

Time Capsules

Part 1: Vessels of “Intentional History”

An only child, I always looked forward to visiting my older cousins, Suzi and Sheila. They lived in a remote part of northern New Hampshire, in a brown-and-white trailer at the end of a dirt road.

In this natural setting, surrounded by fields and forest, we didn't have the activities I had at home to entertain teenagers like us, such as going to the movies or wasting an afternoon at the mall. So one summer day, we decided to take a long walk. We had our aunt's permission to go, but with one caveat: “Do not, under any circumstances,” she said, “go into the house across the street.”

The house was a two-story farmhouse, leaning to one side and obviously abandoned long ago. The elements had worn away what was probably once white paint, leaving the whole structure a pale, barn-board grey. Most of the windows were broken, the shutters dangling by a couple of nails.

About 20 minutes after leaving the trailer, we were in the living room of the abandoned house. This was an exciting adventure. Not only were we disobeying my aunt but we got to explore someone's long-forgotten home.

But what we found in this house frightened me. From the outside, we knew that the house was abandoned but, on the inside, it seemed as if the residents had left in a hurry. In the kitchen, children's art still decorated the walls, the cupboards stored plates and mugs. If the windows hadn't been broken and if there hadn't been a blanket of dust over everything, one might think that the family that once lived here had just gone to run an errand and would be back within the hour.

What happened to these people? Why was the house left behind? What kind of life did they enjoy under this roof? One clue as to when people last lived in the house was a stack of old movie magazines, featuring stories about new releases with actors like Joan Crawford and Clark Gable.

Fearful of what it might mean for a whole family to disappear in an instant, we left in a hurry, clutching the movie magazines under a sweatshirt as souvenirs of our illicit excursion.

Looking back, I realize the gift we discovered that summer day and the foolishness of our hasty exit, as the house has since been torn down, with all of its personal objects distributed or destroyed – the clues to the house's residents gone forever. My cousins and I had the rare opportunity to walk through a house that was one part abandoned structure, one part time capsule.

Time capsules have been a convention in cultures throughout the ages, dating back to the Mesopotamians who collected artifacts together and buried them. As heard on a recent episode of DC's own *Kojo Nnamdi* show, Knute Berger, the co-founder of the International Time Capsule Society, affirms that time capsules gained general awareness in American culture, first with the creation of the centennial time capsule in 1876 and then with assembly of a time capsule for the 1939 World's Fair in New York.¹

The centennial time capsule was especially historic as it was the first time capsule to come with a defined date of when it should be opened. And the 1939 time capsule was the first collection to use the phrase “time capsule.” The creator, a public relations employee of Westinghouse, was charged with coming up with a gimmick to entice visitors to the Westinghouse display at the World's Fair. Drawing from the ancient tradition

¹ WAMU, *The Kojo Nnamdi Show*, August 30, 2007.

and from the new convention of dated vessels, he put together a collection of objects reflecting the time in which they lived and featuring many Westinghouse products. He first called this collection a “time bomb,” but then chose the more benevolent-sounding name “time capsule.” At the conclusion of the World’s Fair the company buried the capsule in Flushing Meadows, New York.

With Westinghouse’s extensive publicity, many became aware of this practice and the time capsule became part of American culture, inspiring people and institutions to create vessels of what some call “intentional history.”

Along with discussion of public time capsules, Nnamdi’s program included commentary by callers. One woman, a mother of an eight-year-old boy, spoke of how her son made his own time capsule, a shoe box containing a tiny toy car, a handwritten note and a drawing of his family. Another caller was a carpenter who once found, on the inside of a wall, a board signed by all the builders of the house and a pair of children’s shoes. Placing shoes in the wall of a house was once a common practice, an offering to give the residents of the house good luck.² Since then, the carpenter has signed boards within the walls of all his renovations, sometimes including information about the era – the President, the events of the day – or a photo of the house. In the words of the eight-year-old’s mother, time capsules can be “a fun way to celebrate life.”

It is the intentional nature of these capsules that hold great meaning. Pamela Cressey, an archeologist for the city of Alexandria, Virginia, noted on Nnamdi’s program that archeology is a practice of “excavating the unconscious,” while opening a time capsule is to bear witness to what a people compiled to “communicate with the future.” In this way, the old house I visited on Day Road was not truly a time capsule, as I assume that the residents didn’t plan for their personal objects to say anything to three teenage girls in the 1980s.

Yet both the fruits of archeological exploration and the discovery of time capsules reveal clues to the experiences of individuals and communities. Cressey notes that, over time, the contents of time capsules have changed dramatically, revealing different technologies and understandings of the nature of community. The contents of Alexandria’s 1949 time capsule included notations of the mayor, other civic officials and maps of the area, while the 1999 time capsule included contributions from different organizations, ethnic communities, children and seniors, suggesting that contemporary Alexandrians believe, in Cressey’s words, that “life today is more than just the mayor’s name.”

We at Cedar Lane have also compiled a time capsule of “intentional history.” Created in 2002 as part of the congregation’s 50th anniversary, this capsule is part of everyday church life as an object on one of the shelves in the library. The gold plaque on the front instructs the future leaders of the church to open it in the year 2052, on the occasion of the congregation’s 100th anniversary.

I spoke with Leslie Backus, one of the organizers of the time capsule project at Cedar Lane. She said that church leaders wanted to create the time capsule to manifest a form of immortality, out of the understanding that they will likely be gone before the year 2052. As walking into an abandoned house inspired questions about the past in me, Leslie was motivated to make a time capsule out of questions about the future. Will the Cedar Laners of 2052 remember us? Will anyone from this time be known then?³

Thankfully, we do not need to wait until 2052 to find out the contents of the vessel before us. As Leslie put it, the time capsule includes a collective “snapshot of Cedar Lane” – committee reports, photographs from religious education classes, Roger’s letter, a detailed video of the entire building and interviews with long-time members of the congregation. Before the capsule was finally sealed, the committee also included a CD of the Cedar Lane choir and a small chalice.

² http://www.apotropaios.co.uk/june_swann_concealed_shoes.htm (A reprint of “Shoes Concealed in Buildings” by June Swann, in *Costume* no.30, 1996 p.56-69.

³ Interview with Leslie Backus, November 25th, 2007.

The year 2052 is 80 years after the year I was born. If I am still alive then – and if, in the midst of my retirement, I remember to come back – I hope to join the Cedar Lane community of that time as they celebrate the 100th anniversary of the congregation. I also hope to be present for their anticipation as they open the time capsule, with questions about the congregation of 2002 – “What happened to these people? What kind of life did they enjoy under this roof?” I, for one, will remember the Cedar Laners of this time and hope to be another voice to add to the “snapshot of Cedar Lane.”

In the words of Knute Berger, the creation of a time capsule is a “sacred act” that “plants seeds for the future.” In the spirit of a time capsule, on this cusp between the old year and the next, I give thanks for all the ways we receive what is given to us and plan – with vision, with hope and anticipation – for what lies ahead.

Time Capsules

Part 2: A Spiritual Time Capsule for 2007

As we drew closer to 2008, I posed a question – to you, the congregation, and to my friends and colleagues: If you were to choose objects to reflect 2007, what would they be?

Your responses and the input I received from many others led to the creation of a “spiritual time capsule” – a collection of objects that will not be held for the future but symbolize the past 12 months – historically, emotionally, thematically, from a global perspective, from life at Cedar Lane and from our own lives.

While enjoying lunch with a number of Unitarian Universalist ministers, one clergywoman responded to my question with a question of her own: “What would be a symbol of the pains of this world - the difficulties of surviving and making our world a better place, the heartbreak of personal betrayal and loss – and a simultaneous commitment to hope?”

Together, we decided that a broken vessel would be such a symbol. We as individuals can only hold so much. We as a congregation, as a community, as a nation have limits to our agency and resilience. For countries and communities around the world, so much is broken – Iraq, Darfur, Myanmar, Israel and Palestine, Afghanistan, Pakistan, New Orleans, our inner cities. And yet, even though we are fractured, we can still make positive change. We can still hold water. And so, our time capsule begins with a broken vessel.

This year, we at Cedar Lane have reflected on our history, the life under our roof. In September, we celebrated the 40th anniversary of Dick Darne’s service to the congregation as the Director of Music Ministries. We began preparing for the 50th anniversary of our building, to be acknowledged in May of 2008. Quietly, the debate about whether we should build a sanctuary continued on.

“Sanctuary” was also a theme in politics as we as a country debated the current immigration laws and their enforcement. I am indebted to a colleague who reminds us that “immigration” is a legal convention while “migration” is a religious endeavor, the experience of all people who – literally or figuratively – “wander through the desert.”⁴ How and where we make our home has great political and personal implications. As we know in our own lives, home is often the center of so many of our joys, sorrows and transitions. So I add to our capsule a symbol of home.

In March of 2007, the congregation named environmental issues – specifically global warming – as its first social justice priority. This was a timely choice as mainstream public awareness of global warming increased dramatically with the 2006 release of Al Gore’s documentary “An Inconvenient Truth.” As part of our focus, our Science and Religion group hosted a lecture by renowned anti-nuclear scientist Dr. Helen Caldicott, and our Environmental Task Force organized a day-long festival of art, music, idea-sharing and public education called “The Green In.”

Associated with global warming is melting ice, or water. Water is the way we begin each church year with our Water Communion service, symbolizing the ways we come together as a community. Water is how we express our sorrow, how we weep.

Water has played another role in 2007, through flooding. From England to Oregon to Illinois to the city where I was born in New Hampshire, 2007 was a year of floods.

Water – both a source of life and a destructive power, a sign of danger and sorrow and a symbol of unity.

⁴ The Rev. Susan LaMar.

Ironically, another symbol of 2007 was a lack of water, with droughts in Atlanta and California. Without enough water, California succumbed to extensive fires, destroying homes, land and lives in its path.

Fire, a form of energy, represents how much we depend on power to sustain our lives, a dependence made more complex with the crisis of global warming. This year has also been marked by tremendous world conflict and its impact on access to affordable energy, creating great economic pressure for those on limited means and generating conversation and research into alternative fuels and different ways to warm our homes, to travel and to work.

Yet fire is also a benevolent force, a critical source of heat and a symbol of light and community. This past holiday season we lit candles, recalling the pagan tradition of lighting the Yule log at the Winter Solstice. Every Sunday morning we begin each worship service by lighting our chalice, invoking the values of service, sacrifice and commitment. As fire is a primal symbol, a powerful invocation of hope and new beginnings, I add a lit candle to our time capsule.

But our capsule is incomplete without your understandings of 2007, without your symbols of the past 12 months. I now invite all of you to come forward and place your objects – or your written reflections – on the table to be part of the time capsule.