



The Unitarian Universalist Church of the Restoration
Embracing All Souls and Restoring Wholeness

Words of Inspiration, January 11, 2015
Rev. Dr. Kathryn Ellis

Time and Identity

This morning we mark the changing of the calendar year, a meaning we give time which can lead us to reflect on the passing of time; reflect on our own place in the lifespan; and reflect on the times in which we live.

Much of our identity comes from the times we live in and the generation we are a part of. Some of our individual identity comes from the way we perceive and understand time. I want to share with you one of the ways that I have come to understand time and history, a theory that helps me to hope when times are hard as they are now, again. It is a hope that doesn't require divine intervention.

Much of this comes from the work of William Strauss and Neil Howe in their books: *Generations: The History of America's Future from 1584 to 2069*¹ and *The Fourth Turning: An American Prophecy*.²

TIME

Jewish and Christian teachings have regarded time and history as linear. The God of history leads his chosen people to a preordained destiny. For religious Christians, it has been a unidirectional story which will end when God restores the Kingdom of God on earth.

The secular linear story has been that of ever-increasing progress, ever-increasing knowledge, science, and technology. This story has helped to create and support goals, both scientific and moral. It's been the primary story of modernity. But it also leads to pessimism and despair because the expectation is that whatever is happening now will just continue in that straight line. Strauss and Howe stated, "The more we persist in believing time to be linear, the more that we fear that the path to the future might now be linear downwards."³

In this post-modern time, many Americans no longer believe in progress. And many do not think of time as linear but as chaotic. The belief in chaotic time is the belief in total randomness of the universe, and the belief that there is no real cause and effect. Nothing has any real meaning, and the lessons of history are irrelevant. A sense of time as chaotic tends to decrease the bonds of community; if nothing that we do matters, why care for family, community, or the earth?

There is another way of understanding time, and it is an ancient and a sacred one. Time as cyclical has been part of the religious understanding and rituals of people all over the world. As a former psychotherapist, I have long thought of individual and family lives as like a spiral; we come around to the same spot (issues, problems) but always in a slightly different place. Now I see larger history, national history as also cyclical and spiral.

The natural world is cyclical; we recognize the daily cycle and the seasonal cycle. "Cyclical time is endless, yet also endlessly completed and renewed . . ." ⁴ Cyclical time was part of the living faith of pagan and indigenous peoples and as such was actively suppressed by early Christians. St. Augustine said "only the wicked walk in circles." ⁵ "Nearly every primitive or archaic society came to see sacred time as rounded." ⁶

CYCLES

Ancient cycles whether Babylonian, Hindu, Mayan, Celtic, or Greek had the same 5 attributes: ⁷

1. Each cycle is represented by a circle which symbolizes perfect and unbreakable recurrence. The wreaths we decorate with at Christmas, what are they? They are circles of evergreen and symbols of unbrokenness, of eternity. They were originally Roman, a totem to protect from oncoming winter and a reminder that spring will come again.
2. Each circle is divided into phases sometimes two, nearly always four. Every extreme is balanced by its opposite: yin and yang; peace and war. "The ancient Greeks called it the dynamic pulsation of *philia* (love and harmony) and *neikos* (strife and separation)."
3. Each circle of time has a great moment of discontinuity. A crisis, from the Greek for a decisive or separating moment, is the maximum moment of strife, and it defines the end of one period and the beginning of the next.
4. Each circle requires that time be restarted, at the moment of each creation. We start a new month on the first, and a new year in the first month. Ancients often changed the year back to year one to denote a new start, a new era, perhaps a new dynasty.
5. Each circle is presumed to repeat itself, in the same sequence, over a period of similar length.

The American Saeculum

Strauss and Howe wrote that there are two important, recognizable and interacting rhythmic cycles in history. First is the saeculum. The saeculum is the length of a long human life, eighty to one hundred years, and it is the cycle of human affairs, the cycle of history. It was ritualized by the ancient Etruscans and named by the ancient Romans.⁸ Each saeculum has four seasons; each season is about twenty years long.

The other cycle is the rhythm of the four phases of individual human life: childhood, young adulthood, midlife, and elderhood. Each phase of life is also about 20 years long, and the phases of life help to define our generations.⁹

The Saeculum gives history's underlying beat; the generations perpetuate history's seasonality.¹⁰ Ibn Khaldun, the great 14th century Muslim philosopher and historian, stated, "When there is an alteration of conditions, it is as if the whole of creation had changed and all the world had been transformed, as if there were a new creation, a rebirth, a world brought into existence anew in."¹¹ He noted that dynasties tended to last for four generations after which the cycle began again. Khaldun was one of the first to observe that history moves through stages and that the movement is motivated and energized by parent-child tensions.

Strauss and Howe have traced back the Anglo-American saeculum to the middle of the 16th century. The American saeculum lasts between 80 -100 years. At the heart of the American saeculum is a recurring swing between the overprotection and the underprotection of children.¹²

There are four archetypal generational patterns in the American saeculum: the hero, the artist, the prophet or idealist, and the nomad. Living hero generations are the GI generation, birth years from 1901 to 1924, and the Millennials, birth years from 1982 to 2002. Living artist generations are the Silent, born from 1925 to 1942, and the new artists who are infants birth years probably from 2003 to 2023. The living idealist generation is the Boomer generation born from 1943 to 1960. The GenXers, birth years 1960 to 1981, are the living nomad generation. Hero generations grow up in a time of increasing childhood protection. Artist generations are overprotected. Idealists grow up in a time of decreasing protection, and Nomad generations are underprotected.

We are in the fifth American saeculum which Strauss and Howe have named the Millennial Saeculum. This period began with the end of World War II in 1946 and will end sometime around 2025.

Each season within the saeculum is called a "turning," and there are four turnings in the saeculum. "A turning is an era with a characteristic social mood, a new twist on how people feel about themselves and their nation. It results from

the aging of the generational constellation.”¹³ As each generation occupies a new life phase, the seasons change. These are the twenty year long seasons of the saeculum.

1. The first turning is a High and is the spring. It is a time of growth and promise, prosperity and civic order. Most recently 1946 to 1964.
2. The second turning is an Awakening. This is the summer of the saeculum. It is a time of spiritual growth and social ideals. 1964 to 1984. Racism and gender discrimination are challenged.
3. The third turning is an Unraveling and is the autumn. Consumption, self-absorption and alienation are the themes. There is an attitude of laissez-faire. Public trust, public order and public institutions weaken. Pragmatism and self-reliance are the order of the day. 1984 to maybe 2008.
4. The fourth turning is a Crisis. It's the saecular winter. In the winter, a sudden unexpected crisis is seen as dire. The crisis is the discontinuity and creates a radical shift. There is a sense of public urgency and “wars are fought with fury and for maximum results.”¹⁴ The last fourth turning began with the 1929 stock market crash and the great depression and ended with World War II. 2005 to probably about 2025.

We are in the fourth turning, the winter. It is the hardest period of time that any of us will experience, no matter our generation. Some of us are anxious. Some of us are despairing. Some of us feel that things are worse than they have ever been and will only get worse. Times are hard and they will not stay this way. We need not be hopeless and we need not be passive.

What can we do?

“Cyclical time teaches you not just to accept the rhythms of history, but to look for ways to make use of them, to fulfill your role in those rhythms as best you can. It is an antidote to fatalism.”¹⁵

What must we do? I think what we have already been doing at Restoration.

Work to stop divisiveness. Stress less what is unique and different and more what is shared and what we hold in common.

Listen and build bridges of community.

Strengthen our values and work to find values consensus.

Build and strengthen community.

Live with integrity and honesty. Be known as a person who is authentic and trustworthy

Build and tend personal relationships.

Offer help when it is needed. Be willing to accept help when it is needed.
Expect that teamwork is necessary.

Conclusion

In chaotic time, history would bear no pattern. In linear time, there would be no turnings, just segments along a one directional path of progress or decline. There would be no correction.

In cyclical time, a society always evolves. Usually the circle is a spiral of progress, sometimes a spiral of decline. Always people strive to mend the errors of the past, to correct the excesses of the present, to seek a future that provides whatever feels most in need. Thus civilization can endure and thrive.¹⁶

Just like winter, the fourth turning is a natural season of life. “The fourth turning lends people of all ages what is literally a once in a lifetime opportunity to heal (or destroy) the very heart of the republic.”¹⁷ The end of winter brings the spring. The end of the fourth turning brings transformation and the beginning.

Navajo artists use colored sand to draw circles one quadrant at a time just as their ancestors have done. The sand paintings show the four seasons of life. When they near the end of the fourth quadrant, they stop the circle. The resulting gap “signifies the moment of death and rebirth.” The Navajo accept not just the circularity of life, but also its perpetuity. Each generation knows its ancestors have drawn similar circles in the sand – and each expects its heirs to keep drawing them. The Navajo ritually reenact the past while anticipating the future. Thus do they transcend time.”¹⁸

So may it be for all of us. Ashé. Amen. Blessed Be,

¹ Strauss, William and Neil Howe. *Generations: The History of America's Future*. New York: William Morrow & Co., 1991.

² Strauss, William and Neil Howe. *The Fourth Turning: An American Prophecy*, New York: Broadway Books, 1997.

³ *The Fourth Turning*, p.11

⁴ *The Fourth Turning*, p.8

⁵ *The Fourth Turning*, p. 10

⁶ *The Fourth Turning*, p. 29

⁷ All from *The Fourth Turning*, pp. 28-39

⁸ *The Fourth Turning*, p. 25

⁹ *The Fourth Turning*, p 14.

¹⁰ *The Fourth Turning*, p.15

¹¹ Armstrong, Karen. *Islam: A Short History*. New York, New York: Random House, 2000, p. 105

¹² *The Fourth Turning*, p. 82

¹³ *The Fourth Turning*, p. 99

¹⁴ *The Fourth Turning*, p. 104

¹⁵ *The Fourth Turning*, p. 305

¹⁶ *The Fourth Turning*, p. 105

¹⁷ *The Fourth Turning*, p. 21

¹⁸ *The Fourth Turning*, p. 329