

Learning to Say Goodbye  
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Now that I've reached my final month at Channing, many people have inquired if life has become easier. The answer is "No!"

Layered on top of daily tasks is the knowledge that I may be doing something for the last time. Conversations feel weightier knowing we now have more shared experiences behind us than before us. I am resolved that my decision to leave Channing was the right one for my personal and professional life. I will not be serving another congregation next year. My family will be moving to Cambridge. My plan is to spend more time with my daughter and to reassess my calling.

I care deeply about this community. I announced my resignation back in January because after almost ten years our lives have become interwoven and I wanted to respect our shared ministry. My aim in letting you know before the official three months notice was to allow for a healthy transition. That being said, this is my first settled position, and at times I have been at a loss as how to create a healthy transition.

So, over the past five months, I have asked colleagues about good departures. I was surprised to learn that most of them did not have happy endings. When I asked a minister who has served our movement for about as long as I have been alive for counsel, he laughed and shook his head. "You do not want to learn from me!" he said "One Sunday, I simply burst out in anger, marched right down the aisle, and out the front door of the church." Many shared painful stories about being asked to leave or hurtful interactions that made it impossible to stay. One friend confided that although she had made the right decision to leave her first settlement after four years, she did not give herself time to appropriately grieve. She kept busy with the work of the church and when it was over, found herself crying on the way to General Assembly.

There have been times when I have thought wistfully about the approach of the Rev. Tom Ahlburn who served the First Unitarian Church in Providence, my husband Peter's home church. After announcing his retirement after twenty-four years in Providence, it was determined that Christmas Eve would be Rev. Ahlburn's final service. So amidst the glow of candlelight, the congregation sang the final song, and Tom simply walked out the door in silence never to return again.

Naturally, endings are times loaded with emotion. Often it can feel safer to preserve our existing relationships and the circumstances of our lives rather than risk change, disrupting what we know. When coming to terms with a necessary change or an ending is thrust upon us, our history of previous separations floods our minds and hearts. Suddenly, we are that child being dropped off at summer camp for the first time, that teenager with a broken heart, the pain of being rejected from an application stings once more, the disappointment of a relationship or a job that did not work out can call into

question our own worth and sense of meaning. The specter of these difficult experiences can lead us to be fearful of endings or dread saying goodbye. In our desire to avoid pain, often we burn bridges.

Recently, I counseled someone who I will call Mary about breaking up with her boyfriend. Although they had only been dating for a short time, this had been a passionate affair. Both parties felt that they had found their life partner and made some future plans together. After a certain incident, Mary felt strongly that they would not be a good match over the long term and wanted to end the relationship. After I explored with her whether or not this relationship was really over whether or not they could enjoy dating longer or become friends, it became obvious to me that Mary was done. However, she was so afraid of confiding her feelings with her boyfriend that she planned to break-up by email. Now, sometimes it is necessary to leave a note or depart suddenly when your safety is threatened. This was not the case. I advised her to have the decency to pick up the phone or have a conversation in person. She was terrified! However, in facing her boyfriend and exploring the incident together allowed both parties to learn from the experience and remain friends.

Roy Oswald in his book about leaving a parish writes, “All of us have predictable patterns of leave-taking. The pattern may vary from time to time, but basically we have a similar routine we go through when we wish to say goodbye. A quick insight into your exit style can occur if you reflect on the last social affair you were attending. Think back to the way you left the party. Be in touch with your feelings about yourself during the exit period. In microcosm you have a picture of your typical exit pattern.”<sup>1</sup>

I believe that learning to say goodbye is a spiritual practice. Even though we may always have the temptation to steal off in the night or break-up by email, by being more intentional in our leave-taking we have the opportunity to deal openly and honestly with one another; to have our endings align with our values. If as Steven Smith suggests, “All our lives, we weave our souls around and through everyone we meet” then instead of avoidance or denial, insight can be gained through recognizing how other people shape our lives.

One of the reasons that I entered the ministry is that I wanted to be in relationship with people of all ages and stages of life. I enjoyed being a preschool teacher but I missed the intellectual challenge of adult conversations and appreciated the elders in my home church. This has proven to be the greatest reward of the past ten years, being intimately connected with a religious community. It has been such a blessing to be with you as you fell in and out of love, as children were born and blessed, as you found your calling or struggled to find your way, to be with you as a loved one died and honor their life together. It has been remarkable to see children and youth grow over the past ten years. I never thought that I would be the one saying, “Wow! You are so big! I remember when you were little!” So far, I have restrained myself from pinching cheeks.

My usual pattern of leave-taking is to keep in touch. I still correspond with my elementary school teachers and my best friend from kindergarten attended both my

Ordination and Wedding. Although ministry has allowed me to be in deeper relationship with more people, it has also made it impossible to maintain my preferred method of leave taking.

When I came here in 2000, I had a history of severed relationships from the Nursery School where I worked for three years to my seminary friends scattered all over the country, Starr King Church where I served as Director of Religious Education while attending seminary, the UU Church of Berkeley where I had my internship and the UU Society of Martha's Vineyard where I was an Interim Minister for one year.

So, when I arrived in Newport, I was pleased to establish some roots. It was during my time here that I met my life partner, Peter. When we celebrated our union in 2004, the congregation participated in our Big Fat UU Wedding. When my father died, your sympathy and kind words eased my bereavement and brought healing to my mother. When I was pregnant, you showered us with your generosity and blessings. You have offered steadfast support and affection as our daughter Liza entered our lives.

The ancient philosophy of Ecclesiastes reminds us of the preciousness and fragility of life. Ecclesiastes is among the wisdom books of the Hebrew Scriptures. The passage that Barbara read this morning is a collection of proverbs that calls attention to the relative worth of many things. We are told that the end is preferable to the beginning and "Sorrow is better than laughter, for by sadness of countenance the heart is made glad." Our culture certainly does not affirm that the house of mourning is better than festivity. I have even been to funeral receptions where the subject of death was avoided entirely. Instead of holding onto a grudge or longing for the past, the biblical writer suggests that wisdom is to be found in endings as we are reminded of the value of life itself.

Even though I believe that this ancient wisdom is true, I am not relishing this ending. Although I know it is time to move on, that does not change how much I care about this community. It will be strange to no longer be a part of your network of caregiving. The guidelines of the UU Ministers Association require that once I leave at the end of this church year, we cannot be in touch until your settled minister has been in place for one year. This will allow you to come to terms with my departure and to envision your hopes and dreams as a religious community. This is done not out of any animosity to the congregation but out of respect for your future minister. You need to be open to connect with a new person instead of turning to your past spiritual leader. This makes sense for the health of this congregation. My head understands it. Out of respect for my colleagues, I will follow these guidelines. However, this is a significant change for me and I will miss you in ways known and as yet unknown to me. No doubt this will be a learning experience as I have the space to reflect on the past decade of shared ministry.

My brother Michael died while I was an Intern at the UU Church in Berkeley. He was my only sibling and I loved him dearly. He had struggled with addiction so there had been times when I feared for his life. At that time, he had the language of recovery

and we thought he was doing well. The last time I spoke to Michael we were looking forward to his upcoming visit to California. So, it was a shock when he died suddenly of a heart attack at the age of forty-one (just a year older than I am today). I called my mentor, the Rev. Mark Belletini for pastoral care. Knowing he had experienced his share of grief, I asked him for words that could help sustain me through that dark time. “All Souls” by May Sarton was the poem he offered to me—the poem that was this morning’s responsive reading.

This is a poem that I have often revisited over the years for personal solace and alongside parishioners in trying times of bereavement and loss. Sarton reminds us that love and mourning never end. The strands of relationship are never unraveled. Our lives grow richer with each loss. Love is eternal. Death awakens us to the preciousness and fragility of life. The Sacred demands that we never postpone the kind word, the loving act.

I hope that you will join me in creating a leave-taking worthy of our shared ministry. It will be hard to say goodbye. Let us be honest with one another about the good times shared, our accomplishments, as well as our disappointments and dreams that will never be realized. For in the words of our vision statement, “the true expression of religion is the way we live our lives.”

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<sup>i</sup> *Running Through the Thistles*, Roy M. Oswald, 2001, The Alban Institute