

This Old Clock

Rev. Stefan M. Jonasson

Eliot Chapel – Unitarian Universalist Association

January 7, 2003

Sometimes I find myself lying awake at night listening to the faint sound of the clock ticking away in the bedroom. As time progresses, the sound becomes louder and louder. Oftentimes the beat of my heart slowly blends with the ticking of the clock and it is almost as if the clock and my heart are beating out the same percussionist's score of some cosmic symphony, as if eternity itself and my feeble little bag of bones had dissolved into one. Or perhaps I'm just like one of those lost and lonely puppies who only settle down when you slip a ticking clock under their bedding.



Sometimes I also hear voices late at night, against the silent stillness of the room. They are *not* – let me reassure you – the kind of voices that came to Joan of Arc or, for that matter, the latest mass murderer to get his name in the paper. It is neither the voice of God nor the voice of the devil that I hear in those moments of twilight consciousness. No, they are the voices we all hear, I would imagine, when we are too tired to stay awake and yet too stimulated to fall asleep. They are the voices of memory, for the most part, belonging to loved ones who have gone before.

According to Spinoza, "We feel and know that we are eternal." I hear an echo of our eternal nature in the voices of those whose memory is so deeply etched upon my own soul that I cannot escape them, even if I would. Like the fictional boy at Brekkukot, I first learned about eternal verities from the ticking of an old clock in the home where I grew up.

For as long as I can remember, my great-grandmother's clock has hung on the wall of the family room in my mother's home. Amma, as we called her in Icelandic, had endured more than her share of personal hardship. But life's struggles never defeated her and, if anything, served to give her greater clarity about what she treasured in life. According to an oft-repeated story, this old clock was the first luxury item that she and

my great-grandfather acquired after they were married. In fact, it was likely the *only* luxury item they owned throughout the duration of their nine-year marriage.

This old clock hung on the wall of their home in the north of Iceland when my grandfather drew his first breath, the youngest of Amma's four children. And it was there ticking out the pulsations of eternity when the last breath escaped from her only daughter's lips. It accompanied Amma into widowhood and chimed the hour when she re-married.

It survived fire and landslide and crossed the ocean more than once. Amma brought the clock with her when she emigrated to Manitoba with her family on the eve of the First World War. When she and her second husband returned to Iceland during the Great Depression, she took the clock back with her. There it was ticking away in the background when she received the letter telling her that her youngest son, Otto (my grandfather), had died following surgery for a condition that now would be cured with antibiotics. A few years later, once again widowed, she returned to Canada to be closer to her surviving family. The clock hung for years in the kitchen of her tiny, sparsely furnished apartment, where it gathered dust and grease and further memories. When she was preparing to move into an old folks home, as they were called then, she offered the clock to her middle son, who told her it was nothing more than an old piece of rubbish which belonged in the dustbin. When his uncle had finished ranting, my father told Amma that he would like to take the clock. He brought it home, where he lovingly cleaned and restored it before hanging it as the centerpiece in the basement room.

Amma died on my tenth birthday. I remember the call, mostly because I knew what had happened, even though I hadn't heard a word from the other end of the line. It was something about my mother's manner and the tone of her voice that communicated the gravity of the situation. And without having to ask, I knew exactly who the call was about. My great-uncle, who I remember as being chronically unhappy and rather self-centered – I won't polish him up by calling him a curmudgeon – came to our home after her funeral. He looked at the clock hanging on the wall and, somehow managing to keep a straight face, he told my father that the clock was the only thing of his mother's that he had ever really wanted. My father remembered all too well how he had come to possess his grandmother's clock in the first place, so it remained right where it was. Since then, the clock has chimed farewell to my father himself and my older brother, too, while welcoming a new generation and anticipating the next. For more than a century now, this old clock has marked the moments of eternity for my family, the passages from one generation to the next – their comings and goings, their accomplishments and disappointments, their joys and sorrows. It has been a not-so-silent witness to the events that unfolded around it.

When I went to Iceland on a millennial pilgrimage, along with my brother and sister, we visited many of the places that figure so prominently in our family stories. We stopped at farmsteads that have ties to our family extending over generations – indeed, over centuries. In the church at Oddi, where our family’s roots extend back to the year 1076, we gathered around the baptismal font where Amma was christened by the pastor and poet Matthías Jochumsson, a follower of Channing and the leading advocate of liberal Christianity in Iceland. Afterwards, we wandered through the churchyard, looking in vain for a familiar name on one of the stones, some tangible evidence that our family had once dwelt in this holiest of places. We found nothing. Like so many rural churchyards, there are more unmarked mounds than there are marked graves. At the farmsteads, the farmhouses that were once there – homes of turf and stone and wood – have long since dissolved into the earth. It dawned on me, as we searched for some lingering remains, that the earth itself was all that remained to bear witness to our family heritage. The earth ... and that old clock hanging in my mother’s basement family room.

You see, while touring a recreated village museum on the outskirts of Reykjavík, I wandered into a building that featured a watchmaker’s shop. I was about to leave when I looked up and there hanging on the wall was a familiar sight – a clock that looked just like the one that has accompanied my family through a century. In a land where few traces remained, this sister clock reassured us that the memories and tales of a thousand years were real, not ephemeral voices from a doubtful past. We were home.

So often we dismiss the importance of “things,” feeling it materialistic or superficial to cherish the objects that surround us, while forgetting that they can also be touchstones that remind us of the precious events and cherished people in our lives – even the deepest values we hold dear.

For as long as I have been coming to Boston – some twenty years now – I have attended worship and meetings in this chapel. Like the old clock at home, this pulpit has become one of the touchstones of my life and I never enter this sanctuary without running my hand along its aging wood. From this pulpit, William Ellery Channing preached the liberal gospel and bequeathed to the generations that followed a vital and liberating faith. In a way that I cannot possibly describe nor feign to understand, this pulpit has absorbed something of the people who preached from it, along with those who heard their words, and the events and controversies that swirled around it. It stands today in silent witness to the beliefs and values – *eternal* values – at the heart of liberal religion. Each of us has old clocks – or old pulpits – in our lives that help us to remember people and places and events which are of supreme importance to us, while reminding us that there are truths and values and concerns which transcend our individual lives.

My late uncle Axel used to say, “we live in the shadow of history.” I have always felt the weight of this truth and have sought to live worthily in that shadow. But I would go further: we dwell in the midst of eternity. The work we do today – as ministers and laypersons, as denominational representatives and congregational members, as caregivers to those near us and prophetic voices in the world – is of great importance, for we undertake it in the name of eternal values and abiding truths, as living embodiments of this living tradition we hold dear. Let us be worthy of our work and find joy in our tasks, for we do live in the shadow of history and dwell in the midst of eternity.

*“Eternity is not something that begins after we are dead.
It is going on all the time. We are in it now.”*

– Charlotte Perkins Gilman
The Forerunner, 1909

Reading: From *The Fish Can Sing* by Halldór Laxness

It goes without saying that if there were anything happening in the room you never heard the clock at all, no more than if it did not exist; but when all was quiet and the visitors had gone and the table had been cleared and the door shut, then it would start up again, as steady as ever; and if you listened hard enough you could sometimes make out a singing note in its workings, or something very like an echo.

How did it ever come about, I wonder, that I got the notion that in this clock there lived a strange creature, which was Eternity? Somehow it just occurred to me one day that the word it said when it ticked, a four-syllable word with the emphasis on alternate syllables, was et-ERN-it-Y, et-ERN-it-Y. Did I know the word, then?

It was odd that I should discover eternity in this way, long before I knew what eternity was, and even before I had learned the proposition that all men are mortal – yes, while I was actually living in eternity myself. It was as if a fish were suddenly to discover the water it swam in.*

Reference

* Halldór Laxness, *The Fish Can Sing*, trans. Magnus Magnusson (London: Methuen & Company, 1966; revised edition, London: The Harvill Press, 2000), 5. Originally published as *Brekkukotsannáll* (Reykjavík Helgafell, 1957.)