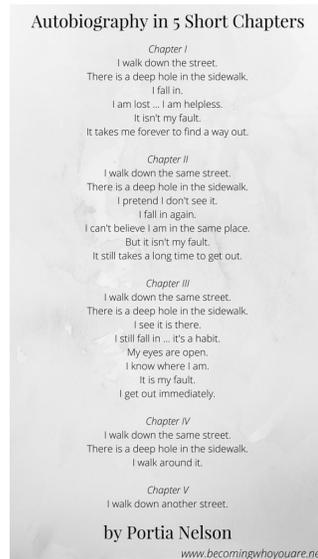


## Tense Time, Part II: Living in the Present Tens-ion

2018 September 30

Rev. Jessica P. Rodela



*Note to the contemporary reader: Although this sermon was written during the week of the USA Kavanaugh hearings, it was not crafted in response to those events. The Kavanaugh hearings, after all, are not a trial where the burden of truth is at issue; it is a job interview, which in my estimation, he has failed. I made the deliberate decision to not steer into any reflection on the obvious impact of today's topic and those events (which unto themselves would have required an entirely different kind of Sunday service than possible on this morning), but I was grateful for the many thoughtful discussions in Whitton Hall afterwards about the implications. To that end, I will simply point out that our memories tend to be better about singular, exceptional, life-altering events; while details shift, the main event is – unfortunately – oft relived. On the other hand, most of us would not be able to recall an incident that we considered having 'harmless fun.' So the disturbing implication is that someone might categorize the victimization of another human being as simply "harmless fun", especially if that kind of victimization was a routine supported by a peer group and oft repeated with a different cast of victims. This seems to be a deep horror of the revelations of the past week, so I let the research speak for itself, and offered instead, this prayer, by Rev. Lisa Bovee-Kemper: <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/prayer/pastoral-prayer-sexual-abuse-survivors>*

### *Pastoral Prayer for Sexual Abuse Survivors Prayer* By Lisa Bovee-Kemper (service version was edited; the complete prayer appears below)

It has been a difficult week in the news, and as always, we have silent personal struggles in the midst of everything else. And so I invite you into a spirit of prayer.

Holy one we call by many names, and sometimes by no name at all, there is a space between our breaths where we find the still small voice within. Let us seek together that place of calm.

For anyone who has experienced sexual assault or harassment, you are loved beyond measure. You are good, right, and beautiful. Your lives are more than the sum of the moment or moments that changed you. Whether the violation occurred yesterday or decades ago, may you find ears to listen, hearts to believe your story, and may gentle hands reach out to clasp yours in solidarity and support.

For female-identified people and others with female bodies, your agency is paramount, your health should never be compromised, and your body is not disposable.

For leaders and holders of power across this country, may your eyes be clear, may your hearts remain open, and may your resistance to the status quo be fierce.

For anyone who is wrestling silently with personal demons or challenging situations that are out of your control, may you be held in the embrace of the most holy. May you find ways to be empowered, and may you find comfort in the fullness of time.

May this community hold us, a calm place in the storm.

May we each strive to be the hands that gently reach out, and the fists that rise in solidarity: fierce and strong.

May it ever be so.

## Sermon: “Tense Times Part II: Living in the Present Tens-ion”

*“Barrabas came to us by sea, the child Clara wrote in her delicate calligraphy. She was already in the habit of writing down important matters, and afterward, when she was mute, she also recorded trivialities, never suspecting that fifty years later I would use her notebooks to reclaim the past and overcome terrors of my own. . .”*

*[When] Clara’s childhood came to an end . . . she entered her youth within the walls of her house in a world of terrifying stories and calm silences. It was a world in which time was not marked by calendars or watches-- and objects had a life of their own, in which apparitions sat at the table and conversed with human beings - the past and the future formed part of a single unit, and the reality of the present was a kaleidoscope of jumbled mirrors where everything and anything could happen.*

*It is a delight for me to read her notebooks from those years, which describe a magic world that no longer exists. Clara lived in a universe of her own invention, protected from life’s inclement weather, where the prosaic truth of material objects mingled with the tumultuous reality of dreams - and laws of physics and logic did not always apply.*

*Clara spent this time wrapped in her fantasies, accompanied by the spirits of the air, the water, and the earth. For nine years she was so happy that she felt no need to speak. Everyone had lost all hope of ever hearing her voice again, when on her birthday, after blowing out the nineteen candles on her chocolate cake, she tried out the voice that she had kept in storage all those years, and that sounded like an untuned instrument.” (House of the Spirits, adapted)*

So begins the world of Isabel Allende’s allegorical reverie in the novel *House of the Spirits*. Told through embedded narrators, a journal within a journal, Allende weaves a tale of four generations. The tale shifts and twists through the art of magic realism, through the ways we nostalgize or regret the past, and the ways we continue to hope for a better future even when we despair during dangerous political and personal present times.

Last week I talked about *The Great Gatsby*, a novel written during The Jazz Age, the Age of Improv. Gatsby is a man who tries to improvise a new self, but unmoored entirely from his past; his failure of understanding the interplay of the past with the present has tragic results. That sermon, Part One, about the past, is posted on our website if you’d like to read it.

In contrast to Gatsby, Allende’s narrator in *House of the Spirits*, uses the tragic past as a foundation on which to build a future; it is a testament to resilience. And though it is a work of fiction, it has historical roots in the very real experiences of her own family through the “post-colonial social and political upheavals of her native land, Chile” (*summary phrase from Wikipedia*). Allende plays with the ways the past, present, and future intersect, the ways we play with memory, and how memory in turn tricks us. The effect of the weaving of past, present, and future makes the novel read like a memoir.

I read a lot of memoirs; and last year I read a collection of interviews with people who write memoirs<sup>1</sup> . . . Many of the authors reflected on their relationship to memory itself – its force and its flaws; they described how their published accounts and perceptions differ from their friends and relations who lived through the same events; they explain how the act of writing and publishing helped them integrate their past and impact their present possibilities.

In Part One of this sermon last week, I explained how our individual theologies are based on biography – that is: our beliefs are developed by the story of our lives and how we grapple with and find meaning in our stories (and over the years, *reinterpret* it through the lens of maturity, increased experience and the perspective of its place in our span of years); I talked about how we tell the story of our past and how we integrate those stories make a difference in our present state of mind and how we perceive the possibilities of the future.

That’s not just a poetic observation, but one backed up by emerging studies in neuroscience.

Studies show that the “same regions of the brain are activated when people are asked to remember something and when they’re asked to imagine an event that hasn’t happened yet”. . . .

“Remembering and imagining engage the same “common core network”<sup>iii</sup>” in the brain.”

Researchers looked further and found that when it comes to remembering a story from our past, the brain disassembles pieces of it as though it were a jigsaw puzzle, then redistributes those pieces in imagining ourselves in a future situation. Your imagined future uses elements familiar to you because they are based on *your* past experiences, but are assembled in a new form, in a story you are creating, starring . . . YOU!<sup>iv</sup>

*There’s more:*

Now we’ve imagined a story of ourselves in the future. . . and what do we do?

We take the new story about a possible future and store it in our memory<sup>v</sup> . . .

The imagined future story is now stored in the same “closet” where our memories of the past are stored, the same past from which we borrowed details to make the future story more realistic . . . and - -

*There’s more:*

Now the future story is something you imagined in the past,  
Which makes *imagining that future* part of your past memories.

And because “neurons that fire together, wire together”<sup>vi</sup> it comes as little surprise that our recollection of that original event from the past, resettles and shifts . . . it changes; it distorts as we “miscombine elements of past experiences or confus[e] imagined and actual events.”<sup>vii</sup> Our future reveries change our story of the past, impacting the original memory. We’re reinventing our past all the time . . . it’s both assuring and unsettling to understand how volatile our memory is . . .

It’s like a bad joke<sup>viii</sup>: *The past the present and the future walk into a bar . . . it was tense. . .*

But here’s the good news: we are also inventing our future all the time.

The way we imagine our future – those stories of possibility we tell ourselves – actually influences future behavior. Research shows that stating our intentions, imagining our desired reactions and envisioning a positive outcome makes it more likely that they will actually happen. We tend to act in a way that is “consistent with or constrained by how [we] have imagined [ourselves] in those situations.”<sup>ix</sup> Reframing our personal stories – both in how we make meaning from our past and how we imagine our future, rehearses our coping skills, reminds us we are resilient, and allows us to make better long-term decisions.<sup>x</sup>

As Mark Twain said: “Plan for the future because that’s where you are going to spend the rest of your life”.

Given that the brain’s function of memory is flexible, connecting the past to the present, and the present to the future, I recommend three practices for managing the present tense and tension.

First, dealing with the past requires a practice of integration. Journaling and conversations are two ways to share and explore how to embrace and usefully reframe the past; so can creating any art form, writing or otherwise, either representative or symbolic. These forms of expression externalize the internal, giving our inner story room to breathe, and if shared, a way to explore new insights and interpretations. We can't make the past disappear (*don't be Gatsby!*) – but we can embrace it with more compassion and larger perspective: “A life story is written in chalk, not ink, and it can be changed.”<sup>xix</sup> Integration requires flexibility, vulnerability, and often forgiveness of oneself or others.

Second, we must recognize and welcome the present moment as it is, by embracing the practice of gratitude. We can become so stuck in the quicksand past or so transfixed by anxiety or fantasies about the future that we entirely miss the moments right here, right now. Ralph Waldo Emerson says:

*“Why drag about the corpse of your memory? Bring the past to judgment into the thousand-eyed present and live ever in a new day.”*

*“You must treat the days respectfully, you must be a day yourself, and not interrogate it like a college professor.”*

*“We are always getting ready to live, but never living.”<sup>xii</sup>*

The practice of gratitude reminds us to notice the realities of the present moment by engaging all our senses to the experience of the ‘now.’

Third, face forward into the future with a practice of connection with a community where one might share both these practices of the past and the present . . . a community like this congregation, where we strive to serve as needed as ballast, as mirror, as somewhere you might share your story. Community is where we encounter and engage with others who can testify to how they cope; where we witness one another's resilience and dare to care with shared sorrow or celebration. This connection with community where we are beloved, where we belong, we might call this same practice faith . . . As Unitarian Universalists, we have faith that our choices matter profoundly – we have faith that our actions matter profoundly – and we have faith that we ‘can be the change we wish to see in the world.’

**Choral Interlude:** SLT #374 Words by William de Witt Hyde

*Since what we choose is what we are,  
and what we love we yet shall be,  
the goal may ever shine afar—  
the will to win it makes us free.*

Isabel Allende's novel *House of the Spirits* ends as it begins, haunting from the past and hinting at the future, considering the meaning of a tumultuous past. She writes:

*“At times I feel as if I had lived all this before and that I have already written these very words, but I know it was not I: it was another woman, who kept her notebooks so that one day I could use them. I write, she wrote, that memory is fragile and the space of a single life is brief, passing so quickly that we never get a chance to see the relationship between events; we cannot gauge the consequences of our acts, and we believe in the fiction of past, present, and future, but it may also be true that everything happens simultaneously.”*

xxx

General Sources:

Allende, Isabel. *House of the Spirits*. New York: Scribners. 1982.

Andrews, Barry M. *Emerson As Spiritual Guide*. Boston: Skinner House Books (UUA) 2003.

Beck, Julie. "Life's Stories." *The Atlantic* Aug 2015.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2015/08/life-stories-narrative-psychology-redemption-mental-health/400796/>

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. Emerson's work is in the public domain and can be found online at <https://www.bartleby.com> and elsewhere.

Neuroscience Sources:

***I particularly recommend the first article on the topic to those wanting more detail on the subject.***

**"The hippocampus and imagining the future: where do we stand?"**

**Donna Rose Addis and Daniel L. Schacter**

**04 January 2012 | <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnhum.2011.00173>**

**<https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fnhum.2011.00173/full>**

"Neural Substrates of Envisioning the Future"

Karl K. Szpunar, Jason M. Watson, and Kathleen B. McDermott

<http://www.pnas.org/content/104/2/642.full>

PNAS 2007 Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America.

"Remembering the past and imagining the future: Identifying and enhancing the contribution of episodic memory"

Daniel L. Schacter and Kevin P. Madore

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5289412/>

US Library of Medicine PMC 2016 Jun 30.

"The neuroscience of imagination"

TED-Ed video by Andrey Vyshedskiy

"Imagining the future – a bird's eye view". *The Psychologist*.

James Thom, Nicola Clayton and Jon Simons

<https://thepsychologist.bps.org.uk/volume-26/edition-6/imagining-future-%E2%80%93-birds-eye-view>

June 2013

"Remembering the Past to Imagine the Future: A Cognitive Neuroscience Perspective"

Daniel L. Schacter & Donna Rose Addis

Pages S108-S112 | Published online: 28 Jan 2009

*"The days are made on a loom whereof the warp and woof are past and future time.  
They are majestically dressed, as if every god brought a thread to the skye web."*

*"Write it on your heart, that every day is the best day of the year."*

*– Ralph Waldo Emerson*

## ENDNOTES:

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<sup>i</sup> Maran, Meredith (Editor). *Why We Write About Ourselves: Twenty Memoirists on Why They Expose Themselves (and Others) in the Name of Literature Paperback*. New York: Penguin, 2016.

<sup>ii</sup> “Life’s Stories.” Julie Beck. *The Atlantic*. This series of paragraphs are adapted from the article. “The way someone imagines [their] future seems to affect the way [they see their] past, at the same time as [their] past informs what [they] expect for the future.”

<sup>iii</sup> Front. Hum. Neurosci., 04 January 2012 | <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnhum.2011.00173>  
The hippocampus and imagining the future: where do we stand?  
Donna Rose Addis. and Daniel L. Schacter

<sup>iv</sup> Addis/Schacter: That the brain “uses the same neural activity for past and future reflects a reliance on memory to provide the details comprising both remembered and imagined events.” The jigsaw image was adapted from other articles and is not my original idea. *I could go look up exactly which of these articles it was, but I wonder if anyone really ever reads these endnotes but me!!!!*

<sup>v</sup> Front. Hum. Neurosci., 04 January 2012 | <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnhum.2011.00173>  
**The hippocampus and imagining the future: where do we stand?**  
**Donna Rose Addis and Daniel L. Schacter**

<sup>vi</sup> TED-Ed on Imagination.  
The neuroscience of imagination - Andrey Vyshedskiy

<sup>vii</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5289412/>

<sup>viii</sup> Lifted from a ubiquitous Facebook meme.

<sup>ix</sup> Front. Hum. Neurosci., 04 January 2012 | <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnhum.2011.00173>  
**The hippocampus and imagining the future: where do we stand?**  
**Donna Rose Addis and Daniel L. Schacter**

“Research has shown that creating implementation intentions significantly increases the likelihood of carrying out that intention; again suggesting that these simulations are not only stored in memory but do influence future behavior.”

<sup>x</sup> <https://thepsychologist.bps.org.uk/volume-26/edition-6/imagining-future-%E2%80%93-birds-eye-view>

<sup>xi</sup> “Life’s Stories.” Julie Beck. *The Atlantic* (The phrase is Beck’s own conclusion).

<sup>xii</sup> The quotes are from three different writings by Emerson. See also Emerson’s “Experience”: “To finish the moment, to find the journey’s end in every step of the road, to live the greatest number of good hours, is wisdom. . . . Since our office is with moments, let us husband them. Five minutes of today are worth as much to me, as five minutes in the next millennium. Let us be poised and wise, and our own, today. Without any shadow of doubt, amidst this vertigo of shows and politics, I settle myself ever the firmer in the creed, that we should not postpone and refer and wish, but do broad justice where we are, by whomsoever we deal with, accepting our actual companions and circumstances, however humble or odious, as the mystic officials to whom the universe has delegated its whole pleasure for us.”