

“Clinging to Timelessness in a Changing Cosmos”

**Sermon by Rev. Amanda L. Aikman
South Fraser Unitarian Congregation
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READINGS

“Oblivious to our human yearnings for permanence, the universe is relentlessly wearing down, falling apart, driving itself toward a condition of maximum disorder.” -- Sandra Dieckmann

From “In Blackwater Woods,” by Mary Oliver

To live in this world

you must be able

to do three things:

to love what is mortal;

to hold it

against your bones knowing

your own life depends on it;

and, when the time comes to

let it

go,

to let it go.

SERMON

I have officiated at over two hundred weddings. I know how to prepare, how to elicit from a couple their hopes and dreams, how to learn their personalities, how to ferret out what it is about their relationship that sparks and inspires them. I know how to handle aggressive photographers, nose-bleeding brides, thunderstorms at the top of the Space Needle. When the carefully arranged votive

candles start exploding and spraying glass splinters all over the bridesmaids, I know just what to say. “Oh. That is *such* a good omen.”

Yep, I’ve seen it all. I can predict with 99 percent certainty who is going to cry at the ceremony – usually the groom, as he is cockily preparing to read the vows he’s written for the bride – “Jennifer, you’ve made me a better man...” I know which one weekend of the year is going to be sunny, and which 51 are unlikely to be.

And still, I am nervous before the ceremony. Every single time. I feel my hands sweating as the groomsmen line up, my breathing getting shallow as the processional music starts, my heart rate increasing as the bride and her parental units of choice prepare to walk down the aisle.

And the reason for my stress is that I am so invested in helping to make sure that the couple is entirely present emotionally during the ceremony. I don’t want it to go by in a blur for them. I want them to savor and deeply feel every single second of this huge event in their lives. I encourage them to take several moments of silence to smell their flowers and look at their guests and feel their feet on the ground. I want the impossible – I want to help them freeze this glorious moment.

And of course it doesn’t freeze. The ceremony comes to an end, the license is signed, the best man makes a speech, and I change from my robe into civilian clothes and drive home.

It’s so human, so universal, this desire to freeze time.

This is the Prologue of William Boyd’s novel *Sweet Caress*. It opens on a summer afternoon in England in 1915. The main character, Amory Clay, has recently been given a camera for her seventh birthday. She is bored, in her bedroom, while her parents and their guests have a party on the lawn.

What drew me down there, I wonder, to the edge of the garden? I remember the summer light – the trees, the bushes, the grass luminously green, basted by the bland, benevolent late-afternoon sun. Was it the light? But there was

the laughter, also, coming from where a group of people had gathered by the pond. Someone must have been horsing around making everyone laugh. The light and the laughter, then. I was in the house, in my bedroom, bored, with the window open wide so I could hear the chatter of conversation from the guests and then the sudden arpeggio of delighted laughter came that made me slip off my bed and go to the window to see the gentlemen and ladies and the marquee and the trestle tables laid out with canapés and punchbowls. I was curious – why were they all making their way towards the pond? What was the source of this merriment? So I hurried downstairs to join them. And then, halfway across the lawn, I turned and ran back to the house to fetch my camera. Why did I do that? I think I have an idea, now, all these years later. I wanted to capture that moment, that benign congregation in the garden on a warm summer evening in England; to capture it and imprison it forever. Somehow I sensed I could stop time's relentless motion and hold that scene, that split second – with the ladies and the gentlemen in their finery, as they laughed, careless and untroubled. I would catch them fast, eternally, thanks to the properties of my wonderful machine. In my hands I had the power to stop time, or so I fancied.

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The great physicist and novelist Alan Lightman tells a story about his daughter's wedding, on an August afternoon at a farm in Maine.

The air was redolent with the smells of maples and grasses and other growing things. It was a marriage we had all hoped for. The two families had known each other with affection for years. Radiant in her white dress, a white dahlia in her hair, my daughter asked to hold my hand as we walked down the aisle.

It was a perfect picture of utter joy, and utter tragedy. Because I wanted my daughter back as she was at age 10, or 20. As we moved together toward that lovely arch that would swallow us all, other scenes flashed through my mind: my daughter in first grade holding a starfish as big as herself, her smile missing a tooth; my daughter on the back of my bicycle as we rode to a river to drop stones in the water; my daughter telling me that she'd started her first period. Now, she was 30. I could see lines in her face.

The nature of the cosmos is change. Everything, everything, from the tiniest molecule to the vastest galaxies, is in a constant state of change. “Oblivious to our human yearnings for permanence, the universe is relentlessly wearing down, falling apart, driving itself toward a condition of maximum disorder.”

Fearing change, fearing loss, fearing death, our minds resist change. We cling like Velcro to whatever promises to endure. We want to freeze the moment. So we invented something unchanging, a divinity that was perfect and eternal. Greek philosophers proposed this ideal unchanging realm, and it was adopted by Christianity, which envisioned an unchangeable, perfect divine being.

Down to the roots of my being, I have always detested this idea of permanence, the ideal of a God or a realm or dimension where nothing changes. It feels profoundly, radically unnatural to me.

And yet, at only a few years older than William Boyd’s protagonist was when she picked up a camera in an attempt to freeze time, I started keeping a journal for the exact same reason. And here it is. A Letts’ School-Girl’s Diary. One of two full file-cabinet drawers full of journals that I have assembled for 53 years now – and now electronically, as well. I started this diary because it was given to me. My parents both kept journals like this – it was the thing to do. But mostly, when I started this journal, at age eight, it was for entirely beneficent reasons – I knew I would be a famous author one day, and that my biographers would be grateful for my having recorded my days, and my reflections on life. I was delighted when I dug this up to see that although my handwriting was atrocious at 8, my spelling was impeccable. So, let’s see what I had to say on this day in history -- Jan. 10, 1962.

Thought that there was clarinet lesson but there wasn’t. Had Library. Found Bible. Ma’s going to meeting. Read about Abe Lincoln in Social Studies. Watched Dick Tracy, 3 Stooges, and Daffy Duck on TV. Got 18 wrong on arithmetic.

Trying to freeze time. Trying to buck the system, which is always, always running down. Grotesqueries and absurdities result.

Alan Lightman:

I don't know why we long so for permanence, why the fleeting nature of things so disturbs. With futility, we cling to the old wallet long after it has fallen apart. We visit and revisit the old neighborhood where we grew up, searching for the remembered grove of trees and the little fence. We clutch our old photographs. In our churches and synagogues and mosques, we pray to the everlasting and eternal. Yet, in every nook and cranny, nature screams at the top of her lungs that nothing lasts, that it is all passing away. All that we see around us, including our own bodies, is shifting and evaporating and one day will be gone.

Physicists call it the second law of thermodynamics. It is also called the arrow of time. Oblivious to our human yearnings for permanence, the universe is relentlessly wearing down, falling apart, driving itself toward a condition of maximum disorder.

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At General Assembly this summer, I heard my name called, and there, to my delight, was my former mentor, and someone I took to be his wife, as indeed it turned out to be, but I didn't recognize her because she had had plastic surgery done to her face. She looked grotesque – not ugly, exactly, but not exactly human. We cling to youth. The results can be pretty ugly.

Despite all the evidence, we continue to strive for eternal youth and human immortality; we continue to cling to the old photographs; we continue to wish that our grown daughters were children again. Every civilization has sought the “elixir of life”—the magical potion that would grant youth and immortality. Do a Google search for “products to stay young” and you will find 37,200,000 websites.

But it is not only our physical bodies that we want frozen in time. Most of us struggle against change of all kinds, both big and small. We resist throwing out our worn loafers, our thinning pullover sweaters, our childhood baseball gloves. Why, I know someone who has two file-cabinet drawers full of journals, dating back to 1962.

Is there nothing permanent to which we can cling? What about our sun and other stars? John Keats wrote, “Bright star! Would I were steadfast as thou art!” But Keats was not up on modern astrophysics or the second law of thermodynamics.

All stars, including our sun, are consuming their nuclear fuel, after which they will fade into cold embers floating in space or, if massive enough, bow out in a final explosion. At some point in the future new stars will cease being born. Slowly, but surely, the stars of our universe are winking out. A day will come when the night sky will be totally black, and the day sky will be totally black as well. Solar systems will become planets orbiting dead stars.

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It is one of the profound contradictions of human existence that we long for immortality, indeed fervently believe that *something* must be unchanging and permanent, when all of the evidence in nature argues against us. Isn't there anything that lasts for ever?

As Unitarians, we are not limited to one religious creed or system when we ask these huge questions. Also, we are not limited to the findings of science. We are blessed in our liberal religious freedom to be able to learn from all sources of wisdom, including our deep inward intuition, our cellular knowing.

We can learn from Buddhism. Buddhists have long been aware of the evanescent nature of the world. *Anicca*, or impermanence, they call it. “Impermanent are all component things, They arise and cease, that is their nature: They come into being and pass away.” We should not “attach” to things in this world, say the Buddhists, because all things are temporary and will soon pass away. All suffering, say the Buddhists, arises from attachment. By practicing meditation and non-attachment, the suffering may in time pass away as well.

We can learn from one of the contemporary prophets I most admire, Michael Dowd. Michael is an American Progressive Christian minister, author, and eco-theologian. With his wife, Connie Barlow, Michael promotes what they call “The Great Story” – a re-mythologizing of our world-view that encompasses the reality of what we know about the length of history and size of the universe and

encourages us to look at our lives in a far deeper, broader context than we ever have before. He says:

Looking at reality through evolutionary, “deep-time eyes”, my sense of “self” does not stop with my skin. Earth is my larger Self. The Universe is my even larger Self: my Great Self. So, yes, “I” (in this expanded sense) will continue to exist even after “I” (this particular body-mind) comes to a natural end. There is deep comfort in knowing that my larger Self will live on. More, I am powerfully motivated to be in action today precisely because I do not ignore or deny the inevitability of death. My small self has but a brief window of opportunity to delight in, and contribute to, the ongoing evolution of the body of life. Truly, this is it; now or never. I am immensely grateful for both the comfort and the compulsion born of this sacred evolutionary perspective.

And we can learn from process theology, a twentieth-century system of thought that speaks deeply to me. In process theology, God is not envisioned as eternal and unchanging, but rather as everlasting change. God non-coercively lures, or urges, all creatures into greater levels of complexity and capacity for enjoyment through evolution and other means. God does not know the outcome of the processes at work in the universe, but, working in responsive relationship with the creatures, co-creates the world. In process theology, God is like a choreographer who participates in the dance but does not know how the dance will come out. And finally, if God is responsive to us, then our deeds and our joys and our sorrows affect and enrich deity itself; we affect and enrich the universe, and in some sense live eternally, through all of being.

And we can learn from a physicist, like Alan Lightman, who says: “If, against our wishes and hopes, we are stuck with mortality, does mortality grant a beauty and grandeur all its own? Even though we struggle and howl against the brief flash of our lives, might we find something majestic in that brevity? Could there be a preciousness and value to existence stemming from the very fact of its temporary duration? ... I think of the night-blooming cereus, a plant that looks like a leathery weed most of the year. But for one night each summer, its flower opens to reveal silky white petals that encircle yellow lacelike threads, and another whole flower

like a tiny sea anemone lies within the outer flower. By morning, the flower has shriveled. One night of the year, as delicate and fleeting as a life in the universe.”

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One of the marks of maturity, in theology as in life, is to be able to hold ambiguity and paradox in a gentle place in the heart. Our rational mind hits its limits both in imagining our own end, and in imagining eternity.

One of the gifts of our faith is the encouragement to be with our despair as well as with our joy; to encompass paradox and ambiguity. While I become literally nauseated at idea of an unchangeable, omniscient god, I feel my heart come to life when I contemplate the image of god as co-creator, changing and evolving, suffering with the creatures, retaining in the Great Mind all the moments of every creature's existence.

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When fear of ending arises within us, let us sit quietly and non-violently with that frightened part of ourself, not pushing the fear away, but cradling it, loving it and giving it space to transform, as it eventually will, into compassion and peace. Letting our fear transform into an acceptance beyond the power of our rational minds to understand; letting our finitude be, without trying to figure it out or solve

it -- and also detaching, like a strip of Velcro, from the impossible demands we make of the universe -- demands that give us suffering and pain.

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The pencil writing in this old diary is starting to fade. It's ridiculous to hold onto it. I can't freeze time by making some marks on paper, or taking a photograph. I think as a marker of the new year, I'll burn it in the back yard. Or maybe I'll hang onto it after all. Those biographers might be very grateful indeed that I kept it, and I sure don't want to let them down.

May you be richly blessed. Amen.