

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany
 “Abandoning Past and Future Lives”
 Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore January 4, 2009

Reading

I'd like to share with you this morning these selections from Buddhist meditation master Ajahn Brahmavamsa's pamphlet for beginning meditators. He teaches as part of the Buddhist Society of Western Australia.

Meditation is [a] way to achieve letting go. In meditation one lets go of the complex world outside in order to reach the serene world inside. In all types of mysticism and in many traditions, this is known as the path to the pure and powerful mind. The experience of this pure mind, released from the world, is very wonderful and blissful...

In the way that I teach meditation, I like to begin at the very simple stage of giving up the baggage of past and future...Abandoning the past means not even thinking about your work, your family, your commitments, your responsibilities, your history, the good or bad times you had as a child..., you abandon all past experiences by showing no interest in them at all. You become someone who has no history during the time that you meditate...In this way, you carry no burden from the past into the present. Whatever has just happened, you are no longer interested in it and you let it go. You do not allow the past to reverberate in your mind...

Some people have the view that if they take up the past for contemplation they can somehow learn from it and solve the problems of the past. However, you should understand that when you gaze at the past, you invariably look through distorted lenses. Whatever you think it was like, in truth it was not quite like that! ... Let all of the past go and you have the ability to be free in the present moment...

As for the future, the anticipations, fears, plans, and expectations, let all of that go too. The Lord Buddha once said about the future, "Whatever you think it will be, it will always be something different"! This future is known to the wise as uncertain, unknown and so unpredictable. It is often complete stupidity to anticipate the future, and always a great waste of your time to think of the future in meditation...

Recently I heard of one man on his first ten-day retreat. After the first day his body was hurting so much he asked to go home. The teacher said, "Stay one more day and the pain will disappear, I promise". So he stayed another day, the pain got worse so he wanted to go home again. The teacher repeated, "Just one more day, the pain will go". He stayed for a third day and the pain was even worse. For each of nine days, in the evening he would go to the teacher and, in great pain, ask to go home and the teacher would say, "Just one more day and the pain will disappear". It was completely beyond his expectations, that on the final day when he started the first sit of the morning, the pain did disappear! It did not come back. He could sit for long periods with no pain at all! He was amazed at how wonderful is this mind and how it

can produce such unexpected results. So, you don't know about the future. It can be so strange, even weird, completely beyond whatever you expect.

<http://www.bswa.org/modules/icontent/index.php?page=93>

Sermon

I would not know how enjoyable it is to live in the past had I not been quite ill as a teenager. I slept till noon, ate little, had no energy, lost a lot of weight and missed a lot of school. I was finally diagnosed with intestinal problems through exploratory surgery. During that time of misery, not knowing what was wrong with me, I expected to die young. I didn't imagine a future that included the good health, marriage, fatherhood ministry to this wonderful congregation, I enjoy today.

As I lay on my sick bed, I remember the delightful nostalgia I felt remembering my "younger days." It is an emotional experience those who are aged here might know far better than the younger among us. Nostalgia deliciously brightens memories of the past and erases the unpleasantness that might have also been part of that memory.

I recognized that nostalgia effect in a group called "Conversations Among Friends" that met weekly in the first congregation I served in Port Charlotte, Florida. A dozen or so retirees met every Tuesday morning. Sometimes they would talk about the sermon I'd delivered on Sunday or a current event. But reliably, the conversation would drift to the theme of "Ain't it Awful" often featuring disparaging comments about "Kid's Today" and reminisces about "The Good Old Days." I would often bring up the features of "the Bad Old Days" they were forgetting but my comments were brushed aside. They enjoyed basking in the glow of how things used to be, before the current travesty-de-jour usually blamed on the next generation. Horace Greeley quipped, "The illusion that 'times that were' are better than 'those that are,' has probably pervaded all ages."

This rosy view of the past depends on your social location. Things have never been better for the African American community about to see one of their own ascend to the Presidency. The growth of the African American middle class in the last 40 years is nothing short of amazing. Computerization and globalization have created great opportunities for the technocrat and information worker to strike it rich. Yet for manufacturing workers in Detroit and Rochester, the best years are long gone. The real estate and financial market crash has hurt them even more as many move toward retirement. I like how Presidential historian Doris Kearns Goodwin puts it, "The past is not simply the past, but a prism through which the subject filters his or her own changing self-image."

Most religions are obsessed with the segment of the past in which their founder lived. Southeast Asian Buddhists revere the Pali Canon that captures the breadth of the Buddha's oral teachings, copied down several hundred years after his death. Jews memorialize Moses' escape from Egypt and rituals and dietary practices

thousands of years old. Christians want to know who Jesus was and what he actually said and did. Moslems revere the words of the Prophet preserved in the Koran. Contemporary Muslim behavior is guided and circumscribed by that book and the record of Mohammed's life (peace be upon him). For most religious traditions, their founders reach forward out of the past to direct their follower's lives in the present.

Yet, however perfected and enlightened they were, they are now long gone and we imperfectly remember them. No matter how skillfully their words were recorded, their parables preserved and their answers archived, we will still not completely know them or even understand them. And even if we did, we will not be able to perfectly interpret them in this modern time.

Jesus knew nothing of birth control and stem cells. We have no record of how he felt about homosexuality. And given Jesus' enjoyment of turning the expectations of both the Pharisees and his disciples upside down, rational extrapolation of what he did say may not work. Jesus is often a cipher. For example, responding to a disciple who wanted to go home and bury his father he said, "Follow Me, and allow the dead to bury their own dead." (Matthew 8:22) The fellow was an enigma!

We Unitarian Universalists are not bound to the past, far from it. Post-modernist in sensibility from the start, we've critiqued the text and the history of Christianity asking uncomfortable questions. We've cut our mooring rope to any single tradition, lifting anchor and sailing out on the open sea of life looking for direct personal experiences of the truth. That anticipation of discovery has encouraged us lean into the future as we brave the winds of the present.

Unfortunately living in the future has its own set of pitfalls to which we, Unitarian Universalists, are particularly vulnerable. Rather than the past, we tend to enshrine the search itself and can be suspicious of finding any ultimate answers.

Anyone who has had a direct personal experience of transcending mystery and wonder knows that those experiences have a beginning and an ending. Almost none of us can remain in some luminous, mystical state. Once finished, they are crafted into memories that may or, more likely, may not reflect what really happened, creating our own personal mythology. I've seen this in my own life as I have shaped and reshaped my own seminal experiences that guide my inner life. My inspiration is in tension with the actual facts I can no longer fully retrieve, even with the help of my written records of those experiences.

The tension between the vision of the future and the effort to actualize it in the present divides us one against another. Moses' revelation of God's promise of Palestine to Israel is in explosive tension with non-Jewish Palestinian inhabitants of that territory for thousands of years. We grieve that division once again this past week as the peace in Gaza is broken and the innocent die. The American vision of Manifest Destiny justifying territorial expansion to take the Southwest from Mexico and extend our borders from sea to shining sea, decimated the Native American population and turned Mexicans into illegal immigrants on their own land. European territorial aspirations have cost millions of lives over centuries of conflict.

No religious tradition lives up to the grand vision of its founder. I'm often sympathetic to poor Jesus as I witness the folly done in his name. I've had a little of my own taste of this watching what happened after I left my little struggling congregation in Port Charlotte to come to Albany. I was their first full-time minister and I tried hard to set up a healthy vision for ministry. When I returned to speak to them last June, I hardly knew any of the current leadership. After nine years and several ministers, they were working on their own grand vision of the congregation's future. The current minister had taken my beautiful oil portrait painted by a talented member (now probably deceased) off the wall and stored in her closet. Of course she'd be happy to ship it to me if I'd like it.

To my mind, the most dangerous and destructive vision of the future is the concept of an afterlife. Generations of serfs, slaves and untouchables have tolerated poverty, deprivation, inequality and misery yearning for a better existence in heaven or the next incarnation. The wanton disregard of the earth by religionists planning eternal bliss singing with the angels makes me ill. The manipulation of the desperate and the young by terrorists molding them into suicide bombers, promising them eternal bliss as a warrior of the faith is even more offensive.

I deeply believe that the ends do not justify the means when it comes to afterlife planning. I completely reject believing in a God that would permit immoral action in this world to attain an improved afterlife status. Nor can I accept giving my allegiance to a government willing to wantonly sacrifice its vital youth and precious wealth in pursuit of domination and nationalistic glory.

To live a good, moral life grounded in this world today, I believe we must abandon trying to recreate a mythologized past and striving to attain a fantasy of an afterlife. While I honor the best practices of human civilization in the past and the lofty visions of human civilization in the future, I know for sure they are all flawed, inaccurate and incomplete. And I know, real people responding consciously in the present moment can muddle through.

My call today is to loosen our grip on the ideal, whether inherited from the past or imagined in the future, and to learn how to work skillfully with the present moment. As some anonymous sage put it, "The past is history, the future's mystery, the present is a gift – that's why it's called the present."

Working skillfully with the present moment drew me to meditation in the 1980's. In those days, I sometimes found myself regretting "missing the moment" and not saying or doing something that would have been helpful to another. A fear of want, inherited from my depression era parents, limited my generosity. A lack of self-assurance might mean a missed gesture of kindness. My past interfered with my ability to act in the present.

Other times, ambivalence about what I should or should not do, caused me to miss the moment as I projected my actions into the future. When I lived in California in the 1980's, I wondered if writing that letter to my congressman against the Contras would influence him? Angry at Reagan's secret war in Nicaragua, I wondered if it

would make any difference if I got arrested protesting at the Concord Naval Weapons station? Today it is easy to wonder if my little efforts to reduce greenhouse gases add up to anything? The ends-and-means-evaluation-process can get murky and confusing quickly.

Developing the capacity to stay with the present moment operates differently. Instead of being bound by the past or the future, it sharpens my awareness to what is alive and moving in me in this moment. Where can I make a difference right now? What is coherent with my values as I understand them right now? What can I do today that actualizes my values in this moment?

My practice of meditation helps me attune myself to what is alive and moving in me right now. Through developing my awareness of sensations, feelings and thoughts as they arise and pass away, I can be more fully in the moment as it happens rather than regretting what I wished I'd said and done or frozen pondering what I should or shouldn't do. And meditation is just one way to develop this attunement to the present moment. Yoga, martial arts, physical and psychotherapy, prayer, contemplation, and journaling are other ways to look inward and observe the experience of life in real time.

One of the living masters of this approach is Eckart Tolle. He is someone who has had an awakening experience to living in the present moment and managed to center his life in that experience. To help guide us toward what living out of the "now" might look like, I'd like to share a few quotes for you to contemplate that come from his 2005 book, *A New Earth*:

- Awareness is the greatest agent for change.
- You do not become good by trying to be good, but by finding the goodness that is already within you, and allowing that goodness to emerge.
- Being spiritual has nothing to do with what you believe and everything to do with your state of consciousness.
- All the things that truly matter - beauty, love, creativity, joy, inner peace - arise from beyond the mind.

Unitarian Universalism, unchained to the past nor bound to an exclusive path into the future, has the potential to grow into a religious tradition that develops our capacity to be awake in the present moment and respond creatively and compassionately to it, guided by the wisdom of the ages and the possible future outcomes of our actions. In the present moment there is a living and breathing freedom to be lovingly authentic and genuine. The price for this freedom is complete responsibility for our actions. That responsibility is crucial to our inner growth as we learn from the results of our inwardly guided actions. When we discover our own inner guidance process and learn how to follow and trust it, our lives will be transformed for the better as will the world around us.

This is the radical freedom and personal responsibility I practice in my own life and I offer to guide you towards as you participate in this congregation. There are many ways and levels of commitment to approach this awakening process in the present moment. Let me assure you, I am far from perfected in the practice,. And, I have a growing appreciation and experience with it and offer it to you as you seek to deepen and broaden your spiritual life in our congregation. In the crucible of our shared action and reflection, growth happens.

The spiritual truth we seek ultimately isn't "out there," its "in here." Let's find it together.

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