

A REQUIEM CELEBRATION

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Many believe this to be an auspicious day—this, the last day of the second millenium.

Why a requiem celebration?

Requiem is a hymn, service, or composition for the dead.

There is a New Orleans tradition of holding a requiem, a funeral, for the old year, expressed in the language of jazz. A solemn cortege marches behind the brass band.

Today we bury a millenium 1,000 of our years.

This concept of a “New Year” (and a new millenium) is a highly arbitrary and artificial idea.

- The cosmological origin. What is a year? What is our perspective?
- Different New Years are designated by different cultures. Chinese, Jewish....
- New Year in the west was traditionally celebrated March 25.
- Pope Gregory 13th established January 1 as the beginning of the New Year in 1582, when the Gregorian calendar was adopted by the Catholic Church. It was a hit—today celebrated on earth almost universally.

Why do we celebrate this arbitrary New Year? Each day we see the sun appear to rise and set without it knowing or caring that we earthlings frantically celebrate the completion of another orbit of the sun. Why have we created a national and international holiday to celebrate this non-event? (I asked Elaine—she said, “hey, it’s a day off work. I’m for it.”) But, why the fireworks and noisemakers? Why do we book all the clubs and hotels for expensive dinners, open bars, and champagne? It’s not a day to commemorate any national event, or religious day. The New Year even lacks the cosmological significance of the solstice or the equinox.

Are we celebrating the acknowledgement that we have one less year to live? Perhaps subconsciously we are sensing the loss of another year and counteract that loss by stirring up gaiety and drinking ourselves into obliviousness of our sense of loss and our remorse for not making better use of the precious 365 day span.

All of this brings the question of TIME into focus.

- Hope concept of no past—no future. The “New Year” would be meaningless.
- Exemplified by other Native American cultures.
- We are struck by the message in today’s reading by Black Elk “...many hoops that make one circle.” And we compare it to the wisdom of King Solomon: “Whatever is, has already been, and what will be has been before.”

Cycles are a universal theme, experienced by evolutionary man and woman's incipient consciousness.

It was also the wise King Solomon who wrote in Ecclesiastes 1:

The sun rises and the sun sets,
and hurries back to where it rises

The wind blows to the south
and turns to the north;
round and round it goes,
ever returning on its course.

All streams flow into the sea,
yet the sea is never full.

To the place the streams come from,
there they return again.

All things are wearisome,
more than one can say.

The eye never has enough of seeing,
nor the ear its fill of hearing.

What has been will be again,
what has been done will be done again.

There is nothing new under the sun."

The German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer expresses poignantly this deep-seated feeling we have about cycles and time:

"Each day is a little life; every waking and rising a little birth, every fresh morning a little youth, every going to rest and sleep a little death."

The British philosopher Bertrand Russell tried to explain our uneasy relationship with TIME this way:

"A truer image of the world, I think, is obtained by picturing things as entering into the stream of time from an eternal world outside, than from a view which regards time as the devouring tyrant of all that is."

Yet, we do have trouble living in the present. Our arbitrary invention of years, months, minutes, and seconds mark the passing of time. This whole idea of time has fascinated philosophers, physicists, and pundits since people started marking time. Time is viewed

with fear, or resignation, or sometimes joy. Time is viewed as a destroyer and a healer. Many see time as a grim specter, an ominous presence.

Shakespeare, for example, in *As You Like It*:

‘Tis but an hour ago since it was nine,
And after one hour more ‘twill be eleven.
And so from hour to hour we ripe and ripe,
And then from hour to hour we rot and rot.
And thereby hangs a tale.

Or in *Twelfth Night*:

“And thus the whirligig of time brings in his revenges.”

The English poet Andrew Marvell wrote in the 17th century:

“But at my back I always hear
Time’s wing-ed chariot hurrying near.”

A more recent reminder of this grim aspect was penned by the British author, John Berger:

“Modern thought has transferred the spectral character of Death to the notion of time itself. Time has become Death triumphant over all.”

Yeats wrote of this menacing aspect of time:

“The years like great black oxen tread the world,
And God the herdsman treads them on behind,
And I am broken by their passing feet.”

Time inspires resignation and exasperation in writers like Thomas Carlyle:

“The illimitable, silent, never-resting thing called Time, rolling, rushing on, swift, silent, like an all-embracing ocean-tide, on which we and all the universe swim like exhalations, like apparitions which are, and then are not: this is forever very literally a miracle; a thing to strike us dumb, for we have no word to speak about it.”

There is a poem affixed to the front of the clock case in the Chester Cathedral, written by Henry Twells in the 19th century. It read, in part:

“When as a child I laughed and wept,
Time crept.
When as a youth I waxed more bold,

Time strolled.
 When I became a full-grown man,
 Time ran.
 When older still I daily grew,
 Time flew.
 Soon I shall find, in passing on,
 Time gone.”

Our concept of time can take a more encouraging and mystical aspect, as in the inspiration of Argentina’s great author, Jorge Luis Borges:

“Time is the substance from which I am made. Time is a river which carries me along, but I am the river; it is a tiger that devours me, but I am the tiger; it is a fire that consumes me, but I am the fire.”

Lord Byron saw time both as life’ remedy and life’s nemesis:

“Oh time! the beautifier of the dead,
 Adorner of the ruin, comforter
 And only healer when the heart hath bled:
 ...Time, the avenger!”

Then, how can we avail ourselves of this phenomenon we call Time?

We are stuck with the tradition of accounting for our year. In doing so we cannot escape the fatal arithmetic, that absolutely we now have one fewer year than before. We observe wistfully that we have a definitely limited supply of years such as the one just passed. This thought impels us to reflect:

How have we spent this year?
 How could we improve on how we spent it?

This is not to make a judgment of “good” and “evil”, or of “grace” and “sin”.

People do what people do;
 We build, and we destroy,
 We heal, and we wound,
 We love, and we hate,
 We nurture ourselves, and we self-destruct.

The question is: what do we want to choose that enables us to build, to heal, to love, and to nurture ourselves? Moreover, most of us want to feel that we have used this gift of time appreciatively. Especially on New Year’s when we sense that another big chunk of it is irretrievably gone!

A recent survey of data about how we average Americans use our time tells us:

- The TV is on 7 hours and 29 minutes a day. That would be 24 hours per day for almost 4 months of the year.
- Women over 18 spend 5 hours a day watching TV—that is 24 hours a day for 2 ½ months of the year.
- We are exposed to 247 commercial messages a day—that is 90,155 per year!
- We spend the equivalent of some 20 eight-hour days per year hunting and gathering in stores.
- After we buy all that stuff we each generate 1,628 pounds of municipal trash per year.

After we have done all that, and our daily work, and our cleaning, and our personal maintenance, we wonder what time is left to do the other things we would really like to accomplish before it is too late.

Max Lerner wrote:

“We all run on two clocks. One is the outside clock, which ticks away our decades and brings us ceaselessly to the dry season. The other is the inside clock, where you are your own timekeeper and determine your own chronology, your own internal weather and your own rate of living. Sometimes the inner clock runs itself out long before the other one, and you see a dead man going through the motions of living.”

Chance, and our own choices, both wise and foolish, have left us holding a hand of cards, some good and some we wish we could have drawn better. But that’s the hand we have, and, like the grizzled singer, Kenny Rogers, advises us:

“You have to
 Know when to hold ‘em,
 Know when to fold ‘em,
 Know when to walk away,
 Know when to run...”

Tradition gives us the New Year concept. We have made it a time for remembrance and resolution. But let us not make too much of it. It is an arbitrary idea and an arbitrary measurement. Ogden Nash gave the New Year its due disrespect:

“Every New Year is the direct descendant, isn’t it, of a long line of proven criminals?”

Let us do use this New Year idea to make our Todays, the Present we live in, a better place.

I would like to share a personal story of a New Year’s Eve time of accounting. By way of preface, W. H. Auden, an icon of 20th century literature, wrote of New Year’s Eve:

“The only way to spend New Year’s Eve is either quietly with friends or in a brothel. Otherwise, when the evening ends and people pair off, someone is bound to be left in tears.””

(personal story...NOT with friends, and NOT in a brothel)

I hope we can join together in laying this old year to rest. Let us not try to resolve to begin anew in the New Year, but let us instead just press on. Let’s finish what we have started, let’s build up those supportive relationships, let’s hold each other up, let’s be intimate with this beautiful earth in all its seasons, let’s dance and sing a little more—not begrudging the loss of each passing day but celebrating each new day. Let’s be conscious of how we choose to use our hours and our year and we will not bemoan their expenditure when we take stock on New Year’s Eve, 2001.

For this requiem service you see I placed a little casket on the table. The inscription reads: "Year 2000—Troubles and Trivia". Let’s be thinking about what we want to bury in that box.