**Phi Beta Kappa Initiation Ceremony, April 11, 2012**

**Thoughts about Time and an Ancient Text**

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I am pleased and honored to speak to you tonight as you are being initiated into the nation’s oldest and most respected academic honor society. You should be proud and you should be heartily congratulated. I am also humbled as I am not myself a member and I speak to you as an outsider looking in. And I thank you for the opportunity.

My charge is to talk with you about the value of liberal learning—the heart of what Phi Beta Kappa is about— and the worthiness of intellectual pursuits as things in themselves, as opposed to means to other ends. I wish to do that by looking into two areas to which I have given some recent thought and seeing if some worthwhile links can be found. One of them is the phenomenon of time and the other is the book of Ecclesiastes.

I have long been fascinated with the idea of time (and I realize I am far from alone). What exactly is it? Is it a fourth dimension (as in length, width, depth, and duration)? Does it, somehow, flow? Or do we move through it? Or is it some kind of illusion; a consequence of our own being and existence? It seems clear to me that if a tree falls in the forest and no one hears it, it makes no noise. So, if there is no one to ‘experience’ time, does it actually happen? And whatever it is, why does it appear to change its rate of speed? All of us here already know that the older we get the more quickly time seems to pass? Why is that so? We also know that differing degrees of anxiety, interest, or boredom appear to alter the speed at which time ‘passes,’ regardless of our age. Why is that so? There are so many questions; so little time to address them.

Recently I have become even more focused on the phenomenon of time, prodded no doubt by my advanced age, but also by some recent readings of time travel books. During the holiday break I read Stephen King’s *11/22/63*, a time travel book about undoing the Kennedy assassination and detailing an alternate history in a universe where the assassination did not occur. It was interesting beyond what I expected, not particularly having been a Stephen King fan. I followed it with a couple of dozen other time- and time-travel related pieces including novels, short stories, and works of non-fiction, including some indecipherable physics.

Thinking about time opens up the broader ‘universe’ of the liberal arts. Philosophy, mathematics, physics, theology, literature, history, psychology, and the other social sciences leap into view. Indeed, time may be the only thing we have (even as we all run out of it). We have, each of us, so much time (but we rarely know how much time), and yet we have a hard time figuring out where we stand in time. When is the present? Is there one? We talk about past, present, and future, but do we experience anything but the past? And if the past is over, how do we experience it? Is time continuous or is it made up of discrete segments? How does all this affect free will? Is time travel possible? Surely Einstein thought so; apparently Special Relativity allows for time travel to the future, while General Relativity opens up time travel to the past. In fact, my head hurts so much that I am turning all this into an *FSP* this fall called “Explorations of Time and Time Travel.” Maybe we can share the pain.

So how is this related to the book of Ecclesiastes, a part of what is called Wisdom Literature in the Hebrew Scriptures? Ecclesiastes offers advice on how to live, but it does so in a way quite different from how we usually ‘hear’ Biblical advice. I turn to a brief volume by Rami Shapiro called *The Way of Solomon: Finding Joy and Contentment in the Wisdom of Ecclesiastes*. It is a ‘fresh’ translation of Ecclesiastes and it happens to have quite a bit to say about time and the related factors of permanence and eternity.

Shapiro’s key observation is his re-translation of the more common ‘vanity’ into ‘emptiness.’ See Chapter 1, verse 2: “Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity” (KJV). Compare it with Shapiro’s treatment of this same verse:

Emptiness! Emptiness upon emptiness! The world is fleeting of form, empty of permanence, void of surety, without certainty. Like a breath breathed once and gone, all things rise and fall. Understand emptiness, and tranquility replaces anxiety. Understand emptiness, and compassion replaces jealousy. Understand emptiness and you will cease to excuse suffering and begin to alleviate it.

This translation, or expansion (because it obviously contains more than the ‘original’) moves the work into a different level of thought—an alternate relevancy that evokes Eastern thinking and contemporary sensibilities alike. Shapiro so highlights emptiness and impermanence as to make them the central themes.

Here is the NRSV of 1:3-4: “(3)What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun? (4)A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever.” And here is how Shapiro puts it:

(3)When you are deluded by the illusion of permanence, you become trapped in the pursuit of profit. Profit for the body—wealth. Profit for the mind—knowledge. Profit for the soul—eternal life. Vanity and foolishness! Profit requires permanence, and there is no permanence. Therefore there is no profit, and the pursuit of profit yields only suffering. You suffer because you hunger for permanence and there is only impermanence. (4)One generation arising from the dust of another, only to collapse itself in the heap of history. Even the earth is passing away; its permanence is an illusion—it passes more slowly than you, and you mistake its slow death for eternity. Eternity is not the infinite stretching of time, but the ending of time. When you see the emptiness of things, you see the emptiness of time. When you see the emptiness of time, you are free from eternity. When you are free from eternity, you no longer pursue permanence. When you no longer pursue permanence, you no longer harvest anxiety. When you no longer harvest anxiety, you reap tranquility.

Note the elaboration in each verse, particularly in verse four where the single sentence, three clause statement of three related facts (“A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever”) is rendered into two longer sentences with additional context (i. e., the earth’s “permanence is an illusion—it passes more slowly than you, and you mistake its slow death for eternity.”), and then an additional six sentences explaining what eternity is (the ending of time—or the emptiness of time) and why we are better off free from eternity (and free of permanence and anxiety, free to reap tranquility).

Let us look at verse 11 in the NRSV: “The people of long ago are not remembered, nor will there be any remembrance of people yet to come by those who come after them.” Shapiro puts the same verse like this: “There is nothing new—only forgetfulness masquerading as creativity. Blessed is the shortness of memory, for without it we would all go mad.” The passive voice becomes activated by forgetfulness’s creative masquerading and the ‘relief’ that we may escape madness.

Turning to a different matter, see 2:24 in NRSV: “There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God.” Shapiro adds a preface and joyous elaboration:

If there is no profit to wisdom or folly, if neither pleasure nor knowledge can bring peace of mind, what then have I learned? Simply this: there is no other good than eating when hungry, drinking when thirsty, and appreciating all that comes your way. For pleasure and profit are empty as the wind; there is no lasting joy at all. Joy is as fleeting as the breeze. Celebrate its coming, and do not seek to halt its passing away.

The emptiness and impermanence theme continues and the existential pleasures of eating and drinking are celebrated as ends in themselves.

In the ‘famous’ opening of Chapter Three, where the KJV says: “To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven,” Shapiro says, “Life is fleeting, the passing of moments upon moments. Embrace them as they come; do not cling to them as they go. In this alone there is tranquility.” Verse 9 as rendered in the NIV simply says: “What does the worker gain from his toil?” Shapiro opens it up widely and continues the path to tranquility:

Moments and the passing of moments—this is life. There is a suffering natural to this flow; there is no escaping either sorrow or joy. Do not add to the first by clinging to the second, for in doing so you deny the flow itself. Live the moment; attend to the doing; accept whatever comes into your hand. In this only is the path to tranquility.

So too in verses 16 and 17 of Chapter three, where the NRSV says: (16)“Moreover I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, wickedness was there, and in the place of righteousness, wickedness was there as well. (17)I said in my heart, God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for he has appointed a time for every matter, and for every work.” Shapiro takes that text and works it into a far more tangible lesson with sociological, theological, and philosophical overtones:

(16)From the order of nature I turned my attention to the order of society. I looked for justice and found corruption. I looked for righteousness and found evil. (17)I said to myself: Both the righteous and the wicked are haunted by time. Yet there is a difference. The righteous accept the flow and find the Way. Letting go of time, they enter eternity; letting go of self, they find tranquility. The wicked insist upon controlling time, forcing the world to conform to their will. Theirs is a battle unending. And the prize is only fear.

Under the heading “Reverence, Humility, and Contentment” the NRSV renders 5:12-15 like this: (12)Sweet is the sleep of laborers, whether they eat little or much; but the surfeit of the rich will not let them sleep. (13)There is a grievous ill that I have seen under the sun: riches were kept by their owners to their hurt, (14)and those riches were lost in a bad venture; though they are parents of children, they have nothing in their hands. (15)As they came from their mother’s womb, so they shall go again, naked as they came; they shall take nothing for their toil, which they may carry away with their hands.” Again, Shapiro makes this into a clearer and more pointed lesson:

(12)I have witnessed a great suffering in this world. (13)You pretend to labor for others, but your work becomes an escape from others. Your wealth becomes your enemy. (14)If the wealth is lost to error or stolen by thieves, there is nothing left of you. You can give your children nothing; neither gold nor love is yours to give. (15)You come into the world naked. You leave it naked as well. Empty we enter; empty we depart. You waste your time trying to find fullness in things or desires. What fullness there is arises out of its own accord when you learn to live simply with whatever each moment brings. Here is the root of your suffering: chasing permanence. It is a race for the wind, and you drop exhausted from the chase. You thought to make something of yourself and to leave something behind. But there is nothing to make and nothing to leave.

Shapiro’s ‘additions’ to verse 15 transform the ‘lesson’ from the relatively simple, “You can’t take it with you so spend more quality time with your family,” to the far more profound notions that fullness is in the moment and that chasing permanence is folly because there is no permanence. And of course he has already established that eternity is not permanence, but the end of time.

As we are running out of time I want to close on a comparison of parts of the final chapter. Here is 12:1 from the NRSV: “Remember your creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come, and the years draw near when you will say, ‘I have no pleasure in them.’” Here is Shapiro’s:

How shall you live in youth and in age? Keep God with you always; let the One Who Is All shine though all who are one. Walk with God in youth, bend with God in age; and your last days will be no less than your first. When the end times come and you have no desire for tomorrow, be neither angry nor despairing; know that all things come to pass arising from and returning to the One Who Is the Source and Substance of All.

And finally, 12:8 from the NRSV (the last verse prior to what is identified as the Epilogue): “Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher; all is vanity.” This nicely returns to the beginning. But listen to how Rami Shapiro handles the very same verse:

The whole of life is empty of permanence; there is no certainty. No surety, no salvation to lift you out of impermanence. There is only doing without reward; serving without payment; learning without knowing; rejoicing without reason; loving without controlling; walking without map and measure. To think otherwise is to pursue the wind, and vanity piles upon vanity as you seek to freeze that which is forever melting.

In the final words of Ecclesiastes, 12:13-14 (KJV), “(13) Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. (14)For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil.” Shapiro’s ‘turn-around’ is subtler and a lot more complicated:

(13)Cling to nothing and allow all to pass; and do not imagine that you can buy your way to eternity. You cannot control destiny, nor can you secure reward; yet God brings every deed to fruition, allowing even the hidden motive its due. Whether for good or for ill, the consequences of your deeds will manifest; you will reap what you sow; and Order will use Chaos as it will. (14) So when all is said, remember this: open your mind to wonder, your heart to compassion, and your hand to justice, that you fashion a whole and holy world.

Ecclesiastes helps us to ‘order’ some of our questions on time and to focus them on more fundamental matters. I began this talk with a series of unanswered questions, but with a keen interest in trying to discover what time means to us and how we can make sense of it, if possible. We are in need of a framework for reflection, but one that leaves the ends open enough for us to use our own intellectual imagination in an unfettered manner. In Shapiro’s own comments on his translated text, he says “the complexity of life is generated not by the tools we use but by the illusions we cultivate and live by.” (Shapiro 3). In Ecclesiastes we have the opportunity to use an ancient text to help us examine our own illusions. Isn’t that what an education in the liberal arts and sciences is for?