The Transient and the Permanent

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Unitarian Universalist Meeting House January 4, 2009

The turning of the New Year has no more inherent meaning in the bigger scheme of things than does the turning over of the odometer on your car; it is a cultural phenomenon, not a natural one, a byproduct of our particular calendar, and yet we traditionally mark the occasion, celebrate with horns and bells and toasts. And in the sphere of opinion, pundits, bloggers and preachers engage in trying to make something of it.

Here at the Meeting House, Dave Monroe gave us a thoughtful discourse last week on memory and time. The Jug Band was all set to weigh in with our musical ministrations on Wednesday night, but then Mother Nature decided to preach her own sermon by blanketing us in eight inches of snow and showing that there are forces even more powerful than First Night. Wasn't it a wild and a beautiful night? I hope you were all snug and warm and safe that night; Jacqueline and I had the good fortune to be invited to the house of our neighbors Eugene and Cecilia Clancy, where there was Irish music and food and good cheer. Let it snow, let it snow.

And the next day, leaving nothing to chance, I engaged in my yearly Southern superstition: I made and ate hoppin' john, which is black eyed peas and rice, and collard greens. In the south, hoppin' john consumed on New Years Day is supposed to bring you luck in the coming year, and collard greens is supposed to bring you money. I could use both. I hope the way the New Year began for us can be a good omen, of coming together and making merry in the face of the storm, of a turn in fortune. As a country, as a world, we are in a terrible situation, one which is only partly of our making.

Dave Monroe pointed out last week that the good old days ain't what they used to be, and probably never were. We are all inclined to make good old days, to make gardens of Eden from which we've been cast out. An older generation of American conservatives may locate the Garden as the Eisenhower Fifties, when postwar prosperity reigned and before the cultural meltdown of the Sixties. Boomers, by contrast, may claim the Sixties as the Good Old Days. Gen Xers may cast the Eighties as the time to remember. But each of these periods had its dark underside. The Fifties were good if you were a white middle class male, but not if you were nonwhite or female. The Sixties were times of turmoil; the promise of a new authenticity and a world built on peace and love got sidetracked by drugs and the Vietnam War and narcissism. In the Eighties, our country virtually abandoned the hope of making the world fairer as the gap between rich and poor grew ever wider and we ceased to care about using fossil fuels.

William Faulkner said that the past isn't dead – it isn't even past. All the words and actions of these bygone eras continue to reverberate in the present, and it is hard to find solid ground on which to make a measurement of where we are at the moment. This is why I turned in my title to one of our Unitarian prophets.

In a recent newsletter column, I noted that two of the phrases which Barack Obama used in his victory speech on election night came from a Nineteenth Century Unitarian minister, Theodore Parker. Parker was a transcendentalist, a great disciple of Emerson, and his most controversial sermon was preached in 1841, entitled "the Transient and the Permanent in Christianity."

The main point of Parker's sermon was that the religion that Jesus taught and which God showed to humanity through Jesus' ministry, is unchanged from one age to the next, because its truths are eternal, while the religion about Jesus, with its creeds and doctrines, rituals, denominations and sects, are transient, always in flux. I think that Parker's title forms a good

question to be asking ourselves as we pass into 2009: what is it in our communal life, our national life, our parish life, our personal lives, which is permanent, and what is it that is transient? We have such a welter of information coming at us; maybe asking what is of this time and what is timeless will enable us to pay attention to the questions which truly need our attention.

To begin with, one painful and specific question on everyone's mind is, is this economic debacle part of the permanent or the transient? Some of you are old enough to remember the Great Depression, while the rest of us know it from history books and the recollections of our parents. Are we in for a return to the hardscrabble life of the Thirties? Are we in that deep a hole, and is it going to look this way for the rest of our lives? Fear is abroad in the land – as Dave Monroe was preaching last week, I couldn't help thinking how scary he looked at the Solstice Celebration as the dragon of Depression.

We have certainly seen many transient economic cycles in recent decades. We have seen the dot-com bubble inflate and burst. We have seen the real-estate bubble inflate and burst. We have seen contraction, recession, and expansion. Fortunes have been made and lost. What is permanent here? Is the fluctuation of the business cycle the only permanence we have on the economic scene?

It feels like it. I have been impressed over my lifetime with how capitalism presents itself politically as a conservative force but is culturally the most radical agent of change in the whole picture. Think about the landscape in the town you grew up in. That landscape is totally changed now – unless a specific effort has been made to preserve things, the old trees, the contours of the land, many of the old houses and other buildings are gone and there will be new stores, new structures, new looks presenting themselves every few years. New England, of course, is famously opposed to change and the forces of preservation here are stronger than elsewhere, but even here, development makes relentless changes in the physical environment.

If now this engine of change is weakening, we may have a fundamental shift. In the modern age we have become used to an accelerating pace of change. Sure, it causes future shock and all kinds of dislocations, but since the industrial revolution and the development of modern capitalism, we also take it for granted. If now the pace of change slows to a crawl, that lack of change would be a major change. To put this in perspective, for most of human history, this year looked pretty much like last year and like next year. Medieval peasants tilled the land in the same way for centuries. Medieval scholars went back and forth over the same arguments for hundreds of years.

In the last two centuries, by contrast, there has been such an explosion of ideas and knowledge that we can't keep up with it, and if any of us is inclined to go back and look at the hottest issues of just a half-century ago, they will seem quaint and beside the point because we move on so quickly.

Our common experience is that everything changes and that is why we tend today to favor those philosophical points of view which hold that everything is always in flux. Change or impermanence is fundamental to Buddhism and Hinduism, and is reflected in thinkers from Heraklitos to Whitehead. So we approach Parker's dichotomy, the transient and the permanent, by asking is anything permanent these days?

A couple of centuries ago the answer would have been yes and people would have pointed to the rocks and mountains. A mountain such as Yosemite's Half Dome depicted on the cover of the Order of Service is a perennial symbol of longevity. But since the early Nineteenth Century, geologists have been telling us how the supposedly fixed rocks and mountains are actually in constant motion, what was once seacoast is now desert and particular ranges have sprung up and worn down several times in the history of the earth.

And the equivalent change agent in the biological realm is the process of evolution. Prior to Mendel and then Darwin, the general notion was that species were fixed – you had the same

types of plants and animals today as you had when God created the earth and Adam named each species. And even after Darwin, there are some species which are more or less permanent – the amoeba looks pretty much the same today as it did millions of years ago. But for those animals and plants which engage in sexual reproduction, the story is one of ever-increasing complexity. There is tragedy in this story, as evolution leads to some blind alleys and many species become extinct. But for those species which are evolving, such as our own, the long arc of history shows an ever-increasing complexity.

So is anything permanent? The thinkers who would say yes most enthusiastically are the followers of Plato; they would say yes, ideas are permanent. For Plato, the ideal circle you can imagine is more real and more permanent than any circle you can actually draw. The formula for the circle, the formulas of mathematics and physics – $E=mc^2$ – perhaps these are the permanent entities. In biology, we can say the permanent thing is the process of mutation and adaptation.

Now logically we can quibble with that, for it's my understanding that the laws of physics did not come into play before the Big Bang 15 billion years ago. So maybe Einstein's famous formula hasn't existed at all times, but let's get practical: if it has existed since the Big Bang, it's permanent to all intents and purposes. And in biology, if it's been operating since the dawn of life forms, that's permanent enough for me.

Plato sill has a big place in Western thought, but he came under severe attack in the Post Modern movement, which questions whether there are such things as essences, timeless truths, something solid. Postmodernism is sometimes described as the collapse of the grand narratives, and Plato's idealism might be one of the grandest. Just as the solid rock has given way to the fluid one, and the fixed species gave way to evolving ones, so solid ideas now can be seen as conditioned by the times in which they are born and the social location and power interests of those who maintain them.

But even if we grant the permanence of the laws of mathematics, physics, and biology, this still provides rather cold comfort to the human condition. We're in a world of hurt here. Many of us are peering into the abyss, we don't know what the future holds, and to say that we can rely on matter to equal energy and for the inverse square law to hold does not really give us much basis to get out of bed in the morning.

I think we need to look elsewhere for our permanence, and the elsewhere I think we need to look is to our two religious traditions, Universalism and Unitarianism.

Historically, Universalism is bottomed on Universal salvation, the idea that God is too loving to condemn any of her creatures to hell. As I have said before, this has some strong and rather counter-cultural implications for our thoughts about time. Orthodox Christianity, and particularly the Calvinist variety, measures everything *down* from the Garden of Eden. There was an initial state of grace, and then Adam and Eve ate the apple, were expelled, and the human race was tainted with original sin from which only a few are predestined to be rescued by the grace of God. Universalists have always said this paints God as a sadistic monster.

If, on the other hand, we embrace a God whose love is so powerful as to overcome all evil, we are measuring *up*, not down. We are looking forward to a state of grace, not backwards. The good old days are ahead of us, not behind. Our philosophy is one of ascent, not descent.

Now we are a theologically schizophrenic denomination because our Universalist side is based on a divine determinism, while our Unitarian side is based on free will. The Unitarian affirmed that God was loving and benevolent, and agreed that the Calvinist doctrine of inherent depravity was bad. But they never said everyone is automatically saved. Rather the early Unitarians embraced an idea called Arminianism: we are neither inherently good nor inherently bad, but good or bad tendencies dominate according to our character, will and knowledge, and we each have the power to achieve salvation in this life by our actions.

These are inconsistent world views and they have never been reconciled since the two denominations combined in 1961. But when I put the Universalist notion of Ascent, of upward progress, together with the Unitarian notion of personal responsibility, what I come out to is that, whether or not we want to call it God – and I know that many of you will shy away from using that word – we can have faith that there is a real force for love acting in the world, but *it acts through us*, and it imposes on us a responsibility to act with love. To me, this is the distillation of what Jesus was teaching, and the most important thing about him.

It is a structure, a framework for salvation, it is not salvation itself. It envisions a future beloved community towards which we can be working.

It does not necessarily envision personal life everlasting, and does not even guarantee the success of the human race as a collective entity. Rather, it places the fate of the world squarely in our hands and invites us to put our hearts and minds and sinews to the task of grasping the arc of history and bending it towards justice.

This is the permanent in which we may ground ourselves: as the old hymn says, there is more love somewhere. We spend a lot of our energies looking for love and trying to prove ourselves worthy of love, and the love we need is there all the time. It is all around us. It is as pervasive as the air. This is the permanent condition.

And surely the Buddha was right when he said that we make ourselves unhappy by trying to latch on to the transient, to make it stay. I find this in my life by the day, by the hour. The Christmas season always brings up memories of Christmases past, of joys of the family in which I grew up and the family which I raised and the places and people I will never see again. I expect it is much the same for you, for most of you had lives elsewhere before you moved to this place. We can choose to dwell on the past and what we don't have anymore, and keep ourselves unhappy by the clinging, or we can look at the beauty and richness that is here before us. Spiritual wisdom is living fully in the moment.

So we embrace the transient, and yet we can ground ourselves in the permanent with the faith that the arc of history is bending toward the just, the true, the humane, knowing that we ourselves have a right and duty to grasp that arc and give it our own tug.

Reinhold Niebuhr's serenity prayer well expresses the conundrum. We want to learn to accept with serenity the things we can't change, which is most things. But we shouldn't shy away from changing the things we can, for indeed our Unitarian and Universalist faiths give us an imperative to work for justice and the beloved community. But the big task is to have the wisdom to differentiate between those things we must accept and those we must try to change.

Maybe even this framework for love and salvation is cold comfort to some of you this morning. If you're looking to your minister to make a New Year's prediction about whether the value will come back in your investment portfolio, you will come away disappointed. Though that may be the most immediate source of your anxiety and unhappiness, I can't solve it for you. But if you want to know how the wisdom of our two combined religious traditions speaks to our present parlous situation, I have given it my best shot.

Many of us will put our hopes in the new administration, and there does seem to have been a political sea change in the country. I wanted to be there on the mall in Washington for the inauguration, but instead I will be in Charleston where Jacqueline is giving a pre-inaugural concert. But the political winds and the new administration's policies are the prime example of the transient. Lay not up for yourself treasures on earth where moth and rust doth corrupt and where thieves break through and steal. Let us rather lay up for ourselves treasures in our hearts, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through and steal.

When we are grounded in the permanent, we may embrace the transient, knowing it is transient, and live fully in this moment. Happy New Year

Reading

"There are but two possible philosophies of life, only two possible explanations of human existence. We are here. Where did we come from? How did we get here? What are we here for? Which way are we going? There are but two answers to this series of questions. We mean there are only two possible rational explanations of the simple fact that man is. ... These two philosophies, which include all special philosophies, can be designated by two words. One is the philosophy of Descent. The other is the philosophy of Ascent. One says man has come up from where he once was to where he is now. One says man has fallen. The other says that man has risen. One says that through the wickedness of our first parent, or the weakness of the race, or our own individual weakness, the history of humanity is like the history of a plant whose root dries up and whose leaf withers and whose blossoms fade. The other says that in spite of all weaknesses, whether racial or individual, man is like a seed cast into the soil. Little, obscure at first, he has deepened his root, widened his branches, grown to greater and greater strength. The philosophy of descent puts creation in the past tense. It says that man was made. The philosophy of ascent puts creation into all the tenses, past, present, and future. It says that man is being made. The philosophy of descent sees the perfect specimen at the beginning of beginning of the series. The philosophy of ascent sees the perfect specimen at the end of the series. Behind one series is an angel and an Eden from which mankind has been driven by its own vicious curiosity. Behind the other series is an animal and a cave, which mankind has grown by the inherent propulsion of vital processes of development."

Philosophy and Faith of Universalism, Rev. Frederick W. Betts 1916