

**Sermon (David)** “It’s Time for Your Scheduled Maintenance.” About 1600 words.

[ Introduction]

“It’s Time for Your Scheduled Maintenance.” Every so often, I receive a missive bearing these or similar words. Usually from an auto dealership or the dentist. My reaction upon receiving such typically falls squarely in the region between “meh” and “bleh”. I’ve never thought “Yes! Time to drop some serious bucks on the car!”; I’ve never thought “Hot diggity doo! I’m a goin’ to the DENTIST!”. And then, on Friday morning as I was writing this sermon, I was interrupted by an email alert: **From:** Kris Tyssowski, **Subject:** Annual Congregational Meeting. [pause] I believe that the pulpit is a place for honesty, and so I must admit that I audibly sighed when I parsed this alert – and then, recognizing both the irony of the situation and its value as sermon fodder, laughed and threw it in.

No, maintenance is neither glamorous, nor exciting, nor even interesting, and it is often expensive, or inconvenient, or both. But we generally understand that it is important, and we know that it is something that really should be done – at some point – by someone – eventually... [pause]

Maintenance. This morning, I’m going to talk about maintenance. I’m going to tell you why it is so dang hard. And I’m going to talk about one of the greatest maintenance success stories ever. And then in the brief wrap-up we’ll ponder where we might fit into all this. And that’s the plan. So let’s go.

[Bridges]

Let’s begin with bridges. Big bridges. Bridges that cross significant bodies of water or wide canyons, such as, say, San Francisco’s Golden Gate Bridge. The paint on the Golden Gate Bridge, (color: International Orange), helps to protect it from rusting and ruin from San Francisco's famous, frequent, and highly corrosive salt water fogs. The “word on the street” is that it is painted from one end to the other, and then, as soon as it is finished, the painting starts again. It turns out that this isn’t exactly true – the bridge is always being painted, (and its rivets and panels are being replaced, etc., etc., etc.), but not from one end to the other. The actual process involves continual inspections, and the places that need it the most get the attention. There

are 28 painters, 13 ironworkers, 3 pusher ironworkers (whatever they are), and 5 painter laborers, and that's just the painting team. There are also engineers, electricians, carpenters and many other laborers. And although the bridge was completed in 1937, the maintenance team was not formed until 1965, when the bridge was **visibly** corroding. [pause] I'm going to repeat that last bit for emphasis: **the maintenance team was not formed until 1965, when the bridge was visibly corroding.** The Golden Gate bridge is not even 100 years old. Will it survive for 200 years? For 500 years?

Yes, maintenance is hard, and not just for large bridges. A city's infrastructure, a house, a car, your teeth. And this difficulty is not just limited to things physical. Maintaining relationships – which are metaphorical bridges – between nations and between people is difficult. Maintaining all sorts of organizations, large and small, is difficult. Why?

[The 2nd Law of Thermodynamics]

I'll tell you why. In a word, Physics. More specifically, the 2nd Law of Thermodynamics, one version of which from the Wikipedia states,

The entropy of isolated systems left to spontaneous evolution cannot decrease.

Huh? Aren't you glad you came to Church today?

Let's see if we can make this a bit more palatable. Entropy is a measure of the disorder – the chaos – of a physical system. The more entropy there is in a system, the more chaotic it is. The 2nd Law is often *inaccurately* paraphrased as “entropy increases”, i.e., “disorder increases”. And while this *physical* law is a *physical* property of *physical* systems, it seems to, as the young people say, “hit” on many levels and apply to all sorts of systems. I'd wager that you've felt this to be true in your general experience – I know I have. Stuff gets dirty. Stones get scattered. You open up a closet, and HOLY MOLY, what happened here?!

But, as I said, “entropy increases” is not accurate. There is more to the 2nd Law. It's more accurate to say that “entropy increases, *unless work is done.*” I repeat, “entropy increases, **unless work is done.**” It takes work to clean things. It takes work to gather stones. It takes work to organize the contents of the closet.

And what is this work of which I speak? Well, in today's sermon context, my answer is "maintenance", and so I shall rephrase the 2nd Law of Thermodynamics thus:

*Any system, be it physical, organizational, relational, etc., etc., etc., will fail without regular maintenance.*

[repeat this rephrasing]

One could argue that the modifier "regular" is redundant here, but I leave it in for emphasis, because one millisecond after you do the work of maintenance, the forces of chaos are at it again – they are in their very essence relentless, and they will outlive you and your progeny.

So let us give a shoutout and our gratitude to those who do the maintenance of our modern world. The cleaners, the bridge crews, the road crews, the repairpers, [pause], the accountants, the administrators, the trash haulers, the dentists, etc., etc., etc. [go slow on these etc.'s] We rarely see the results of your labors, but we reap its benefits in the large, day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year. From you, we receive, and to you, we give, together, we share, and from this, we live.

[Passover]

And now let us turn our attention to what I believe to be one of the great maintenance success stories, a human endeavor that has survived and thrived for **thousands** of years: the Jewish Passover Holiday.

14. And this day shall be unto you a memorial; and ye shall keep it a feast to the LORD throughout your generations; ye shall keep it a feast day by an ordinance forever.

Every part of the Passover celebration is meaningful, beginning with the removal of all leavening from one's home and the eating of matzoh, "the bread of affliction" for seven days, generating empathy for the Hebrews who had to leave their leavening and ovens behind. For seven days, no work is to be undertaken, except as is needed to feed oneself and family, giving celebrants time to consider both the evils of slavery and the responsibilities of freedom. On the first night, a ritual meal, called the seder, is prepared. Everything said and done at the seder is prescribed by an ancient text called

the haggadah. The story of the Hebrews' escape from slavery in Egypt is retold, and each element of the meal symbolizes a part of the story.

Now, I learned from the Wikipedia that there are lots of variants on the Passover rituals, depending on all sorts of things (for instance, Passover lasts 8 days outside of Israel), but the heart of the tradition, the celebration and the retelling of the story of the escape from slavery, is and has been shared since the 5th century before the common era. That's at least 2700 years. Ain't that something! I'll go so far as to say that it is a miracle of maintenance.

Compare and contrast to Shelley's Ozymandias, whose remains are naught but the busted pieces of a statue lying in the desert with the deliciously ironic inscription: "Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair." Here's the thing. Ozymandias was a King, even "King of Kings", but a King is an individual. One person. And one person, however powerful, cannot stand against the 2nd Law of Thermodynamics. Not for thousands of years. No way. Not. Even. Close. As we learned just a few minutes ago, even maintaining the 87-year old Golden Gate Bridge requires a massive team and the commitment of the people of California.

Commitment. There's a word...

Indeed, it is only through the commitment of a people that a system can be maintained for any non-trivial amount of time. And this commitment of a people must be earned, and it must be somehow transmitted across generations. It does not happen automatically, because our natural tendency is simply not to bother, especially if we cannot see any short term results. A system worth maintaining must be important, even holy to us. The Jewish people have succeeded, arguably wildly succeeded, with Passover. [pause]

Here's a fun fact before I move on to the wrap-up: Ozymandias is the Greek name for the Egyptian pharaoh Ramesses II, who, in as much as these things can be historically verified, is believed to be the Pharaoh who enslaved the Hebrews in the book of Exodus. I'd love to accept erudition and cleverness

points for having known this before I picked Shelley's poem as a reading, but to be honest, it was merely a happy accident, a bit of entropy that broke my way.

[Channing, Spiritual Maintenance, and Wrap up]

And what about us? By that I mean as UUs, that is, as Unitarian Universalists? Though we come from the older traditions of Unitarianism and Universalism, our denomination is quite young, having been formed in 1960. So we don't have a thousands of years old tradition like Passover, but we do have our own rituals of memory like the lovely Flower Communion given to us by Norbert Capek in 1923.

And we have our more routine rituals that we perform during worship service: the lighting and extinguishing of the Chalice, the singing of hymns, the prayer and silence, the offering, the giving of the sermon. All these rituals serve as tools for our spiritual maintenance, and we gather together to do them, week after week, year after year. And maybe, just maybe, one day, we will see that we have maintained our own tradition for 2700 years. Maybe.

It's up to us.

Amen.