

THIS MOMENT NEVERTHELESS

By David Herndon

All Souls Sunday

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One of the people whose work I encountered while I was in theological school was David Tracy, a Catholic priest and theologian who taught at the University of Chicago Divinity School. In one of his lectures he referred to three challenging existential realities which he memorably summarized as Finitude, Transience, and Mortality. I believe that Finitude, Transience, and Mortality are quite worthy of our sustained attention. Thus, for November, our spiritual theme of the month here at First Unitarian Church is Finitude. We will explore Transience next year, and Mortality the year after that.

Finitude refers to the challenging existential reality that as human beings we have limits. Our minds are wonderful and amazing, and the human family certainly has not exhausted the creativity that may be drawn forth from our minds. But our information-processing capacity as individual human beings is limited. Our bodies are wonderful and amazing, and much of what our bodies do requires no conscious effort. But the aging process appears unavoidable, and our physical abilities become increasingly limited. Our very existence is wonderful and amazing, and most people have many remarkable experiences over the course of their lives. But our span of years has an end, a conclusion, a limit.

We often help children grow by encouraging them to challenge and overcome limits. We encourage them to walk and read and operate computers. We encourage them to try new things, and in particular we encourage them to try things they believe they cannot possibly do. We say to them, "You can do it!" We say to them, "You can accomplish whatever you would like, so long as you are willing to put forth effort." We say to them, "The sky is the limit."

As we grow older, however, we begin to realize that all this advice about being able to accomplish whatever we would like is not entirely accurate. For example, one's talent as a baseball player may allow one to play at the top of the minor leagues, but somehow, no matter how hard one works, no matter how deliberately one trains, no matter how long one waits for the lucky break, one never actually becomes a major league baseball player. Many individuals begin to see the contours of their lives emerge in defining ways around mid-life: this is my career path, these are the people who are in

my family, this is where I live, this is what I can expect to accomplish. Instead of having a universe of imagined possibilities, one has a single actual reality. The transition from a universe of imagined possibilities to a single actual reality can be difficult for many people, and contributes to the so-called mid-life crisis that many people experience. Awkwardly, although we receive much encouragement about challenging and overcoming limits when we are young, advice about how to handle the growing limitations of our lives is rather scarce. Nobody is eager to rain on anyone else's parade of limitless possibilities.

Most Unitarian Universalists nowadays are reluctant to claim absolute certainty about what happens after death. We may have our private beliefs or hopes, but we tend to focus our religious attention on living well in this life for the sake of this world here and now. This approach rests on a sound intellectual foundation, but it leads to a particular kind of anxiety, an anxiety which recognizes that we may have no reward other than what we experience when we are alive, that we may have not opportunities other than what we have when we are alive, that we may not have any other chance to accomplish anything other than what we have when we are alive. It's a pretty unforgiving view of life: you have one chance to get it right, one chance to live well, one chance to fulfill your promise or actualize your potential, and if you mess up or miss out, well, too bad, because this one life is all you get. For achievement-oriented people, including many Unitarian Universalists, this view of life offers little reassurance.

The story we are associating with the theme of Finitude is from the Buddhist tradition. The story deals squarely with the existential reality of Finitude, in particular the existential reality of having a finite or limited span of years. Here is the story:

Once upon a time there was a monk walking through the woods. He noticed that a tiger was stalking him. He quickened his pace, but to no avail. Eventually he came to the edge of a sheer cliff. The tiger was blocking the way back; the monk could only go over the edge and hope for the best. Over the edge he went, but he found a small tree growing out of the side of the cliff, and grabbing hold of the tree he swung suspended in space, but out of reach of the tiger above. Looking down, the monk concluded that he would most likely survive if he dropped the rest of the way down; but then he noticed a second hungry tiger on the ground below looking up at him. And so the monk decided he would simply wait until the tigers gave up and went away. But alas! It was not to be, for now two mice were gnawing through the branch of the tree, and they could not be scared off, no matter how much he shook the tree. The monk's fate was sealed. He calmed down, and looked around, and noticed a small raspberry bush not far away. Reaching out, he gathered a small handful of berries. By now the mice had gnawed nearly through the branch of the tree. But the monk ate the berries, one by one, and said simply, "How delicious!"

We can interpret this story in different ways. For example, one interpretation points out that the monk was just as delicious to the tigers as the strawberry was to the monk. This interpretation then goes on to use this observation as an illustration of the Buddhist doctrine that there are no distinct and separate selves. But for this morning, I would like to focus on the attitude of the monk. Confronted by the inevitable limitation

of the end of life symbolized by the tigers, and unable to stop the flow of time symbolized by the mice, the monk says yes to the present moment nevertheless, making the best of what is within his control, and letting go of worry about what is not within his control.

Many of us need an occasional reminder about the importance of enjoying the present moment, being mindful of the present moment, appreciating the present moment. But it is not enough simply to be mindful of one moment at a time, for many moments derive their meaning from the contributions they have received from previous moments and from the contributions they will make to future moments. Yes, one should focus on the present moment so that one can enjoy and appreciate what is happening here and now; and yes, at the same time one should focus on the connections between past, present, and future.

Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr said: “Nothing worth doing is completed in our lifetime; therefore we are saved by hope.” Niebuhr was being a little dramatic in this sentence, for of course we all regularly do things that we find worthwhile that we can complete in a few moments, or an afternoon, or a couple of years. But Niebuhr does point to a significant insight. Larger purposes that transcend our own particular interests may take generations to accomplish. For example, consider the struggle for racial justice here in the United States. The Abolitionist movement got started in the early decades of the nineteenth century, but the struggle for racial justice is far from complete. Even now, those who are deeply engaged in that struggle may not be around to witness the final fruits of vindication and victory. Thus, if you need quick results to keep you engaged in that struggle, if you need quick results to keep you from feeling demoralized and frustrated, it will be difficult for you to stay engaged in that struggle. Niebuhr asks, “If results are not quickly forthcoming, what saves us from despair?” Niebuhr says that we are saved by hope. This is a finitude issue. As finite beings, as creatures who are confronted by the challenging existential reality of finitude, why should we bother becoming engaged in a struggle that has been going on for two hundred years and may continue for another two hundred years? Niebuhr says that hope saves us from despair and keeps us going even though we personally may not be around to witness the end of the struggle.

I think Niebuhr is correct on an individual level: as individuals we are saved by hope. But what saves us on a community level is feeling connected with those who have come before us, those who struggled for justice in their time, and with those around us now, struggling for justice in this time, and with those who will come after us, those who will carry the struggle for justice forward. Feeling these connections means loosening the boundaries of self: “We are the boat, we are the sea,” as Lorre Wyatt says; “I sail in you, you sail in me.” Making these intergenerational connections truly effective, however, means sharing resources forward from one generation to the next. For example, those who built this building shared their resources with future generations; and we can do something similar for those who will come after us.

I would like to close my sermon this morning with another story. In this story, Sheila Kay Adams tells about one memorable event in her childhood in the remote mountains of North Carolina, and she offers a memorable image of living life deeply despite the challenging existential reality of finitude.

The cemetery that was just down the road from my home place was a wonderful playground for me and my cousins. It lay nestled between two ridges and was peaceful and quiet. I was never really frightened while playing there, but I do admit to being uneasy at times. Mainly because of the [spooky] stories the grown-ups told us on cold winter evenings. And then they would scratch their heads in wonder when we woke up screaming a few hours later.

Anyway, one warm summer day I remember watching [my grandfather] and two other men struggle with what appeared to be to be a giant white tombstone. It looked as though they were trying to rip it from the head of the very first grave you came to after you'd left the path leading to the graveyard.

"Whatcha doin'?" I asked my grandfather.

Without looking up he answered, "Movin' the tomb rock over a bit so it won't be right in the main path."

I stood there shaking my head back and froth, liking the feel of my hair brushing against my shoulders and my arms that stuck out like sticks from my sleeveless shirt.

"Are you gonna move the coffin too?" I asked.

Already I could envision the telling of the story to my friends. Maybe, if I was allowed to stay with them, I might get a glimpse of bleached bones or decaying flesh. How exciting, how horrifying! This could definitely raise me to a position of envy among all my cousins in Sodom. Already in my mind's ear I could hear their squeals and groans.

"Move outna th' way, honey child," my grandfather said, interrupting my thoughts of fame, coffins, and what lay within.

I moved back a few steps, and the men wrestled the tombstone into a freshly dug hole on the other side of the path. The two men helping [my grandfather] kneeled to pack the dirt in around it.

"You gonna move the coffin too?" I asked a bit louder.

"Nah," he said. "We're just gonna leave him lay; he'll never know the difference.

"But you ain't supposed to walk on graves! Mama said so. She busted me last year for jumpin' on Uncle Arnol's grave. And that was a week after decoration Sunday. She said she would've killed me if I had've done it Decoration Day, what with all them people watchin'. She said walkin' on graves showed bad disrespect for them that was dead."

The three men laughed, and [my grandfather – my mother's father –] took out a dingy white handkerchief and wiped his sweaty face. He looked over at me and smiled. He slowly waked over to where I stood and laid a gentle hand on my shoulder.

"Your Mam's right. You shouldn't walk on graves outen respect for them that's passed on. But we can't move this fella. He's been gone from this world a long time and if'en we tried to move him it'd just be a big [mess], what with the coffin all rotted and him a spillin' out the holes. There's probably not much left down there anyways."

He pulled me close, and for a moment I buried my face in his faded work shirt. I breathed in the old-man scent of him – the sweat, the chewing tobacco, and the clean, outdoors smell that always clung to his clothes.

Then he pulled away, patted my head, and winked.

I looked up into his face, and my eyes met his. I saw the laughter breaking up the blueness there beneath his white, bushy brows, and he said, “Far be it from me to let you get away with somethin’ your Mam wouldn’t let you do.”

He held out his hand to me as he began to dance a little jig on the grave. I reached out and placed my hand in his. He began to sing the words to an old familiar fiddle tune, “Cumberland Gap ain’t my home and I’m gonna leave old Cumberland alone.” I moved my feet in time with his, and we laughed and did a right arm swing, our feet now flying above what remained of a man long gone.

Now, years later and a woman grown, I always pause when I enter that graveyard. A smile spreads across my face. In my mind I can see the two of us as we must’ve looked. A skinny little girl with brown eyes too big for her face, with the promise of all life had to offer stretching out in front of her, and the old man in his final days, his faced tanned and creased with age, and his eyes like blue crystal – dancing. Two children, actually, with the same blood flowing through our veins, and the same song in our hearts.¹

So may we dance also in the midst of our limitations, feeling the spirit of life rising within us, and singing a song in our hearts.

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¹ Sheila Kay Adams, Come Go Home with Me (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), pp. 41-43.