

TIME TO BEGIN – A HOMILY FOR ENDING
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Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Vero Beach, Florida
June 20, 2010

*What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from.*
~ T. S. Eliot

Don't you just hate it when you're all involved in the realities of something, the emotions of BEING THERE, and somebody comes out with words that are both intellectual and profound? What'd he say? What's it mean? And why do I have to think about this now, anyway?

Ever had this happen? You're right in the middle of a big trauma time, and somebody just has take you aside, has to assure you that every time God closes a door, but he opens a window too. And if you're like me, what comes right into mind is, "Oh, good. Why don't I just jump?"

Except that – thank heavens – we most often **do** find ways to carry on. One door closes, and yes, there IS a window open, light comes in, and after a while we **DO** find that "to make an end is to make a beginning." The end IS where we start from.

Like now. Like today.

So walk back with me in time, just for a bit . . . those of you who've been here that long, think back to two years ago . . . to the summer of 2008 . . . a time of turmoil . . . a time I suspect you'd rather forget, when people were angry, when conflicts were live . . . It was clear there was an ending, because your minister had accepted the call at a new congregation, and here was this new woman . . . this "interim minister" . . . but it wasn't at all clear what, other than continued chaos, had begun.

Throughout my first sermon, and in those early weeks together, I kept asking you

- What – specifically -- do you value most about this fellowship?
- What contributions have you made to this community that you feel good about?
- When have you been proud of this religious community? Why?

I reminded you that when your only tool is a hammer, every situation looks like a nail. When you focus *only* on what went wrong, who did what to whom, or the "bad behavior" of someone with whom you disagree . . . this generates its own kind of energy.

And I insisted, in words that I hope you will take away from our interim time:

What we focus on, grows. And it withers when we turn away.

Why am I reminding you of this, in this time of new beginnings for your next chapter and for mine? Because psychologists tell us that unless we are intentional, our behavior will revert under stress. The way we have behaved yesterday is how we will behave when stress comes 'round again.\

It doesn't have to be that way.

Remember the Cherokee elder who told his grandchildren about the two wolves that lived in his heart. "They're in a terrible fight," the old man said. One wolf is filled with fear, and anxiety, and anger and shame. The other wolf is courage, and kindness, humility and HOPE."

The children were very quiet., "These same two wolves live inside you too, " said the old man. "They live inside every person. And inside each human being the wolves are fighting." Grandfather!" The children wanted to know. "Which wolf will win?" "Ah!" the elder smiled - "The one you feed."

I say it again . . . and it applies whether we're talking about how you feel about your job . . . or a relationship that's on edge . . . or whether what's on the table is the shape and the future of this religious community.

What you focus on, grows. And it withers when you turn away.

What is special to you about this congregation right now?

What values and behaviors do you want to carry into the future?

What can you do to be part of that carry-over, starting even today?

The end, my friends, IS where you start from.

I have seen amazing changes in this congregation over our interim time.

- I have seen some of you confront your anger, not by blaming others but by holding yourself accountable for how you are going to behave.
- I have seen you work hard at developing healthy ways of being in community, like avoiding broadcast emails and talking TO rather than ABOUT the person with whom you disagree . . .
- I saw you as a congregation develop and agree upon a set of bylaws appropriate to a congregation of your size and complexity.
- I've seen your leadership hold itself accountable to a set of relevant and usable policies which will soon be on the website for easy access and for everyone to see. . .
- I celebrated with you as, by unanimous vote, you called Rev. Scott Alexander as the third settled minister of UUFVB.

You have done amazing things.

Take the credit.

Do not, for a minute, believe it was all about me.

I came here as a builder of bridges . . . It is my blessing to be a transition specialist, a midwife to change. Remember the old joke about how many UUs it takes to change a light bulb? "Only one, but the light bulb must want to change."

In the questions submitted for our seed pot sermon last week, one person asked, "*How important is the minister to the growth and success of a congregation?*" And I'm going to say, "vital," though there's more than one way to do it and churches grow up and around their ministers in various ways. The minister has to care about growth (whether you want to count numbers or depth of connection) . . . the minister has to care, has to embrace the possibilities . . . above all the minister must not be afraid.

But, as some of you know, I've been blessed serve two churches that doubled in size during my tenure – and what I said to those congregations, I passionately believe – As your minister, I can get people in the door. They'll come once, maybe twice, to hear me preach. BUT WHETHER THEY STAY OR NOT, that's not the minister's department.

Churches grow – I said it last week, but let's hear it again –

- churches grow: when they know exactly who they are,
- when they're passionate about what they do;
- when they don't try to be all things to all people;
- when they have clear and high expectations of members;
- and when they engage newcomers in meaningful ways within a few days of their walking in the door.

And **yes it is incredibly important** that the minister be on board.

And to do that, he – and I say "he" because obviously I have in mind your incoming minister, Rev. Alexander – Scott needs to feel supported . . . He needs to know that you aren't going to try to put him in a box, or nit-pick his every idea, or dissect his sermons for every small point with which you disagree. Be honest, yes . . . but be loving, too.

Remember -- *What you focus on, grows, And it withers, when you turn away.*

When I first arrived, one among you told me that she was going to work very hard NOT to connect with me, because it would make it too hard to let me go. My response then, as it was throughout our interim years, was this: IT'S NOT TIME YET. Well, now it is. [REV. MAUREEN PICKS UP STUFFED PANDA from chalice table, holds it for duration of service].

I toyed with having us sing that old song, NOW IS THE HOUR WHEN WE MUST SAY GOODBYE, but it's a bit of a tear jerker. You may not know that, decades before it became popular during the 1940's, it was sing in Maori in New Zealand, to "farewell" Maori soldiers heading off for the FIRST World War. [PIANO MUSIC PLAYS]

*Now is the hour, when we must say goodbye. . . .
While you're away,
Oh please remember me.
When you return,
you'll find me waiting here.*

See what I mean? It's a tearjerker.

It misses all together the fact that wherever I am, wherever you are, we stand in the same living stream of free religion . . .

Whenever we connect heart to heart . . . whenever we draw on our values for courage in hard times. . . then we are together.

When we act for justice . . . when we heal the broken . . . when we comfort the grieving . . . we are together.

When we speak truth to power . . . when we treat one another with respect whenever we do these things, then we are together.

And no matter where I go, we go together. And for that I say, praise be.

Releasing the Covenant:

AL PARMENTIER (board president): An interim year is a time of transition, a time between what was and what is not yet. As our Interim Minister, Rev. Maureen came to UUFVB to help us prepare for our next chapter of called ministry. When she arrived, she formally promised to focus on our strengths as individuals and as a congregation. She committed to being truthful and open, to listening deeply to our truths, to learning from our wisdom, and to holding herself open to the transformational power of genuine dialogue. She promised also, that when our work was complete, she would leave clearly and completely, that our next chapter of ministry could begin.

REV MAUREEN: Friends, we have done well together, and whether or not our hearts are ready, our work together is complete.

CONGREGATION: Rev. Maureen you have offered us moral leadership, religious insight, learned wisdom, and spiritual guidance. You have helped us celebrate our strengths and deal with challenge and pain. We have done our best to remain in honest and open communication

with you. We have tried to handle disagreements directly and with kindness, so that our shared wisdom could blossom into renewed vitality and vision for this congregation. We have done well together, and whether or not our hearts are ready, our work together is complete.

REV. MAUREEN: Members and friends of the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Vero Beach, I release you from our covenanted relationship as Interim Minister and Congregation. May the healing work of this interim period continue to empower your congregational life. May the strengths you claimed continue to shape your relationships with one another, and give you energy and courage to live your values in the wider world.

CONGREGATION: Rev. Dr. Maureen Killoran, we release you from our covenanted relationship as Interim Minister and Congregation. We send you forth with appreciation and caring. May you continue to bring both challenge and compassion to congregations in transition, and may you always be surrounded by people who value your strengths, accept your foibles and appreciate your gifts.

AL PARMENTIER: To make an end is to make a beginning. The end is where we start from.

CLOSING WORD (by Rev Maureen)

Friends, your interim period is over.
Your new chapter is begun.
Go in peace, go in joy, go in love.