



Sunday, September 23, 2012  
Unitarian Universalist Church of Reading  
*Staying With What Matters*  
Betsy Tabor

**Reading:** “This Shining Moment in the Now” by David Budbill

When I work outdoors all day, every day, as I do now, in the fall, getting ready for winter, tearing up the garden, digging potatoes, gathering the squash, cutting firewood, making kindling, repairing bridges over the brook, clearing trails in the woods, doing the last of the fall mowing, pruning apple trees, taking down the screens, putting up the storm windows, banking the house—all these things, as preparation for the coming cold...

when I am every day all day all body and no mind, when I am physically, wholly and completely, in this world with the birds, the deer, the sky, the wind, the trees...

when day after day I think of nothing but what the next chore is, when I go from clearing woods roads, to sharpening a chain saw, to changing the oil in a mower, to stacking wood, when I am all body and no mind...

when I am only here and now and nowhere else—then, and only then, do I see the crippling power of mind, the curse of thought, and I pause and wonder why I so seldom find this shining moment in the now.

## Sermon:

A few weeks ago, life yanked me into humility, again! Executing errands one day at a high rate of speed, I was feeling like a well-oiled machine! In a hyper-adrenalated state, as soon as I'd cross one thing off the list, another would take its place. I wanted to start the year off with a clean slate—everything in order, i's dotted, t's crossed, all surfaces clean—the way we all live, right?

Now, every September is different for everybody. Some people love turning over a new leaf, ramping up in the fall. Others struggle with the pressure of too many demands. For others, autumn yawns dark, uncertain and disheartening. And many of us don't even think about September! But whether this time of year we feel excited, pressured, low or don't particularly focus on it, our minds have a way of spinning, and when they do, we lose track of what matters.

That day of errands, my mind swirled with details—details of this wonderful internship for which I'm so grateful, of another year of school at Andover Newton, of my mom's assisted-living situation, of our son's college tuition bill, of my tuition bill, of paperwork for the Unitarian Universalist Association, AND details of my shopping list: I needed a new notebook. *That* is what humbled me.

Downtown, all the notebook covers had schmaltzy flowers, goofy cartoons and sappy messages. Nothing appealed to me until I saw “the one.” Great colors, snappy geometric design, just the shape of spiral notebook I like. It had some letters on the front, HE RE NO—they didn't make any sense. Whatever, I liked the look and bought it.

Not until the next day did my mind slow down enough to read those letters, the R and W off kilter, as if blown off the line by a strong wind. What I'd muttered as a mantra of meaningless sounds, HE RE NO, read truly mantra-like, “Here and now.” Oh! *Here and now!* An appropriate reminder to *anyone* with an overly active mind! I had to laugh. I'd been so in my head the day before, so lost in the spin of crucial details, I'd been so not mindful, that being “here and now” was the last thing on my ministerial mind. How humbling!

I read my notebook's gentle exhortation and thought, “OK, take a breath, then. What *is* here and now?” I breathed, felt myself relax. There might be more to this good-looking little book than meets the eye! I opened it to discover on the inside cover *a stream* of spirituality. Large lower case letters read like a prayer: “care now. speak now. reach now. believe now. laugh now. simplify now. connect now. ask now. forgive now. make things now...remember now...love now...feel it now. appreciate now.”

What a gift! Notice how these prayerful words inviting *us* into the “here and now” slow us down! Already, they've eased *our* minds' chatter, taken us beyond our details. And they've reminded us of what matters: caring, connecting, feeling, loving. Taking them in now—praying them, if you will—has lifted our thinking minds to another level of awareness—what writer

Geneen Roth calls a place of “unruffled peace.”<sup>1</sup> Spiritual author Eckhart Tolle calls the “here and now” “...a realm of deep stillness and peace...of joy and intense aliveness...”<sup>2</sup>

We’ll reflect this morning on the spiritual practice of pausing from thinking and planning and doing—and noticing what the here and now offers. Sometimes we find ourselves in the “here and now” just by chance, as happened with the notebook. We can also invite the “here and now,” on purpose. What’s handy about the *now* is that it’s always *here*!

An old man comes to the bakery every morning. He only orders a small coffee, but Harold, in his nineties now, sits a long time. He enjoys the bustling kitchen behind the display case and the kind eyes of the woman who works at the counter. It’s been a year since Harold lost his wife after some sixty years of marriage. “She was a good girl,” he likes to say. In the spring he reminisces about her rhubarb sauce. She made it every May, and she made it like no one else could. Not too much sugar, but just enough so you could still taste the tartness. And not too soupy either, but with nice big chunks of fruit. He misses it.

It happens that the woman behind the counter, about the age of Harold’s own daughter, loves rhubarb too. And for the first year of *her* life, her mom—no longer able to live at home—didn’t make rhubarb pie in the spring. So she offers to make rhubarb sauce with Harold, and he accepts, though he highly doubts that hers can match his wife’s. For some reason, the planning of this event takes on a life of its own. While enthusiastic, they can’t commit to a date, what with her work schedule, his meeting the troops at the air base, his morning men’s group and always, it seems, another funeral to attend. Weeks pass, and their planning becomes more and more convoluted. Meanwhile, Harold has taken it upon himself to do some prep work—he’s filled his freezer with a dozen bags of carefully measured, chopped rhubarb.

Finally, late in July, the woman from the bakery says, “I’m coming over tomorrow.” This thing has to get going! When she arrives, Harold has bad news. Thawed, all that frozen rhubarb has turned into a soggy, tasteless mess. This deflates him, after all his careful work and planning. Something in him can’t deal with it, and at once he goes right back into planning mode. “Don’t worry,” he says, walking her out the door. “We’ll do it another day. We’ll do it next week. You’ll come back then. I’ll pick some more and get it ready. Let’s do it later.” But she has an idea that it won’t happen if they start *that* all over again. So they hunker down and do it. In the now.

They pick a dozen crunchy stalks from the patch in Harold’s back yard. The chopping and boiling and stirring fills the kitchen with movement and the sweet aroma of cooking fruit. They have a great time. She smiles—he has no clue where to look for jars and lids and pots, but there’s a spring in his step: he marvels, “How do you chop so fast? You make this look so easy!” They make two batches of rhubarb sauce—one with fresh and one with thawed fruit. Harold labels every jar for future taste tests. The warmth of friendship and satisfaction fill the air.

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<sup>1</sup> Geneen Roth. *Women Food and God*. New York: Scribner, 2010, 23 (?).

<sup>2</sup> Eckhardt Tolle, *Stillness Speaks*, accessed 22 September 2012, <http://www.slideshare.net/PapajiBlissed/eckhart-tolle-stillness-speaks>.

The dance that takes place between Harold and his friend from the bakery over those first several months—never taking action but constantly planning and talking about it—reminds me of the mental maneuvering we often engage in that prevents us from enjoying a clean, clear experience of the present. When we allow our thinking and planning, our what-if-ing to run the show, we can miss out on the present, miss out on what’s ripe today.

Sometimes we get lucky, and life hands us a notebook with instructions for how to be in the here and now! But more often, we need to figure out how to do it and then be intentional about making it happen. The good news is that the present is right here. Always. It’s like a standing invitation every moment of our lives—an invitation we can accept and be nourished by, any time. Poet Danna Faulds imagines the invitation to the “here and now” as a white dove, in her poem by that name:

In the shared quiet an invitation arises  
Like a white dove  
Lifting from a limb and taking flight  
Come and live in truth  
Take your place in the flow of grace....  
...All you ever longed for  
is before you in this moment  
If you dare draw in a breath  
And whisper...yes <sup>3</sup>

So how do *we* step into the sweetness of the “here and now”? We know how....

We whisper “yes” to life’s invitation when we spend time in the natural world—when we watch a sunrise, or walk in the woods or stand at the water’s edge. We whisper “yes” to now when we pick one of the season’s last blooms or delight in the colors of the fall leaves. We enter into the now when we taste or breathe in the fragrance of something tasty, bubbling on the stove. We whisper “yes” when we make contact—when we cook with a friend, or look into someone’s eyes, or when we stroke and talk to a pet. We can also accept life’s invitation to “the now” when we do physical work, like the poet in the reading. Or when we breathe low and slow in meditation and yoga. When we sense into our arms and our legs—maybe at a stoplight on a busy day, or in a meeting or right here, now...actually *feel* our arms and our legs. Eckhardt Tolle suggests we move into the now by listening to silence, “...Just notice it [he writes]...Pay attention to it...Always say ‘yes’ to the present moment....”

We accept life’s invitation to the present moment in these and so many more ways. So many ways to choose from, to think about, so many kinds of spiritual practice to be grateful for! And so we close with the spiritual practice of gratitude—yet another entryway into the here and now. When we pause to feel our gratitude for this life, for the world, for our coming together here today, it brings us right into this moment. And even when we look at all those details in our minds, we can feel grateful for them. Considered one at a time, these are our unique details, our

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<sup>3</sup> Danna Faulds, “White Dove,” adapted. *Living Yoga*, accessed 22 September 2012, [http://livingyoganow.com/nl001\\_2007-09-05.html](http://livingyoganow.com/nl001_2007-09-05.html).

stories: these are the activities, the work, the people and the concerns we are drawn to, our own precious details that give our lives meaning, that make us tick.

When we look at our lives in this gentle, present way, our thinking mind relaxes. It frees us up to care now, reach now, connect now, love now. It frees us to accept life's standing invitation into the "here and now."

Fellow thinkers and planners, fellow intrepid wanderers into the "here and now," when we catch our thinking brains taking over, let us remember the ease and the sweetness that the present offers—the now that is always here. We have a choice to either keep thinking and efforting, or to pause and listen, to stay with the here and now.