

# “Time, the Great Teacher”

Rev. Shawn Newton  
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto  
13 June 2021

A few weeks ago, a small group of people emerged from a cave in south-west France, with “big smiles on their... faces.”<sup>1</sup>

They were met by a round of applause, as they “basked in the light while wearing special glasses to protect their eyes after [spending] so long in the dark.”

You see, this group had been underground in voluntary isolation for 40 days, part of an “experiment to see how the absence of clocks, daylight, and external communications would affect their sense of time.”

The project, called [Deep Time](#), involved the fifteen volunteers living in a cave where “there was no natural light, the temperature was 10C, and the relative humidity 100%.”

They had to get around using only the light of their head-lamps.

And for almost six weeks, “they had no contact with the outside world, no updates on the pandemic, nor any communications with friends or family.”

“As expected, [they all completely] lost their sense of time.”

One of the biggest surprises for them, when they were brought out of the cave, was finding out that the full 40 days had actually passed.

Several thought they had been underground for only 30 days. And one person thought they had been in for just 23 days.

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/apr/25/deep-time-team-ends-40-days-underground-in-french-cave>

Scientists monitored the 15 team members' sleep patterns, social interactions, and behavioural reactions via sensors.

One sensor was a tiny thermometer inside a capsule that participants swallowed like a pill. It measured body temperature and transmitted data to a computer...

The team members followed their [own] biological clocks to know when to wake up, go to sleep, and eat. They counted their days not in hours but in sleep cycles.

Early on, the volunteers began to easily synchronise their patterns, though they found it tricky to organise group tasks “without being able to set a time to meet.”

At the end of the study, “two-thirds of the participants expressed a desire to remain underground a little [while] longer to finish group projects [they had] started during their stay...”

One of the seven women in the experiment, Marina Lançon, said the experience was “like pressing pause.”

She said she “did not feel any rush to do anything and wished she could have stayed in the cave a few days longer, [though, once outside, she did admit] “she was happy to feel the wind and hear birdsong again.”

\* \* \*

I'm guessing that right about now some of us may feel a bit like these French volunteers.

Slowly emerging from lockdown, as the world around us begins to re-open, squinting our eyes against the bright light of day, maybe not quite ready to give up all the comforts of the cave.

And like them, we may well feel completely discombobulated, with our sense of time utterly upended.

For so many of us, the usual markers of time—  
from the routines that took us regularly out into the wider world  
to the special events that mark the passing of the year—  
have all been largely absent or greatly altered by the pandemic.

For myself, I find my sense of chronology is off.  
The sequence of my memories is scrambled.  
What happened yesterday sometimes feels like it was months ago.

And I have what feel like recent recollections  
of walking through Canadian Tire or sitting in my favourite Indian restaurant,  
though I have not done either of those things since the winter of last year.

And the unfolding of time across the days and weeks has also felt different.

During this long ordeal, though there have  
definitely been periods that felt tedious and tested my patience,  
I also feel the time has flown by in ways that startle me a bit.

I think this has had something to do with simply being able to be in the moment,  
more often than seemed possible in the frenetic pace of the before-times.

One of the volunteers in the cave, “Johan Francois,  
a maths teacher and sailing instructor,  
[who, remarkably] ran 10,000-metre circles in the cave to stay fit...  
[said that] he sometimes had “visceral urges” to leave.”

I think almost all of us—even our most ardent introverts—can appreciate that feeling!

But he found, without his usual obligations,  
the challenge was, as he put it:  
“to profit from the present moment  
without ever thinking about what will happen in one hour, in two hours.”

That, of course, is a teaching at the heart of so many of the world’s religions,  
so much of what is learned through hours of spiritual practice:  
To be fully present to the moment we are in.

It’s no wonder that Marina Lançon, the woman I mentioned a moment ago,  
the one not quite ready for the experiment to end,

said she “did not plan to look at her smartphone for a few... days, hoping to avoid ‘too brutal’ a return to real life.”

When we’ve known something of what it means to be present to the moment, even if imperfectly, even if only sporadically, it can be daunting to risk losing it—losing that sense of connection, losing our connection to the tap-root that sustains us.

My hope is that each of you, through the strange twists and turns of this pandemic, have somehow found that connection, that you’ve uncovered unexpected gifts—blessings, if you will—that you will try to hang on to, even as life shifts toward our new and different normal.

Take a minute now to reflect on what gifts you have taken from this time, what practices or ways of being that you want to carry with you into the future.

\* \* \*

Our faith emboldens us with something of a paradox: that because our days on this earth are numbered, our lives are an amazing time-limited gift to be cherished and lived to the fullest.

But that paradox can also sometimes intimidate us—leaving us to question, at the end of our days, not so much what comes *next*, but what has come *before*?

As the UU minister Forrest Church so powerfully put it: in the end, we all want to live lives that are worth dying for.<sup>2</sup>

And that’s why, this month, we are inviting you to think about time—the time of your life. And how you spend it.

In memorial services I’ve officiated, I’ve often shared the words of Robert Ingersoll, who wrote that:

---

<sup>2</sup> Church, Forrest. *Life Lines: Holding On And Letting Go*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1996.

Before the sublime mystery of life and spirit,  
the mystery of infinite space and endless time,  
we stand in reverent awe....

This much we know:  
we are at least one phase of the immortality of life.

The mighty stream of life flows on,  
and, in this mighty stream, we too flow on...  
not lost... but each eternally significant.

How how might we spend our time—  
how might we live our lives—  
if we truly recognised we are living out the precious bit of eternity  
that is given to us with each breath that we draw?

It's the biggest question there is.  
And one I ask often.

And I don't know about you,  
but I am not always satisfied with my own response.

I too frequently forget  
that the meaning of life boils down  
to the meaning I make with my life.  
And the meaning you make with yours.

There are so many things to distract us from this, life's most central task.

Like many of you, I am, at times, completely overwhelmed  
by a sense of scarcity when it comes to time.

But, it's not simply a matter of managing our calendars;  
it's that nagging existential element—  
the hard realisation that this world offers more  
than you or I could (or will) ever see, or taste, or feel.

There will never be enough time to do everything.

Our time will eventually run out,

and when it does, each and every one of us  
will leave behind books unread,  
art unseen, words unsaid, and work undone.

And, yet, the time we have can be enough.

The challenge is to decide what makes our life's list and what doesn't—  
to choose, quite literally,  
how we will use the time of our lives  
in the service of who we are  
and the things in which we most deeply believe.

And hear me when I say this:  
This isn't about your to-do list or even your bucket list, per se.

It's as much or more about your quality of being  
as it is about anything you may accomplish.

It's about being awake to your life.  
Engaged in your relationships.  
And connected to the wells that nourish your soul.  
It's about being alive every day you are alive.

In that light, it's natural we may feel some regret.  
Some disappointment for the time we've already whiled away across the years.

As Alice Bloch's haunting words remind us,  
we sometimes say we "waste time,"  
but what we are actually wasting in those moments is ourselves.

And, so it is, that we might all do well  
to reflect on our relationship with time.

Benjamin Franklin sternly warned us to "not squander [it,  
saying that time is] the stuff life is made of."

And, indeed, it is the stuff  
in which we live and move and have our being.

But for only a while.

As the composer Hector Berlioz so vividly put it:  
“Time is a great teacher,  
but unfortunately it kills all its pupils”<sup>3</sup>

But one of the best lessons that time has to teach  
is that it’s ultimately the journey and not just the destination that matters.

How many of us have fallen into the trap—  
the trap of feeling that your life  
is really going to start rolling along  
once you reach some important milestone,  
or some distant goal on the horizon,  
or once the pandemic is finally over?

We think that when we get promoted or find a partner,  
when we hear back from the doctor,  
when the kids move out, or when we retire,  
then, and surely then, we’ll start fully living our lives.

But, the truth, of course,  
is that all the moments in between are our lives, too,  
and if we miss living those moments with intention  
rather than anxious anticipation,  
we may well look back and decide  
we haven’t really been as alive to our lives as we had thought or hoped.

In his book, *Time and the Soul*, Jacob Needleman writes:

It is *this* life that I wish to live, the same life I am living,  
but with one great difference:  
a difference in my experience of time...  
the fact is,” he says, “that I am not now living my life—*it* is living me.”<sup>4</sup>

Needleman speaks to what seems,  
from what I know of your lives and my own,  
a fairly widespread experience.

At this juncture, as we move towards

---

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/1/q108131.html>

<sup>4</sup> New York: Doubleday, 1998.

a full return to life beyond the pandemic,  
we face a choice about how we will live going forward.

We have a rare opportunity here—a time to pause, to reflect,  
and to carry on with intention  
the best of what we may have learned about ourselves over the pandemic,  
the practices or ways of being that have helped us  
to have a better, firmer handle on life.  
The blessings that have helped us to feel connected to life.

There's been a lot of talk about “building back better.”  
My hope is that this can be true for each of us.

That, as Needleman suggests,  
we might more fully live our lives rather than our lives living us.

As this cautious but hopeful summer begins to unfold before us,  
my wish is that each of us  
will savour this changing season  
and consider anew what makes us truly come alive,  
and then order our lives accordingly,  
that we all might make the most of the time that is ours.

So may it be. Amen.