



“The End Is Where We Start From.”
Sunday, 31st December 2006

In the words of the poet T.S. Eliot:
“To make an end is to make a beginning”
 – a reflection on the old and the new year

I wonder where each of you will be at midnight tonight! Most people, I imagine, will be with friends and family at home, partying till midnight then dancing till dawn! Others will go to a restaurant and party there, and some will go to the movies before going on to a party somewhere. Others will stay home and watch television programmes geared towards seeing the new year in while still others will go to a quiet place somewhere, to be quiet, alone.; and some folks will simply go to bed at the usual time.

As we bring the year to a close, do you get a sense of TIME? I'm sure we all do in some way, for as the big hand of the clock approaches midnight on the last night of the year, there builds up in us an excitement and awe at something that is about to happen.....that something is ending and something will start. There's a crossing over from one thing into another.

Do you recall the end of the millennium and the start of the new not so long ago? Remember the confusion around the question “When does the millennium actually end..... and the new one start?” Some (most) thought that the millennium ended on 31 December 1999 and that 1 Jan 2000 was the start of the new. There were others (the minority, who really seemed to get it right, in my opinion) who said that the old millennium ended on 31 December 2000 and that the new started on 1 Jan 2001!! And not to mention the doom and gloom story around the Y2K computer bug!!! Horrors!!

But the real point of that time was the even greater sense of expectation and anticipation relating to the start of the new millennium.....that each of us was alive at the start of the 21st century and the third millennium! almost as if we were about to step into an entirely new territory or space. It seemed SUCH a significant time!! We were part of making history!

When I was younger, in my thirties and forties, I suppose, the moments just before the change from an old year to a new year were sacred moments almost, a time when I felt a strong urge to be away from the partying people with whom we were socialising, and go to a quiet place at the end of the garden to be alone and to allow that sense of something to be felt fully, a feeling, almost a knowledge, that I was truly stepping into a whole new period of my life, a feeling of deep conviction relating to my own personal destiny, that this coming year would see significant change or difference or achievement for me.....Those moments of deep introspection always were very profound and very energising!

Then the big hand of the clock would finally rest fully on the figure twelve.....and all hell would break loose as everyone shouted and sang for joy as they expressed their good wishes for a happy new year. "HAPPY NEW YEAR!!" was heard all over the neighbourhood, as well as on the radio which always had a special programme for that time, loudly and excitedly announcing the hour and the birth of a new year. As a child and a teenager, what was very special for me was the fact that at that precise moment of twelve o'clock, we could hear the City Hall clock chime midnight, (parties in those days weren't as noisy as they are these days! You could hear others speak!) and there would be a short silence as we all stood outside in the street with our neighbours and friends, a countdown almost, as we listened for what would be the "official" announcement that this was IT!! That clock was accurate to a fraction of a second, so this *really* was the new year!! And what's more, it was not only us in our little street who heard the chimes of that City Hall clock, it was the whole city.....we were part of a bigger picture.

You've seen television scenes, no doubt, from Times Square, New York, where a ball slides slowly down a flag pole, slowly signalling the approach of midnight, and in London, where all eyes are on the hands of Big Ben in anticipation of the arrival of midnight.....and then the same emotional scenes of well-wishing, hugs, and tears of joy or anticipation become the order of the moment! And everywhere around the world, as the globe turns, people doing the same thing.

So, in a way, New Year offers a moment in our lives to think about the concept of **time**. "Oh, the last twelve months were terrible" or "exceptionally good", or "very difficult".....will be the reality of the lives of many people. "Last year, we experienced the death of someone very special" or "what will the coming year be like?" What will the new year bring, the next twelve months? This is a significant time as we each engage in such questions.

So **TIME** is a period of our lives, such as a minute, a day, a year, a season. The Hebrew scriptures (Ecclesiastes) reminds us that "for everything there is a season and a time". But it's not as simple as a period, or a moment. It's more profound. Listen to this definition of time: "*Time is a continuous passage of existence in which events pass from a **state of potentiality in the future**, through the **present**, to a **state of finality in the past**.*" Think about that! That's a very profound thought! That definition tells us that our existence is characterised by a **state of potentiality or promise** in our future, which becomes present and then is finalised in the past. It tells us that that whole process of life, of the future, the present and the past, is all one. Just as our little community in my childhood neighbourhood heard the chimes of the City Hall clock and were reminded that we actually are part of a greater city, and just as we watch television and experience what happened in Times Square, New York or in Trafalgar Square, London, what comes to mind is that everything is one! We are part of a bigger picture.

Often we bemoan the past, or we anticipate the future, and in so doing we're not conscious of the present, the 'here and now', which means we're not present to our selves. So, it would be good for us to **expand our consciousness to become aware of the grand pattern of past, present and future as one.** Here's a simple way of relating to that oneness in time: Think about playing a piece of music from a record or CD. Before you put the record or CD in place so as to listen to it, the music is already there; it's already present before it becomes the reality of *your* present. The music was composed and recorded in the past, and in its past and in its future, is its presence.

So, if time is a continuous passage of our existence in which events pass from **future potential**, through the **present**, to **finality in the past** we're reminded of the words of the poet T.S. Eliot who wrote:

**What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from.**

**We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.**

These lines have meaning for us specifically at the end a year and the start a new one. **"To make an end is to make a beginning, and the end is where we start from"**. In order for us to start a new year we have to end the old year. As we end the old year, we can not but start a new one. What I understand the poet to be saying refers to all of life *as a journey*. Eliot's life experience centred around Massachusetts and Missouri in the USA as well as some time in England. He spoke of himself as a conquistador, an explorer or adventurer. It's not surprising that he was Unitarian for a large part of his life, during which time he was influenced by some Buddhist and Hindu thought and he later converted to Anglicanism.

It appears to me that for him there where many beginnings and endings in his life as he went from one place, or experience, to another. Consider his words:

**We shall not cease from exploration.
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started,
And know the place for the first time.**

Always he seemed to be eager to question, to explore, to start out on new things. His life was a journey of spiritual exploration, starting out and ultimately arriving back where he started. This could be interpreted as his inner journey that took him to unknown inner places within himself, arriving back to where he started and "Knowing himself for the first time, as a new person". And as he

outgrew an aspect of himself, the experience of making an end in order to make a beginning became part of his ever-widening consciousness.

I have a sense that he and the American poet, Walt Whitman, must have had a lot in common, both free spirits, both adventurers, pioneers, eager to set out on the open road of spiritual freedom and exploration.

So in T.S. Eliot we have a good role model who inspires us to widen and expand our consciousness in every aspect of our physical, psychological and spiritual life, and in the words of that definition of time earlier, to become conscious of our life as "*a continuous passage of experiences which pass from a **state of potentiality in the future, through the present, to a state of finality in the past.***" In other words, on reaching an end to something we are enabled to move into a future of potentiality, in which the possible becomes our reality in the present, a new way of experiencing time!

Perhaps all of this is a little philosophical. I imagine that Eliot was not just a poet, he obviously was a philosopher too; but aren't we all like that just a little, sometimes. We think, we ponder, we're inspired to write or to share our thoughts with others.

And in more practical terms, here are the words of someone called W.E. B. du Bois, from our book of prayers and songs (#502) *Singing The Living Tradition* :

"Now is the accepted time, not tomorrow, not some more convenient season. It is today that our best work can be done and not some future day or future year. It is today that we fit ourselves for the greater usefulness of tomorrow. Today is the seed time, now are the hours of work, and tomorrow comes the harvest and the playtime. "

So my wish for you in the new year is you may journey more fully and deeply into yourselves - that you will never cease from exploring and making endings and new beginnings, so that you may know just exactly who you are, and everything you'd like to be.

So may it be!!