

## There is a Season

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Unitarian Fellowship of West Chester

"Vanity of vanities! All is vanity." is how the book Ecclesiastes begins. Ecclesiastes is the Greek translation for Qoheleth which means the one who conducts the assembly, or often translated to be "the Preacher" was the most cynical writer in the Bible. Those of you who are long time Unitarian Universalists are aware that rarely from our pulpits do the preachers preach from the Bible, at least not these days, and I will not defy that tradition too often. Though there are many verses in the book that might be interesting to undertake sometime in the future, it is the classical verses from chapter three where we begin. It is a new year and what better way to usher it in than with a discussion about time and purpose?

Sr. Joan Chittister inspires me to look at the seasons of life, the dimensions of time, and new ways of looking at pat phrases. We begin today on a journey into this well known short passage in a biblical book that I would venture few, if any of you have ever read through. On occasion I will find something in one of these chapters that I wish to explore with you. I have no schedule or plan. We begin at the beginning since it seems like a good place to start.

"For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:  
A time to be born . . . . "

Sr. Joan begins the chapter:

"Ecclesiastes is quite clear: the first thing a person is meant to understand is that there is no such thing as being born out of time. Our time is now. The era into which we are born is the era for which we have responsibility, the era for which we are meant to be blessing. The implications are sobering, Whatever is going on now ethnic slaughter, unjust international business policies, the false god of militarism, the sexism of the churches — is our affair. What we want to have happen in these arenas we must make happen in our own."<sup>1</sup>

There was a wonderful rabbi who taught at my seminary. I went to his services on a couple of occasions. At the beginning of the month he would call everyone up to the bimah whose birthday fell in that month for his birthday blessing. I asked him what went on in the huddle. He told his assembled group that life was a gift, that they were blessed to be there. Then he asked them to each consider what they would do to make their lives a blessing to the world.

"The era into which we are born is the era for which we have responsibility, the era for which we are meant to be blessing."<sup>2</sup>

As most of you know I moved to PA last summer to be here with you. I moved from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts to the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, a distinction not lost on me. It is explicit in the Constitution of Mass. declaring "The body politic is formed by a voluntary association of individuals: it is a social compact, by which the whole people covenants with each citizen, and each citizen with the whole people, that all shall be governed by certain laws for the common good." Though this is not spelled out in the PA Constitution there are many attributes that are. Sen. Dinniman pointed out to me that the PA Constitution guarantees that "The people have a right to clean air, pure water, and to the preservation of the natural, scenic, historic and esthetic values of the environment." He was very pleased to point that out. This is an essential part of the concept of commonwealth.

This fall I attended the first organizing meeting to form a network of religious leaders promoting progressive values in the public square in contrast to those of the religious right. We are being coached by the national organization Faith in Public Life. The concept of working for the common good in the commonwealth did not escape this group either. Somehow it will appear in the name of the group and currently the working title being used is "Common Good Values."

The concept of Commonwealth is very important. It is about each of us being a blessing to one another. But "commonwealth" doesn't happen by itself, there are great forces trying to privatize everything so there no longer is anything shared in common. Commonwealth stands in stark contrast to the mantra of "greed is good" and personal entitlement that grew out of the 1980's and has yet to abate. I lived in the Pacific Northwest for several years in the late 80's through the mid-90's and found the strong libertarian mindset a bit disconcerting after having been in a New England where the social safety net was fundamental to the ethos of the area. As time went on and the "me generation" thinking of the 80's took hold, sadly the concept of the common good started to wane even in parts of New England. As Sr. Joan says, *"personal development, not personal responsibility is the high priest of the age. Nothing must interfere with my personal comfort. Nothing may take precedence. It is a pernicious disease and it has sickened our society."*<sup>3</sup>

To find community and a true focus on the common good we come here and many places like it where we know we are welcomed and if a need arises, we have a natural group of caring people who will step up. As I read daily of the economic indicators that portend rough times ahead, this community could become more and more important to every one of us. But this isn't enough. We won't be able to circle our wagons around us and keep ourselves safe from what may come. What is needed is a culture change, a revolution of thought and soul. And we need to be a part of that change, it is our destiny.

A time to be born indeed. William Jennings Bryan said *'Destiny is no matter of chance. it s a matter of choice: It is not a thing to be waited for, it is a thing to be achieved'*<sup>4</sup> Our destinies have brought us here together. What will we achieve, what will we do with the opportunities we have been given in this place and this time?

Recently my brother the singer/songwriter came to the area to do a concert. he opened up with these words:

"This is the year for making changes  
This is the year for moving on  
This is the year of overcoming  
This is the year for growing strong.

This is the year for a new way of thinking  
This is the year for making plans  
This is the year for reaching out and  
This is the year for joining hands. . . .

This is the chance to recapture the power  
This is the time to abandon the fear  
This is the moment the finest hour  
This is the year, this is the year."<sup>5</sup>

It could be that he intentionally opened with this because I was there and this was his musical way of sharing my excitement of moving here, but in the new year, the words can ring true for all of us if we make a deliberate choice. This is the year for making choices. Did any of you make New Year's Resolutions? Did they reach beyond the personal goals of losing weight, getting more exercise, eating better, finding a new job? Did any of them include getting active? Volunteering? Finding a way to make a difference?

Many of the people who have made a difference in the world go unheralded and are for the most part unknown. They start with themselves and the people they know and the circle gets larger and the reach gets wider. People step up to meet their destinies. There are heroes and sheroes throughout time that have inspired us. For the most part they were ordinary people who rose to the occasion that was presented to them. Mainly what it takes is courage. Courage is something we need a lot of right now. It is not easy to come by for any of us. Sr. Joan points out the three obstacles to what she calls "the development in us of the force of personality that would make us a moral factor in the world around us:"

"First. fear of loss of status has done more to chill character than history will ever know. We do not curry favor with kings by pointing out that the emperor has no clothes. We do not gain promotions by countering the beloved viewpoints of the chair of the board or the bishop of the diocese. We do not get invited to house and garden parties by being politically incorrect. We do not figure in the neighborhood barbecues if we embarrass the Pentagon employees in the gathering by a public commitment to demilitarization, It is hard time, this choice of destiny between public conscience and social acceptability. Then we tell ourselves that nothing is to be gained by upsetting people. And sure enough, nothing is.

Second. personal comfort is a factor, too, in the decision to let other people bear responsibility for the tenor of our times. It takes a great deal of effort to turn my attention beyond the confines of where I work and where I live and what my children do. It lies in registering interest in something beyond my small, small world and perhaps taking part in group discussions or lectures. It requires turning my mind to substance beyond the sitcoms and the sports channel and the local weekly. . . But these things that cost comfort are exactly the things that will, ultimately, make life better for my work and my children.

Third, fear of criticism is no small part, surely, of this unwillingness to be born into the world for which I have been born. To differ from the mainstream of humanity, to take a position that is not popular on a topic that is not acceptable tests the tenor of the best of debaters, the strongest of thinkers, the most skilled of speakers. To do that at the kitchen table, in the office, at the family table takes the utmost in courage, the ultimate in love, the keenest of communication skills. And who of us think we have them? . . . [we fear] I may lose. I may make a perfect fool out of myself. But everybody has to be perfect about something. What else can be more worth it than giving the gift of the perfect question in a world uncomfortable with the answers but too frightened or too complacent or too ambitious to raise these doubts . . . ?"<sup>6</sup>

I was not born to be an activist. Neither of my parents were involved in any causes. My love throughout school was the theater. I wasn't much of an actor and I found my passion in lighting

and set design. After college I waited on tables and then found my way into architectural lighting design. None of that directly prepared me for what I am now doing with my life. I found the Unitarian Universalist church because of Alanon. In working through my life struggles with the affects of the disease of alcoholism around me I found a program and a religion. Between the program and the church I was transformed. I remember trembling with fear the first time I was called on to give an announcement in church on a Sunday morning. I was shaking. It was just an announcement in church! Eventually I entered seminary. I thought I was going to follow a path of helping others find personal transformation. And somewhere along the line I woke up to the world's ills, and the country's ills and I started getting involved in things beyond myself.

Something unremarkable, yet big happened to me along the path. You might say that I was born again but not into religion—into activism. There was no flash of lightning, there was no conversion on the road to Damascus. I studied, I read, I learned, I opened my eyes to things greater than myself. And then I began to pull out of my memory history that I had witnessed. Barbara Jordan's booming voice left an impression on me as she steadily asked questions during the Watergate hearings. The confirmation hearings of Clarence Thomas and Robert Bork opened my eyes. Ballot measures in Oregon to restrict access to abortions and to deny rights to gays and lesbians roused me to action. Oddly, it was ministry that radicalized me. There is an amazing legacy of activism that has been handed down in this faith tradition that I take seriously. But it is not an activity confined to the pulpit.

We espouse the prophethood of all believers that means we all have the opportunity to embrace our destiny and speak truth to power. From that trembling raised hand in the sanctuary in Arlington, MA the journey has taken me to roam the halls of congress and meet with lawmakers, make friends with my state representatives, and find a world of activists to join with who are basically just people like you and me, people who hold day jobs of all sorts and want to make a difference. Many have traveled the circuitous road that I have, never intending to be a public advocate. My story is not in any way extraordinary. Many of you are already engaged in the process. You have a cause or causes to advocate. You are actively making a difference. Those who aren't yet, I invite you on the journey. We'll work together.

When I heard Sr. Joan speak in October I expected her to talk about her book [Tents of Abraham](#). Instead, to a full to overflowing sanctuary she spoke of the effects of war—especially the Iraq war—on women and children, those being raped and killed, those being orphaned, those who live on with the physical and emotional scars of war—scars for which we bear some responsibility. She spoke of UN Resolution 1325 the first resolution ever passed by the Security Council that specifically addresses the impact of war on women, and women's contributions to conflict resolution and sustainable peace. We were sitting in a comfortable, warm sanctuary, chilled to the bone hearing about atrocities happening to civilians half a world away. There is work to be done.

This congregation has not taken part in the creation of mission and covenant statements in quite a while. But you did take the time and effort to craft your vision statement just three years ago. You recite it every Sunday, it appears on the web site and in the literature. It is the last phrase in that vision that for me stands out, “challenges us to live responsibly and is a catalyst for a just and compassionate world.” Sr. Joan shows the way to be that catalyst. She writes:

“Freedom is the capstone of truth. Our time is short here and there is much to do. Therefore, we must cultivate a passion for the truth. We must seek it, demand it and tell it.

And once we have broken through the levels of propriety and protocol that collude to pretend that what isn't true is necessary, we are forever free. No one can ever enslave us again."<sup>7</sup>

Living in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts was easy—speaking up, holding up liberal and progressive values in a community and state that shared them was easy, there was no “costing responsibility” as James Luther Adams would say. Doing so here in the more conservative Commonwealth of Pennsylvania is not as easy, which is why it is even more important to do so. Our voice is needed desperately in the conversation.

For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven. This is our season, this is our time, this is the year. It is my great hope that we will all be born into a new purpose as we walk together into this new year.

Oh, and one more thing,

How will your life be a blessing to the world?

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<sup>1</sup> Chittister, Joan, **There Is A Season**, (New York: Orbis Books, 1995) p.17

<sup>2</sup> Chittister, *ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Chittister, p. 18

<sup>4</sup> Chittister, p. 17

<sup>5</sup> Roth, David ©1990 from the CD *Nights At The Chez* [www.davidrothmusic.com](http://www.davidrothmusic.com)

<sup>6</sup> Chittister, p. 19

<sup>7</sup> Chittister, p. 20