

Good Goodbyes

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July 31, 2011

Saying goodbye. One of the hardest things in life.
Many of us never learn how to say goodbye very well.
It's so much easier to deny,
to pretend it's not really happening.

When we're young, on graduation day,
we crack open each other's brand-new yearbooks
and smell that new-book smell
and write notes saying, "See you soon!"
If we were honest, we might write something like this:
"I don't know if we'll see each other again.
I care about you. I wish you well."

Or say it's your last day on a job.
Maybe over coffee you say to your coworkers, "Let's stay in touch,"
but even as the words pass your lips,
you hear how lukewarm they sound.
Maybe you know you don't mean it,
and you wish you had said what you really meant.
It might be as simple as this:
"I'm glad we've gotten to know each other.
I wish you well."

But instead, so often, we make those shallow promises
we know we're not going to keep.
Because somehow we think there's something wrong
with simply saying goodbye.
We think it would be mean or unfriendly or rude,
or even hurtful,

to say goodbye
and be honest that the relationship is ending.

Saying goodbye. It's hard to do.
But that doesn't change the truth
that sometimes relationships do end,
sometimes abruptly and painfully;
sometimes for very good reasons,
with no one to blame, no one at fault.
Relationships come to an end.
And in that moment of ending,
by saying goodbye *well*,
we honor what the relationship has been,
and we make room in ourselves for a new beginning.

Years ago, when I was a girl,
we had a dog named Winky.
Half-husky, half-golden retriever.
She was so beautiful, with her thick husky tail, always wagging,
and her beautiful golden face and her soft brown eyes.
We ran together and played and barked and laughed.
We loved each other a lot.
But Winky got old, as dogs do.
She got old so much faster than I did.
The time came when she couldn't see so well.
Her joints were getting stiff.
We all knew she probably wasn't going to be around much longer.
And right around that time my family had to move.
We ended up finding a new place that was great except for one thing:
no dogs allowed.
My mom and dad did the best they could do at the time.
They decided to put her to sleep.
Looking back, I would have done it differently.
But I know they did what they thought was right.
The thing is, they didn't *tell* me in advance.

They didn't tell me Winky was going to die.
They were trying to protect me.
So they only told me afterwards.

To this day, I carry that regret with me.
Because I never got to see her.
I never got to tell her I loved her, one last time.
I know my parents were trying to protect me.
I know that.
And it would have been hard.
I would have cried and cried.

But the thing is, I did anyway.
I still felt that awful grief,
only it was worse because, unlike the little girl in our story,¹
I hadn't been there.
I never got to say goodbye,
except in my heart, over and over again.

Dear ones,
none of us get to skip over the experience of losing what we love.
Because we know everything in this world is temporary,
and that includes us.
Everything changes.
We know it's true.
Every religion teaches it.
And our own lives tell us,
with constant nudges both gentle and jarring:
that to live is to change.
We cannot stay forever as we are.
Everything changes.
Things exist for a while in a particular form,
and after a time that form comes to an end
and changes into something new.

¹ Corinne Demas, *Saying Goodbye to Lulu* (New York: Little, Brown, 2004).

Relationships, people, mountain ranges, empires.
Everything changes.
This is the nature of things.
This is how the world is.

Mary Oliver puts it this way:

To live in this world
you must be able
to do three things:
To love what is mortal;
to hold it
against your bones knowing
your own life depends on it;

And, when the time comes to let it go,
to let it go.²

But we forget.
We struggle and deny and will ourselves to forget
that letting go is part of life.
We struggle against the truth
that everything which begins must also come to an end.
And so we come to think that ending is the same as failure.
But it's not.
An ending need not be a failure.

Oh, my dear, do not despair,³

says the poet. Do not despair that things come to an end.
Don't despair, but *live*—
live into the time that is left.
And when it's time to say goodbye, say goodbye.

² Mary Oliver, *Singing the Living Tradition* #696.

³ Elizabeth Tarbox, "Legacy."

In just a week's time, you and I will have to say our goodbyes
and get our hearts and minds ready
to love someone new.

You have to be free to love your new minister,
I have to love my new congregation.

It's like the little girl said in our story:

“You're not Lulu.

Still, I'll love you too.”

The good news is, I'm not dying, at least not yet,
and neither are you.

But isn't it strange, the way *every* goodbye feels a little bit like death.
Church consultant Roy Oswald says, when a minister leaves,
both minister and congregation must be

able to live deeply into the human side of death—;
the death of relationships—;
the death of roles and functions and responsibilities—;
the death of that special relationship a pastor has with a parish.

And to ministers in particular he gives some hard advice:

Dying to the parish
involves dying to our role with people, as well.
Our failure to die to this role with congregational members
gets us involved in pastoral acts with them long after we've left.
Our hanging onto these roles is our bid for immortality.
We allow ourselves to be indispensable with people,
insuring our ability to live forever in their lives.⁴

Ouch. This is hard to hear.

When a minister hangs on too long with a congregation,

⁴ Roy Oswald, *Running Through the Thistles*, p. 11.

it's like trying to deny and fight against our own death.
Hard but true.

For five years, we have worked together,
laughed and cried and wondered and puzzled together
about what it all means.

We have done our best to live out faithfully
what it means to be
the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Stockton
in this moment that we've been given.
Now we have one more thing to do together:
to say goodbye, well and honestly.

In just a few days, when my ministry here ends,
my job, my duty to you,
will be to get out of the way,
to truly say goodbye
and acknowledge that this is the end of our relationship
as congregation and minister.
Our paths may cross again down the road.
That would be wonderful.

But my most important job right now
is to help you say goodbye to me
and get ready to open your hearts to a new minister.
None of us knows yet who that will be.
But whoever it is, I want that new minister to succeed here.
I want them to connect with you.
I want them to build deep relationships here,
so that, together, you can thrive and grow and continue to grow.

So I'm going to be very disciplined with myself.
I need to be very clear that the relationship we've had is ending.
I'm not going to say "see you later,"
because I truly don't know if we will.

I'm not going to promise to stay in touch,
because that would get in the way of *your* job,
which is to be open to what your new minister brings.
This might sound harsh,
but please believe me when I say
this is a gift I'm giving to you.
This is making room
for your relationship with your next minister to flourish.
It's essential.

Now, sometimes people wonder,
does this mean we can never, ever see each other again?
No, of course not.
If we run into each other,
I'm not going to run the other way!
Far from it.
If you ever find yourself in Virginia, where I'm going to be,
come to a church service. Come by and say hello.
I would be delighted to see you.
I would love to hear how you're doing.

But I won't ask you how this *church* is doing,
because I don't want to get in the way,
even though of course I care. How could I not?
And even though I will *always* care about you,
I won't be able to exchange cards or letters
or be Facebook friends or anything like that.
Because when a minister leaves a congregation,
the way we can show our care for your future
is by getting out of the way.

My colleague Mark Morrison-Reed tells his story
of leaving a congregation:

[W]hen we left we left.

Well, we left town at least.
Leaving emotionally proved more difficult.
We maintained contact with two couples.
One had been our surrogate parents—Bill and Eleanor.
The other was a friend of mine I'd introduced to his future wife
who was a church member.
We also exchanged Christmas cards
with those—mostly senior members—who wrote to us.
That was a mistake—a misguided courtesy.
Most often it was just that, a courtesy.
But then a long revealing letter would arrive,
or a note from someone I knew had ceased attending,
or a wistful comment about us from someone
who was keeping the new minister at arm's length.
In those moments I cringed,
for I knew we were intruding upon our successor's ministry.⁵

It's a hard thing to hear, but it's true.
The best gift a minister can give a congregation when they leave
is the gift of getting out of the way—
with love, and blessings, of course!
We don't have to stop loving each other.
You will always have a place in my heart. Always.
But I *do* need to get the heck out of the way
out of respect for your future,
which you will chart with your new minister.
And this is why we'll need to say goodbye.

So what happens now?
I hope in these last few days together
we can really be present to what is happening.
Be aware of the situation,
aware of our emotions, whatever they might be—

⁵ Mark D. Morrison-Reed, "After Running Through the Thistles the Hard Part Begins," Berry Street Lecture, June 2000.

sadness, hope, nostalgia, excitement, anger, relief—
whatever it is.

Don't deny what's happening.

Just be aware.

This change in the congregation's life
is bringing difficulties, absolutely.

It's also bringing new possibilities.

Remember the song I taught you a couple of weeks ago:

We give thanks for unknown blessings already on their way.

Be aware. Be open to what's coming.

And in the meantime,

let us well and truly celebrate what has been.

I understand there's going to be a little party after church next week;
it's our pianist Chris's last Sunday as well,
so please come.

Hugs and tears and laughter are all welcome!

Let's celebrate, one last time.

Finally, in the midst of these goodbyes,
remember what is *not* going away.

You have each other.

Would you look around at each other now?

Look at each other.

You have each other to embrace and encourage and applaud
all throughout this transition, and always.

You have each other to challenge you
and help you stay true to your vision of what this community can be.

And even more than that, you have the faith
which is the living, breathing heart of this community.

Call it what you will—Spirit of Life, the human spirit,

God, Goddess,

infinite creativity,

that which IS—

this holy spark of life and love and joy
which will never leave you.
Call it what you will, it will be with you
in good times and in bad,
in the purest joy and the darkest despair.
For you are part of the life of the universe,
the great and stately dance of the stars and the trees
and the mountains,
and the generations of beings that rise to love
and love again,
through struggle and pain and joy,
part of the great promise that love is never wasted
and hope will never fail
and the future is always before us, beckoning us on
and on
and on.

Blessings to you, always.
Now go forward in peace,
and joy abundant,
and courage, and purpose.
Go forward and find your future.

May it be so.
Amen.