

## What Won't Go Away

A Sermon Preached by David Breeden at Eliot Unitarian Chapel on Dec. 30, 2007

I remember my grandfather, not long before he died, saying that the best thing in life is walking barefoot through new-plowed ground.

As I child, with my life before me, I thought—that's very strange. And a little pathetic...

One of the myriad forms I have filled out as part of the ministerial discernment process asked a simple question: what, so far, has been the high point of your life?

I've been alive for half a century, so I had to give that some thought—I had several things to choose from. I've graduated from various university programs four or five times now. I've published some books and articles and been honored for various achievements of various sorts. I have three children—all delivered naturally—so I've had some experience of that process. But the highpoint of my life I've concluded was the birth of my first child. After that experience, life looked different, somehow. There was magic.

Did I have time to savor the moment? No. I was 26 years old. I had to go to school; keep my job; pay the bills; do the laundry; all the day-to-day things that life requires. I didn't have time. Yet, somehow, despite my busyness and inattention, life gave me something marvelous.

What that moment was is what I wish to think about today. I wish to consider memory and time.

I.

The Gregorian calendar, the calendar used by most of the Western world, tells us that another year will soon be ended. It is traditional at this time of transition to pause and to think about our actions in the past year. We pause; we reflect; we consider—as the Anglican phrasing would have it—what we have done and what have we left undone. It is time to consider memory and time itself. Out of this we accomplish another or our yearly traditions: we resolve ourselves concerning what we shall do with our new birth in a new year. . .

Of course we know that **when** a new year begins is utterly arbitrary—the earth in its wobbly circuits is predictable but never exact, and various cultures have developed various ways of marking years. What is consistent is the desire to mark the transition.

It appears the Babylonians were celebrating the new year—and making resolutions—by 2000 BCE. Strangely enough, though we have the model of Rosh Hashanah in Western Culture, the concept of a religious function of the new year never developed around the Gregorian calendar. Still, we do have the **shadow** of a religious ceremony concerning the new year—when we. . .religiously. . .repent of old habits and behaviors and make resolutions about new ways of being.

A bit of Googling reveals the top ten resolutions of a new year:

Spend more time with family and friends.

Exercise

Lose weight

Quit smoking

Enjoy life more

Drink less

Get out of debt

Learn something new

Help others more

Get organized

All are worthy goals, and their obverse reveals a damning vision of what we are when we don't watch ourselves, when we don't take the time to be aware: We don't exercise; we gain weight; we smoke; we get bored with life; we drink; we spend; we entertain ourselves with vacuous entertainments; we are selfish and unorganized. Too often our default mode is overdoing the destructive and short-changing our best selves.

Yet we have this door, this rebirth so that we may consider how to be more aware. January is named for Janus, the Roman god of passages—literally in the case of hallways and doors, figuratively in the case of time. Janus has two faces—one looking to the past, one to the future. Besides being the god from which we derive the name for January, Janus also lends his name to the **keepers** of hallways and doors—jan-itors. Janus has no fun myths attached to his name because he is exclusively a Roman god, with no counterpart in Greek myth, and the Romans tended to be practical people not given to story-telling.) Janus is the god of luminal spaces; the god of the spaces in-between. Janus guards the portals and the hallways because those spaces frighten us. What would horror films and suspense films be without their doors and hallways and the dangers that lurk there? We are afraid of the spaces in between. This fear springs, I suspect, from our knowledge that the spaces between represent new possibility, and new possibility frightens us creatures of habit, we people who slip so easily into default mode. We may want to spend more time with family and lose weight and exercise and quit smoking and drink less and help humanity more. . .but we know it feels safer and more comfortable ignoring our family, eating lots, sitting around, smoking, drinking, and thinking only of ourselves. That's our comfort zone. That's our happy place. Down that long hallway, behind that **new** door there may be a homicidal doll or a guy in a hockey mask with a machete or a chainsaw.

I have to admit that I'll be embracing at least five of that top ten list of New Year's resolutions. As usual. I figure that I've lost something between twenty and fifty pounds per year for the last twenty years or so—that's something like half a ton worth of dieting. Yet, I will re-solve yet again. In the very teeth of reality.

## II.

The idea of passages and portals flies in the face of another thing we know: life whirls on in huge circles that never stop. It is we, humans, who stop, not time. That's one of nature's little perversities. Another is that we have to make so many major life decisions when we are too young and too inexperienced to make them. Our career choices; our marriage partners. Where we're going to live and how. Kids tend to come along just when careers are at their most critical stages. And so we spend too much time working and worrying. Too little time with the kids. And then they're grown up and gone. And we have regrets. And memories. And resolutions about spending more time with family.

And it's not that we don't try! When my kids were small, I took to heart the advice that they're only young once. I made many resolutions over those years to spend more time with my kids. Yet, fact is, no matter how I tried, I never managed to spend as much time as I would have liked. I **knew** the time was precious and fleeting; but there was nothing I could do about it— if the kids were to be housed and fed, I had to work long hours. And so it goes, the balances and compromises; the resolutions and shortcomings. The regrets and the memories. We can be as conscious as we like—reality still will hold sway.

Cycles and circles.

There's never enough time. For loved ones. For diets. For exercise. For ourselves. And so another drink, and a good midnight snack sound like the best way to end a long, stressful day, a day that will most likely be a lot like the last one.

Life is indeed what happens to us while we're making other plans, even when the plans include savoring life's moments. It's one of the contradictions that makes the human condition a confusing condition. Those contradictions fund a huge part of the self-help industry; and it forms the basis of meditative practices of various sorts. The central insight of Buddhism is, after all, that now—this moment— is everything. Considering the past and resolving for the future is, therefore, inherently a contradiction that can lead only to suffering. As the old Japanese saying goes, "Demons laugh at talk of next year." But how are we going to pay the electric bill? Welcome to the human condition! The cycles and circles.

Those of us with some gray hairs—apparent or not—know that as we age, we accumulate regret and memory a lot like an old truck acquires mud on a wet country road. Our aunts, our uncles, our siblings and parents and friends age and weaken and die. Our kids don't do as we think they ought. And along the way we accumulate regrets and resolutions. Cycles and circles.

In the interest of full disclosure I will admit to you that I've been married a few more times than is healthy. Now you might ask what business I have counseling anybody concerning marriage. All I have to say in reply is that you don't want an admiral who has never been to sea. . . Or perhaps a minister who doesn't know regret. I've come to accept that I was at least fifty-percent responsible in each of those cases. But also I've learned that maybe I wasn't all that much more than fifty-percent responsible in most of those cases. I've taken responsibility; but I've also learned to forgive myself. It's a tough balance. And it's a moving target. I've been to sea. I know what it means to keep going. Despite a half-ton of failed dieting; despite too many divorces, I believe that cynicism is a luxury we can ill-afford. I believe in getting up and trying again.

Emily Dickinson is perhaps the greatest poet on the subject of regret. She says,

That sacred Closet when you sweep—

Entitled "memory"—

Select a reverential Broom—

And do it silently. (#1273)

In another poem Dickinson says,

No Passenger was known to flee—  
 That lodged a night in **memory**—  
 That wily—subterranean Inn  
 Contrives that none go out again—  
 (#1406)

Emily had not studied Buddhism, but she knew where lies the great danger: we can live in memory and regret. We can check in as if it were a hotel. And never leave. It may be a subterranean inn, as Emily Dickinson portrays it—an inn like a tomb. It may be the Bates Motel where the showers are not entirely pleasant. It may be the Hotel California where you can check in any time you like. But you can never leave.

Memory is a dangerous thing. . As the great essayist Michel de Montaigne put it, “Nothing fixes a thing so intensely in the memory as the wish to forget it.”

III.

Or, as science fiction writer Philip K. Dick defined reality as “that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn’t go away.” That is, I think, an insightful and profound definition.

Memory makes us what we are. Does it go away? Those of us who know people with Alzheimers and similar forms of dementia have seen what it means to lose memory, “Where wasteful Time debateth with Decay,” as Shakespeare puts it. We are our memories and regret can, as Emily Dickinson points out, bury us. But it can also go away.

Mnemosyne, from whom we get the term mnemonic, as in “mnemonic device,” was the mother of the muses. Memory is, then, according to the Greeks, the mother of the arts. I think they were right. Emily Dickinson went to town on her memories. She also went into catatonic depression. Modern psychology began with Sigmund Freud’s great insight concerning memory and what the repression of memory can do to our psyches. Later insight has shown us that Freud got a lot of things wrong, yet there’s no doubt that our memories make us what we are, and that we can re-write and re-process memories, or at least try to, because some memories are more than we can bear. We continue to learn what violence and sexual abuse do to children; we continue to learn what warfare does to young people; and the more we learn, the more we realize that some damage can’t be fixed: the brain is permanently changed. Reality sets in.

What doesn’t go away, even when we stop believing in it? Time, certainly, does not go away. Cycles and circles. . . Forget the human definitions of time; forget the Gregorian calendar; we know that time passes because we observe growth and decay, in ourselves and in people and things around us. This fact leaves us at the portal of Janus, looking forward to a future which may or may not be realizable, and with a past available to us through the function of memory. And memory is often the Bates Motel. And so off we go to the shower—where regret is waiting.

As the old saying goes, “A clear conscience is the sign of a bad memory.”

We are our memories, our stories about ourselves, yet our memories and stories are often self-serving or self-depreciating; or faulty to the point of fiction. And they, as do we, go away. We are, indeed, as Shakespeare put it, a “quintessence of dust.”

#### IV.

This time of year we pause to consider what we can do better. Resolution implies that we’ve tried another solution before. It is as RE-solution. (The first one. Or dozen. Didn’t work.) The fact of resolutions gives a wink and a nod to our human frailty, but it also offers us the chance to try one more time, with feeling. The fact of resolutions calls us on our cynicism and says this new year really is a new chance to get it right.

No, I’m not going to resolve to make no more pointless resolutions like the guy who gave up watermelon for Lent. I intend to try. . .one more time. . .with feeling.

As a poet, someone who spends a good bit of time focused on images, I’m often amazed at what does and doesn’t stay with me. Why are some moments so vivid, others hazy or forgotten? When I’m working on a poem or story, as I look back at scenes from my life, the details I remember are often not what might be considered high-points. Though I’ve had lots of birthdays, I remember a particular birthday with a particular present; though I’ve had many Christmases, I remember one Christmas most vividly in every detail; I remember the light on a particular table on a particular afternoon, though the image has no connection to anything that might be called important. Because the Buddhists have it right: the moments are all we have. Those have not yet gone away. And they are enough in the cycles and circles that make “reality.”

My grandfather knew a real moment—a moment of clarity—walking barefoot through new-plowed ground. Forty years on, I don’t think it’s as strange or as pathetic as I once did.

This time of year the Gregorian calendar places us at the portal that Janis guards. I intend to take more time to enjoy family and friends and life this coming year. I intend to eat and drink less, to exercise more. I intend to learn something new and help others more. This is my re-solution to the challenge of memory and time.

We look forward; we look back, knowing that, as the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein said, “Nothing is so difficult as not deceiving oneself.” We take time to clarify:

What is it, after all, that we mean to be doing with our lives?

What is it that deserves our devoted love?

How is it we intend to spend this tiny blip of time we call our existence? What have we done and what have we left undone?

How can we. . . this time. . . keep to our re-solution, keep our re-solve, and keep the first things first in our lives?

Our best selves may not be so good as we’d like; but they are sufficient; and we will keep trying.

So may it be.