

June 9, 2010 "The Long Now" (Spirituality Shoppe NewsLetter Vol 14 No 2)

Reflections

I'd like to begin my reflections by asking you the question I asked my philosophy class a few weeks ago, as I taught the class on "time": what is *now*? Just how long is *now*? If you are like most of my students, you probably answered in terms of seconds, or perhaps minutes. For many of us today, life is lived in a short now, a brief horizon of conscious activity.

But it has not always been that way, and for much of the world. There was a time when change came slowly, when "now" was perceived in terms of generations, and when "what I am doing now" spoke of a lifetime project rather than a momentary activity.

I have been pondering our relationship with time of late. A friend handed me this science-fiction novel called *Anathem* and said, "Here read this. I think you'll like it." Though it was not the best book I have ever read, it had lots of interesting philosophical discussion, was set in a sort-of monastic environment, and had a fun twist of the plot near the end (which meant I had to read about 700 pages to get to that point!). But one aspect of the book got me thinking. The protagonist of the book was a member of something like an intellectual-oriented monastic order. The different houses or monasteries of this order--and likewise the membership divisions--were identified by the number of years the doors of the monastery were kept closed (Oners, Teners, Hundreders . . .). In each of these monasteries, at the end of their allotted time, the doors would open and for a brief period of time there would be an interchange of people and ideas. Then the doors would close again and the members would work on solving problems for another year [ten years, hundred years . . .]. The extended enclosure made for a very isolated existence. But on the other hand it gave monastery members the freedom to explore problems deeply and thoroughly for a long period of time. They did not lose their focus due to being co-opted by political agendas, economic pressures, or temporary fads. Their sense of "now" was long.

Somewhere around this time Cheri got a book through interlibrary loan called *The Clock of the Long Now*. She has been reading about positive psychology and slowness for a while now and was fascinated enough with the title of the book to get it sent to our small town. As she read, she passed on a few tidbits of information: like how fast valuable information is lost in the computer age, like how the pace of life has increased exponentially, and like how some people are actually planning a ten-thousand year clock to model a long now for our culture (see <http://www.longnow.org/>).

In my class on "time," I asked my philosophy class what they expected to be doing the rest of the day. Most of the students could talk about that. It got harder when I asked about the next few weeks, and broke down entirely when I asked them for a five-year plan. When I asked them what the world might be like one hundred years from now, many doubted there would even *be* a world. And these were not Christians looking forward to the rapture! Many studies of postmodernity identify a shift in our concept of time as characteristic of postmodern culture (many speak of a "collapse of" our concept of time).

Andy, the intern/guest living at the hermit hut, has just returned to the US from a study abroad term in Spain. He also did some traveling in France and England. As we sat around the cook-out our first night together, Cheri and I asked him about his time in Europe. Andy shared that he appreciated the life-oriented approach the Europeans (especially Spain and France) had. While Americans live to work, they work to live. But this live-for-the-moment approach also had its down side. In particular he noticed that people weren't getting married. Few were having children. The Social Security system was in serious trouble. "Family" was moving toward extinction.

My grandmother was born around 1900. I remember Grandma telling stories of her childhood and I can "reach" back, through her generation, one hundred years. I suspect that should my daughters marry and have children, my own grandchildren could live to around 2100. They will hear my stories. I can "reach" forward, through that generation, one hundred years more. Many of my philosophy students are now a little bit younger than my daughters. If I have a measurable influence on them they will tell their stories to their children. From this perspective, we could say that my "now" is about 200 years long.

What might it mean to live from the perspective of a--should the Lord tarry--two hundred year "now"?

We are all aware that our times are unique. The world is changing dramatically and at a pace never before imagined. Most of us are overwhelmed just trying to keep up with the latest computer upgrades. And the Christian Church is not exempt from this chaos. We are living in a confusion not experienced since the sixteenth-century Reformations. And I suspect that we are not near the end of this transition.

So how, then, should we live? We could proclaim that "The end is near!", retreat to our own comfortable Christian bubbles, and entertain ourselves with the latest Contemporary Christian Culture until our time is up. We could demand that Christianity change, argue that the Church is no longer relevant, and start something new--that is, until a few years later *another* change is necessary. We could become an advocate for "blended" Christianity, trying somehow to mix pre-modern, modern, and postmodern with all the confusion that brings. And frankly, while I present these options from their down side, there are important strengths of each.

As for me, I am choosing to live in the present with a different "now" in mind. You have probably heard the phrase, "Think globally, act locally." That is a nice phrase with regards to our approach to space. So I have invented a new one to speak to our approach to time:

Think centuries, act minutes.

I am a student of Christian spirituality. I can only read or write a limited amount of material. I have only a limited range of relationships. Just as I might ask how my local activities reflect and impact global realities, so I might ask how my actions in the short now (minutes) reflect my perspective of and my influence within the long now (centuries). And here is where the rubber meets my road. I am convinced that Christian spirituality--both as lived experience and as an academic discipline--could benefit greatly from an overhaul informed by the historic evangelical traditions. Yet, at the same time evangelical spirituality itself is in need of reappropriation. Again, this is not merely a matter of intellectual trends. Our theology, our community life, our mission and more are all tied up together here.

What is needed to accomplish this reconfiguration of Christian spirituality? To begin with I have identified over one hundred names of people we would call "evangelicals" whose lives and/or writings need to be published, explored, and summarized. People like Sarah More, Timothy Dwight, Phoebe Palmer, and William Seymour must be examined in the way that Julian of Norwich and John of the Cross have been in the recent past. There are practices to examine. Just as we have explored celibacy, the Jesus Prayer, and liturgical spirituality, so we must now explore the family, the small group conference, tongues speaking, and revival meeting spirituality. Just as we have pondered questions of mysticism and the universal call to holiness, so we must now ponder the spiritual function of assurance and the role of the Spirit in spirituality. Just as we experimented with contemplative and active religious communities within the framework of the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions,

we have only begun to explore the possibilities for religious life in evangelical Protestantism. I could go on and on.

My point is this: the job is too big for me. Indeed, it is too big for a lifetime. And this is just my own little world of evangelical spirituality. Face it friends, we cannot fix things "now." But then, just what is "now" anyway?

So then, what if I looked at all this with a "long now" perspective? What if I committed myself to "occupy" until the Lord comes (Luke 19:13 KJV), making responsible investments of my time and talents with a view to what may be needed further ahead? Given my own circumstances and gifts, what might I be able to contribute to the care of the earth, the love of my neighbor, or the advancement of the kingdom in the next century with the minutes of my day today? What could happen if a few of us could gather and commit to a few common problems to solve? What would we explore if we were to close the door to our "monastery" and leave it closed for another ten (or thirty) years? Would anybody care? Should we care if they care or not?

I do not have a lot of clear answers for everybody regarding such questions. I have only the vaguest hints regarding my own steps ahead: a few ideas, a few relationships, a few projects. Furthermore, what I think I see and what God sees, down the road, may be quite different visions. I see obstacles. God sees opportunities.

How about you? How long is your "now"? What might it look like for you to *think centuries* and *act minutes*? Where will you "occupy" until the Lord comes?

May God the Father bless you with his riches in Christ Jesus through the work of the Holy Spirit.