

**SACRIFICE, COMMUNITY, FULFILLMENT - #1:
*Is There Time for Family?***

Rev. Jack Donovan – Unitarian Universalist Church
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TIME FOR ALL AGES, TIME WITH CHILDREN *“Don’t worry, they left the seeds”*

I know a little boy who loves a story about a Digger machine that loved a beautiful flower growing on a piece of land at the edge of the city. Digger protected the flower as city grew outward. But one day, when Digger was away, a bulldozer came to make room for a houses, and knocked down the flower and buried it and it died.

That part of the story made the little boy I know very sad. But the story continued. Digger was very sad, too – and dug around – and found that seeds had been left behind. Digger took the seeds to a safe place and put them down. And there they sprouted and grew. They were the children of the beautiful flower, and Digger loved them.

That little boy I know has his mom or dad read that story every night. And you know what he says when they get to the sad part about the bulldozer? He says, “Don’t worry, Mom; don’t worry, Dad. They left the seeds.” What do you think of that little boy?

SERMON *Is There Time for Family?*

Through the course of this church year, on Sunday mornings, I have been asking us to ponder our human potentials for surviving and thriving, for understanding life and for taking the best care of it – our spiritual potentials. Of all times to consider spiritual potentials, springtime and Eastertide seem obvious. To be born again is Easter’s claim about spiritual potential. Not for life renewed like a flower seeding a similar flower, but the same flower taken to a whole new blossoming.

One of our readings this morning was from Alice in Wonderland, a story still wondrous for many. It starts with Easter’s universal symbol of fertility and new life – a bunny – but curiously, a white bunny in formal suit, carrying a pocket watch, and worrying about being too late.

What is the significance of an Easter bunny with a watch, running scared that it is too late? What is the sense of checking the time when you are out of time? What is the sense of checking time when you are outside of time, as Alice and bunny both are? That is a question about spiritual potential for you.

Can you remember when you first had authority to allocate your waking hours? Perhaps it was a time during your education’s late years? Or perhaps it was post-education and you had solid prospects for work and could expect to support yourself for all future time? Perhaps it wasn’t until you were authorized to manage other people’s time?

Or perhaps you won't realize your authority over time until sometime in the fourth quadrant of your life, reflecting on how life might have been, or might still become before it is completed?

Perhaps we can think of our potentials as the seeds of our being, that might open in the many spring times of our lives.

We are in the month of April, named from the Latin word for "opening," as the flowers are doing, for Aphrodite, goddess of love and creativity, and for her parallel Babylonian goddess of love and creativity, Ishtar or Eastre, after whom Easter and estrogen both seem to have been named. So in several ways it is time to be talking of opening ourselves to grow all the potentials we possess for not only surviving but for thriving in this life.

What have been your choices for allocating your time, consciously or not? One categorization of choices could be whether to emphasize family, or work, or adventure, or withdrawal, or leisure – or some part of these.

What have you emphasized, consciously or not? – and by conscious choice I mean observant, reflective, and discerning. There are of course always limits to choice of emphasis: for example, by culture, by one's own earlier choices, by the choices of others.

On past Sundays we have considered the growth of our potentials under earlier limiting or empowering influences in our lives – evolution and genes, culture and ancestors, history and education, values and fortune . What about the influence of your choices as part of a family? What sacrifice and fulfillment come from those choices?

Speaking broadly, I'd like to describe the sense of family as a sense of togetherness across generations – togetherness particularly in resource-sharing, story-sharing, problem-sharing, grief-sharing, and celebration-sharing - for better or for worse, till death does us part, or maybe beyond.

As I understand it, whom we include in the idea of family and family functioning seems to vary depending on culture and technology. Hunter-Gatherers move and nest in common togetherness as extended families and eat together and share the experiences of the day and the stories about those shared experiences.

Subsistence farmers and herders may be more specialized and their families spend more daytime apart, a bit more under the influence of less familiar tribe members in the experienced togetherness of the day, but again together at night in person and in stories of the day.

With the coming of crafts and trade, people are required to be mobile beyond the family's view, perhaps for days, with family togetherness restored mainly around the dinnertime and bedtime to which all return.

With the advanced development of craft, trade, and farming, centralized outside powers make demands on family productive wealth for defense, infrastructure, administration, and self-perpetuation. Then the machine age comes and compels family diaspora, so togetherness must rely on intermediaries, gradually and substantially now electronic.

That path is well-known. But it seems important to retrace it here in order to recognize the importance of what we all know – our modern connections to our families can be much less influential, less immediate and personal, than in most times past. And that may be extremely influential on the fulfillment of our potentials as humans, on the human spirit's surviving and thriving, and perhaps on the spirit of the universe.

Yes, on the one hand, we can be in contact with many more people in many more cultures. But on the other hand, we may become much less skillful at actually knowing people or knowing how to know them – and even the people closest to us we may not really know.

So it may be today – which raises the question, do you have time for family? Do you make time and by which of the above modes - common experience of the day, directly told stories of the day, distance-communication of highlights of the times, or out-of-sight, out-of-communication and outside of care?

I think the question is important if this assumption is correct: that the investment of time in knowing one's self and others pays off in understanding, gratitude, personal growth, and peace – essentially that which leads to what scholar Karen Armstrong describes as the religious virtues of compassion and care.

I look back to my Peace Corps experience of the placidity and interpersonal sophistication of the Pacific Islanders still living pretty much as their stone-age ancestors had lived, as village-wide and island-wide families. I look back at my State Department experience with refugees and destruction in Vietnam, seeing them manage to live with psychological integrity in the family-and-ancestor-oriented villages while the American soldiers in dislocation and meaninglessness suffered debilitating psychological damage.

What is the influence of being in a family? Wonderland Alice gives us one answer from 1865, a time not long after the industrial age had swept the peasant subsistence farmer of merry old England into urban industrial poverty.

Both the fictional Alice and the real Alice had a life of leisure, as typical of the class of leading academics in the universities to which the real Alice's parents belonged. At ten, she still had an imagination that could be thrilled by the archetypal adventure tales of Lewis Carroll, that is, Dr. Dodgson, the university mathematician-logician friend of her father.

But what expectations did Dr. Dodgson have of young Alice's future adventures? For the real Alice, as described in the words of the fictional Alice's older sister, he pictured matronly bliss, completely fulfilled in passing on idyllic dream adventures to her children. Though she might

not forget going down the rabbit hole or stepping through the looking glass, she was not expected to really do it. But what would Alice have chosen if free to choose what she thought best for her?

The real Alice would surely have known, and perhaps been influenced by, the gospel of Jesus and the anecdotes involving Nicodemus. If she pondered them from a mythical perspective, to be reborn in spirit would likely be what had happened wonderfully to Jesus and would perhaps happen to some of his followers – to have the stunning life-changing epiphany of a greater good than one's own self or even one's own family. From loving her sister and her parents and her children, she would have felt her caring concern drawn out to wider and wider circles of life that she would embrace as family. As Tolstoy reminded us, not every family is good and happy – but there is a way for them all.

Consider Jesus' final actions as choices regarding family. In the story of the Passover Seder that Christianity has called the Last Supper, Jesus reminds his friends how he cares about and cares for them. And he calls them to do likewise and thereby make heaven on earth by caring for each other and the world in the way he cares about them. He calls them to extend the circle of family even to the least of people and the ends of the earth. Is that not what he wanted – all he considered to be the completion of human fulfillment?

Few people approximate that standard of caring concern better than you here who feed the hungry on Friday, who raise money for housing most people can afford, who help with resettlement of the stranger, who mentor children in the schools, who speak out against all violence, who provide transport to the non-mobile, who participate in social justice research, and who lobby public officials when they repeatedly fail to do that which research and experience indicate is the right thing for our children.

And remember Jesus' very final living deed as recorded in the Gospel of John. He made sure his mother would be cared for and that the disciple he loved – be that man or woman, we do not know – not only provided that care in his place, but would receive it in return from a mother who knew how to build great families. She was, after all, the mother of Mother Church.

The beginning of the Church, so profoundly promising for its first 300 years, was about expanding the family of God. It was about growing our potential to include everyone in our family. We can still be that church. We can make Easter an everyday event by waking up each morning and each moment, and devoting ourselves one way or another to raising up the well-being and fulfillment of the great family of humankind and earthkind.

Here is my prayer: May we not be like the white rabbit, too late to matter. And may we not be fooled into thinking it is too late. May we see that fulfillment is a matter of cyclical time and of being on time when we can, for it is never too late for fulfillment. As said by the timeless people whose executions we remember this uprising weekend, "Now is the time for expanding our circles of family even to the least through compassion and justice." For the generation that does, will it not be truly said of the fulfillment of their potential, "It is completed"?

READINGS

Thoughts For Gathering

Now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God's children.... I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.... I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "that all people are created equal." ... that one day little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.

- Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., 8/28/63, Lincoln Memorial, Washington, D.C.

Compassion is the path to a just economy, a peaceful global community, and enlightenment -- treating all others as we wish to be treated ourselves to alleviate the suffering of our fellow creatures - even those regarded as enemies -- to dethrone ourselves from the centre of our world and put another there, and to honour the inviolable sanctity of every single human being, treating everybody, without exception, with absolute justice, equity and respect.

- from *Charter for Compassion*, - theologian Dr. Karen Armstrong

Invocation

On this Easter Sunday, may we raise the spirit of caring within us,
by which we resurrect and heal and flourish.
May we arise into the wonder of life,
seeing and hearing, gathering and understanding.
May we remind one another to rest for moments
of awareness, of reverence, of gratitude,
and to raise our light with the rising light
of each other and our world.

Pre-Sermon Reading #1 *It's Getting Late*, from *Alice in Wonderland*, by Lewis Carroll

Alice was beginning to get very tired of sitting by her sister on the bank of the stream, and of having nothing to do, when suddenly a White Rabbit with pink eyes ran close by her. There was nothing so *very* remarkable in that; nor did Alice think it so *very* much out of the way to hear the Rabbit say to itself, "Oh dear! Oh dear! I shall be too late!" But, when the Rabbit actually *took a watch out of its waistcoat-pocket*, and looked at it, and then hurried on, Alice started to her feet, for it flashed across her mind that she had never before seen a rabbit with either a waistcoat-pocket, or a watch to take out of it, and, burning with curiosity, she ran across the field after it, and was just in time to see it pop down a large rabbit-hole under the hedge.

In another moment down went Alice after it, never once considering how in the world she was to get out again. Who knows how much later, she heard her sister call, “Wake up, Alice dear! Why, what a long sleep you’ve had!”

“Oh, I’ve had such a curious dream!” said Alice. And she told her sister, as well as she could remember them, all these strange adventures of hers. And when she had finished, her sister kissed her, and said, “It *was* a curious dream, dear, certainly; but now run in to your tea: it’s getting late.”

So Alice got up and ran off ... but her sister sat still just as she left her, leaning her head on her hand, watching the setting sun, and thinking of little Alice and all her wonderful Adventures, till she too began dreaming after a fashion. She dreamed about little Alice herself - (and she dreamed that) the whole place around her became alive with the strange creatures of her little sister’s dream. With eyes closed, she half believed herself in Wonderland.

Lastly, she pictured to herself how this same little sister of hers would, in the after-time, be herself a grown woman; and how she would keep, through all her riper years, the simple and loving heart of her childhood; and how she would gather about her other little children, and make *their* eyes bright and eager with many a strange tale, perhaps even with the dream of Wonderland of long ago; and how she would feel with all their simple sorrows, and find a pleasure in all their simple joys, remembering her own child-life, and the happy summer days.

Pre-Sermon Reading #2 *Born of Flesh; Born of Spirit* from John 3 and John 19

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of Jews who believed in strict obedience to the law and the prophets. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” Jesus answered him, “I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.”

At the Passover meal, Jesus said to his disciples, “My little children, I am with you only a little longer. I am giving you a new commandment: that you love one another just as I have loved you. If you love me, you will keep my commandment and the spirit of truth will abide in you.”

That night, the Roman governor of Israel, Pontius Pilate, feeling threatened by local political and religious turmoil at Passover, summoned Jesus and asked him, “So you are a king?” Jesus answered him, “You say that I am a king. But my kingdom is not of this world. For this I was born and for this I came into the world – to testify to the truth.” Pilate asked him, “What is truth?” When Jesus stood silent before him, Pilate handed him over to the soldiers to be crucified. On the hill called *Golgotha*, The Place of the Skull, they crucified him. Standing near his cross were his mother and his mother’s sister, Mary, the wife of Clopus, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her,

he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son." Then to the disciple, "Here is your mother." And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.

After that, when Jesus knew that all was now finished he said, "I am thirsty." And his family gave him the medicated wine and after that he said, "It is completed," and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. And because it was the Sabbath eve, his disciples were permitted to take his body for burial, and with them was Nicodemus the Pharisee who had come secretly to Jesus in the night.