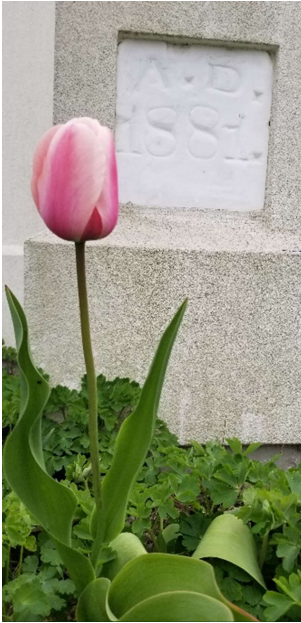


The Time to Plant a Tree

Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda

Rev. Rodrigo Emilio Solano-Quesnel

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There's an expression used on the internet to describe when someone appears to speak modestly about themselves – maybe even in a self-deprecating way – even though they're actually drawing attention to something that they're proud of. This is called a “humblebrag”.

I'm going to share a bit about myself in a way that may sound like a humblebrag, but I hope is more of the opposite – something that *sounds* like I'm showing off, but is actually meant as an illustration of humility... a “brag-humble”?

I have shared before about my workout routine – a simple regime of four body weight exercises, and some running in place, where the only equipment required is a floor – and since I have a floor at home this works out fine (and if you're curious, the source of this is a 1960's booklet called *The Royal Canadian Air Force Exercise Plans for Physical Fitness* – it was a hand-me-down from my mom).

Now the reason that I've shared about this isn't so that you can marvel at how fit your minister is, but to illustrate the fact that I started this by doing only a few repetitions – or reps – per day, maybe just a couple times a week at the beginning, and I gradually built myself up to dozens of reps, several times a week, over several weeks and months.

This is the lesson of “eating the chair”, whereby small, incremental steps lead to considerable progress over time – a story that I shared some months ago, in which a couple of college students ate a chair over several months, by filing it into sawdust with a rasp, and adding the dust

to their salads and cereal, until they ate the whole chair... for kicks, and extra credit on their summer philosophy paper.

But there's a hidden truth to this reality. Not only did this kind of workout routine that I... "brag" about build up from a few reps to a longer, more vigorous workout over time... but that small start also had to begin at some point. There was a time when I hadn't exercised for a long time, and it sometimes felt like I had missed the boat. It took a conscious decision to start, knowing that, with a few reps at a time, I might not see any visible benefits to the routine for some time. The RCAF's Fitness Guide even has an exhortation: *Do not Delay! Start Today!*

And there's an even hidden-er truth to this, because I have actually fallen off of the workout wagon... several times. Maybe I've gotten sick and have had to take a break, or been travelling, or felt I was too busy with something else. And I've had to start again, incrementally.

And with that, I've found that one of the hardest things of starting, or starting again, is battling with the *regret* of having missed out on that time when I *could* have been doing that which I thought was good for me or for those around me. That deceptive regret that seems to whisper that there's no use to doing anything now since we haven't done it anyway – and what use will it be now?

Last week, I mentioned Pastor Charleen's reflection that "comparison is the thief of joy". She was mainly talking about when we compare ourselves to others, but it also applies to when we compare ourselves *to ourselves*. Be this comparing ourselves to our past selves, or to a self we wish we had been – and sometimes these are the toughest comparisons we make.

In the Talmud, there is a story of an old man planting a fig tree, and when the emperor sees him do this, the emperor asks the old man why he would plant a tree, since it'd be unlikely he'd have a chance to eat its fruit – the emperor tells him: "The time to plant it was in your youth".

The old man gives a few answers – for one thing, he’s used to working and sees no need to stop, also... who knows? maybe he’ll just live a bit longer and taste the tree’s fruit after all. And in any case, even if he’s not around to taste the fruit of the tree, he’ll gladly leave it to his son, just as his father left him the fruits of *his* labour.

The story of the old man and the fig tree is sometimes summarized in the saying: *the best time to plant a tree is 20 years ago – the second best time is now.*

The best time to have healthy habits is last year, or twenty years ago, or as a teen, or as a kid, or whenever it was that we weren’t doing it. The second best time is now. And with that approach, a lot is possible. A solid second best is much better than other alternatives, and that is good enough.

Now, this isn’t a Public Service Announcement to make you converts to *The Royal Canadian Air Force Exercise Plans for Physical Fitness*. Your situation, abilities, and personal goals will be different, but I imagine there are some things you wish you had started before, and would still like to carry out, but wonder if it’s really worth it. The lessons of the second best time to plant apply throughout.

When the pandemic was declared, and shelter-in-place orders kept us from meeting in person, I remember feeling regret that I hadn’t already secured a Zoom account for the church. But that regret wasn’t going to be very helpful in allowing us to continue our community with other options.

I was also blessed by having already had some experience using this platform as a Trustee on the Canadian Unitarian Council’s Board, which has been meeting on Zoom for several years. The seeds that had been planted by them, gave me some confidence in learning to host Zoom for our community of faith. This includes an ongoing learning curve,

which you are now sharing with me, as we explore how this tool can help us reach all who wish to be part of it.

And that is another lesson from the story of the Old Man and the Fig Tree. A humility in recognizing that, what we have now comes from trees and seeds planted long ago, by people who we no longer have around, or by people we have never even met or heard about. And some of what we're doing today will become seeds for others to harvest.

This week was a landmark commemoration of Victory in Europe Day... and depending on how you count the signing of the treaty, the anniversary was this past Friday (May 8) or on Saturday (May 9). And the heritage of war is always a complicated one, comprising seeds *and* scars.

One thing that we can say with confidence, is that our world would not be what it is today, were it not for the many acts that were carried out by millions of people during the time of the Second World War, from resistance fighters in Europe, to soldiers and other service personnel, to engineers, and people at home, seeking to support each other, offering the abundance of themselves in times of scarcity. Many seeds were sown then, and very often, we benefit from the fruit of those trees that some of us had no hand in planting.

Today is also a recognition of a major demographic in society – mothers. This too can be a complicated day, including many seeds, and sometimes, scars.

One thing we can say is that our lives would not be what they are today, were it not for the work of mothers, and parents of many genders, who have offered of themselves in raising children throughout the world. Often nurturing generations, not just for their benefit, but for the benefit of the generations afterward. Many seeds have been sown by our ancestors, and very often we eat from the fruit of trees that we have had no hand in planting.

And seeds we are sowing today, will impact generations to come – regardless of whether we see their fruits or not.

These days, we've been exploring ways to make our church more accessible, and for folks to be part of it in different ways, through different media. And we plant these seeds with the backing of the seeds that were planted in 1880 and 1881 by our church founders, Big Mike Fox, and the blessed company that teamed up with him.

And in our wider community, there are also some discussions, or actions, that have taken the backseat for some time, and are now coming into sharper focus, especially because their absence is being felt more strongly at a time of crisis, like this one.

Matters such as poverty, homelessness, food security, work safety standards, migrant worker's rights, a robust healthcare system, science literacy, environmental awareness.

Many of these are conversations where we might sometimes feel like we missed the boat... where it might feel like we really should have gotten our ducks in a row, like, yesterday, or last year, or back in the twentieth century.

And yet, my friends, we are better off seeking swifter and stronger action on these issues now, than if we stayed wallowing on the fact that we might not have been as active before.

In fact, my friends, this may well be an opportune time to make a stronger case, as the effects of inaction are more clearly visible. Many people who might not have felt affected by these issues, now see them closer to their home, or even affecting them, illustrating how what touches one affects us all.

My friends, as we look for ways in which we may find healthier ways of being at home, healthier ways of being in community, and healthier ways of connecting with our wider world, let us be mindful of that

deceptive regret that comes with not having engaged before,
remembering that now is a fine time to recognize what is possible.
Though we may be long overdue, we can always start anew.

So may it be.
In Solidarity,
Amen

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Suggested hymns:

#409 Sleep, My Child

~)-|W: Adapt. by Alicia S. Carpenter, 1930- , © 1990 Alicia S. Carpenter

M: Welsh melody, c. 1784

AR HYD Y NOS 8.4.8.4.8.8.8.4

Hymn #177 Sakura

~)-| Words: Japanese folk song. English words by Edwin Markham, 1852-1940

Music: Japanese folks song

SAKURA 6.7.7.7.7.6.6.

Opening Hymn #151 I Wish I Knew How

W & M: Billy Taylor and Dick Dallas,

~)-| arr. by Mary Allen Walden, 1946-1997, © 1992 UUA

MANDELA 11.11.11.6.6.6.6