

August 15, 2010
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Story and reading referred to in sermon, followed by sermon “Time, Space, and the Essential Heart of Being.”

At Table With My Mom

The summer after my mother’s heart surgery, she reacted to one of her medications. She hallucinated. During the times when she was aware of us; she said she saw someone hiding in the bushes at the end of the yard. She saw exotic birds in the bushes. There were other times when she was unaware of us, unresponsive to us, sometimes moving her hands or speaking and we tried to understand what she was seeing, with whom she was speaking. Sometimes we could tell that she was in a different time in her life, speaking to the family of her childhood. It was my brother who recognized that she was pinching the dough and making biscuits with one of her recurring hand motions.

I thought I knew my mother well; however, listening, watching her hallucinate, it seemed to me that I knew too few of the stories about her life. If only she would become better again, I said to myself, I would ask her. I would learn more about her life, more about what was important to her.

She did stop the hallucinations, was taken off the medication causing them, and continued to deal with recovering from heart surgery—no small thing.

One morning my mother and I sat at the table lingering over breakfast, having a second cup of coffee, sitting in companionable silence. The stillness gave me time to be aware of how glad I was that she was well enough to be at the table. And I remembered that I had wanted to ask her questions when she was better. Now was the perfect time, while we were leisurely sitting together with our second cups of coffee.

I looked up at her, ready to speak, and was flooded with gratitude. Gratitude to be lingering at the table, as we had so many times over the years, the morning light from the east windows flooding the room with warmth and soft color. The silence was a *living* kind of silence. I did not speak. The most important thing was we were both alive, present for, and to, the wonderfully ordinary, extraordinary act of having breakfast together, and lingering, with companionship, at table.

Reading from WELCOME: A Unitarian Universalist Primer by Thandeka

So if someone tells you that she or he knows pain loneliness, loss, fear, and dismay, but does not know the feeling of being sustained by a love that is wider, deeper, and infinitely vaster than the sorrows, hear those words as a commission. Hear your commission to love, to create community, and to heal. One at a time in personal relationships, ten at a

time in covenant groups, hundreds at a time in our congregations, hundreds of thousands at a time in our religious movement, millions at a time as we take our commission deeper and deeper into humanity's heart as a justice-loving people who will transform the world. This is the Good News of our faith.

Sermon: Time, Space, and the Essential Heart of Existence

In 1951, one year before I was born, Abraham Joshua Heschel, rabbi and Jewish theologian, published a book called *The Sabbath Its Meaning for Modern Humans* (Heschel used the less inclusive term, Man; I change the language to gender inclusive language here and in any following quotes and think this is in keeping with the spirit of his work. Heschel would, and did, talk more about Sabbath than I do here; but I hope the spirit of his book is conveyed.)

Heschel begins his book by writing that civilization is [human's] conquest of space. It is a triumph frequently achieved, however, by sacrificing an essential ingredient of existence, time. In civilization, he says, we expend time to gain the things, and the power, of space. Yet to have more does not mean to be more. And, the power we attain in the world of space stops at the borderline of time. There is a realm of time, he says, where the goal is not to have but to be, not to own but to give, not to control but to share, not to subdue but to be in accord.

What would time as the heart of existence look like, I wondered. And, in my mind's eye, was the memory I shared with you about sitting at table with my mom. What does "time as the heart of existence" look like to you? When is a time you might describe as spiritual?

Heschel writes that "Life goes wrong when the control of space, the acquisition of things of space, becomes our sole concern." And, he believed, in 1951, that humans had become too preoccupied with the things of space. Does what he wrote resonate with us in 2010?

"Things, when magnified, are forgeries of happiness, they are a threat to our very lives; we are more harassed than supported by the Frankensteins of spatial things. ... The higher goal of spiritual living is not to amass a wealth of information, but to face sacred moments. In a religious experience, for example, it is not a thing that imposes itself on [humans] but a spiritual presence. ... Spiritual life begins to decay when we fail to sense the grandeur of what is eternal in time." When are some times you have experienced a sense of the eternal?

I'm not sure that Heschel would recognize or have been able to imagine our world today, the extent to which things threaten our existence. Maybe he would not be surprised, saddened certainly, but maybe not surprised. He did write, "Nothing is as hard to suppress as the will to be a slave to one's own pettiness." He believed we humans must "gallantly, ceaselessly, quietly, fight for inner liberty." Gallantly, ceaselessly, quietly,

fight for inner liberty from domination of people as well as from domination of things; but things are harder. Heschel believed there were many who had achieved, what he called, a “high degree of political and social liberty, but only very few are not enslaved to things.” “This is our constant problem,” Heschel says, “how to live with people and remain free, how to live with things and remain independent.”

What sustains us in this inner work? For Heschel, it was his understanding of time. No one can possess time he said. There is **no** moment which belongs to you or to me exclusively. This very moment belongs to all humans, to you, to me, to all. We share time. Time makes us equal.

In Heschel’s view, things of space have a “deceptive independence,” a “vener of limited permanence.” Things created conceal the Creator, he said. He understood **time** as the **process** of creation and the things of space as the **results** of creation. Heschel considered time more majestic and “more provocative of awe than even a sky studded with stars.” Time has an independent ultimate significance; it cannot be divided, except in our own minds. It is easy, Heschel says, for us to pass by “the great sight of eternal time.” And, here’s a lovely thought of his, “When looking at space we see the products of creation; when intuiting time we hear the process of creation.”

“When intuiting time we hear the process of creation”—I’m not quite sure what he means, but I love it that that sentence makes me what to cock my head and *listen* outside myself; close my eyes and *listen* inside myself.

“It is the dimension of time wherein [human] meets God, wherein [human] becomes aware that every instant is an act of creation, a Beginning, ... Time is the presence of God in the world, and it is within time that we are able to sense the unity of all beings.” “It is only,” Heschel writes, “within time that there is fellowship and togetherness of all beings.”

What would that look like, that time of fellowship and togetherness of all beings?

Mary Daly, radical feminist theologian, mother of modern feminist theology, teacher, writer, model, **voice, sustainer** for so many of us, in those early years of feminist theology and when there were but a handful of women in seminaries, Mary Daly died this year. Thomas C. Fox, editor for the National Catholic Reporter said, "With a heavy heart, yet grateful beyond words for her life and work, I report that Mary Daly died this morning, January 3, 2010."

I heard the news of her death on the NPR radio station during my morning commute. “Mary Daly died today” was in my head and heart all day and I wanted, needed to *say* to someone, Mary Daly died today.

Although my spouse and I were in seminary together and he was trying to be sympathetic when I got home and told him, he was busy and distracted. And Mary Daly had not been the kind of sustaining force for him that she had been for me in seminary. I tried but

didn't make contact with a fellow woman seminarian from those days. And, in the next few days was too busy to try calling her again, or, maybe too reluctant to feel the loss.

Then, during a business meeting with Youth Coordinator Jenn Maschal-Lorms, I found myself suddenly blurting out, Mary Daly died.

Jenn's response was so immediate, so present, so heart-felt; that I could feel the knot inside me began to release. "Do you know who Mary Daly was?" I asked Jenn, somewhat hesitantly. "No," Jenn said, "But I knew she was someone important to you." (As we talked about grief and the losses in our lives, Jenn realized she remembered Mary Daly from her mother and her mother's friends conversations when she was a child.)

"I knew she was someone important to you," Jenn had said and she had responded with genuine caring and full attention, creating for both of us that dimension of time where, as Heschel writes, there is spiritual presence, where there is fellowship and togetherness, the heart of existence.

What does Unitarian Universalism say about space, time, and the heart of existence? Unitarian Universalism is a young religion. At the 2011 General Assembly, we will celebrate the 50th anniversary of Unitarian Universalism. Dale McGowan, a Humanist and the Fahs Lecturer this past General Assembly, said, "Most denominations came about by fracture; Unitarian Universalism came about by merger." What does our young, inclusive religion, with old roots, say about the heart of existence?

On the back of your order of service each Sunday, is printed the principles, purposes, and sources, adopted in 1985; the sixth source adopted in 1995. In their curriculum, "Articulating Your UU Faith," Barbara Wells and Jaco B. Ten Hove, write that "Our first and seventh UU Principles are statements of *what* we affirm about life. They are the pillars that hold up the other five Principles, which are more about *how* we agree to be together." I'm not sure I agree with all of their statement, but I do think that having an understanding of ourselves as part of an interdependent web of all existence is where we, in the words of Heschel, sense the unity of all beings; is where, for us, the heart of existence lies.

If we take seriously our 7th principle, that we are connected and interdependent with all existence, if we covenant to affirm and promote respect for the unity of creation, we cannot think and act as though there is an "us and them" any more, any where. And, we must gallantly, ceaselessly, quietly (or not so quietly) fight our inner distractions and the outer distractions that make it easy for us to pass by the great sight of eternal time, the grandeur of creation and our opportunities to co-create loving, healing relationships and community. We must gallantly, ceaselessly, quietly (or not so quietly) choose to sit in fellowship and togetherness, choose to care for ourselves, to care for others, and to care for the living earth. What does making those choices look like in your life?

On the home page of the Unitarian Universalist Association website is a link to an article by Peter Morales, President of the Unitarian Universalist Association, about his recent

arrest at the protest of SB1070, Arizona's anti-immigration law, in Phoenix. His account of what he experienced and witnessed is distressing and disturbing and I appreciated his depth of feeling and honesty. I was also struck by his observations about the prison staff and his question, "What must it do to the human soul to be part of such an abusive system?" For me, reading that part of Morales' account was a witness to his affirmation of our 7th principle. We are interdependent, connected, in relationship, all of us, not the protesters only, not the prison staff only, all of us. How do we assist each other, all of us, how do we co-create together, all of us, to "know the feeling of being sustained by a love that is wider, deeper, and infinitely vaster than the sorrows?" What choices do we make?

When Sue Moran taught our church's preschool class, she ended each class with the children, individually, repeating the words and lighting the chalice for, "Care for myself, care for others, care for the living earth and all life." I think that about sums it up.

What will you hold in your mind and heart to guide and encourage you? What words, images, or stories? The preschool story is one I try to hold in my mind. What does it look like in your own life to care for yourself? For others? For the earth? What choices do you make? What choices do you want to make?

The Universalist root of our Unitarian Universalist religion has long affirmed love as the heart of existence—love, the receiving and giving of love, the practice and discipline, the actions of love, co-creating again and again a loving presence in the world.

May it be so for each of us.