"Unraveling Time"

A homily delivered by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May
at the First Parish in Wayland, MA
May 24, 2015

I will start by confessing that this is not a new sermon, but it is a very important sermon. It's a slightly revised version of the sermon I gave as a part of my final interview with the Ministerial Fellowship Committee on my path to becoming a Unitarian Universalist minister. I chose to use it again because it felt like a good moment to share it with you and, well, because it meant I would have some extra time available on this Memorial Day weekend.
I put this extra time to good use when I spent yesterday hiking up a mountain, Mt. Monandock in New Hampshire. It had been a long time since I had gone hiking and I found the experience both physically challenging and spiritually renewing.

Growing up in Michigan, I had not seen many mountains until my family took a vacation in the Canadian Rockies when I was 16. Normally our vacations involved our pop-up camper and state parks. But thanks to a bonus from my dad's work…that year was different. After flying from Michigan to Seattle, we took a bus across the Canadian border to Vancouver where we boarded a train.

I *loved* the train. At 16, I was allowed to venture alone to the domed observatory car. For hours, I would sit and watch the passing mountains that towered above and all around. Born and raised in Michigan, this was my first encounter with wild, craggy, snow-topped mountains. Nor had I ever seen

© Stephanie May 2015

such a vast wilderness—an *expansive* terrain of steep, pine-covered slopes far, far different than the flat hardwood foresta or cleared farm land of Michigan.

Stopping in Banff, Alberta, we visited a small museum of the Canadian Rockies. In the exhibits, I found an early 20th century photograph of a line of mountaineers along the ridge of a mountain with a wide expanse of glacier rising up behind them. They seemed so small, so fragile within that scene.

Beside the image, there was a little plaque with a poem by Eunice Tietjens:

> "The stone grows old
> Eternity is not for stones
> But I shall go down from this airy space
> This swift white peace,
> This stinging exhultation
> And time will close about me,
> And my soul stir to the rhythm of the daily round…
>
> Always I shall feel time
> Ravel thin about me,
> For once I stood
> In the white windy presence of eternity."[1]

The image… these words...they captured for me what I had been feeling since boarding that train in Vancouver. In view of those rugged, immense

[1] Excerpt from "The Most Sacred Mountain" by Eunice Tietjens.

© Stephanie May 2015

mountains, the invincibility of my adolescent self had been tempered, I felt myself to be so small. I felt the world to be full of wonder, of beauty, of a shimmering sense of sacred presence.

The excerpt on the plaque comes from a much longer poem by Tietjens that describes her visit to the sacred mountain of Tai in China. She talks about climbing six thousand stairs to reach the temple at the mountain peak. She describes the timeless, sacredness of the place, noting that Confucius had been there "a half a thousand years before the Nazarene."

And here *we* are, nearly 100 years since Tietjens poem first appeared in print—or, as she might say, one-tenth of a thousand years. Choosing how to mark and name time is something that we humans do a lot of in our lives and in our cultures. This Memorial Day weekend is one example of marking time as we pause in our regular routines to remember those who have died in service to this country. And, in about a month, we'll stop time again on the 4th of July to mark the declaration of independence of this nation.

We love marking time—well, perhaps not all of us on certain birthdays that end with a "zero". Whether we want it to or not, time can pass so quickly. One day our child is toddling on unsteady legs and the next day the same child is driving and moving away. One year our face in the mirror is smooth and the next year deepening lines grace our face.

© *Stephanie May 2015*

Time can pass so quickly. And so we set aside times when we pause, when we try to stop time if only for a moment and say, here, now, *this* is the time:

When my child was born

When we declared our love to each other

When we lost our loved one into death

We stop time for a moment.

We pause, we are still, and we remember.

We also mark time through holidays. We set aside time to remember:

Here, now, *this* is the time…

When we remember the thousands of lives lost

To wars fought on this soil and abroad.

Here, now, *this* is the time…

When a group of political leaders took a step

To fulfill their dream of a self-directed nation.

Yet, it can be too easy to forget <u>*why*</u> we are marking these days as special, as <u>sacred</u> in some way. We find ourselves instead <u>racing</u> to get ready for the holidays with chips and watermelon to buy; grills to clean; cars to pack or lawns to mow.

Don't you just sometimes want to say, make it stop?! Oh, what I would give right now for some peace and quiet.

…For a moment of stillness.

…For a time to just be present.

© *Stephanie May 2015*

Like here and now.

…as we're gathered together in this sacred space,

…in the stillness of this historic sanctuary.

We're here together because we have been called to be *here* to engage in the sacred work of naming what matters, to seek truth in freedom and in a spirit of love, to experience a sense of connection to the Holy and one another by uniting in worship, community, and service.

We are here to nurture this rich Unitarian Universalist tradition in which so many have found the space to explore and to name where they find the Holy—not only on temple mountaintops nut also in the here and now…even in *this* here and now of a quiet Sunday morning at the corner of Cochituate and Boston Post Roads.

When I first read Tietjens words as a young woman of 16, I was just beginning a journey of finding my way to name my experience of this "presence of eternity"—or, as I might say today as a Unitarian Universalist, this presence of the Holy, the sacred ground of our being.

At 16, though, I was still an evangelical Christian, and my language for the Holy was rooted in that tradition. Yet, I was being *changed* by the experience of being in the mountains…of feeling small in a world that was bigger and more wondrous than I had ever imagined.

© *Stephanie May 2015*

I believe Tietjens' visit to Mount Tai changed her as well. Moreover, by noting a plaque that read: "On this spot once Confucius stood and felt the smallness of the world below," Tietjen's suggests visiting the mountain changed Confucius as well. I think that we all can be changed by such experiences…of feeling small in a wondrous world, or of feeling time itself with its daily demands ravel away.

I believe that when we experience this kind of sacred presence—however we might choose to name it—we are often brought to a place of stillness. And, in this stillness, we are reminded anew that the rhythm of the everyday round of wake, eat, email, sleep, repeat is *not* all that there is to life.

When we mark time, by celebrating birthdays or holidays, by participating in weddings or funerals, by lighting a chalice to begin worship or holding the congregation in a moment of silence, we are invoking this sacred presence to remind us all that there is more to life than the rhythm of the daily round. To remind us all that life is a sacred and wondrous gift.

To help me remember my journey on that train, I copied down the poem into a small journal that day and bought a poster of the image with the mountaineers. Since I was 16 that framed poster has been with me in every place I have lived. When I look at it, I remember the poem as well as the mountains. Like Tietjens, I have not forgotten the feeling of myself as infinitely small amidst a swirling grandeur of eternity—of a Holy Presence greater than all.

© Stephanie May 2015

I've hung on to that picture to remind me of this Holy Presence—from an evangelical Christian dorm room to a living room that witnessed a difficult marriage to a Cambridge apartment as I read theories of religion To my home now beside a forest where I often find a connection to the Holy.
My hope is that we will each find and hold on to our own ways to reminding ourselves of our experiences of the sacred…and of time raveling thin as we connect to something *more* than the daily round of to-do's.

So may it be.
Amen

Image from Byron Harmon, *In Mountain Light* exhibit, Banff, Alberta

© Stephanie May 2015