“Everybody Else”

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8 February 2015

N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

Sometimes I wish we had an organ. One of those big pipe organs. Not because I don't love the piano, but because there are some things you can only do with an organ. Take John Cage, for example. He's an avant garde composer, best known for his piece entitled 4'33, which consists of a performer sitting silently in front of the instrument of their choice, while letting the restless shuffling of the audience become the "music." Shawn doesn't know it yet, but that's going to be the anthem for when he's back in the pulpit next week. But John Cage also wrote a piece for organ, entitled ASLSP, an acronym for "as slow as possible," which is the recommended tempo for the piece. There's been some debate about exactly what is meant by "as slow as possible," and the longest documented performance by a single musician was 14 hours and 56 minutes. Even more ambitious, though, is a performance which takes the directions "as slow as possible" very seriously. This performance began in 2001, and by 2008 had reached the 6th chord. Its most recent chord change occurred in October 2013, and the next is slated to happen in 2020. The performance itself is slated to finish on September 5, 2640 a full 639 years after it began.

Now, if this seems absurd, that may be because it is. But I'd like us to consider that it's not as absurd as it might seem, and that there is something beautiful, maybe even revolutionary, in a group of musicians taking shifts on an organ, holding the same note year after year, knowing that the final resolution won't come for generations, long after they're dead and gone.

Writer, philosopher and activist Joanna Macy has spent decades developing what she calls "The Work that Reconnects," a set of practices to help people live fully into our despair at the suffering in the world and the planetary ecological crisis, and practice what

she calls "active hope." One of the key tenets of this work is coming to take a larger view of time, what she calls "deep time."

Deep time is a scientific concept, arising out of the astonishing scientific and archaeological discoveries of the past few centuries, which have revealed to us that the earth is far, far older than previously suspected: approximately 4 billion years old.

Yet deep time is also a spiritual concept, inviting us to step out of our hectic, crisis filled lives, and our sense of living in an unraveling world, and inhabit a larger story, one which began long before we did, and in one way or another, will continue long after us.

A common mental image to help us step into this sense of time, is to consider that, if the history of the earth until now were taken as a 24 hour period, the dinosaurs didn't appear until after 11pm, mammals at only around 10 minutes to midnight, and human beings only in the last 5 seconds. If evolution is a party, we are either party crashers, or we take an extreme view of being fashionably late.

And, if we view human history as a 24 hour day, the industrial revolution only occurred in the last minute or two of that time, and we've used more energy and resources in the final 20 seconds then we did in our entire previous history.

Perspective, as they say, is everything. And the perspective of business as usual, of ticking clocks and quarterly profits, comes with some serious side-effects. Macy identifies 5 characteristics of the narrow time, or shallow time, which we customarily inhabit. These characteristics are, and if you'll forgive me a list:

Short term benefits outweigh longterm costs

We don’t see disasters coming our way

Narrow timescapes are self reinforcing

We export problems to the future

And narrow timescapes diminish the meaning and purpose of our lives.

Joanna Macy illustrates these principles with a powerful story. She began her career as an activist working on issues of nuclear disarmament, and what she calls "guardianship" of nuclear waste. In the 1980s, she took a group of students and friends to a "deep geological repository" for nuclear waste, which was being built in the New Mexico desert; deep geological repository essentially meaning throwing the waste underground. An engineer proudly showed her around the site, with its high tech barriers and signage, which would serve to warn off visitors for one hundred years. "And after that?" she asked him. He was baffled, and couldn't understand why she would ask that. She was asking because radioactive compounds remain highly toxic for tens of thousands of years or more. There was no plan for that time span, and it's hard to imagine how you would make one. I wonder what the plan is for Ontario, and how a 147 year old province plans to deal with radioactive waste that has a half life of 24,000 years.

I could give a litany of tragic examples of how these phenomena play out, from the over-exploitation and sudden collapse of the Newfoundland cod fisheries, which left an entire society nearly destitute, to the human, ecological, and increasingly economic disaster which is the oil sands industry. But I don't want this to turn into an environmental sermon: I've done those before, and I will do them again!

Today I'm thinking most about the last of Joanna Macy's characteristics: that narrow timescapes diminish the meaning and purpose of our lives. If something can't be measured in hours worked, quarterly profits, or at least a 4 year bachelor's degree, it hardly seems worth doing.

Charles Eisenstein says that "The most pervasive, life-consuming form of scarcity is that of time." He points out that so-called "primitive" people generally don't experience a shortage of time. They don't see their days, hours, or minutes as numbered. They don't even have a concept of hours or minutes. "Theirs, " says Helena Norberg-Hodge in describing rural Ladakh, "is a timeless world." I have read accounts of Bedouins content to do nothing but watch the sands of time pass, of Pirahã fully absorbed in watching a boat appear on the horizon and disappear hours later, of native people content to literally sit and watch the grass grow. This is a kind of wealth nearly unknown to us."

"Scarcity of time is built into the Story of Science that seeks to measure all things, and thereby renders all things finite. It delimits our existence to the boundaries of a single biographical timeline, the finite span of a separate self."

"Scarcity of time also draws from the scarcity of money. In a world of competition, at any moment you could be doing more to get ahead. At any moment you have a choice whether to use your time productively. Our money system embodies the maxim of the separate self: more for you is less for me. In a world of material scarcity, you can never “afford” to rest at ease."

Rest assured, I won't test out this worldview on you by trying to preach a "timeless" sermon, unencumbered by concepts of minutes and hours. Though I do have a few more things to say.

First, that it is incredibly hard, and can feel almost impossible, to change something as deeply ingrained as our sense of time. And I would say that it probably is almost impossible to do so alone. And it's not just because we resist change. On the contrary, it's that there is so much pressure to do things right, to do it now, to do it fast. Even our efforts to change the hectic and destructive pace of our world can fall into this trap. We think we have to stop the machine *now*, and find ourselves running at the same pace just to keep up.

As I think of what reframing time would look like, I think back to the summer of 1996, and the Olympics in Atlanta. I was bursting with Canadian pride, as I watched sprinter Donovan Bailey cross the finish line of the 100m in a record-breaking time of 9.84 seconds. It was a great moment.

Of course now that record has been broken a few times over, most recently by Jamaican runner Usain Bolt, who finished the race in 9.58 seconds. Quite astonishing, especially considering that the 100m champion at the first Olympics in 1896 finished in a time of 11.80 seconds. That's a difference of 2.22 seconds over the course of a century or so.

This is either incredible or absurd. Incredible from the perspective of athletic achievement, but perhaps absurd from the perspective of cultural importance. It might say a lot about our culture that one of the most prestigious sporting events us focused in who can run a very short distance in the shortest possible time.

Which brings us back to that organ piece, which is supposed to be played as slowly as possible. Is it any more ridiculous that dashing 100m as fast as possible? Maybe the organ piece has more resonance with the experience of our lives, and our place in the unfolding cosmos. Each of us one note, or one chord, in music that began long before us, and will finish, if it ever does, long after we are gone.