

**SERMON: “A LIFETIME BURNING IN EVERY MOMENT”**

**Based on Part V of “East Coker” by T.S. Eliot**

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**The First Unitarian Church of St. Louis**

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I bring you greetings from the members and friends of the United Church of Christ in Canton, Massachusetts, where I serve as their Pastor, and from my colleagues at Salem State University, Endicott College, and Andover Newton Theological School where I serve as an assistant professor of philosophy, theology, and literature. I also bring words of deepest gratitude from the T.S. Eliot Society for your generosity in hosting the Sunday program that is part of our annual meeting.

It is an honor to preach at the spiritual home of the young T.S. Eliot — and that of his father (Henry Ware Eliot) and his grandfather and founder (William Greenleaf Eliot) before him. It is also strange and a bit liberating to be preaching in a Unitarian Universalist Church. It's a bit of a guilty pleasure, I must confess. As you may know, we in the United Church of Christ (the UCC) are often referred to as “Unitarians Considering Christ.” This is much better than the name that inevitably arises when someone misspells the word “united” and we become “The *Untied* Church of Christ.” While my theology is a bit more “traditional” than most UCC pastors, my deep affinity for anything Eliot makes us sisters and brothers of a different mother.

In my tradition, the “readings” for worship always come from Scripture: the Hebrew Bible as well as the New Testament. The Unitarian Universalist Church draws from a more expansive library allowing for other voices and faith traditions to enter the conversation. The religious verse of Tom Eliot is quite *apropos* for worship in the Unitarian Church, especially, one would think, in his home church.

T.S. Eliot's theological *pièce de résistance* is his *Four Quartets*, published separately between 1935 and 1942. When I first read *Four Quartets*, certain passages struck me — they resonated with my spirit. My favorite of the four is “East Coker,” whose opening and closing lines became the poet's epitaph: “In my beginning is my end. In my end is my beginning.” These lines, particularly, the second part, are associated with Mary Queen of Scots. They encapsulate the idea of our being born to die, but also dying into eternal life. This existence is merely the beginning of the end. Regardless of your own theological orientation, Eliot was a man who believed in the afterlife. Heaven and Hell were very real

places to this poet. The lines that became the poet's epitaph are the ones that frame the entirety of "East Coker." We can therefore assume that *in between them* is a reference to a life lived.

Linda Ellis and Mac Anderson, authors of *The Dash: Making a Difference with Your Life*, argue that "It's not the date you were born or the date that you die that matters. It's the dash in between." In other words, one's gravestone not only contains his or her epitaph. It also states the date of birth and the date of death: two instantaneous moments in everyone's life. But those dates are separated by a dash, which most people view as simply a mark of punctuation. It separates our birthday and our death-day. But, as Ellis and Anderson contend, the dash is more important, because it represents the lives we lived. We measure one's life based not on his or her birth or death. We look at the dash.

Approximately halfway through the fifth part of "East Coker," we have a twenty-line stanza that serves as the poem's climax. The *Quartets* cover a lot of ground. Two of its main themes, as Craig Raine tells us, are "time and the mystical experience."<sup>1</sup> We can go in multiple directions with this, as Eliot does. The experience of the divine is something that occurs in and out of time. It transcends the moment of experience, while, paradoxically, being contained in it. But the climax of "East Coker" suggests another idea. Here, Eliot is focusing on the aforementioned dash — how we are to live deliberately in time, as Thoreau would write in *Walden*.

The beginning of the fifth part signals that the poet is pausing to take stock:

So, here I am, in the middle way, having had twenty years —  
Twenty years largely wasted, the years of *l'entre deux guerres* —

Eliot wrote the *Quartets* between the two World Wars. "East Coker" was written in 1940. The poet was fifty-two, *more than halfway* through his life. One thinks of the psychologist Erik Erikson's last two (of eight) stages of psychosocial development. When we, too, hit the middle way and progress into our elder years, we look at our lives (according to Erikson) and we have a sense of achievement and a life well-lived, or we are filled with a dreaded sense of torpidity and despair. This is a gross simplification of Erikson's rich theory, but the idea is that between the ages of 35 to 64 we examine our lives and find that we are happy in our careers and the life we share with our families and friends or we feel as if we are stagnating. Likewise, when we reach the age of retirement (65 and forward), we assess our lives and realize that we either a) had a fulfilling life, or b) squandered the time we were given. It seems as if Eliot is doing this in part five of "East Coker" and is encouraging us all to do the same.

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<sup>1</sup> Craig Raine, *T.S. Eliot* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 95.

Look back. Take stock. But also, look forward.

It is never too late to live the life God intends for you, the life you want. “Old men ought to be explorers,” Eliot writes. Ours is to be “a lifetime burning in every moment.”

Here and there does not matter  
We must be still and still moving  
Into another intensity  
For a further union, a deeper communion

Three lines later comes the poem’s aforementioned conclusive line (half a line actually): “In my end is my beginning.” Is Eliot suggesting that even when we come to our journey’s end, like an old man, that we should still be living fully, that we should be explorers? I think he is.

This is not the image that most people have of the reserved, prim and proper T.S. Eliot. But who knows? We never truly know another person — the thoughts and feelings that ruminate in the depths of their being. Based on what we do know about Eliot — not just the details that fill biographies — but his drama, his criticism, his letters, and especially his poetry, we can clearly see that this is a man who felt deeply, even though he once said that poetry is an escape from emotion, not an expression of it. It is difficult to read Eliot’s poetry and not see a man filled with life and passion — and, once we delve into *Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats* and some of the juvenile verse found in *Inventions of the March Hare*, we see a bit of a child with a sense of humor. In his recent book *Young Eliot: From St. Louis to the Waste Land*, Robert Crawford begins with a comical picture of Eliot that differs greatly from the stoic picture we have of him: the Nobel Prize winning poet, the recipient of the prestigious Medal of Honor, and director at the renowned London publisher Faber and Faber. Crawford writes,

Eliot’s youth remained vital even to his “aged eagle” tone and achievement. Several people who knew him intimately recognized this. His widow Valerie, who died in 2012, maintained that there remained always a “little boy” inside “Tom.” His nephew Graham Bruce Fletcher remembers being taken in boyhood by Uncle Tom to a London joke shop during the early 1960s to buy stink bombs, which they then let off inside the nearby Bedford Hotel, not far from Eliot’s office; with a fit of hysterical giggles, Eliot put on a marked turn of speed as he and his nephew, Macavity-like, removed themselves from the scene of the crime. “Tom” sped off twirling his

walking stick, “in the manner of Charlie Chaplin.” Back home, they did not tell Valerie what they had been up to. Instead, the septuagenarian business-suited Nobel Prize winner settled down to playing with his nephew’s remote-controlled toy Aston Martin James Bond car. In age, among those whom he trusted most, the poet nicknamed Old Possum retained a certain gleefulness. He remained young Eliot.<sup>2</sup>

*Carpe diem*: seize the day. Are we not to do the same? To sing even when there is no music. To dance on the beach with the one we love — or even alone when the music is just right. To breathe deep and drink deep the nectar of life. As one of my favorite singer-songwriters Mary Chapin Carpenter says in her song, “The Long Way Home”:

Or you could be the one who takes the long way home  
Roll down your window, turn off your phone  
See your life as a gift from the great unknown  
And your task is to receive it

Tell your kid a story, hold your lover tight  
Make a joyful noise, swim naked at night  
Read a poem a day, call in well sometimes and  
Laugh when they believe it<sup>3</sup>

In many respects, Eliot lived a lifetime burning in every moment. He certainly encourages us to do so. This does not mean that we are to be oblivious optimists — overly idealistic Pollyannas. The poem “East Coker” is named after a town in England where Eliot’s ancestors lived. Andrew Eliot was the first to immigrate to America in the seventeenth century. In conjuring this place, T.S. Eliot merges past and present. In so doing, he recognizes, as Ronald Bush writes, “that his ancestors’ lives were no less difficult than his own.”<sup>4</sup> But even in the midst of difficulty we are aware of the presence of God’s grace which is enough to encourage us to live deliberately even when we are in the valley.

Be still and still moving. Live deliberately. Embrace the mystery of it all — and let God embrace you through it. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Crawford, *Young Eliot: From St. Louis to the Waste Land* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015), 1-2.

<sup>3</sup> Mary Chapin Carpenter, “The Long Way Home,” from the Columbia Nashville album *Time\*Sex\*Love*, 2001.

<sup>4</sup> Ronald Bush, *T.S. Eliot: A Study in Character and Style* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 211.