time is not such a neat continuum. I am not sure how Mr. Einstein came to his conclusion, but I know precisely the moment I achieved enlightenment. It occurred one evening as I looked back on my day's events. I had received word of the birth of my first grandchild and had kept an appointment to have my college graduation photo taken – both on the same day. The juxtaposition of these two events shook me loose. I was definitely somewhere in Rod Serling's 'The Twilight Zone.'

Since then, I have noticed time zapping me around like that a lot. It happens mostly in relationships to other people. Alone, I can close my eyes and be any age, halt the zapping around and exclude time altogether. But once I begin to relate to other people, time gets crazy again.

As long as my father is on this earth, I never quit being a little girl sometimes. Not long ago we were browsing through a store and I saw Cadbury chocolate bars on display. I actually heard myself saying, 'Oh, Daddy, that's my favorite. Will you buy me a candy bar?' I'm 48 years old, for Heaven's sake! To my credit, I did not stamp my feet – but almost. Talk about a time warp! Of course, he did buy me the candy. Dad visits the 'Twilight Zone' occasionally himself!

The clock turned a few circles around and the next thing I know I am answering a midnight phone call. 'Oh, Mom, help me. The baby's temperature is 103. What should I do?' The middle-aged kid with the candy bar is now required to be All-Wisdom and Knowledge. Never mind that I told her to wipe the child with alcohol and she said, 'Oh Mom, the books say not to do that anymore!' So, not only is it possible to zap oneself around in time, but if you don't, others will surely do it for you! If I ever had any doubt about the value of living for the moment – in the here and now – I don't anymore. The moment is all I can be sure of. It's a cliché, but 'now is all we do have!'

Ziggy in the newspaper comics says: 'Your present will be determined by your past. Therefore, in the future, you should be very careful what you do in your past!'

My own experience has proven it to me: the beginning can be the middle – the end can be a beginning – and the middle? The middle can be all over the place!"

SERMON

- "To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven."
– **Ecclesiastes 3.1**
- "Time and tide wait for no man."
– **St. Marher**
- "Time is the cruelest teacher; first she gives the test, then teaches the lesson."
– **Anonymous**
- "Time makes more converts than reason."
– **Thomas Paine**
- "No time like the present."
– **Mrs. Manley**
- "Dost thou love life? Then do not squander time, for that the stuff life is made of."
– **Benjamin Franklin**
- "Time heals what reason cannot."
– **Seneca**
- "Time is but the stream I go a-fishing in."
– **Henry David Thoreau**
- "The only reason for time is so that everything doesn't happen at once." – **Albert Einstein**
- "'The time has come,' the Walrus said,
'To talk of many things:
Of shoes – and ships – and sealing wax –
Of cabbages – and kings –
And why the sea is boiling hot –
And whether pigs have wings.'"
– **Lewis Carroll**

It is such a universally accepted measure that we often refer to it obliquely or indirectly: "Wait a sec" – "See you later" – "Give me a minute" – "Hold your horses" – "Back in a while."

Alternatively, we talk about doing time – summer time – time is money – supper time – nap time – killing time – wasting time – in the fullness of time – biding one's time – taking a time out – "My, how time flies!" – overtime – living on borrowed time – full time – part time – "It's Miller time!" – war time – peace time – "the times, they are a changing."

. . . Ever since I was a little boy – not sure just when, probably age 8 or 9, I have been fascinated by the construct of time. I say "fascinated" and yet it would not be unfair to say that, at times, I have been totally "obsessed" with time. I have wanted to pursue it, manage it, be more efficient with it, use it more wisely and measure it more precisely.

Time is a commodity so dear to most of us that we buy it, sell it, borrow it, save it, and waste it daily in every way. Yet, however finely we are able to measure it, and however well we use it, time continues to pass, unaltered as the bookends for our lives.

Though I readily admit to being intrigued by the construct of time, I am not sure that, if pressed, I know just how to explain it.

Pondering the mystery of what time really is, St. Augustine wrote in his *Confessions*, "If no one asks me, I know; but if any person should require me to tell him, I cannot." . . . I feel the same way.

A dictionary definition of time just doesn't seem to do it for me, either: "Time is a non-spatial linear continuum in which events occur in an apparently irreversible succession – Time is the indefinite continued progress of existence and events in the past, present, and future, regarded as a whole – or: Time is a system of distinguishing events: a dimension that enables two identical events occurring at the same point in space to be distinguished, measured by the interval between the events."

A half dozen years ago or so, Julian Barbour, a British physicist, published The End of Time, a treatise on the idea that time does not even exist. It is nothing more, he posited, than an illusion – a sort of cosmic parlor trick.

If so, it is an illusion that has appeared in varying guises to different groups. For many outside the Western European tradition, time is a circle that turns on a daily, yearly, and even a cosmic scale. The Hindu concept of reincarnation is perhaps the most familiar example, yet the Hopi in the American Southwest and the Inuit in the Arctic North also look at the world as a series of repeating cycles with no beginning and no end; so, also traditionally, did the Chinese and the Japanese cultures.

In the Judeo-Christian West, however, time is linear, marching steadily from the past through the present to the future.

Throughout recorded history, humanity has struggled to keep its methods for recording or measuring the passage of time in sync with actual time. When Julius Caesar invented his namesake calendar in 45 CE, it deviated from the astronomical calendar by eleven and a half minutes annually. Over the centuries that small error added up. By 1582 the Julian calendar had fallen ten days behind and spring was arriving in early March. To correct the error, Pope Gregory the 13th fine-tuned the process for adding leap years.

Over the centuries since, efforts have periodically been made to perfect the manner for humanity's recording of time. In our technological age, scientists now can calculate and measure time to a billionth of a second.

On December 31st, 2005, after two and a half years of research, study, discussion and debate, scientists added a "leap second" to all of the world's clocks and timekeeping devices. This was only the 23rd time in human history that this has been done to reconcile our two different kinds of timekeeping. – As an aside and just as an informational factoid – the official and ultimate timekeeping authority for the world is the International Bureau of Weights and Measure, housed just outside of Paris, France.

. . . My grandfather was a railroad man – his entire working life spent at the E J & E railroad – and his pocket watch kept excellent time – it was THE timekeeping instrument which was the absolute

authority on time in my family when I was young. One always knew when something was supposed to occur – like time for meals, time to go for a walk with the dogs or time to go to bed – when my Grandpa pulled his watch out of his vest pocket, cast a stern glance upon it and everyone knew it was THE time! Upon my grandfather's death, I was given his gold pocket watch to have as my very own. I can recall how, as a young boy, I treasured receiving his watch – I still do, probably now more for sentimental reasons and fond memories than for its timekeeping ability. Over the years since, I have accumulated more wristwatches than I care to publicly admit to and I probably am one of the very few individuals who always have more than one clock in every room, basement, garage, nook and cranny of one's home. At any given moment I want to be able to know what time it is! – I can tell you that it is an involved ritual and lengthy process in my house to switch back and forth to Daylight Savings Time each April and October!

My fascination with keeping time, measuring it, and knowing the time has added a significant dimension in how I have acted and interacted since receiving my first watch as a child. My concept of time has helped dictate the values that I attempt to live my life by. For example, I do not like to be late – being punctual, on time, or even ahead of time has been a defining part of how I have faced the world all of my adult life. I always show up earlier than my appointed time when going to a doctor for a check-up, but if I am kept in a small exam room waiting for more than thirty minutes for the doctor, I have been known to get up and leave. My reasoning is that my time is just as meaningful and significant as the doctor's. Valuing time is an important way for me to also value myself, others, and my world.

There have been times in my life when I wish I had a more highly attuned and accurate internal clock – a Circadian rhythm-type of knowing time – believing that then I would be more in control of time and could make better or wiser use of it. I marvel at the animal world and that instinctual sense of duration that I witness there. Obie, my chocolate Lab, has just such an innate sense of time and when events are supposed to happen: he is never off by more than a few minutes when he starts making noise that it is time for his food or when he goes and gets his leash off of the table, for he knows that it is the time for his usual daily walk. He just knows the time – no matter if it is sunny and bright out or dark and grey outside. I marvel at that innate sense of time.

In college, I had a friend named Andy Forberg who never wore a wristwatch nor ever glanced at a wall clock, and yet Andy always knew exactly what time it was – day or night, and he was always correct within a minute or two of the actual time. He didn't know how he knew just what the time was; knowing the time came naturally for him. I was always envious of Andy's ability and wished I had that same ability or gift.

My life-long fascination with measuring time, knowing time accurately, and trying to utilize time may seem to be border on the fanatical – I am sure that my kids and my wife sometimes think that I am a "few rungs short of the ladder" when it comes to my time fascination.

Yet, the overarching theme throughout recorded human history also details a similar preoccupation with the construct of time. Many ancient philosophers wrote lengthy essays on it, believing time to be the essence around which life was based. A famous analogy, passed down to us from the 3rd century, is the one that compares the time of life to the passing of grains of sand through an hourglass. The sand at the top is the future, and, one tiny grain at a time, a future flows through the present into the past. The past ever expanding, the future ever decreasing, but the future grains being molded into the past through the present.

The earliest recorded philosophy of time was expounded by Ptahhotep, who lived around 2650 BC, when he said: "*Do not lessen the time of following desire, for the wasting of time is an abomination to the spirit.*"

In the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes, traditionally thought to have been written by King Solomon, time was regarded as a medium for the passage of predetermined events.

And around 500 BC, Heraclitus, a fatalist, held that the passage of time and the future both lay beyond the possibility of human influence: "*Everything flows and nothing abides; everything gives way and nothing stays fixed. You cannot step twice into the same river, for other waters and yet others, go flowing on. Time is a child, moving counters in a game; the royal power is a child's.*"

The ancient Greeks created two words to describe time: *chronos* and *kairos* – *Chronos* referring to chronological or sequential time and *Kairos* signifying a moment of undetermined period of time – "a time inbetween" – in which "something" special happens. While *chronos* is quantitative, *kairos* has a qualitative nature. *Kairos* becomes the specialness or fullness of time.

As I have gotten older – hopefully more mature and less obsessed with accounting for and measuring time chronologically – I find that I still possess a strong fascination with time, but now I am more focused and concerned with the specialness or fullness of time – with *Kairos*.

. . . As a faith tradition, Unitarian Universalism has always had a timely quality – a message of reason and hope for living in the dailiness of everyday life. As an evolving, searching and inquiring faith stance, our liberal religious perspective has sought to ferret out the experiential and thoughtful answers to respond to and answer the challenges, the concerns and the joys and moments of grace which daily greet and confront each one of us.

Candidly I must admit that though, for over forty years, I have spoken about this shared faith of ours as a life-engaging and hopeful way to live, I have never truly or completely internalized the deeper, more significant dimension of our faith's message of *Kairos* until I recognized that I "am much older in a day."

Now, in the latter years of my life, I find that I am taking a more intentional and serious look at my life and my values and the desired or hoped-for impact my life has, and is, making in its earthly pilgrimage.

My colleague, the Reverend Victoria Safford, tells the story of Vedran Smailovic, the cellist of Sarajevo. In the spring of 1992, amidst the war in the Balkans, one of the last bakeries still able to make bread in Sarajevo had a long line out the door as usual, stretching far into the street. At four o'clock in the afternoon, a shell hit directly into that bread line, and twenty-two people were instantly killed.

Vedran Smailovic lived nearby. Before the war, he had been the principal cellist of the Sarajevo Opera, and, according to an article by Paul Sullivan in *Hope Magazine*, "It was a distinguished and civilized life, and one to which he deeply and patiently longed to return. But when he saw the carnage that day outside his window, he was pushed beyond his capacity to absorb and endure any more. He resolved to do the thing he could do best. Every day thereafter, at 4:00 p.m., Vedran Smailovic put on his full, formal concert attire, took up his cello, and walked out of his

apartment into the battle raging around him. He placed a little stool in the blood-stained, glass-splattered crater where the shell had landed, and every day, for twenty-two days, he played Albinoni's *Adagio* as tribute to the twenty-two dead. Snipers fired at him (they missed), mortar shells fell all around him, but he played the music to the abandoned streets, the smashed trucks, the burning buildings, and to the terrified people still hiding in the cellars, who heard him."

Vedran Smailovic lives now in Belfast, Ireland, where he plays in the Irish streets and Irish craters left from war. In Sarajevo and throughout the other war-torn regions of our world he continues to play his cello, leaving a legacy, but in a strange container.

Vedran Smailovic is just an ordinary person – no one even knew who he was at first – yet his passion, his courage, his determination, his defiance, his art, his intention – all of these live on. The container for his legacy is memory, and when memory fades – when everyone who knows this story finally dies – it will become something else, part of a people's way of being, part of humanity's humanity.

My friend, Jane Rzepka, the Senior Minister of The Church of the Larger Fellowship, relates another dimension of leaving a legacy when Jane tells of a woman she once witnessed on a subway train in New York City: the station was crowded, and as the woman left the train she realized she was holding only one of her gloves. She looked back into the car and saw the matching one on the seat, but it was too late to rush back and retrieve it. Suddenly, as the doors began to close, she flung out her arm and tossed the remaining glove onto the seat alongside its mate. The doors shut and the train pulled away.

This may seem like a frivolous gesture, gratuitous, spontaneous, spur of the moment. But this woman must have lived a long life of generosity – a life of creative generosity of the spirit – to be able to think so quickly, to act so urgently and healthily, to know precisely in that moment what would bless the world right then and there.

Kairos – in that special fullness of time.

. . . More and more my fascination with time has shifted from *chronos* to *kairos* – more and more I wish live in *kairos* – to live each of my days so intentionally that I embody the hope and promise inherent in my understanding of this faith of Unitarian Universalism.

I cannot do what Vedran Smailovic has done and can do – I am not a gifted musician in any way. Yet, I can find the ways – authentic for me – that hopefully helps address the concerns that touch my spirit – the genocide in Darfur or the starvation of children in war-torn Ethiopia.

I am also not the kind of person who might be prone to leave some place without my gloves or hat in my possession. Still, I am completely able to take the time to stop and help someone get his or her vehicle out of a snow bank or act in such a way as to demonstrate simple courtesy and concern for others.

. . . If my desire is to be able to leave a legacy that bespeaks a larger courage and conviction, a grander compassion, a more passionate and deeper commitment, a fuller spirit of generosity, and a more knowing acceptance and respect for all of life, then I need to continue to be who I am and continue to uncover my authentic ways to live out of my values and convictions.

In truth, the imperishable timeliness of Unitarian Universalism – that “specialness” of living out of our convictions, beliefs and values – that fullness to our moments — that legacy of our individual lives that we each hope to leave – that *Kairos* – resides within each of us now . . . in this moment . . . in this particular moment of time.

If we desire to bequeath a legacy of lives well-lived – lived in the fullness of time – then let us be about that task . . . for the materials – our lives . . . and time, itself – are, oh, . . . so precious and, oh, . . . so fleeting.

Amen and Shalom.