

## TIME TO IMAGINE

A sermon by Galen Guengerich  
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City  
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At long last, spring has arrived – in fact, if not yet fully in evidence. The bright yellow daffodils, profligate in both their beauty and their fecundity, are once again springing from the cold dark earth. I love the word profligate; it means to fling something out extravagantly and heedlessly, even recklessly.

That's what the fall season does with seeds and what spring does with pollen. There's vastly more of each than ever gets used. Most of it appears to go to waste. Most seeds don't end up producing mature plants and most pollen ends up blowing in the wind. I don't know the odds are of any one seed sprouting or any one grain of pollen fertilizing a flower, but it can't be very high.

In her poem "Among the Multitudes," the Nobel Prize-Winning Polish poet Wislawa Szymborska points out that the same is true of human beings; each of us is "a coincidence no less unthinkable than any other." Indeed, you and I need not have been human at all. "Nature's wardrobe," she says, "holds a fair supply of costumes: spider, seagull, field mouse." She goes on to point out that you could have been a tree rooted to the ground as fire draws near. I could have been a blade of grass trampled by a stampede.

As it happens, however, we did end up becoming human beings. Even so, the odds of you being you and me being me are almost nonexistent. Bill Bryson, in his book *A Short History of Nearly Everything*, puts these odds into cosmic perspective:

To be here now, alive in the twenty-first century and smart enough to know it, you had to be...extremely — make that miraculously — fortunate in your personal ancestry. Consider the fact that for 3.8 billion years, a period of time older than the Earth's mountains and rivers and oceans, every one of your forbears on both sides has been attractive enough to find a mate, healthy enough to reproduce, and sufficiently blessed by fate and circumstances to do so. Not one of your pertinent ancestors was squashed, devoured, drowned, starved, stranded, stuck fast, untimely wounded, or otherwise deflected from its life's quest of delivering a tiny charge of genetic material to the right partner at the right moment in order to perpetuate the only possible sequence of hereditary combinations that could result — eventually, astoundingly, and all to briefly — in you.

Despite the odds, you and I made it – lucky us! We won the lottery of life. But getting born turns out to be only the beginning of the challenge. While it's impossible for bad things to happen to us before we're conceived, it's more than possible for bad things to happen to us after – indeed, it's almost certain. We probably won't be squashed or devoured, but we may be starved, stranded, or untimely wounded.

Harry Lodge was untimely wounded. I told you about Harry a couple of years ago in a sermon titled "Better Next Year." Harry was a physician at Columbia – he was one of the world's leading gerontologists. Along with one of his patients, Chris Crowley, Harry wrote a best-selling book arguing that the long slide from being in top form in midlife to being physically debilitated and socially isolated at the end of life isn't necessary, in most cases. What we typically think of as necessary effects of aging are mostly unnecessary effects of neglect. His book, which has now sold more than two million copies, is titled *Younger Next Year*.

Three years ago, Harry was diagnosed with an especially virulent form of prostate cancer. He died two weeks ago at the age of 58. I will conduct his memorial service here in this sanctuary a week from tomorrow.

During my last conversation with Harry, which took place just two days before he died, Harry told me that he didn't feel cheated – despite the fact that his life would be foreshortened by more than two decades. "I've been fortunate beyond my wildest dreams," he said. "A career I never could have imagined, two amazing daughters, and the love of my life – my soulmate, Laura, and her two amazing sons."

He went on to say, "There have been hard things too. But most people have just as many hard things as I have had and not nearly as many good things." He added, "Of course I want more of everything. I'd love to live to 85 or 90. But I don't feel cheated. I've had a wonderful life."

As far as Harry was concerned, even though he was untimely wounded, he had won the lottery twice. He was lucky to be born when and where he was, and he was lucky to have lived the life he did.

My guess is that most of the time you and I go through the days of our lives being less grateful for what we have and more frustrated about what we don't have than we should. We take the good things in our lives mostly for granted, and we take the relative absence of truly bad things mostly as a given. We forget that the presence of good things, and sometimes the absence of bad things, comes to us as a gift, often from people we don't know – or even know about.

The Pulitzer Prize-winning American poet Carl Dennis tells a story that emphasizes this point in a simple yet powerful way. The story appears in a poem titled "Candles." It imagines you lighting a candle for your grandmother on her birthday to honor her memory. But, the poem suggests, you might want to light a second candle as well – a candle for someone you never met.

Imagine that a man came to the town where your grandmother lived when she was a girl. He scoured the want ads for a month looking for work, but never found it.

Before he left town in search of work elsewhere, he took a stroll in the park. He noticed on the gravel path the shards of a green glass bottle that had been broken. He scooped the broken glass up with the want-ad section of the newspaper and carried it to a trashcan. If he hadn't, your grandmother would have stepped on the glass barefoot when she wandered away from her school picnic.

The poem continues:

You needn't suppose the cut would be a deep one,  
Just deep enough to keep her at home  
The night of the hay ride when she meets Helen,  
Who is soon to become her dearest friend,  
Whose brother George, thirty years later,  
Helps your grandfather with a loan so his shoe store  
Doesn't go under in the Great Depression  
And his son, your father, is able to stay in school  
Where his love of learning is fanned into flames,  
A love he labors, later, to kindle in you.

The poem concludes by suggesting that you take a moment to wonder how he died, this unknown person to whom you owe so much. Maybe he died at home with his family and friends. Or maybe he died alone on the road, waiting for someone “to sit at his bedside and hold his hand, the very hand it’s time for you to imagine holding.”

Each of us is a coincidence no less unthinkable than any other. That’s why it’s time to imagine. It’s time to imagine the good that might result if you asked someone, “So what is it that you most like about your work?” — the question Harry’s patient Chris Crowley asked that eventually led them to write the book *Younger Next Year*. It’s time to imagine the harm you might prevent if you pick up a shard of glass — confront someone else’s cutting comment, or sexist story, or racist retort. It’s time to imagine the life you might change if you focus not on what’s present but on what’s possible.

It’s time to imagine Harlan and Joy Snow, on their vacation in Mexico, deciding to go to a museum instead of a piano recital on that day in May of 1995. It’s time to imagine them not talking to the young pianist afterwards about studying piano in the US instead of staying in Guadalajara to study architecture. It’s time to imagine that, even if they had spoken to him, the young pianist hadn't had the courage to get on a plane to a college in Virginia, not knowing English. It’s time to imagine Alejandro Hernandez-Valdez not being the Music Director of All Souls.

Harry’s book summarizes the plan for being younger next year in seven succinct rules. The first five rules mostly concern exercise and food – rule five is “Quit eating crap!” Rule six consists of a single word: “Care.” In order to be younger next year, you need to care deeply about something beyond your own needs and desires. Rule seven concerns your relationships with the people and world around you: “Connect and

Commit.” Make your relationships deep and make them substantial. Go through each day looking for places where you can make a difference.

Springtime is a good time to renew whatever part of your life needs renewing. The natural world gives permission to cast off what’s old — unhealthy habits, hurtful attitudes, and unhelpful ways of living that keep you from realizing fully the life that’s in you and around you. It’s time for a breakthrough.

Whenever you see evidence of spring bursting forth, renew your resolve to care in new ways about the people and the world around you. Pick up the broken glass — whatever the broken glass might be. Limit damage wherever you can. Care about the people you encounter — wherever they may be. It’s time to imagine the harm you might prevent. It’s time to imagine the good you might do.

Harry Lodge, rest in peace. Lots of people became younger next year because of you. Harlan and Joy Snow, thank you for opening a door for Alejandro. Lots of people’s hearts have been opened to transcendence because you saw what was possible.

What’s possible for you and me? It’s now our time. It’s time to imagine.