



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Power of the Pause

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As we settle back into our post-holiday routines, many of us are participating in one of our country's favorite annual spiritual practices—the practice of New Year's resolutions! This practice seems to cut across religion and belief system, appealing widely regardless of tradition.

Spirituality is about our growth and development of ourselves as whole people--body, mind, and spirit. When we consider our New Year's resolutions, or intentions, we often look at growth areas in our lives, areas in need of attention and healing. When we say we want to "eat better" or "exercise more," we are not talking simply about our desire to lose weight but our need to heal our relationship with food and our bodies. When we say we want to "save more money" or "get out of debt" we are not only talking about stashing away an extra hundred dollars every month but about our need to heal our complicated relationship to money.

Many of us make resolutions about our relationship to time. We want more time for our families, our children and grandkids, more time for ourselves, more time in nature, more time traveling. We want to work on our time management at work-- to be "on time" to our commitments and to better manage our to-do lists. We want to "slow down" and do less.

What is our spiritual relationship to time? That is, what about our relationship to time can bring us more fulfillment and wholeness? And what practices might help us heal this relationship? Our wish to be more intentional about our time isn't as simple as cutting out dairy or sugar.

Senior editor for the New Yorker, science and technology writer Alan Burdick has a recent piece in the New Yorker about our ongoing human quest to understand time. He writes:

For more than two thousand years, the world's great minds have argued about the essence of time. Is it finite or infinite? Does it flow like a river or is it granular, proceeding in small bits, like sand trickling through an hourglass? And what is the present? Is now an indivisible instant, a line of vapor between the past and the future? Or is it an instant that can be measured—and, if so, how long is it? And what lies between the instants?

Burdick looked to St. Augustine of Hippo, a fourth century bishop in the early Christian church who tackled time as a phenomenon of the mind. British philosopher Bertrand Russell's History of Western Philosophy firmly located Augustine's theory of time beyond its theological significance. Augustine was "the first to talk about time as an internal experience—to ask what time is by exploring how it feels to inhabit it."

Augustine believed time is only a moment, and can only be measured as it passes. Listen to his own words:

What we call three tenses are only one. Past, present, and future are all immediate in the mind—our current memory, our current attention, our current expectations. The vital energy of what I am doing is in tension between the two. Time is nothing other than tension, and I would be very surprised if it is not tension of consciousness itself.

The Western canon of philosophical and theological traditions from which Augustine theorized understood the dynamic and unchanging part of our religious experience, and it is our spiritual task to navigate its limitations, rhythms, gifts and challenges.

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, God acts within time to influence God's followers and intervenes in history through the person of Jesus. In the Jewish tradition, God is the keeper of time, recording the fate of each person in the book of life, opened and closed only once a year at the Jewish new year. In the Hebrew scriptures, the wisdom tradition of Ecclesiastes reminds those who observe that life is cyclical from birth to death, we have bodies that grow, age and feel emotions, and that religious life involves the whole range of human experience: "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven."

While other theories of time have come in the centuries after Augustine, he named something fundamental about time which still resonates with us today. To heal our relationship with time, according to Augustine, we have to accept this tension and the nature of time itself.

At this, the new year, we are somehow more aware of this tension between what has come before and what will be. We sift through memory of the year gone to try to claim a space to create expectations of the future-- an ever elusive task. The poet Dana Gioia articulates this in his poem *New Year's*:

can this blur, this smudgy in-between,
This tiny fissure where the future drips
Into the past, this flyspeck we call now
Be our true habitat?

Some teachings from the Buddhist tradition embrace the tension of time as the primary spiritual task. Vietnamese Zen Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh's Zen lineage echoes this in his mindfulness teachings, perhaps the clearest example of Thich Nhat Hanh's theory of time is called: "Dwelling Happily in the Present Moment." He writes:

Aware that life is available only in the present moment, we are committed to training ourselves to live deeply each moment of daily life. We will try not to lose ourselves in dispersion or be carried away by regrets about the past, worries about the future, or cravings, anger, or jealousy in the present. We will practice mindful breathing to be aware of what is happening in the here and now.

When we say we want “more time” in our lives for the people, things and experiences we care about, I think what many of us mean is that we want a better relationship to the present. We want to understand the limitations and rhythms of time and navigate them as skillfully as we can, directing our time towards our relationships, our passions, and our purpose. For many of us, this requires us to pause and reflect on our lives-- to mindfully consider how we spend and waste our time-- and how we wish our lives could be different.

In a wonderful essay from author and spiritual activist Alice Walker, she names spiritual phenomenon of time she calls “The Pause.” She describes the pause as:

The moment when something major is accomplished and we are so relieved to finally be done with it that we are already rushing, at least mentally, into The Future. Wisdom, however, requests a pause. If we cannot give ourselves such a pause, the Universe will likely give it to us. And we find ourselves required to stop, to sit down, to reflect. This is the time of the universal place of stopping. The universal moment of reflection. As a culture we are not in the habit of respecting, honoring, or even acknowledging the pause. (Culturally the most common reference to the pause was given over to Coca-Cola, which promised “The pause that refreshes.” In other words, whenever there is a moment you are not busily doing something, *Eat. Drink.* And here’s what we want you to eat or drink.) The pause is a good time to listen, once you have inhabited Silence for long enough to find it comfortable. Even blissful.

So this is our opportunity to pause before rushing into the future, to consider our relationship to time, how we want to inhabit our present moments for the year to come.

Each of you have chosen to start this new year here in this sanctuary. I often begin our services welcoming us to this place of memory and hope. Memory--the experiences of our past which unite us in common purpose and experience, and hope, hope for the future expectation of our happiness and flourishing--individually and collectively.

The sanctuary remains the same as it was yesterday, and yet, we come to it each week anew to find meaning in the passing of time and to witness to our shared life as a community. Whether you are new here today or a long term member, may you sense that this sanctuary is a place wide and deep enough to hold your search for meaning and community as you grow.

Through the seasons of the new year we will honor and grieve our losses and lift up our joys, we will sing hymns and experience, again and again the beauty and transcendence of music. We will hear messages that heal, challenge and inspire us. We will make time sacred by enacting the rituals of our faith which bless and nourish us and give our lives meaning. And we will take our faith out into the world to bring a balm of justice and healing.

The pause is a good time to listen-- to our own deepest longings, to the needs of our families and to the cries of the world.

The sounds of the gong awaken us to this moment in time. We are here now, together, in these bodies, at this potent time in history. In his poem *To the New Year*, the poet W.S. Merwin writes:

so this is the sound of you
here and now whether or not
anyone hears it this is
where we have come with our age
our knowledge such as it is
and our hopes such as they are
invisible before us
untouched and still possible

This is the sound of the new year, if we have ears to hear it. The sound of the new year is the hush of prayer and quiet contemplation, the steady beating of our hearts and the rise and fall of our breath. We have come, with our lives such as they are, to welcome the new year in beloved community. The New Year's spirit revels in freedom, joy and abundance. It relishes the present moment, where anything is possible. May the promise of the new year unfold in beauty, for our lives, our children's lives, and for our world.