

**Thomas Jefferson Memorial Church – Unitarian Universalist**  
**“The Prufrock Syndrome”**  
**Rev. Tony Perrino**  
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According to Greek mythology, the God Chronos, married Rhea, who bore him three sons and three daughters. But, because an Oracle had predicted that, one day, Chronos would be overthrown by one of his own sons, the fearful father swallowed each of the children when they were born.

After Chronos had swallowed five of Rhea’s children, she fled to Crete where she bore the last son, **Zeus**. Hiding the child, she wrapped **a stone** in swaddling clothes and presented it to Chronos, who again gulped it down, presuming it to be his offspring. (He must’ve been pretty near-sighted?)

Thus, according to legend, Zeus was raised to manhood, in secrecy, and, eventually, **he did vanquish his father**, as predicted. The writer, **Homer**, reports that Chronos was banished to a region beneath the earth and chained there forever. But we know better: **Chronos still swallows every mother’s child in this world for Chronos... is time.**

**As children**, we are blithely unaware of this basic fact of human existence. Life seems to pass so slowly that **“tomorrow seems forever,”** and we are impatient to grow up, totally oblivious to the mortality decreed by the devouring Chronos.

Then, **during our 20’s and 30’s**, we are preoccupied with achieving the goals that we’ve been told will bring happiness and fulfillment to our days. The tempo speeds up, but we’re so busy pursuing these objectives that the finiteness of time is **still** not a conscious concern.

Later we begin gradually to recognize, as time touches the face in the mirror, that subtle changes are being wrought—to reveal the reality of our mortality. We usually don’t “feel” that much older, but suddenly we find ourselves in our 40’s, and wondering **“how did it happen so quickly!”**

Thus we enter what one psychologist calls **“middle-essence,”** comparable to the adolescence of youth, when a host of questions rise up to haunt us: Prufrock’s existential questions which reflect what’s been termed “an identity crisis.” **(The difference being that the adolescent thinks he knows the answers!)**

Then we begin to question the goals we have pursued and wonder why the achievement of them hasn’t been more satisfying. **Gail Sheehy**, in a book entitled **“Passages,”** revealed such disillusionment when she quoted a prominent, network newscaster confessing, “I’m at the top of the mountain that I saw as a young man, and it’s... mostly salt.”

And so, many of us succumb to what I call **“The Prufrock Syndrome:”** gripped by **the angst of aging:** a feeling of helpless anxiety: **Prufrock’s** are a weak man’s insights into his unfulfilled life, and inability to change it.

--I--

There is so much in Eliot’s poem which we won’t be able to explore (the tyranny of time again?) but, basically, and relevant to our purposes this morning, **Prufrock invites us into a twilight state of consciousness** (“like a patient etherized upon a table...”) of a middle-aged intellectual who is timid, yearning, uncertain, and fearful that life has passed him by. He reflects a self-pitying mood: the feeling of having entered what a psychologist calls **“the forlorn forties.”**

**“There will be time,”** he keeps telling himself, but he knows better because he has seen “the moment of his greatness flicker...” and seen “the eternal footman hold his coat and snicker...” and recognizes that he “has

known them all.. the evenings, mornings and afternoons (in which he ) measured out (his) life with coffee spoons..." Indeed, he has **had** time "for a hundred visions and revisions... and decisions which a minute will reverse." So, how then should (he) presume and "dare disturb the universe.." with his questions? And would it have been worth it, after all, if someone should say, "**That's not what I meant at all.**"

Prufrock's mid-life crisis stems from a **loss of belief** in the meaningfulness of his life. He suffers from the feeling that his was, in **Shakespeare's words**, "**A tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury.. signifying nothing.**" And he lacked the will to do anything about it.

Other poets have written of this mood. **Matthew Arnold in "Dover Beach"** concludes a similar lamentation with these words:

"Ah, love, let us be true to one another  
**For the world hath really neither joy...  
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;**  
And we are here as on a darkling plain  
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight  
While ignorant armies clash by night."

Thus, many of us experience **the angst of aging.**

## --II--

Most people react to this mid-life experience with a **denial** of the reality of aging, which **takes one of three forms:**

**The first** (which often has great appeal) is that of **defiance: in Dylan Thomas' words**, "**To rage, rage against the dying of the light.**" There is a certain nobility in the determination to "**go down fighting!**" denouncing the injustice of it all: just as we're beginning to learn the rules of the game, the two-minute whistle blows, signaling that it's almost over! But bitterness is often the price of such defiance, and the satisfaction of it may turn sour.

**The second form of denial is a preoccupation with thoughts of eternity.** It would replace fears of mortality with dreams of **immortality**. Such adherence to faith in an "after-life" serves, for many, to dull the pain of aging. This thought has great appeal, of course, and I am willing to keep an open mind to the possibility of it's being true. But, as comforting as the promise may be, of my physical infirmities falling away and my being with loved ones again in an after-life, with no clear first-hand evidence of its validity, I get little comfort from what seems to be wishful thinking. (I hope that doesn't upset any of you? I really don't want to undermine your belief.)

And, **finally**, there is the silliest of all denials: **the effort to disguise our age** with cosmetics, and clothing, and behavior which fools no one but ourselves. Our culture's obsession with youthful appearance contributes to this anxiety- driven effort, **ignoring the exquisite beauty of well-earned wrinkles!**

One of the saddest expressions of such reality evasion is the sexual affair which seeks to recapture our youth by proving our attractiveness to someone younger. It usually succeeds only in hurting all those concerned.

## --III--

But I would suggest that **there is a place between Prufrock's self-pitying despair and the denial of aging:** a place where all of us can live out our later years –with contentment, if not ecstasy, with abiding satisfactions, if not earth-shaking achievements, with a sense of our own value,

**It involves acceptance, but not surrender:** an honest recognition of the realities of aging, like having less physical energy, but a refusal to let those realities embitter or defeat our spirits.

The closing lines of **Tennyson's poem, "Ulysees,"** reflects the attitude I'm suggesting: "Tho' much is taken, **much abides,** and tho'

We are **not now** that strength/ which in old days  
Moved earth and heaven,  
**That which we are, we are:**  
One equal temper of heroic hearts  
Made weak by time and fate, but **strong in will**  
**To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield."**

**That's** what I would say to the ego-centric whining of J. Alfred: much **does** abide, much to seek and find. **We need not yield to despair or denial.**

(I might also add what the **cartoon character, Porky,** said to Churchy LaFemme when he whined about life's brevity, "Aw, shudup, **you're lucky to be here in the first place!**")

**One bonus of our growing older is self-understanding.** Whatever aging does to us physically (and it's particularly frustrating for an ex-athlete to grow fat and clumsy) it need not stop our intellectual and emotional development. Indeed, unencumbered by the anxious preoccupations of earlier years, **we are freer to explore, discover and accept our unique identities as persons.** Of course, there are days when I can't stand what I understand! But then I can always change, if I really want to. Growth in understanding need never cease; **it is beyond the grasp of Chronos.**

**Love abides also: indeed,** our capacity for human relationship becomes greater-- when we've achieved a better understanding of ourselves. Indeed, it is **only** when we have worked through some of our "hang-ups" that we can **truly** love another human being. Perhaps that's what **Browning** had in mind when he wrote, "**Grow old along with me/ the best is yet to be.**"

**Another reality which abides** is suggested in a poem by **Robert Frost** which concludes with these familiar lines:

"The woods are lovely, dark and deep,  
But **I have promises to keep**  
And miles to go before I sleep, and miles to go before I sleep."

**Life can always have "promises to keep,"** meaningful purposes to pursue, They need not be world-shaking endeavors. Every act of caring for another human being—is capable of giving worth, meaning and joy to our days.

But what I most want to communicate to J. Alfred Prufrock is summarized in a poem by **Herman Hesse** called "**Steps:**" it begins

"As every flower wilts,  
and every youth gives way to age,  
So **flowers every step of life...** (and then concludes)  
**In all beginnings lives a magic**  
Which **does** protect us, helps us live.  
Joyfully **we shall wander through our lives**  
Not hang on one, as if it were a home.  
**Life's spirit does not want to bind** or hinder:  
**It wants to widen us** and **lift us** **step for step.**  
**The call of life, to us, will never end.**  
**Well, heart, take leave then... and renew."**

**That's** the challenge: **to renew our lives at every step.** To re-define and re-invent our selves. As another poet, **Stanley Kunitz** put it, "I have walked through many lives/ and **I am not who I was...**" and then he concludes,

“Though I lack the art to decipher it/ no doubt the next chapter in my book of transformations is already written, **I am not done with my changes.**”

Similarly, **the playwright, Edward Albee**, when asked by a reporter how he would classify himself as a dramatist, replied, **“I wouldn’t. I consider myself a work in progress.”** Well, that, of course, is **what we all must be**: “a work in progress:” continually re-writing the story of our lives. It’s not an easy task, of course, and sometimes requires what the song describes as “a little help from my friends.” But, as the **German poet, Goethe**, wrote, “The moment one definitely commits oneself, then providence moves too.... **Boldness has genius, power and magic in it.** Begin it.. now””

During 55 years in the ministry I have seen many models of aging. Some have been beautiful and brave and committed to such unending renewal. **There are many of them in this Congregation.** (Visit the Active Minds group on Thursday afternoon, average age 75! and you’ll meet some of them.) We would do well to emulate such exemplars of graceful aging.