

## "Musings Upon Time"

All quotations are from the book Man and Time by J. B. Priestley, Bloomsbury Books, 1964

Our fourth Unitarian Universalist principle affirms and promotes "A free and responsible search for truth and meaning." As we journey along that road, and truth and meaning by turns elude us and unfold, Time is with us every step of the way. When we stop to try to find a true description of Time, a Grand Canyon of notions about it opens up. Sacred, scientific, philosophical and secular notions of time abound.

Have you ever been to the Grand Canyon? The canyon presents a depth and expanse of view so amazing, one is filled with awe. There is no other word for it. When I saw the Grand Canyon for the first time, I was so overwhelmed all I could do was sit down on the bench at the viewing area and eat a baloney sandwich....The idea of Time inspires comparable awe.

What does Time mean for us?

Is it the circle of the seasons? Or could Time be more accurately described as a spiral?

The other day I walked from the Meetinghouse over to the Tick Tock Jewelers on Bank Street. The cases in the store held watches, some with gems sparkling around the circumference of their faces - is that time?

Have you ever had a job, or do you have a job, where you have to "punch in" on a time clock? What do we call that experience of time?

Think of how long the summer days feel when you are a kid and it's the first Monday of summer vacation. And how long until we get there, Dad? How many days until Christmas?

How brief is a butterfly's life?

How many light years away is a star?

Priestley writes:

"It is one of the peculiarities of Time that it is intensely private and yet also widely shared. We could put it like this: That superficially, in the world of clocks and watches and appointments, we share Time; then, on a deeper level, it seems intensely private; and then, on a still deeper level, perhaps we begin to share it again, in ways we cannot yet fully understand." [p. 276-7]

This morning's guide for our brief trip into the Grand Canyon of Time is J. B. Priestley. Since it is always good to know where your guide is coming from, here is a brief biography of John Boynton Priestley, should you not already be acquainted with him.

[see <http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/priestle.htm>

<http://www.jbpriestley-society.com/biography.html>

<http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/Jpriestley.htm>]

Priestley was born in Yorkshire, England in 1894. He quit school at 16, and went to work in the wool trade in his hometown of Bradford. He bought books with his wages and wrote articles and poems which were printed in the local and then in the London papers - and from these beginnings he went on to write over 150 published works, many articles and columns.

Priestley volunteered for military service in 1914. He fought in the trenches and survived the front lines in Flanders. He was wounded several times. In 1917, he survived a German gas attack. "I was lucky in that war," he said, "and have never ceased to be aware of that fact."

After the war, he completed studies at Cambridge and continued his work as a journalist, essayist, playwright and, eventually, a successful theatre producer. In June, 1940, Priestley entered radio broadcasting as the presenter of a BBC program. It was estimated that around 40 per cent of the adult population in Britain listened to his weekly program. In the midst of the war, he inspired folks by reflecting on the beauties of the English landscape, and with phrases like "a steaming pie in a shop window defies the bombers." Priestley also called for social change after the War, so the mistakes made after World War I and the poor treatment of the returning soldiers would not be repeated. Some members of the Conservative Party complained about Priestley expressing left-wing views, and his program was canceled.

He said at that time "...We're fighting not merely to keep the German jack-boot off our necks but also to...bring into existence an order of society in which nobody will have far too many rooms in a house and nobody have far too few." He advocated for public ownership of land, railways, mines, docks, and a national wage.

In 1957, he wrote an article which catalyzed a new movement, The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. Priestley wrote "In plain words: now that Britain has told the world that she has the H-Bomb she should announce as early as possible that she has done with [the H-Bomb], that she proposes to reject in all circumstances nuclear warfare....

Alone we defied Hitler, and alone we can defy this nuclear madness. There may be other chain-reactions besides those leading to destruction: and we might start one....And this might well be a declaration to the world that after a certain date one power able to engage in nuclear warfare will reject the evil thing for ever."

Priestley's own interest in the subject of time was, perhaps, sparked by that grandfather clock of his youth we heard of in the Reading [p. 43-4]. It was deepened by experiences of time's malleability that he had in the course of his life. In introducing the subject of time, he said: "Time is not a thing in actual existence with qualities and attributes....I realize that Time is a concept abstracted from our unavoidable acquaintance with succession and all our befores and afters. I regard [Time] as a condition of our experience; and if I refer, as I certainly will, to different times, I am referring to **different temporal conditions for different kinds of experience.**" [p. 81]

Priestley is a pragmatist. He grounds his study in human experience. One truth about time, he maintains, is that we have different experiences of time. Cultures shape our experience of time in distinctive ways. Individuals also have varied experiences of time. Time "flows," if it may be said to flow, faster during some experiences, and slower during others. In some stretches, Time seems to disappear or stop altogether; we can have experiences where Time doubles back on itself, or leaps ahead. But Time is more than the river flowing. It is the banks and canyons through which the river flows, too. In this sense, Time embraces both change, and that which endures.

He says "Change itself...does not give us Time. Suppose we found ourselves in a mad world, created by a surrealist demiurge. A sun like ours rises and sets and there is darkness; then three blue suns follow one another across the sky; then there is a lot of

darkness, finally dispelled by a colossal double sun that glares and glares at us until we are sick of it; then a twilight into which six multicolored moons arise; and so it goes on, the scene forever changing, without repetition or rhythm. Even in such a world, of course, somebody could say, 'We met when there were those three blue suns, remember?' so that some faint notion of time would be struggling through. But it would be a very dim and distorted notion, not our Time at all.

For Time as we know it," he continues, "we need both change and not-change, some things moving and others apparently keeping still, the stream flowing and its banks motionless. ...One philosopher tells me that all is flux, nothing remaining the same, but how can he know this? **If everything is changing, including himself, how can he know that anything is changing?"** p. 64

For my part, I notice many times I say to folks, or they say to me, "Everything changes." Upon reflection, I think this isn't exactly true. As we experience time, we undergo change; but our experiences in time may also reveal true meaning and foster lasting connections.

An "amateur" is, according to its Latin roots, a person who loves his or her subject. In Man and Time, written in 1964, Priestley provides an avowed amateur's sweeping survey of humanity's experiences of time through the centuries; he reflects upon selected scientific, philosophical and esoteric conceptions of time. Most interesting to me as I thumbed through this book as a youngster were the "dream letters."

Priestley recounts: "I had been interviewed, about this book I am writing on Man and Time, on the BBC television program "Monitor," a late Sunday night program chiefly concerned with the arts. At the end of our talk, the interviewer had appealed on my behalf to viewers to send me accounts of any experiences they had had that appeared to challenge the conventional and "common-sense" idea of Time....The response was so immediate and so generous that my secretary and I spent days and days opening letters, then hurriedly glancing through them, as a first step, to sort them out into the six categories I had devised." [p. 187-8]

One interesting conclusion Priestley draws, on the basis of this correspondence, his own experiences and study, concerns the subject matter of precognitive dreams and visions: "At one extreme," he writes, "the deaths and disasters, found in so many of these dreams, come crashing through, events so huge and grave that they seem far out of our reach and control. They will happen, and we cannot stop them happening. But this is equally true of the dreams and waking events at the other extreme, where all that is discovered in advance, plucked out of the future, is the sight of a certain sunlit beach or an unusual cafe, some tiny adventure with a toy or a stuffed bird. These too will happen, and we cannot stop them happening, but now it is because they are so small, incidental, unimportant....We have most foreknowledge of those two borderlands, terrible or trivial, where we plan the least." [p. 239]

This is because, Priestley proposes, in the mid-range of activities, neither trivial nor traumatic, we may exert the most willpower and the future is less certain.

This time, as I read this book through, it was not the dreams which captured my attention so much. The following passage, concerning his youth and time in the trenches, stayed with me: [pp. 284 - 287]

"Now long before I had considered any evidence for precognition and the rest, long before I had read anything about multi-dimensional Time, I had felt a strong resistance

to the idea of our being entirely contained by linear, passing time. It was like being forced into a mental strait-jacket. To accept the idea was to reject thoughts and feelings that, however vague they might be, seemed to light up and liberate the mind. The 'facts' might favor passing time... but then I did not really believe in these 'facts' though in truth I had never carefully considered them.

What I did believe is that we knew nothing for certain, and that it was better to live between gay tapestries of half-beliefs and fancies than between the iron walls of 'facts' that might not even be true. I preferred indulging my fancy to the risk of finally disinheriting my imagination. So I half-believed in a good deal of nonsense, and I still have some notebooks of my teens to prove it. All this was before the First War, when I was a junior clerk in the Yorkshire wool trade. Some of my more fantastic half-beliefs, I suspect, were there to defy the wool trade. But then I left it, in 1914, to join the army as an infantryman.

Life in the infantry on the Western Front was capable of squeezing and hammering all the nonsense and fancifulness out of a man. If living hard and dangerously tests a man's notions, then mine were severely tested. So what remained was something quite different from those prewar half-beliefs and fancywork. There was, for example, the feeling (without any theory attached to it) that on some occasions we slipped out of passing time, became detached observers of our fortunes, with death approaching in slow motion, as if we were in some other time. Then again, there were those men, lively gossipers and wags, who became subdued and thoughtful some hours before the sniper's bullet found them or the shell tore their bodies to bleeding shreds - as if they had been watching, throughout a whole morning, death pointing a finger at them across No Man's Land. These men's familiar moods changed completely, we might say, because at the back of their minds a Now had opened hugely so that it was already being darkened by an event that was to take place, in passing time, some hours afterward....

And this does not contradict and cancel out that sudden detachment at the high point of danger that others of us felt, as if we looked on from some other time. True, our Now narrowed to the finest possible point, and then opened out, to set things seemingly in slow motion, into another time. The difference - and a difference that perhaps cannot be fully explored by the human intellect - was that these men were going to die and we were going to live.

In this strange region," he recounts, "far removed from ordinary routine existence and its prevailing ideas, a region of hard living and danger and death, I noticed...that Time played many tricks. It refused to be true to form. It did not adapt itself to the 'facts.' ....Perhaps in jungles and deserts, on high seas and battlefields...the certainties fade, the facts turn awkward, and Time plays its tricks."

I am reminded of William James, who explored the world of mediums and spiritualists, in search of a genuine spiritualist phenomenon. He sought, as he said, the "one white crow that proves that not all crows are black." The human experience of time in warfare, and the experience of time in giving birth, for that matter, are white crows, certainly. They indicate that there is more to our experience of time than simple, linear, chronological time. Embracing this natural, experiential truth opens a path for meaning to come into our lives. At least I have found this to be the case, on my own journey.

I conclude with an anecdote from Priestley that you may, or may not, find redolent of your own experience: "Though I have now forgotten in what city I was, I remember coming to a halt outside a fine large fish shop. As I stared at the scales and fins and the round eyes, looking indignant even in death, I lost myself and all sense of passing time in a vision of fishiness itself, of all the shores and seas of the world, of the mysterious depths and wonder of oceanic life. This vision was not in any way related to myself: My ego was lost in it. And real poets, I suppose, must be always enjoying such selfless and timeless visions. They come to me only rarely: It might be from the sigh of something, like those fishes gleaming on the marble, or after I had heard somebody merely say "France" or "Italy," or from simply reading the words "eighteenth century"; but they brought me at once a feeling for the immense variety, richness, and wonder of life on this earth. This feeling was deep and joyful but did not belong to ecstatic mystical experience, though it was nearly as far removed from the flat and stale acceptance of everything we find among so many people now....Our consciousness dwells among many dimensions." [p. 289]

My fellow travelers, let us give thanks for our times together, the wonders of experience, for questions, and for wise guides among us. AMEN