

Doing Dishes in a Collapsing Society
A Case for a Season of Civic Deliberation

Kenneth Bailey



What is happening to this society? Multiple mass shootings. The on-going attempt to roll back Roe v. Wade. The latest devastating floods, hurricanes, and fires. Widespread attacks on LGBTQ+ people. The list goes on, and keeps on going on. Many of us are experiencing anger and despair from these daily events. We feel overwhelmed, seemingly unable to respond in any way that feels commensurate to the task at hand.

In the back of our minds and hearts we know society is falling apart. But the bills have to get paid and we have to get our children to school. This affects us. How so? We are experiencing temporal dissonance: we are embedded in everyday time--caught up in the responsibilities of bills, work, cleaning one's home, and the like--while also being in the extended, bizarro time of society in decline. The rub between these two time realities contributes to our experience of frustration and hopelessness.

Without knowing how to address this, we tend to fall back on our repertoire of familiar tools to address emerging events one at a time. Strikes, protests, boycotts, and policy work all come to mind. These are important, however they don't have room for the depth and breadth of the problem we are facing. As discrete actions, they are incommensurate to the task of trying to sit with what's going on with the state of the nation and world.

What can we do about this? We need an organizational form, or social arrangement, that affords us time, that lets us stop the routines of business as usual to focus on the problem at hand. One that allows us to tackle the question, "What is happening in our society?" One that allows for inquiry and study, as well as enacting different scales of collective time for creativity, imagination, and action. I propose we consider using the form of a season to step away from superfluous distractions and step into shared study, community, and society building.

Why a season? It gives us time. It still has an end in sight, but it isn't as brief as a protest, and it's not organized towards winning something. It makes room for inquiry and time to be with others. And tactically, we can prepare now for fall as a season to drop deeper into community to question the state of our society and what to do about it. That said, giving ourselves time for collective inquiry and meaning-making is so counter-cultural that just by doing it, we will affect social life.

A time to process

What is happening to this society? Many of us might have our own answers. But having a length of time for community members, students in public schools, nearby store owners, neighborhood faith leaders, and all sorts of regular people to be with this question and to hear and discuss multiple perspectives on the answer would do a thing. It could do its own kind of work on and for people traumatized by the string of events we are experiencing regularly.

A time for community

A season would give us time to breathe and do more than talk. It's important that we dance, cook, and play together, hold space for collective grieving, and be with each other in ways that resist individuation and the erosion of social fabric. A season gives us time to build points of connection, trust, and joy.

A time of creativity

Imagining and testing ways to creatively address the state of society can happen over the course of a season. Imagining how we might intervene in the course of our society will require time to experiment and prototype. A season won't be enough time to solve our problems, but the commitment to stopping business as usual to dive into them together could move us further than we can imagine.

A time to ask, *What time is it?*

The length of a season gives us time to rethink time, to imagine new temporal patterns that in turn let us challenge power's desire to keep us distracted from the state of society and each other. To take this time for ourselves, our communities, and society could make for a powerful counter-cultural move this coming fall. We could model what it looks like to do society work, and what it looks like to stand up for the kind of society we want to be a part of.