

**Message – Cincinnati Friends Meeting  
August 9, 2009**

**“No Time but This Present Time”**

**by Donne Hayden**

*Oh! Be faithful! Look not back, nor be too forward, further than you have attained; for you have no time but this present time: therefore prize your time for your souls' sake!*  
—George Fox (1624-1691)  
Epistle 5, Letter to His Parents

For ages, great spiritual leaders and mystics have advised that we “Be Here Now,” i.e., that we will be happier if we live in the present moment. Time and our relationship to it has come up in several places this past week, most especially in a book I read titled *My Stroke of Insight*. I haven’t been able to put aside the ideas that book stirred in me, though my intent for this Sunday’s message was to continue speaking about the teachings of Jesus. Inspiration, however, has led me elsewhere.

I tried for a while to connect ideas about time to the teachings of Jesus, but in what we have left of his authentic teachings, I didn’t find specific references to time. In some of what he said, however, I find advice on how to spend our time. In the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, for instance, Jesus tells the disciples: “Don’t fret about your life—what you’re going to eat and drink—or about your body—what you’re going to wear. Remember, there is more to life than food and clothing. . . . Can any of you add an hour of life by fretting about it?” (Luke 12:22-25)<sup>1</sup> And Jesus tells the following parable in the Gospels of Luke and Thomas:

*There was a rich man whose fields produced a bumper crop. “What do I do now?” he asked himself, “since I don’t have any place to store my crops. I know!” he*

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<sup>1</sup> All New Testament citations come from *The Five Gospels: What Did Jesus Really Say?* by Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover and The Jesus Seminar and appear in red or pink text indicating that scholars believe these words communicate ideas very close to those actually expressed by Jesus.

said, "I'll tear down my barns and build larger ones so I can store all my grain and my goods. Then I'll say to myself, 'You have plenty put away for years to come. Take it easy, eat, drink, enjoy yourself.'" But God said to him, "You fool! This very night your life will be demanded back from you. All this stuff you've collected—whose will it be now?" (Luke 12: 16-20)

Think about how much time and energy you're putting into your stuff, your possessions, your wealth, etc. Then think about what will happen to it all when "your life is demanded back from you." We could talk about the transience of wealth and possessions, but I'd like to focus on the implication that we should not take *life* for granted, nor the *time* we have to live it. The

*I find it impressive how thoroughly normal it is to be so tentative about the time of our lives, or so asleep within it, that we miss it entirely. Most of us don't know what it actually feels like to be alive.*

*We know about our problems, our desires, our goals and accomplishments, but we don't know much about our lives. It generally takes a huge event, the equivalent of a birth or a death, to wake up our sense of living this moment we are given – this moment that is just for the time being, because it passes even as it arrives. . . .*

*Life is more poignant than we know.*

—Norman Fischer  
"For the Time Being," August 7, 2009

question becomes: are we even aware of how precious time is? Or do we ignore our own lives, moment by moment, as we struggle to "do" some things and acquire others? More important than how we spend our money—how do we spend our precious time?

Many of you will have heard of Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor, the brain scientist who, at 37, suffered a massive stroke that essentially shut down the left hemisphere of her brain, the hemisphere controlling linear thought and thus, the *illusion* of time. I say "illusion" because her experience showed that time as we know it, i.e., in clocks and calendars, is a product of left-brain thought rather than an objective reality. Still, in a very important way, time is all we *truly* have, even if it is an illusion. And we rarely seem to have *enough* time. (One of my professors pointed out, however, when my classmates

complained about not having enough time to complete a project, “You have all the time there is.”)

It took Taylor eight years to fully recover from the stroke. When she did, she began giving talks and presentations about the experience—I first saw her in a You-Tube video several years ago. Her book, *My Stroke of Insight*, came out in June of this year. In it, she chronicles in detail what happened in her mind, her consciousness, in her right hemisphere, as the rational, linear, every-day, sense-making part of her stopped working. Her training as a brain scientist allowed her to understand, observe and be fascinated by what was happening to her own brain. What I find compelling is her description of what it was like to be in her “right mind.” When her consciousness slipped over into the right hemisphere, she experienced everything very differently. For instance, she no longer perceived herself as a separate being, but was “at *one* with the universe”<sup>2</sup> Not only did she experience space differently, but time was different as well. Here is Taylor’s description:

*To the right mind, no time exists other than the present moment, and each moment is vibrant with sensation. Life or death occurs in the present moment. The experience of joy happens in the present moment. Our perception and experience of connection with something that is greater than ourselves [i.e., the Light? God?] occurs in the present moment. To our right mind, the moment of now is timeless and abundant.*<sup>3</sup>

Throughout the book, Taylor’s description of how she perceived time when “in her right mind” matches descriptions of mystical states from various religious or

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<sup>2</sup> Jill Bolte Taylor, *My Stroke of Insight*, published June 2009 by Plume, a division of Penguin Books, New York: New York, page xv.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, page 29.

spiritual practices through the ages. For instance, in leading a week-long Zen meditation retreat, Zen Buddhist priest Norman Fischer referred to writings by 13th century Zen Master Dogen, whose essay “The Time Being,” is “a treatise on the religious dimension of time.”<sup>4</sup>

*Dogen’s view is uncannily close to Heidegger’s: being is always and only being in time; time is nothing other than being. This turns out to be less a philosophical than an experiential fact: to really live is to accept that you live “for the time being,” and to fully enter that moment of time. Living is that, not building up an identity or a set of accomplishments or relationships, though of course we do that too. But primarily, fundamentally, to live is to embrace each moment as if it were the first, last, and all moments of time. Whether you like this moment or not is not the point: in fact liking it or not liking it, being willing or unwilling to accept it, depending on whether or not you like it, is to sit on the fence of your life, waiting to decide whether or not to live, and so never actually living.*

The contemporary spiritual teacher, Eckhart Tolle in his book, *The Power of Now*, says of time:

When I say “time is an illusion,” my intention is not to make a philosophical statement. I am just reminding you of a simple fact—a fact so obvious that you may find it hard to grasp and may even find it meaningless—but once fully realized, it can cut like a sword through all the mind-created layers of complexity and “problems.” Let me say it again: the present moment is all you ever have. There is never a time when your life is not “this moment.” Is this not a fact?

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<sup>4</sup> Norman Fischer, “For the Time Being,” Opinion Page, *Happy Days Blog*, *New York Times* online, accessed 08/08/09. <http://happydays.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/08/07/for-the-time-being/>

Among Friends, as one Quaker writer puts it, silent worship is “dropping out of time altogether.”<sup>5</sup> In the silence, we seek contact with the Light, the Holy Spirit, or perhaps, our “right minds”? We center down, seeking to rest in the part of us where “that of God resides,” where we can hear the still, small voice; the place where time stops and we are in the present moment.

For most of my life I have been preoccupied with the future. When I was a child, I couldn’t wait to grow up. When I was twelve, I couldn’t wait to be sixteen; then I couldn’t wait to be eighteen, then twenty-one. Time was something I surged through, wanting always to get to the next year, the next event, the next milestone. I approached time hungrily, consuming it but not really tasting it. I have always been seeking the future, which of course, never exists. I am reminded of what a Native American chief told Carl Jung about white people who, he said, “have tense faces, staring eyes, and a cruel demeanor. He said, “They are always seeking something. What are they seeking? The whites always want something. They are always uneasy and restless. We don’t know what they want. We think they are mad.”<sup>6</sup> I think I must have had that look about me for much of my life. Perhaps many of us are uneasy and restless because we’re always living outside the present—always running from the past or running toward the future, always seeking a better time.

According to Dr. Jill Taylor, we all have awareness of the present moment embedded in our right mind, and we access it by shutting up what she calls the “brain chatter” of our left mind. Before we go into the silence, where, at least once a week, we

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<sup>5</sup> Cited in *Manifesto for Silence* by Stuart Sim, page 67.

<sup>6</sup> Tolle, page 75.

go to be in the present moment, let me read to you from Dr. Taylor's final chapter, "Finding Your Deep Inner Peace":

*This stroke of insight has given me the priceless gift of knowing that deep inner peace is just a thought/feeling away. To experience peace does not mean that your life is always blissful. It means that you are capable of tapping into a blissful state of mind amidst the normal chaos of a hectic life. . . . Based upon my experience with losing my left mind, I wholeheartedly believe that the feeling of deep inner peace is neurological circuitry located in our right brain. This circuitry is constantly running and always available for us to hook into. The feeling of peace is something that happens in the present moment. It's not something that we bring with us from the past or project into the future. Step one to experiencing inner peace is the willingness to be present in the right here, right now.<sup>7</sup>*

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<sup>7</sup> Taylor, page 168.