

## **“Like a Wheel Inside a Wheel”**

Andy Karlson, Intern Minister

Mt. Diablo Unitarian Universalist Church

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This is an appropriate time of year to be thinking about time. The way we experience time is so central to our existence that it is often easier to take it for granted than it is to examine. My hope today is to take advantage of the time that we have together to look more closely at how our culture does time and how that impacts us; to explore some other possibilities and how they might change and improve our lives; and to wrap up in such a way that you have time left in your Sundays for friends, family, and fellowship.

Today is December 27<sup>th</sup>, 2009. Christmas was two days ago. New Year's is in four days. The Winter Solstice was not quite a week ago. This is always a sort of an in-between time of the year for me, and I would guess it feels that way for a lot of you all, too. We're still at the bottom of the year, but starting to come around on the other side of the wheel. The days are slowly starting to get longer, but still so close to the solstice I don't really see the change yet. The post-Christmas slump, the feeling of let-down from weeks and months of anticipation, planning, saving and scheming, all of it over in a few moments of torn paper, scattered ribbons, gratitude and disappointment. There's New Years to look forward to, but for me there's also the knowledge that once the big ball has dropped in Times Square it's a long stretch until Valentine's Day, and then longer until Easter.

This is also an in between time in a larger sense. After today, there are only four more days in the year 2009, four more days in the decade that no one seems to have a name for. The oughts? The naughts? The naughties? Four more days, and it's history: we'll be firmly in the teens of this new millennium. From this in-between time, we can take a clearer look at the forces that shape time for us, and hopefully see new possibilities for ourselves.

Thinking about Christmas makes me realize how much my sense of time depends on the holidays, and how much shape those few special set-aside days give to the year. As I look forward to each in holiday in its turn, they help me remember that each day is both like the last and completely different. Holidays help me remember that while time only moves in one direction, it also rolls and spins like wheels inside of wheels inside of wheels. Moments, days, seasons, years, whole eras repeat over and over again, each distinct and unique and at the same time deeply the same, in the same way that different actors play the same roles over and over again, bringing new emphases and interpretations to words and actions that are at the most fundamental level unchanging.

### *So how does time work?*

Time is a funny thing. St. Augustine said of it, “What then is time? If no one asks me, I know: if I wish to explain it to one that asketh, I know not.” Defining time is slippery work, in part because it is so fundamental to our experience of the world, and because it can be different for every person. There is an aspect of time that is relentless and unchanging, that it only moves in one direction like an arrow and at an absolutely steady rate. This is the mechanical time that Alan Lightman wrote about, and that the ancient Greeks would call Chronos.

Then there is the aspect of time is subjective, that darts and stalls, that drags and soars, that Alan Lightman called body time and that the ancient Greeks would call Kairos. Kairos is the kind of time that slows down and speeds up, that makes some moments in our lives stand out; the kind of time people talk about when they say *Carpe Diem*, or seize the day. The Greeks portrayed Kairos as a winged man standing on tiptoes (because he was always on the edge of running off) with a funny haircut: he had a big tuft of hair on the front of his head, and was bald behind. This was because the whole point of Kairos was that he had to be grabbed hold of as he raced past. If you were quick enough to seize the moment (aka Kairos) you could reach out and grab on to the big wisp of hair on the front of his head. If you waited too long on the other hand, he would rush by and your fingers would slip off his bald head. I can think of many times in my life when I’ve hesitated as Kairos went by me and my fingers squeaked on that slippery scalp, and I would bet that the same is true for you, too.

*So how does time work in our culture?* I think that the idea of time that underpins our dominant culture outlook is steeped in a particular, apocalyptic branch of Christian thought. This school of thought says that the physical world had a definite beginning when it was created by God. Then, when Adam and Eve ate the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge that the world was broken and pain, suffering, and evil were introduced to the world. Then the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross wiped clean the sin that stained every human that was the consequences of that fall. Since that sacrifice, adherents to this theology have been waiting for Jesus to return to Earth, which would result in victory over evil, the end of the physical world, and the beginning of a timeless, endless supernatural existence, with the elect raised up to eternal unity with God in heaven, and the damned cast down to an eternal separation from God in hell. In this view of time, time moves relentlessly from known beginning to known end, and life is very goal-and-product-driven. It’s not about the journey, but rather about the destination.

Other cultures, religions, and societies see and experience time differently, and explicitly recognize and honor the way in which time turns and comes back in on itself like the snake that swallows its own tail. Hinduism, Buddhism, many American Indian beliefs and religions, Neopagan and Wiccan spiritualities and faiths all see time as an ever-turning wheel of repeating themes and moments, from the smallest scale of the death and renewal of individual cells in our bodies; to the cycles and patterns we experience in our day to day lives; to the social cycles we live through; to the life of the universe itself.

*What do we gain from the way we experience time, and what do we lose?* We do one kind of time—mechanical, linear, Chronos time—very well, and our economy depends on it. Any organization whose employees arrive at work depending on when they wake up, for instance, will not be effective. Our economy also depends on the constant growth and increases in productivity that our focus on goals and accomplishment makes possible. However, we are overbalanced with our focus on effectiveness, productivity, and efficiency. We don't do nearly as well with recognizing the cyclical nature of time, and that, I think, causes us to miss the truly special, magical moments when they are in front of us.

*Problems with being overbalanced on one time-view:* Another problem that I see with this linear experience and orientation of time is that it overemphasizes the long term and future planning, and can hamper our capacity to be in the moment, to appreciate the present.

*Personal level? Interpersonal level?* Also, the constant looking forward and goal-driven mindset that drives our culture and economy keeps us focused on virtuousness and seeking perfection. The new, stylish car. The six-pack abs. The advanced yoga postures. The best spiritual practice. We have a tendency to set ourselves goals that are either unattainable or unfulfilling, and to my mind that are counter to the work of being human. The task of being alive as I see it is maintaining balance: balance between the needs of the self and the needs of family and community; balance between taking and giving; balance between work and play; balance between living in the moment and planning for the future. Focus on goals and accomplishments, and making the self more perfect, denies the work that it takes in the moment, the power of making mistakes, the constant struggle and wrestling of being alive and in community with other people.

The brittleness of perfection is an illusion, a false idol. It is a denial of humanness, and it can crush your spirit and break you, because you need flexibility to not be shattered by this world's losses, betrayals, and hurts. That flexibility depends on our ability to be present in the moment, to be gentle with each other, and to be understanding of ourselves, all of which are capacities we already have within us, that a small shift in the way we look at time can help to bring out.

*Societal level?* On a larger scale, our overdeveloped sense of linear time can create conflict and confusion as we interact with people and traditions from different cultures. A movie came out recently about the end of the world—I haven't been to see it yet, but some of you might have, or at least seen the posters for it on BART, huge computer-rendered scenes of unimaginable chaos and destruction in Washington DC, Rio de Janeiro, Los Angeles. The movie is called 2012, and takes its title and conceit from a misappropriation and misreading of the Mesoamerican Long Count Calendar, which was used by the Maya and other Central American peoples. This calendar measures time in repeating cycles, and according to it the cycle that we're in now ends on a date that translates to December 20, 2012, according to the Gregorian calendar system that we use in our culture. For the Maya and other peoples who used the Mesoamerican

Long Count calendar, the end of a cycle would only be cause for a big celebration—there have been three other time cycles since the creation of the world, and the ending of the fourth means nothing more than it is time to begin the fifth cycle. There is no archaeological evidence that the Maya or other peoples thought that the end of this fourth world meant the end of all things. So all the hubbub and anxiety around the date 2012, reflected in the movie as well as in a whole cottage industry of books and seminars, is the result of a misapplication of our apocalyptic view of time, and is an injustice to the culture and people that produced it.

*Solutions/possibilities; what we might gain from a shift in our time-view* I talked a little bit about how making a shift to pay more attention to the nature of time as a wheel might give us the gift of greater flexibility. Thinking about time as linear and relentlessly pressing forward towards an end, whether that end is the miniature apocalypse of death that each of us will face, or the major apocalypse of the end of all existence, can fool us, can convince us of our lack, and drown us in fear. An idea of time that honors the cycles of each day, month, year, and age lets us be mindful, helps us to embody the serenity prayer; the serenity to accept that which we cannot change, the courage to change what we can, and the wisdom to know the difference between the two.

Let me let you in on a little secret: in your life, you will make mistakes, and you will fail at many things. You will not become perfect, or even approach perfection. You will continue to work on the same stuff you've always worked on. And that's okay. In fact, it couldn't be any other way. The brittleness of perfection is an illusion, a false idol. It is a denial of humanness, and it can crush your spirit and break you, because you need flexibility to not be shattered by this world's losses, betrayals, and hurts. That flexibility depends on our ability to be present in the moment, to be gentle with each other, and to be understanding of ourselves, all of which are capacities we already have within us, that a small shift in the way we look at time can help to bring out.

*Closing words, hope for going forth into the days, weeks, months, years, and decades.* As we prepare for the end of one of our yearly cycles, and the beginning of another, these are my wishes for myself and for each of you in the New Year: that we find balance in our lives and in our relationships with each other; that we not work too hard, or be too lazy; that we temper the forward-focus that our jobs and culture might demand of us with moments each day where we look at our lives and appreciate where we are and what we are doing; that our joy in times of plenty and happiness be tempered by the knowledge that there will be lean times ahead, and our sorrow and suffering during difficult and painful times be leavened with the understanding that the wheel is always turning, and that our pain and grief will pass. Indeed, the wheel's turning has already brought us through the longest night of the year, and will shortly bring us through the death of 2009 and the birth of a new decade. The rainy season will end, the long days of spring and summer will come, we will mark out that time by celebrating holidays and holy days, and before you know it it'll be time for Christmas again. And in between will come sadnesses and joys, some new and some old, as the wheels spin on and on, world without end, amen.