

Still Taking Back Our Time

Jamaica Plain, October 23, 2005, Rev. Terry Burke

"I can't believe how busy I am." I hear this over and over again. In trying to decide on the cover for this week's order of service I chose an idyllic, hopeful scene, as opposed to one of a desperate person falling into a maelstrom. That's how many people feel these days.

Today is the official "Take Back Your Time" Day, part of a campaign sponsored in our area by the Mass. Council of Churches. This date was chosen because it's about 40 days from the end of the calendar year. Western Europeans work an average of 40 days less a year than we do. The idea for that 40 days is to try to set aside several blocks of time for family, friends, exercise, God, time that would otherwise have been spent working. Our busyness is a spiritual problem. This is the third time I've spoken on this topic (the other sermons are on the church website), and it touches a raw nerve for most people. Trying to set limits to our busyness is an ongoing struggle in which we need to support each other.

One of my favorite musicals is *Guys and Dolls*, a great tale of love and redemption. One of the characters in the play, Miss Adelaide, is a star stripper in a nightclub. In one of her routines she leads other strippers as she sings, "Take back your mink, take back your pearls, what makes you think, that I was that kind of a girl..." While singing, Miss Adelaide and the other strippers are taking off the items described and piling them up on the stage. She laments that, instead of a free offering, the gifts were given with the expectation of payment in return.

Perhaps a contemporary version would go, "Take back your cell phone, take back your email, what makes you think, I want my relationships to fail..." At the end of the routine in *Guys and Dolls*, Miss Adelaide and the other strippers grab their piles of goodies off the stage and say, "Well, wouldn't you?" Likewise, it's hard for us to live without the technology that's driving us to distraction.

Some of you know about my ongoing battle for months with Verizon over our home DSL service. In order to be better available by phone, we needed to be able to use our internet service and phone same time. Shortly after we got the DSL service, it stopped working, and for months we couldn't get it going again. Technical support people in places like Pakistan or Thailand would tell us that there were problems with DSL service in our area. After trying endless suggestions of these tech support people, our friend Jim Solomon, who is a software engineer, came over recently to handle the call for us. As a result of his efforts, Verizon agreed to "escalate" our case and send out an actual technician to our home.

We agreed to be available the next Wednesday between 8AM and 5PM, a nine hour block. That Tuesday, we received a phone message that we had to schedule an appointment with a technician. After 45" in the phone queue (I recently learned the expression "to die on hold"), I was asked to try some of the procedures we had tried many times before. Finally I was told that I could have an appointment, but not necessarily on Wednesday. Verizon would call back at 10PM and tell us when the appointment would be. At 10PM they called to say, "Please call Verizon at 7AM tomorrow" (Wednesday) to see if we had an appointment. I spent half-an-hour Wednesday morning with a woman who kept trying to find out if I should stay around all day waiting for Verizon. Finally, she told me that Verizon would call us when they knew when the appointment would be. "Would that be in an hour, a day, a week, or a month?" I asked. She didn't know.

Half-an-hour later the technician showed up unannounced. He found the problem in the phone lines in our basement. Now I can make telephone calls while the kids do homework on the internet. Is that progress after all our efforts? I'm not sure.

We live in a society where people want things now -NOW! In 12 step programs there is a saying, 'What is urgent is not usually important, and what's important is usually not urgent. I participated in two memorial services this week - one was for Yardley Beers, Dorothy's husband, a gifted physicist and wonderful human being, a man who in his 70's

took piano lessons and got a B.A. in English history. The other memorial service I took part in was for my 30th Harvard reunion. Since 1975, 46 of my classmates have died. In the light of death, the urgency of answering a cell phone doesn't seem that important.

In our reading today from Matthew, Jesus says to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself. While that love of neighbor is truly radical, it's also clearly OK to love yourself. Self care is OK - physical, mental, spiritual, and relational. Finding a balance between the legitimate needs of others, and our needs, is something we do in the light of God and community.

Since I spoke to you last on this topic, one of the things that I have done to find balance and combat the frenetic busyness is to start running again. It takes me away from the phone, I get some exercise, and I run in a park setting that gets me out into nature. Our son's college search/application process is also an almost daily reminder of the too swift passage of time, the inevitability of change, and that endings can be beginnings. The start of the church year this Fall has been a special joy for me - I'm grateful to be here spending time with such remarkable people in this community.

I also delight in my new friend and colleague Rabbi Victor Reinstein. As many of you know he is starting a new synagogue in JP, Nahar Shalom. This week we had a clergy meeting in Victor's sukkah. For the Jewish holiday of Sukkoth, families build a temporary booth or sukkah to eat their meals in, remembering the temporary dwellings of the Exodus. The sukkah is also a reminder that we need to be willing to be on the move to grow spiritually.

The sukkah is supposed to be open to nature, and Victor's congregation had decorated it with flowers, branches, stickers of frogs and Sponge Bob, and a hanging cloth fish. One of my other colleagues asked Victor about tithing and financial giving in ancient Israel. His fascinating thoughts about tithing I will share with you another time. However, Victor also talked about the half-shekel tax before Passover. This nominal tax, about .25, was to be paid by all. Everyone could afford it. No one of means could pay more than the

set amount, however. And it was a half shekel tax to show that we all need one another to be whole.

All of us dwell in temporary dwellings. All of those dwellings are precious. I need my church neighbor and my church neighbor needs me to determine what is important and what may be merely urgent. As a Unitarian Universalist congregation we provide a spiritual connection that draws on the past, points to future generations, and helps center us in the present, so as to help one another take back our time.

Those are my thoughts. What has been your experience, what has worked for you? How have you fared?