

TAKING TIME SERIOUSLY

A sermon preached by the Reverend John H. Nichols to the Channing Memorial Church of Newport, R.I. on September 18, 2011.

Could you take off your watch and put it out of sight for an hour? Could you even leave your watch at home for a couple of hours? For an entire day? Could you put your watch in the drawer for a week? There's a daunting thought. And an irresponsible thought. One of the things many of us pride ourselves on is that there are people who depend upon us to know what time it is so that we can be where they want us to be and keep our commitments to them.

On the other hand, if we carry the time around with us only to meet schedules that are not entirely of our own making, how likely is it that the pace of our lives is set by other people? How much of each day that we are granted to live is lived on a timetable that we did not create or even control? Where does it say, on our calendars, "This time is for me? Or are these mechanical devices on our wrists really symbols of servitude in which we cooperate?"

A ministerial colleague told me that once he was invited to spend a week's vacation in a cottage situated on an isolated arm of the Maine coast. His host greeted him by saying; "You have to surrender your watch for the week. We ask that of all our guests." This proved an extremely difficult thing to do, and yet he could not find the words or even the thoughts to explain to himself why he was reluctant to be parted from his watch. It seemed wrong. It seemed almost unlawful, but by whose rules was he living?

He had no other commitments that week. He had no use for a watch. But taking off that sacred timepiece was like being cast adrift in the middle of the ocean and, then being asked to give up your life jacket. In a disturbing way the ticking of his watch seemed connected to the beating of his heart and connected to the source of whatever it was that secured his identity. Who was he? He was someone who needed a watch, because he had important places to go and important people to see. By giving up that watch, he was risking a crisis over who he really was.

This I believe absolutely. Each of us needs to be in charge of who we really are in the world so that we can trust what we do in the world. So let us take this connection between the passage of time and the security of our identities very seriously. If we cannot protect our lives from being forever on loan to someone else, we then run the risks of not having enough life left to enjoy.

Years ago we sent our then ten-year-old son to a very unusual summer camp. It was based in a very eclectic and somewhat romantic way on Native American culture. In order to reach this camp on opening day, you must first transit successfully from big roads to smaller roads to really, really smaller roads.

Then you reach dirt logging roads that disintegrate so badly you begin to wonder how you are ever going to explain your presence there to the insurance claims adjuster you are going to have to call to evaluate the inevitable damage to your car. Finally, you have to park your car and walk for yet another mile on woodland trail.

Just when you have lost all hope of ever seeing a cheeseburger or another human being again, you emerge into a sunlit clearing, where people clearly do live and work. In those days it was surrounded by brilliantly painted teepees. But there was no sign of the modern world. There was no electricity. Drinking water came from a well. An icehouse, packed with fresh ice and sawdust every winter, kept the food fresh. Meals were cooked over wood fires. And in order to participate in this community you must surrender your watch.

Campers and staff lived for eight weeks without their watches. There was literally no mention of Western time. Their lives were governed by the rising and the setting of the sun and by a Native American calendar which recognized five rather than seven days to a week. The daily and weekly schedule for the camp community was generated by what needed to be done. No other agenda intruded. Meals were served when the camp was ready to eat. There were daily chores, games, work projects, hikes coming and going but there was no correspondence to the watch mechanism, which drives the Western world.

Depending on your taste and politics I imagine this sounds like either a New Age Dream or a New Age nightmare. Nevertheless every year they returned to us the most relaxed son any parents could hope to have: relaxed and centered at the core of his own developing values. For a boy who had grown up in one of the most pressured school systems of the Northeast, this camp – where time followed the slow, nurturing rhythms of night and day – became a spiritual island deliberately set apart from a cluttered world. We truly believe – and so does he – that our son found the core of his strength and soul in a setting that was bracketed away from the passage of Western time.

So, where is your island that is set away from a time-cluttered world? I would like to think that this hour of worship could be such an island, but I know all too well that our consciousness of the passage of time intrudes even here. Even at this moment I am sure some of you are wondering if we are going to conclude this service on time so that you can get on, in a timely way, to other commitments.

There's nothing wrong with having other commitments and keeping appointments and meeting deadlines. These time-based obligations can make for a very interesting life. The question is what rules that life, because a life that is ruled by apprehensiveness over the passage of time is likely to be an anxious life. Do you carry some of that time anxiety around with you? Try this test. When you take a day off or a long weekend or a vacation are you continually aware of

the rate at which your block of free time is diminishing, minute by minute, or can you, for the most part, manage to set aside your awareness of the passage of time.

We can be haunted by watch time, but we can also be haunted by calendar time. Memories and regrets can haunt us. Worry or fear about the future can haunt us.

Each of us has a past full of wonderful memories but also full of powerful regrets. With the luxury of hindsight, we can retrace our lives and – since many of us are closet perfectionists – we will spot how things should have worked out differently. But there comes a point when enough is enough. There comes a point when our ruminating endlessly over events we wish hadn't happened and people we now wish had been wiser, stronger, kinder anchors us to the past while the waters of the present keep rising.

One of the Ten Commandments is that we should honor our parents. At first blush this is problematic for those who still have hard feelings for their parents, but the real meaning of this commandment may be that we need to make peace with the past as being, very possibly, the only thing that could have happened under the circumstances. In making peace, we don't so much forget our regrets as we try to put them away, because they are simply no longer useful to us. They get dragged into the present and clutter up our lives, leaving us less room in which to form new lives.

For anyone the past is a history of good intentions that went awry, but it is also a history of deeds of love that mysteriously hit the mark and did the good that was hoped for. We need to honor the good intentions that went awry in our own lives, because awry is precisely where many of our own good intentions are going to go. And we need to remember that some deeds born of love did incredibly hit their mark in us. We can only hope that some of our own loving deeds will do the good that we intend. This making peace with the past as probably the best that could have happened leaves us free to grow into the present.

We can be shackled to the past by regret, but we can also be dragged into the future by worry. Will I be healthy? Will people like me? Will I be successful? Will my children and family members be proud of me? There are some things we can do to effect a positive answer to all of these questions, but – and this is my UU heresy for the morning – much of the future is – to a large extent – out of our hands.

Many of us have difficulty with this idea because we have held, almost unconsciously, an article of faith that says there is virtually nothing that intelligent, dedicated people can't fix. There are, however, some things we can't fix, and knowing that some things will

happen whether we want them to or not can be a growth experience for anyone. Aging, for example, is one of those things that happens whether we want it to or not.

Will I be healthy as I grow older? There is no question we can and should follow the advice of competent medical professionals and take care of ourselves physically as long as our doing so doesn't interfere with our basic enjoyment of life. But aging is one of those things that will happen whether we like it or not.

We are going to get older. It is the cost of being born. Since every age in life comes with some limitations, there will be limitations to our growing and life will ask us to adjust to them with some degree of grace. Worrying about it will not take years off our lives, but it will take away our ability to enjoy the fullness of our lives remaining.

Will I be successful? Success is a relative thing in business or professional life. Most people near the end of their active careers describe their accomplishments much more modestly than they would have described their goals forty, thirty or twenty years earlier. At some point we realize that those who succeed us will have to deal with our mistakes – our inevitable mistakes.

The next minister of every congregation I have served as a settled minister did not say, "Well, John Nichols did everything there was to be done." That minister had to build upon or alter or even undue some of what I thought I achieved. And the same is true for most of us. Very few of us build monuments to our intelligence, our vision, or our goodness even though we may have thought we were building them when we were working.

On occasions when I am asked to do a eulogy at a memorial service I usually call the friends and family together and say simply, "Tell me about him. Tell me stories." As the conversation flows it becomes animated, and I am hearing about the qualities this person had that embraced, amused, supported, comforted, sustained and gave hope to other people. In this conversation I almost never hear the substance of his or her curriculum vita. I never hear what he did when he thought he was being "successful." It had never been mentioned, because it wasn't that important to the people who loved him.

In other words, the shape of what we regard as health, wealth or success changes as we grow older, and all of our worrying about mechanical time or calendar time turns out to be needless self-recrimination. Finally only these qualities matter. The integrity of life well lived in the present; the importance of friendships loyally served, of compassion genuinely felt and justice truly sought in small ways here and now. These qualities enrich our lives and extend our work far beyond the limited sphere in which we live and act.

Psalm 90 says, “So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom.” Very simply put, this means that we aren’t given enough time to waste it either being haunted by the past or obsessed with the future. The time we have to become fully loving, caring, contributing human beings is now – wholly apart from the demands of our calendars or from timetables that anyone else created.

I think often of one of the dramatic concluding passages from the play, “Our Town which I used as a reading this morning. You might be interested to know that when it was first produced many reviewers said that passage I read to you was too pessimistic. But, clearly despair is not the message people took away from this play.

I think they came away thinking, “Yes, I have wasted a great deal of time in my life. There may also be large chunks of my time that are and will continue to be at the command of other people”. Most of us can’t stop most of our responsibilities nor would we want to.

The message would continue, “I also know I need to take charge of my life – and not let the past or the future smother me. I need to bracket times and places to see – to really see, to know and appreciate – the fullness of what this present time has brought me. I want to stop regularly and listen for the eternal song of the natural world that gave birth to all of us.

I need to pause regularly to rediscover what I mean to those with whom I most intimately share this life. In my best moments I can set aside time to live honestly and not reactively – to remember who I am apart from what others would like me to be.”

We spend too little time trusting this life, because we have never really allowed ourselves enough time to live it. Let us take more time to learn how to trust so that we will learn how to live.