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Survival Is Insufficient: What Will You Do with Your Four Thousand Weeks?

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Have any of you been watching the *Station Eleven* tv series on HBO? Or did you read the novel *Station Eleven* by Emily St. John Mandel? I read the book when it was published in 2014 because so many people were recommending it. And the tv series, which is a little over halfway through at this point, is arguably one of those rare cases where the television version is even better than the book.

To avoid any spoilers, I will limit myself to sharing only the basic premise, which is related to our theme around New Year's Day. *Station Eleven* is a post-apocalyptic tale set twenty years after a flu pandemic has caused the deaths of 99 percent of the world's population. Interestingly, the book was published years before anyone had ever heard of COVID-19, and the mini-series had already filmed two episodes prior to the beginning of our real-life pandemic.

Now, I would certainly understand if watching or reading about a fictionalized pandemic sounds like the opposite of how you want to spend your free time these days; if so, fair enough. But for what it's worth, ***Station Eleven* skips quite rapidly over the illness part of the pandemic to explore what life is like two decades into the future.** And one of the most compelling aspects is the Traveling Symphony. This troupe of actors and musicians have built a new life for themselves by making a never-ending circuit around the 1000-mile shoreline of Lake Michigan. Year after year they

continue traveling around and around, stopping at various points to perform. To quote from the novel:

The Symphony performed music—classical, jazz, orchestral arrangements of pre-collapse pop songs—and Shakespeare. They’d performed more modern plays sometimes in the first few years, but what was startling, what no one would have anticipated, was that **audiences seemed to prefer Shakespeare to their other theatrical offerings.**

“People want what was best about the world.”

What a fascinating example of what it could look like to construct a meaningful life in the face of extreme circumstances: after spending a few years focusing only on the most basic necessities of life, choosing to lean in to the humanities and the arts, into literature, theater, and music.

I’ll share just one more passage along those lines, to give you a sense of Emily St. John Mandel’s subtle humor that is woven throughout the novel. Here’s how she describes the humanity and day-in-and-day-out reality of the Traveling Symphony:

this collection of petty jealousies, neuroses, undiagnosed PTSD cases, and simmering resentments lived together, traveled together, rehearsed together, performed together 365 days of the year, permanent company, permanent tour. But **what made it bearable were the friendships, of course, the camaraderie and the music and the Shakespeare, the moments of transcendent beauty and joy when it didn’t matter who’d used the last of the rosin on their bow or who anyone had slept with,** although someone—probably Sayid—had written “Sarte, Hell is other people” in a pen inside one of the caravans, and someone else had scratched out “other people” and substituted “flutes” (47).

Perhaps the most memorable line in the novel is the motto of the Traveling Symphony that gets to the heart of why they keep going on their thousand-mile circuit year after year performing Shakespeare, more than two decades after society has collapsed from a pandemic. Emblazoned on the front of their horse-drawn caravan is this motto: **“Because survival is insufficient.”**

I love that, and it's really worth thinking about: *because survival is insufficient*. Although Shakespeare may or may not be your jam, as we find ourselves on the second day of a new year—and still frustratingly embedded in a pandemic—what is it that makes life *sufficient* (or more than sufficient) for you, for me, for us?

I've been thinking about that motto—"Because survival is insufficient"—as I have been watching the *Station Eleven* miniseries over the past few weeks and also reading a very interesting book titled *Four Thousand Weeks: Time Management for Mortals* by the journalist and writer Oliver Burkeman.

As alluded to in the title, *Four Thousand Weeks*, the book starts with a helluva first sentence: **"The average human lifespan is absurdly, terrifyingly, insultingly short."** Here in the U.S. at least, the average life expectancy is close to eighty. And for us humans who are around long enough to blow out candles on our 80th birthday cake, we will have lived just over four thousand weeks (Burkeman 3).

Reflecting on our human lifespan through the lens of weeks is an interesting and provocative way to think about it. Often for me, and I suspect sometimes for many of you, weeks can just fly by one after another. And the passing days, weeks and years just keep adding up.

We all spend our days doing something, and as Annie Dillard has written, **"How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives.** What we do with this hour, and that one, is what we are doing."

So how should we spend our finite number of weeks upon this earth? Well, another interesting aspect of Burkeman's book is that he makes the case that, **"time management as we know it has failed miserably, and ... we need to stop pretending otherwise"** (4-5).

Burkeman challenges us to consider that a hyper focus on "productivity" is always doomed—for at least two reasons. The first reason that **extreme productivity is self-defeating is that being super-efficient tends to have the ironic effect of generating more work in response.**

With our endless to-do lists, we can find ourselves reenacting the ancient Greek myth of Sisyphus: spending all day rolling a boulder uphill only to have it roll back

down to the bottom, at which point he must roll it back up. This dynamic is perhaps most obvious with email inboxes. The more email you send, the more emails you end up generating (43).

Burkeman's second reason that productivity culture is self-defeating is that, "There will always be too much to do" (10). Instead, Burkman invites us to consider a paradigm shift: **what might change if we started by accepting that it is impossible to get everything done?** As you have heard me quote before, "We are saved from perfection." We will never perfectly complete our to-do list because the goal posts keep getting moved farther and farther away. It's like Lucy and Charlie Brown: that football is always going to keep being pulled away at the last second—but we can choose to start playing a different game.

So, paradoxically, it can be liberating to accept that we will never get it all done (14). We have a limited number of weeks in this life, so how might we live them in a more life-giving way?

The singer-songwriter Carrie Newcomer says it this way in a poem titled **"Because There is Not Enough Time":**

I used to think
That because life is short

I should do more be more
squeeze more
into each and every day.
I'd walk around with a stick ruler
with increasing numbers
as the measure of fullness.

But lately
I've sensed a different response
to a lack of time.
Felt in my bones
The singular worth

of each passing moment.
Perhaps the goal is not to spend this day
Power skiing atop an ocean of multi-tasking.
Maybe the idea is to swim slower
surer
dive deeper
and really look around.

There is a difference between
A life of width
and a life of depth.

I should add that I am also an advocate for systemic changes to make our lives more sustainable — universal health care, universal childcare, universal college and/or vocational training, and a universal basic income (34)—and we’ve explored all of those issues in previous sermons that are available in our online sermon archive. But for now at the beginning of this new year, I want to invite us to consider some more immediate changes we can make at the individual level.

If you want the full details, I recommend Burkeman’s short, fascinating, and accessible book, *Four Thousand Weeks*, but for today’s purposes, I will limit myself to a New Year’s Top Ten list of some of the highlights from the book that stood out most to me. These aren’t in any particular order, but I’ll still count down from ten to one because it’s a little more exciting that way.

#10 in our list of how to make the most of the limited weeks in our human lifespan: **Get out of your comfort zone** in one or more areas of your life where you feel curious to grow and explore (220-221). On one end of the spectrum, we don’t want to burn out by being way out of our comfort zone in too many areas. On the other end of the spectrum, we don’t want to become listless. So in this new year, is there one or more areas of your life in which you feel led to grow, stretch, and experiment physically, emotionally, intellectually, aesthetically, financially, socially, vocationally, spiritually, etc.

#9 Let go of impossible standards (221-333). Meaningful growth can be as simple as keeping one promise to yourself each day or week related to whatever you

want more of in your life: it could be as simple as five more minutes of exercise than you have been doing, reading one chapter of a book, emailing or texting someone to meet for coffee once a week—or whatever feels right to you.

#8: Accept the particularities of who you are as an individual. To use myself as an example, I need to give up all hope of being a professional football player. That just isn't in the cards for me. I'm too scrawny. Another example is that a few years ago I spent a year taking guitar lessons and practicing regularly, but my progress was frustratingly slow. In contrast, I found training for a marathon challenging, but also vastly easier and more natural. I've come to accept that, for better or worse, I peaked on the guitar at age sixteen. As a wise story from the Jewish tradition relates, Rabbi Zusya of Hanipol (1718–1800) said on his death bed that, “In the coming world they will not ask me—Why were you not Moses? They will ask me—Why were you not Zusya?” So too are we each called to be nothing more than our unique best selves.

#7 is one of the suggestions that I'm going to try to prioritize myself in this new year: “**Adopt a 'fixed volume' approach** to productivity.” In 2022, I aspire to be more realistic about what I can reasonably get done. And when my schedule is full. I am setting an intention to improve at gently saying no and setting boundaries around what I don't sustainably have time for (235-236).

#6 is another one I may try: **keep a “done list”** of what you have accomplished that day. Although I find it satisfying to delete items from my to-do list at the end of the day, I'm left with only the remaining list of all the thing I wish I had done. I think it would be more motivating at the of the day to spend just a moment or two savoring a short bullet list of all the things I did get done.

#5: Make your technology more boring. Our devices and apps are designed to keep us hooked, and using them as much as possible. And Burkeman suggests a fairly hardcore way of making them more boring: switching your screen color to grayscale (240). I'm not sure I'm up for that since it would make taking color photos difficult. But I do think adjusting the settings to have fewer notifications would be worthwhile.

#4: “Pay more attention to every moment, however mundane.” The invitation here is to sink more deeply into the life you already have (213). Each moment, no

matter how ordinary, can become extraordinary if we begin to notice the fullness of our senses (241-242). Practicing mindfulness helps with this!

#3: Be continually curious in every relationship (242). Every human being in our lives is complex and always changing. Be open to being surprised by everyone in your life no matter how well you know them. You may find your relationships evolving in unexpected ways as a result.

#2: Act on generous impulses immediately. This idea is from the meditation teacher Joseph Goldstein, who was the focus of the recent 13-week Tuesday evening class I led here at UUCF. For many years Goldstein has practiced the habit of following through on small acts of kindness that occur to him. If you feel an inner prompting to make a donation (or give someone money), check-in on a friend, or email or text someone to compliment something they have done, don't wait—just do it in that moment if it is something quick and easy (243). This small practice can create a virtuous cycle both for you and for others in your life.

#1: “Practice doing nothing” (244). To the extent possible, carve out more unstructured downtime in your life. As you sometimes hear in meditation communities: “Don't just do something, sit there!”

At the beginning of this new year, is there one or more items on that top ten list that particularly resonate with you? Don't feel like you need to embrace all ten. Choosing one or two to focus on may be more than enough. But experimenting with at least something in this new year may be worthwhile. The motto of the Traveling Symphony reminds us to make the most of our four thousand weeks, “because survival is insufficient”

So, in this new year, what do you feel called to *move toward* with a greater level of commitment? Or what are you feeling led to *let go of* that has been a distraction or a detriment? To begin embodying a response to these reflections, you will be invited in a few minutes to participate in an annual UU ritual called [Fire Communion](#).

Reflecting on how 2021 went for you, is there a person, place, or habit that has consistently been a hindrance to your well-being? **Is there something or someone that you feel called to let go of, or say no to in the new year?** What has been life-negating, a hindrance to your well-being—leaving you regularly feeling drained of

energy, alienated, or resentful? Either now or later this week, I invite you to write down whatever you want to let go of, and mentally set an intention to *let go of it*.

And while burning a slip of paper does not necessarily mean that the process of “letting go” is complete, I invite you to experience this ritual as one step in the process of saying no to a part of your life that has been life-negating for you. **You are also invited to light a candle sometime, in order to set an intention for something—perhaps a person, place, or habit—that you want to do, affirm, or say yes to in the new year.**

What has regularly left you feeling energized, connected, grateful, and more fully alive? What do you feel led to say yes or no to in 2022?