UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST
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Spirituality · Community · Justice

For the Time Being
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The blurb for this service was written three months ago, at the end of September, when I had not yet even been here with you all a month. Feeling a need to talk about time, to explore a sacred text, I noted this would be "a love letter and a challenge."

It will indeed be both. We will begin with the love letter. At the end of this chaotic time of this chaotic year, I believe we may need one.

Beloveds, I will tell you a story. In February of 2017, I traveled to the Philippines - the literal other side of the world, the farthest I have ever traveled - to visit a former partner and very close friend. I had just left a corporate job I'd been in for fifteen years, because I had just been accepted to Meadville Lombard Theological School to formally begin this path to ordained Unitarian Universalist ministry that led to my presence here, with you, today.

But this is not a love letter to my former partner, though I do care for him deeply, still. It is not even a love letter to myself, scared and brave and bold as I was, deciding to uproot my entire life as I had known it to begin the work I felt called to do.

In part this is a love letter to a book. One day, while I was in Manila and just a few days before we were due to go to the beach for a brief stay, I decided to buy a book. I had many books with me, on my Kindle, but on the beach I wanted to unplug entirely. I didn't want to worry about getting water and sand on my Kindle; I wanted to feel the weight of a paper book in my hands, the cover getting greasy after I'd applied sunscreen, the sand gritting into the pages when the wind kicked up.

The first thing I picked up when I walked into the bookstore was this book [hold up], Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being.* It was colorful, it was on sale, it was written by a

woman, and when I flipped it open and saw the author biography I saw the line “Ruth Ozeki is a novelist, filmmaker, and Zen Buddhist priest.” I was intrigued. But I told myself not to just buy the first book that caught my eye; I walked all over the three floors of that bookstore, but in the end, I marched right back downstairs, picked up the book, and bought it.

I devoured this book the way I feel like I read the most important, exciting, interesting books - the ones you both want to rush through AND want never to end. I read it, wanting to know more and wanting to linger. I read it, knowing that in some ways the gift of fiction is to take you deeply inside the lives of other people, and that it is inevitable that comparisons will be made. Inside that book were choices and changes; chaos and love and complexity.

It’s tempting to sit here and present a book report. It’s almost impossible to explain what this book is about, you see, but it’s great fun to try. I am not going to tell you what the book is about, because it is about too many things. It is about being human. It is about being a time being.

The dictionary definition of “for the time being” is “for the present; until some other arrangement is made.” At the very beginning of the book we learn that, for several of our main characters, “A time being is someone who lives in time, and that means you, and me, and every one of us who is, or was, or ever will be.”

So this is a love letter to this book in large part because this book is a love letter to you and to me and to all of us; all of us time beings.

A Tale for the Time Being opens with a quote from Zen Master Eihei Dogen, founder of Zen’s Soto school, from his work *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye.* The eleventh chapter of the Treasury is titled “For the Time Being.”

“For the time being, standing on the tallest mountaintop,
For the time being, moving on the deepest ocean floor,
For the time being, a demon with three heads and eight arms,
For the time being, the golden sixteen-foot body of a buddha,
For the time being, a monk’s staff or a master’s fly-swatter,
For the time being, a pillar or a lantern,
For the time being, any [ordinary person],
For the time being, the entire earth and the boundless sky.”

Every one of us who is, or was, or ever will be.

We are mere days from the end of 2019. I have personally always felt a great pressure at this time of year - to reflect on what has gone before and to plan for the future, to somehow make a coherent narrative of a complicated series of moments that we label “a year,” to spend time dissecting all my own personal shortcomings in order to come up with a resolution. Why we do we try to resolve so much at a time when our resolve is at its weakest? We are tired. We have been pulled in many directions. We have tried to pay attention to friends, family, neighbors, strangers working stressful extra hours at low-paying jobs, and all of it can leave us feeling empty. Hollowed. Why then carve into that hollow? To change it, all we must do is give ourselves the time to allow it to refill.

The time.

Where will I find the time?
How can I make the time?
What is the best use of my time?
Where did the time go?
What time do you have?
Does anyone really know what time it is?

Here is a part of the love letter of this book I will share with you as a direct quote. “Both life and death manifest in every moment of existence. Our human body appears and disappears moment by moment, without cease, and this ceaseless arising and passing away is what we experience as time and being. They are not separate. They are one thing, and in even a fraction of a second, we have the opportunity to choose, and to turn the course of our action either toward the attainment of truth or away from it. Each instant is utterly critical to the whole world.”

Whoa! No pressure, time beings!

It might help to have this quote in context. It is a part of a letter written by a Japanese *kamikaze* pilot to his mother. The letter is found in a plastic bag, next to a diary written by a teenage girl which is also in a plastic bag, and they are both inside a Hello Kitty lunchbox which is wrapped in several layers of plastic. This package washes up on the shore of an island in British Columbia, arriving from Japan after the tsunami of 2011. This is only a small part of what this book is about, which is why I am not spending too much time telling you what this book is about. After reading that our young and terrified pilot has written how crucial each moment is, we next read: “When I think of this, I am both cheered and saddened. Cheered at the thought of the many instants that arise and are available to do good in the world. Saddened by all the misspent moments that have

piled on top of each other and led us to this war."

Observing my own idiom, here is what is inside - spending time. Misspent moments. At the end of the year, I fear, too often we are spending our time tallying our time on a balance sheet and finding ourselves wanting. We hollow ourselves out and do not allow ourselves the time to replenish. Fellow time beings, let us take a breath.

[breathe]

Here, a brief caesura, a point between the love-letter and the challenge. This week I learned a heartbreaking story. How many of you are familiar with the Christmas truce, when Allied forces and German forces ceased fighting on the front lines during World War I? It's a beautiful story. These soldiers, perhaps thinking of the misspent moments of war, chose to do good with these moments. They stopped fighting, and lifted their voices in song - not just traditional Christmas carols but also that age-old favorite for New Year's celebrations, "Auld Lang Syne."

The story I learned this week is that two years later, in November of 1916 at the end of the one of the longest and deadliest battles of the war, the Battle of the Somme, there were young soldiers heard singing in the trenches. And this is what they sang. "We're here, because we're here, because we're here, because we're here."

[pause]

We are here...and I'm glad you're still with me, because it is time for the challenge. I don't think it has to stop being a love letter, because the two are not mutually exclusive. No one can love us or challenge us better than a fellow time being, after all.

The modern American idiom of "for the time being," again, carries the connotation that we are simply waiting "until some other arrangement is made." But our tale, our love letter, our challenge as time beings is to learn with our full selves that there is no other arrangement. We are what we have. We are here, because we're here. We are enough.

And yet… How many of us make New Year's Resolutions? Quick show of hands? Maybe not now, but ever? It's most of us, I'm sure. Yet time and again we are reminded that time beings are of and within time; that each moment is a new moment and our full reality at the time, and that not doing a thing we said we would do one time is not a judgement on us or a failure for all time; it is simply a moment. There will be another one now. And now. And now.

In recent years I've heard of a different practice for the New Year - one I find more reasonable and more uplifting than a resolution. How many of you set intentions for the new year, or have heard of the practice?

I have not made resolutions for many years. And truth be told, I was skeptical of the intention business at first too. The date of the start of the year is essentially arbitrary, after all. A promise I make to myself or an intention that I set should not need to be tied to a specific day in the middle of the winter. I should be able to set goals or promises or intentions at any time. But then last New Year's Day, January 1 2019, I went for a walk. I go for a walk many days, honestly, but since it was the first day of a new year I did have a certain expectation. Perhaps I would be given a sign. Some indication of what my year would hold in store. I took a walk on a path that leads about a mile north of my house, on a small road near a horse farm. At one point I saw a herd of bounding deer, and my heart leapt at the sight of them, thinking surely this was my sign. Now I can't say exactly what I thought a bunch of deer was portending for the new year, but it felt pastoral and lovely. As I turned the corner at the small road to start down the long hill back towards my house, I turned onto the shoulder of a much larger road with no sidewalk. I was absorbed in my own thoughts, earbuds jammed in my ears, listening to a podcast. A car was turning right onto the larger road as I was, and suddenly I realized it had stopped and the woman driving the car had rolled the window down.

"Do you need a ride?" she called.
I snapped out of my reverie and took out my headphones. "What?" I called.
"Do you need a ride somewhere? Are you okay?"
"Oh! Oh gosh, no thank you, I'm just walking home, it's not far. But thank you! Thank you so much for asking!"
"Happy New Year!" she called, driving away.
"Happy New Year!" I called, waving, my heart overflowing with joy.

I had been wrong about what my sign was.

My phrase for the year became "radical kindness."

"Many instants arise and are available to do good in the world."

Let me return us briefly to the text, to consider what we may each do with our moments. The teenage girl who wrote the diary which we found in the Hello Kitty lunchbox along with the letters is speaking of her great-grandmother, a Buddhist nun named Jiko: "Old Jiko is supercareful with her time. She does everything really really slowly, even when she's just sitting on the veranda, looking out at the dragonflies spinning lazily around the

garden pond. She says that she does everything really really slowly in order to spread time out so that she'll have more of it and live longer, and then she laughs so that you know she is telling you a joke."

How often do we actually savor time? That quality which allows us to live human lives?

That is part of the work done at this time of the year, I think. The part where we look back. If we can be kind with ourselves, there is a gentleness to spending time with memory - good or bad, it may inspire us to make new moments, new memories, with a different aim in mind. If each instant is crucial to the whole world, why revisit old ones?

Our minds, our hearts, our bodies - they are muscle and flesh as well as thought, sense, and memory. The more we exercise a muscle, the easier it is to repeat the movement, and the stronger we become. The challenge at this time of year is to sample memory, to taste of it - is it sweet or bitter? - and to reflect upon how that flavor enhanced our lives. Even the bitter serves its purpose, has its place on the palate.

And if we turn our minds to the future? Let's return for a moment to our young protagonist and her great-grandmother, on a visit to a beach near the temple that is Jiko's home. "'It *is* different, Granny. The whole point of surfing is to stand on top of the wave, not underneath it.'
'Surfer, wave, same thing.'
I don't know why I bother. 'That's just stupid,' I said, 'A surfer's a person. A wave is a wave. How can they be the same?'
Jiko looked out across the ocean to where the water met the sky. 'A wave is born from deep conditions of the ocean,' she said. 'A person is born from deep conditions of the world. A person pokes up from the world and rolls along like a wave, until it is time to sink down again. Up, down. Person, wave.'
She pointed to the steep cliffs along the shoreline. 'Jiko, mountain, same thing. The mountain is tall and will live a long time. Jiko is small and will not live much longer. That's all.'
Like I said, this is pretty typical of the kind of conversation you have with my old Jiko. I never completely understand what she's saying, but I like that she tries to explain it to me anyway. It's nice of her."

The motif of the wave exists throughout the book; not just in oceans but in physics and quantum entanglement, what Einstein called "spooky action at a distance." If our impulse, as we regard the future, is to immediately rush out to the ultimate conclusion, it's not just the collapsing of our own wave, our own quantum state - it's the heat death of the universe. It can be tempting, when we try to look ahead at a large chunk of time -

like a year or a whole lifetime - to become overwhelmed, to feel unable to handle each crucial moment as it comes because of the untold tens of millions of moments after that.

The untold millions behind us. The untold millions before us. None of them change the moment we are in now. And now. And now. This is our arrangement, this is where we are in time, and we can do no other.

For every misspent moment that leads to war, there are also a thousand moments when we can make other choices. “Many instants arise and are available to do good in the world.” Each instant is critical. Because I am me, and you are you, and we are here. We’re here because we’re here, and that can be a hopeful promise as easily as it is a lamentation. You do not need to change the lyrics of Auld Lang Syne if you sing it this week. All I ask is for you to care for your own time being, and consider each moment as another chance to move toward truth. Toward goodness. Toward wholeness. Toward presence. We share presence and time in our interconnected web.

And now, we share again music. We are here because we’re here. Together, in this moment, now. We breathe.

When our breath moves together, in meditation or in song, we create a flow. We’ll sing about that flow together in our hymn number 1007, “There’s a River Flowin’ In My Soul.”