

Tempus Fugit

The Rev. William E. Nelson, Consulting Minister

Kearsarge Unitarian Universalist Fellowship

The Stone Chapel, Proctor

Andover, New Hampshire

May 31, 2015

“Tempus Fugit” is a Latin phrase that is usually translated into English as Time Flies. It relates to the sensation when we’ve been deeply involved in a pleasurable activity, immersed, perhaps, in overwhelming joy, or fascinated by some new wonder. Time flies, indeed. So much so, that we have the feeling of not knowing how that happened. We’ve been temporarily set aside from the demands of the world around us, incognizant of the ticking clock that orders our ordinary lives into days, hours, and minutes. Time flies, and carries us away with it.

But let’s look for a moment at this common Latin phrase, “Tempus Fugit,” a little closer, from a different perspective, a parallax view of the word “Fugit.” When we check our Latin dictionary, we find that “Fugit” has little to do with “flying.” A more accurate translation is “flees.” “Time flees.” Time itself doesn’t fly at all, it flees! Do you see the difference? Instead of the phenomenon of our losing track of time in those moments or hours of oblivion, instead of time’s “flying,” time is getting away! To flee is to escape, to vanish to slip out of one’s grasp or control. This is time’s running out on us, depriving us of our comfort, our pleasure, our harmony within, our peace of mind, because we have “a million things to do,” and “so little time.” From this angle, time is the opposite of that time of which we couldn’t keep track because of our joy, it’s a very uncaring, quite unfriendly enemy who’s run away. Does it occur to us that fugit is the Latin root word of “fugitive?”

Worrying about time, of course, can take up a good deal of our time. We say, for example, we “waste too much time.” Or we “bide our time,” or try to “keep track” of time. And from time to time we “take our time.” Physicists such as Albert Einstein, of course, have long spent time just thinking about time – which could of itself end up making “time fly,” we might say.

But this is not the moment to introduce any of us to time as a component of a theory of relativity. I wouldn’t know where to start, for one thing. I just wonder about time, that’s all. And as I’ve wondered about it I thought maybe it would be a good discussion for a Sunday morning. Time, after all, is a mystery, and religion . . . – and here I’m assuming that we who gather here are part of a religious community – religion deals with mystery. Philosophers and scientists deal with mystery as well, but I like the subtle spice that religion mixes in with all the

debate. Religion has many facets, but it's primarily made up of storytelling, and it's storytelling that defines for humans who they are, what they are, when they are, and where they are – the four principles of journalism and most forms of literature.

Let's begin with "who we are." We aren't born wondering about who we are but it doesn't take long as we grow and mature and create an identity for ourselves. Whether we're nine or ninety, the creation goes on. The image keeps developing, like a Polaroid photograph (remember those?) Or to bring it up to date, like a "selfy," taken as many times as one wants, in any place, instantly. But the *real* "selfy," the *enduring* selfy, can't compare with the self we can image in our minds through memory, through remembering how life's been, what's happened over the years, how it's all come together in the form of who we've become. Memory is a good thing. But it can also be a not-so-good thing. I've noticed that over the past couple of decades I've woken up in the morning (not every morning, but enough to be significant) remembering things I'd much rather have behind in a kind of bad-memory trash can. But it's not so easy, is it? What's there is there, and it doesn't seem to want to go anywhere. These hauntings are where they belong, in the past; but when the past comes calling, there they are, right there on that cozy pillow.

On the other hand, memory includes the good things, things to celebrate and for which to be grateful. These, too, are in the past, and when they show up, we feel good, don't we? The not-so-good and the feel good are all tossed into the mix, and our task is to sort through it all and come up with something solid.

In one of his sermons, the late Forrest Church puts it this way:

As long as we perceive ourselves as a fixed self or identity rather than a consortium of personae that take turns appearing on our stage, we will lapse into narcissism. We will think too highly or too lowly of ourselves. Both misperceptions throw us out of balance. If each of us is made up of an amalgam of selves, they are also composed – not perfectly but tellingly – by memory. We remember – literally "put back together" – who we are. So, if one of your selves misbehaves, don't overreact. Just call for reinforcements.

Call for reinforcements? Who are these reinforcements? For us, I believe that the congregation comes into play as a reinforcement. So do family, friends, neighbors, psychotherapists, and whoever else we might rely upon. But at this moment, I'm thinking about church. The mystery of the past comes with lots of joys and lots of concerns, but it's here that we have an opportunity to deal with life's mysteries under the transcendental umbrella of our faith, and the tradition that that faith has in our lives.

“This life,” said Martin Luther, “is not being devout, but becoming devout, not being whole, but becoming whole . . . not a rest but an exercise. We are not yet but we shall be. It is not the end, but the way.”

These are not the words of a dogmatist, but of an explorer into the wildness of the human spirit. “. . . not being devout, but becoming devout . . . not whole, but becoming whole. . . .”

This, it seems to me, is one very important aspect of what we’re doing here. We’re here to explore “who we are,” and what it means to be alive, to be at peace, to know what it is to be part of a community where we support one another in our life journeys. It takes time, and time is what we’re talking about this morning, isn’t it? We’re talking about “real” time, and how we can live in “real time.” Which brings us, of course, to what “real” time is. When we talk about time we’re usually talking about the past, the present, and the future. The past is what’s behind, the future is what’s ahead, but what about the present?

Einstein, in his relativity theory proposal, said (as we heard earlier in this discussion) that past, present, and future all exist simultaneously. For me, the most difficult of these three is the “present,” due to its resistance to our enquiring minds. The present, that is, is undefinable. It’s undefinable due to the circumstance of its fragility. Once we determine that the present is “present,” it disappears into the past. In an instant, it’s gone, captured by the encyclopedic past in which it will dwell forever. And in thinking that the future can be “real” is ridiculous, since we have no idea whatever what the future holds. (I’ve heard and repeated the aphorism, “If you want to make God laugh, tell God your plans.”) The poet and essayist William Carlos Williams wrote: “Time is a storm in which we are all lost.”

So what have we left in this mishmash? Sometimes, it may be that we just have to wait, and see what happens. But waiting is difficult, isn’t it? We want things to clear up NOW.

Albert Camus wrote this: “Note . . . that it is so interminable and exasperating to watch the hand turn for five minutes on a clock face that it is almost impossible to do so.” Have you ever tried to do that? I’ve tried it, and I don’t recommend it. Five minutes is three hundred ticks of a second hand. You don’t have to suffer from Attention Deficit Disorder to give up on that little challenge.

The mystery and wonder of time is something is something that, as far as I’m concerned, is something I’ll never fully understand. That’s what makes it so wonderful. As we leaf our way through our individual pasts and form pictures and narratives of who we were in those moments of the long-ago, we need to remind ourselves that the past is, by definition, behind us. As we turn the pages of our personal histories, we need to forgive ourselves for whatever short-fallings we may have exhibited, forgive others whose short-fallings have astounded us, and try as best we

can, to be in the present and look towards a future. Along the way, we have to remember that we are but little specks in a universe that's beyond our capacity to fully comprehend.

This, dear friends, is the “religious” part of the whole business, the hunger in humankind that moves us towards the eternal, the ineffable, the “Holy,” we might say. In the Hebrew tradition, the writer of Psalm 90 says, “. . . a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past, or like a watch in the night.” That kind of puts us in our places, doesn't it? But what it really does, is carry into a future that holds promise for every one of us, that lets us know that we are precious yet fallible individuals who have a place of dignity reserved for them right here on this earth. The past is what it is, the present is difficult to pin down, and the future? Who knows? But whatever it brings, the important thing is to be grateful. “Amor fati” – Love your life!