

"SAYING GOODBYE"
A sermon by Rev. Roger Bertschausen
Fox Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
Appleton, Wisconsin
www.fvuuf.org

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Reading:

“Approaching the Veil Scientifically” by Belinda Subramam

Eyes like stars sparkle and die
and cycle into new stars, new eyes.

The answer is outside our window.

Astronomers look
for the beginning
and find there is no end.

Down to earth
there are frozen lines,
winter trees,
stalled cars in dirty snow,
sorrow over endings.

The real world is through the window,
infinite, ageless.

Though a clear veil
keeps us distant,
the soul of what
we can never prove
keeps us close.¹

Sermon

As I read about ministerial transitions in preparation for this sermon, I ran across this nugget of wisdom: At all costs, ministers should not give their congregations more than sixty days notice of their departure. Well, I gave about 390 days. Missed the mark by just a little bit! I

¹ http://www.poetrysoup.com/famous/poem/12834/Approaching_The_Veil_Scientifically.

understand the thinking behind this best practice. But given my wife's high profile move to St. Louis, it felt like I needed to say something about my plans sooner than later.

While this is a long leave-taking, I think we still have every opportunity to do it well. I have two simple goals for our final year together.

The first is that we find opportunities for spiritual growth in it. Growing spiritually is, after all, part of our Fellowship's mission. And I know there is plenty of spiritual growth available in our goodbyes—because saying goodbye is an important part of every human journey.

My second goal for us is that we do our leave-taking in such a way that you—the congregation—and I are both able, as one book I read puts it, "to enter wholeheartedly into the next chapter" of our respective journeys.

I hope that you will give your hearts to your new interim senior minister and then to the senior minister you call in the same gracious way you've welcomed me into your lives and your hearts. That will be a great gift—to your new senior minister and to you.

For me, looking ahead to my new life in St. Louis, I hope that I am able to enter into it fully. I don't want my life to be focused on what has been, on my life here in the Fox Valley, on you. I want to embrace my new place, my new life.

So this year of saying goodbye is about putting closure on our relationship so that both you and I will be able to move wholeheartedly into our new adventures. I decided to do this sermon in October, when our theme is renewal. Ending—and the new beginnings they beget—give us opportunities for renewal.

In putting our saying goodbye into the context of renewal, I am not trying to put a happy face on it. The truth is also that this is going to hurt, at least for a lot of us. I know it's going to hurt for me.

These words from the spiritual writer Mark Nepo speak to me:

Letting go is not just about putting things down. On a deeper plane, letting go is about letting your heart crumble, about letting yourself be rearranged by the journey of being alive...To soften and crumble is not to die. It simply allows us to change.²

I know that each of you will experience my leaving differently. There will be some here who experience our parting as wrenching; I have no doubt that there will be others who would have welcomed my departure years ago. So let me speak for myself only.

My heart will crumble this year. It already is crumbling. Some of you have shared your disappointment that I won't be here to do your memorial service (unless you die between now

² Mark Nepo, *The Exquisite Risk: Daring to Live an Authentic Life* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2005), p. 163 of Kindle edition.

and my departure—which is NOT a good alternative). Some of you have shared how much you have looked forward to my officiating at your child's wedding someday. Believe me, I feel anguish, too, over not being able to do these things. Being part of your lives at such profound moments is a source of tremendous meaning to me, and it is a huge loss to know that I won't be there at such moments after I leave.

There's a simple reason why my heart is crumbling: I love you! Deeply, completely, unconditionally. After twenty-four years, I know a lot of your shortcomings and failures, and you know mine. And we love each other anyway! Loving each other anyway was a theme in the service installing me as your minister back in 1990. The beautiful chalice you gave me for my twentieth anniversary here honors this. The plaque on it reads: "Twenty years of loving us anyway." And you've loved me for twenty-four years anyway, in spite of my shortcomings and failures. This is the miracle of true love. We've experienced it! Hallelujah!

This kind of love does not always happen in the minister/congregation relationship. So often in the world of faith communities, once you scratch beneath the surface you realize the love—if there is any—is conditional. So you need to know: one of the great things about this Fellowship is that you are able to give unconditional love to your ministers. I've experienced this, and I've seen you give the same gift to first Dottie Mathews, and now Leah Hart-Landsberg. You will have a lot of good things going for you as you search for a new senior minister, but this is the best! Treasure this, and make sure you keep on giving this gift to those who follow me!

I'm not saying that there's been nary a critical or angry word said. True love is about being real with each other, and that includes being critical, feeling angry or disappointed, disagreeing, the list goes on. But underlying it all is unconditional love. That's the key.

So I love you. And I have loved being here. Not necessarily each and every moment, but most of the time—and that's an amazing and wonderful gift. I love how we've grown and evolved together. In preparing for this sermon, I came across the observation that for many departing ministers, a lot of their grief is about the things that the minister and congregation failed to accomplish. I don't feel that at all! I'm amazed at what we've accomplished together! This isn't to say that we did everything perfectly, but I will leave with no regrets about what we didn't do or what we didn't do perfectly. All this is great, and it's why my heart is crumbling.

There will always be a large place in my heart for you. I will always love and care about you. And, in order for me and for you to enter wholeheartedly into our next adventures, our relationship will need to end. That's the simple, painful truth. For me, this is heart-breaking but also, ultimately, heart-mending.

I think it's going to be important for us to be clear about what we will need to do so we can move forward wholeheartedly into our futures. As I see it, there are two key ways to make this work.

The first is easier (which is not to say painless): when I leave, I will no longer occupy the role of being your minister. I will leave that role completely, with no exceptions. I will not return to do your memorial service or your kid's wedding or anything else here. I will not send words to be read at important occasions such as a memorial service. A lot of you know I am mulling over

becoming a church consultant. I would not come back to do consulting with you. Consulting is not exactly the same role I'm in now, but it's too close for comfort. I simply won't step back into being your minister, not even for an hour, not even a tiny bit.

I had a moment of insight about all this a couple weeks ago. As the marriage equality issue continues to wend its way through the courts, it's looking more and more like the Supreme Court of the United States might rule on it once and for all during this term. Often big decisions like marriage equality are handed down in June—typically late June. My plan is to finish up with you in mid-June, and then take some paid time off that I have coming. So if this decision comes in late June, I will no longer be your minister. I will not be able to officiate at weddings.

A few weeks ago I was feeling very sorry for myself about this possibility. I've put a lot into marriage equality. There might be some ceremonies in late June that I would have done last June except for a county clerk's intransigence. How can I not do these weddings? Maybe I should stay on the job longer in June. Maybe I could make an exception. Maybe, if I'm lucky, marriage equality won't come then.

Wait a minute! That last thought ushered in the moment of insight: “Guess what, Roger?” I thought. “It's actually NOT about you!” Marriage equality in June would be a beautiful thing, even if I can't do the weddings I wanted to do! When I officiate at a wedding, I am not the center of the couple's universe. Marriage is actually not about me. It's about the couple. It's about their love, their commitment. Marriage equality is about justice, not me. And what's more, wouldn't it be wonderful to have Leah Hart-Landsberg and, after she or he arrives, the interim senior minister, do these ceremonies, further cementing themselves in the lives and hearts of the Fellowship and the wider community?

So you've been warned: if you ask me to come back and do something after I'm done, I will say no. Please don't ask!

The second key way to make this work has to do with the friendships I have with some of you. This is the harder one. I don't pretend that my relationships with all of you have reached the level of friendship, but I certainly feel like it has with some of you. The recommended best practice for congregations and their departing ministers is for their friendships to end, or at least to become inactive for an indefinite period of years.

To me the friendships I have here feel like real, cherished friendships—but they've also always been a dual relationship: I've been your friend AND your minister. I've been keenly aware of this from day one. Being your minister makes a huge difference in any friendship I have with you. It changes things, especially when it comes time to leave.

Why is it best practice for my active friendships with you to end when I leave? One reason is that if you remain connected with me—even as a friend—it may make it harder for you to connect with and wholeheartedly embrace your new minister. Maintaining an active friendship with me focuses energy outside the congregation, not on building relationships within it. And my being in touch with some of you but not others could introduce a negative dynamic into the congregation as some talk about being in touch with me while others perhaps feel badly because

I'm not in touch with them. The longer a minister serves, the more important this best practice becomes.

I'm still exploring exactly what this will look like for my friendships here when I leave, but of this I'm certain: in a very fundamental way, when I stop being your minister, I'm going to stop actively being your friend, too. Stepping back from active friendship doesn't mean that I will stop loving you or caring about you.

Some ministers choose to avoid friendships altogether with congregants. To help keep things clear, some ministers also choose not to join the congregation. I understand these choices and respect the clarity they convey. For me, I have chosen the more gray area and have entered into friendships. I joined the Fellowship early on. I am one of you, but I also am not one of you. My role as your minister substantively changes what it means for me to be a member of the Fellowship and what it means to be your friend.

Maybe there will come a time when it makes sense and would not be destructive to the Fellowship for our active friendships to rekindle. I wouldn't rule this out. But I do know that such a time would not come for many years.

By the way, if you quit the Fellowship after I leave, it doesn't matter. The reason I need to no longer be in an active friendship with you is based on our shared affiliation with the Fellowship while I was here as your minister, not on your relationship to the Fellowship after I leave.

I need to be very clear about something: I will step completely out of the role of being your minister and step away from active friendships not just because doing so is good for the Fellowship. I will also do this because it's good for me. It's part of what will help me work through my grief at leaving the Fellowship and embrace wholeheartedly my new life in St. Louis.

Because you know what? Even as I feel immense sadness and grief about leaving, I am incredibly excited about the next chapter in my life. I am thrilled to be moving to St. Louis with the love of my life. I can't wait to have most weekends and evenings off together with my wife—something we've never had in twenty-six years of marriage. I can't wait to dive into the life—both the joys and the challenges—of living in a different community. I can't wait to venture into the Missouri River valley and the mountains to the south. I am ecstatic about living in a bigger city and sampling its food and music and rich cultures. I'm scared and pumped about figuring out what I might do professionally there. It feels like there is a blank canvas of possibility. The next chapter of my life is beckoning and I will be ready when next summer comes to dive into it with all my heart, all my attention, all my love.

But these next months before I go are important for you and for me. Here are a few things that will help us get through this in a way which will position us to wholeheartedly embrace what is next.

First, it's likely many of us will feel deep and sometimes painful feelings. This is okay. The Fellowship is a place where feelings are welcome. So let's give each other space to do whatever emotional work we need to do.

Second, I will still be your Senior Minister until I leave. I am NOT relinquishing that role until I lay it down in June. With a long distance marriage, a father who is turning 89 on Monday, and beginning exploration of what I might do next professionally, I'm going to be on the road more, but I am going to give you and my ministry here the dedication you and it deserve.

And finally, it makes sense for me to have a very carefully circumscribed role in the interim minister search, and no role whatsoever in the search for a settled minister.

We have a fantastic opportunity this year to practice saying goodbye. No doubt about it: saying goodbye (and hello) is one of life's main spiritual tasks. We say goodbye and hello all the time. And then of course there's the biggest and most permanent goodbye of all: death. One minister I read this week observes that the manner in which we ministers close a ministry "will be very similar to the way in which they will die." Well, that's quite a thought to ponder!

The good news is that while there will be moments of sadness for a lot of us, it won't be the depth of sadness that death brings. I remember someone telling me that they imagined I was completely devastated when Dottie Mathews announced her resignation. Well, I hated to see Dottie go, but my mom died within a week of Dottie's announcement. My mom's death put Dottie's departure in perspective for me: a big loss to be sure, but not as big as some others!

At the heart of the Fellowship's mission is sharing our spiritual journeys. You and I have shared our spiritual journeys for many years. I suspect that I have influenced many of your journeys, and I know that you have influenced mine. My journey, my soul are not the same because of this time we have shared together. But still, it's my journey. And still, your journeys are yours. Your journey is not dependent on me; my journey is not dependent on you. Part of my departure will be about each of us claiming our own journeys as our own.

The Fellowship's central work of sharing journeys will go on in new and wondrous ways as new ministers join you, as newcomers join, as memories of me grow fainter over time. This is how a thriving spiritual community moves forward through the stream of goodbyes and hellos that keep on relentlessly and endlessly coming, like Lake Superior waves washing up on the shore.³

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³ My main sources for wisdom on ministerial transitions were two classics: *Running Through The Thistles: terminating a ministerial relationship with a parish* by Roy M. Oswald (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 1978) and *Saying Goodbye: A Time of Growth for Congregations and Pastors* by Edward A. White (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 1990).