

## ***NECESSARY LOSS AND THE LANDSCAPE OF LIFE***

*Sermon by Robert M. Thorson for a service organized and led by Linda Beall on May 1, 2011 for the congregation of Channing Memorial Church, Newport Rhode Island.*

### **READING – RELUCTANCE – ROBERT FROST**

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Out through the fields and the woods  
and over the walls I have wended;  
I have climbed the hills of view  
and looked at the world, and descended;  
I have come by the highway home,  
and lo, it has ended.

**The leaves are all dead on the ground,  
save those that the oak is keeping  
to ravel them one by one  
and let them go scraping and creeping  
out over the crusted snow,  
when others are sleeping.**

And the dead leaves lie huddled and still,  
no longer blown hither and thither;  
the last lone aster is gone;  
the flowers of the witch-hazel wither;  
the heart is still aching to seek,  
but the feet question ‘Whither?’

**Ah, when to the heart of a man  
was it ever less than a treason  
to go with the drift of things  
to yield with a grace to reason,  
and bow and accept the end  
of a love or a season?**

### **READING – SONNET 64 – WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE**

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**When I have seen by Time's fell hand defaced  
The rich proud cost of outworn buried age;  
When sometime lofty towers I see down-razed  
And brass eternal slave to mortal rage;  
When I have seen the hungry ocean gain  
Advantage on the kingdom of the shore,  
And the firm soil win of the watery main,  
Increasing store with loss and loss with store;  
**When I have seen such interchange of state,  
Or state itself confounded to decay;  
Ruin hath taught me thus to ruminare,  
That Time will come and take my love away.**  
This thought is as a death, which cannot choose  
But weep to have that which it fears to lose.**

## SERMON

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Good morning!

Here's an opening thought:

The joy of spring requires the necessary loss of autumn.

It's an honor for me to be here today, and a *pleasure* work with Linda and others to help bring you this service.

May has *finally* arrived! The shoulder season of March-April is officially behind us, banished to memory. At this time of year, I know in my heart that *summer* has begun, regardless of what the calendar-keepers and astronomers say. I'm grateful for your willingness to be indoors at the hour.

My *text* is Shakespeare's Sonnet 64, which I shared with a few of you on the beach last year. I stumbled across it a dozen years ago, when skim-reading all of his poetry for mention of abandoned fieldstone walls. Though they are *ruins* worth ruminating on, they are *hardly* the lofty towers the *bard* had in mind.

Since then, I've come to appreciate the scientific insight of this Sonnet's earthly imagery. And at the same time, I've learned to use it as a *foil* to keep me optimistic, regardless of the ruin and wreckage I witness during my life journey, both within my family and beyond.

I'll begin with a personal loss that we all have in common. The loss of childhood innocence. Here's a fragment of memoir from my most recent book: "*During the baby boom years of the 1950s and 1960s, my family ...spent at least part of every summer at the cottage on Union Lake. There I adapted to lakeshore life by becoming amphibious. My hair bleached to reflect the sun's rays. My skin turned bronze to prevent a burn. My toes became antennae, able to differentiate the tickle of grass, the squish of marsh mud, the graininess of beach sand, the wooden planks of the dock, and—after a joyous leap—the cool freshness of the lake.*"

Ohhhh... I wish I could go back in time and be there today.

The truth is... I really *don't* want to go back in time. Only the wistful, unrealistic part of me does. I don't want to repeat the anxious gauntlet called adolescence... that fuzzy lacuna of memory between childhood and adulthood.

As an adult, I've had to become a realist. The *mop of hair* that bleached so white fell out as part of my biologically pre-programmed death. The *bronze skin* of perfect summer days is now a concern for my family physician. The *wooden dock*... I've since learned... was infused with arsenic preservative within an industrial-scale vacuum chamber. The *water* itself was hardly fresh, being a dilute solution of "better things through chemistry," for example, DDT and the aerosols from leaded gasoline.

This retrospective illuminates two categories of loss shared with everyone in this room. The first concerns childhood. No longer do we adults have

- Such a naive *simplicity* of purpose,
- The time for hours of impromptu play, and
- the *agility* and *vigor* of near-perfect health.

Ouch for the necessary loss of childhood innocence! Yet without such memories, we'd be more cynical and pessimistic, which I steadfastly refuse to become.

The second category of loss involves the planet... During the baby boom, Americans believed that it's experts were taking care of the planet or that it would take care of itself. They weren't.

Ouch again for the damage.

Yet without this necessary loss, there would be no modern resolve to repair the damage, no Rachel Carson to thank, and no seventh UU Principle reverencing the fundamental unity of all things.

On that note, please close your eyes for a few moments. Bring into your consciousness *either* a person who you once loved and who is now gone...or a happy time in your life that has since passed. And now...the hard part. Try to reflect on the *polarity* of emotion involved, the *pleasure* of loving that person or that happy time, balanced against the *pain* of the loss or separation. Which was more potent? The *love*? Or the *loss*? I think I know.

Now, when you're ready, please *open* your eyes. I've got a few more examples of losses in store, followed by a theoretical explanation of why they are all necessary.

In today's first reading, Robert Frost concedes that we must:

“yield with a grace to reason,  
and bow and accept the end  
of a love or a season?”

The “end of love” he refers to is left anonymous. The “end of season,” however, is *unambiguously* late autumn. That's when we cling to the warmth of the past, unable to imagine the sprouting warmth of the future.

Where winters are tough, plants have basically *two strategies*. The first is to grow leaves that are *tough enough* to survive deep freezing and wintry gales, and *resinous enough* to retain moisture and taste bad to insects. This is the strategy of the pine...the spruce...the cedar...the juniper...the hemlock...the redwood...the fir...and so forth. This is also the strategy of broad-leaved evergreen plants such as laurels and rhododendrons, whose leaves resemble green vinyl.

The second strategy is to grow *vulnerable* leaves with *reckless abandon*...sweet, soft, fragrant, and tasty leaves...knowing that they will die by summer's end. Such leaves decompose nearly as fast as they grow, releasing nutrients into the soil that will be used during the next juicy season of life, and the next, and the next, and the next.

I spent one year living in the Bay Area, California. Of course it was nice. But the pendulum of the leaves didn't swing enough for me, shifting only from brownish green to greenish brown, and skipping *fall* completely because the leaves didn't actually fall. That year, I decided: “Tis better for me to live *deciduously* than *coniferously* ... to live with the swinging pendulum, rather than the muted quasi-permanence.

People don't talk about the Amy Freedman as much as they used to. Though gone for less than a year, her memory is quickly dimming, along with that of her husband Peter and daughter Liza, who came with

the *package*...or...more accurately...*became* part of the package. Her departure was a necessary loss, both for her, and for us. “Tis better to have loved and lost a minister than never to have loved one at all.”

And now, for the landscape of life.

When I have seen the hungry ocean gain  
Advantage upon the kingdom of the shore,  
And the firm soil win of the wat'ry main,  
Increasing store with loss and loss with store;

When I have seen such interchange of state,  
Or state itself confounded to decay,  
Ruin hath taught me thus to ruminare  
That time will come and take my love away.

**Our beaches:** Where would Newport be without them? Like us, they are mutable forms: shifting, transient and uncertain. Energetically, each is a mechanical buffer linking the necessary losses of storm erosion to the hopeful gains of stabilized dunes, marshes, and lowland flats.

The ocean is indeed hungry at times, especially during late summer hurricanes and winter Nor'easters when it *eats beaches* like a ravenous glutton. This hunger is *satiated* only under the *sultry skies* of June and July, when beaches typically gain back what they have lost, *perhaps* even putting on some weight.

At a longer time scale, our cliffs and rock headlands are the hardened survivors of necessary loss. Without them, there would be no beaches, and without the beaches no mansions, and without the mansions, no local “kingdom of the shore.”

**Our bay:** Shakespeare writes of “state itself confounded to decay.” In the case of Narragansett Bay, the *original* “state” was the truly ancient, *hard-granite highlands* long since eroded away, the bones of which lie at Point Judith to the west, and Sakonnet to the east.

This original “*state*” of granite decayed to clay, *releasing* particles of silt sand, and pebbles that washed into a tectonic basin several hundred million years ago. There, the sediment experienced *another* “interchange of state”... converting to the gray mudstone, sandstone and puddingstone beneath us...rock *strong enough* to hold up a church, but *weak enough* to have been easily carved by glacier ice into countless islands, passages, and coves about 20,000 years ago.

The destruction of the ancient granite was a necessary loss. Without it, there would have been no soft rock to serve as the raw material from which our landscape was carved.

**Our steeple:** Shakespeare writes of “time’s fell hand,” referring to the inevitable destruction of lofty *towers* by the *irreversibility* of gravity and weathering chemistry.... Several years ago our steeple was on a path toward collapse. And as you probably know, we took it down and put it back up again, *stronger than ever*. Paying for that steeple repair was a necessary loss that led to shared sacrifice, which anthropologists tell us is the social super-glue that holds communities together, equivalent to the mortar that holds our physical church together.

And now, Shakespeare's final couplet.

*This thought is as a death, which cannot choose  
But weep to have that which it fears to lose.*

Clearly, Shakespeare is bummed out... resigned **not only** to the fact that time will come and take his love away, **but also** to the fact that he must **fear the coming** of that loss.

I wonder if our newly-formed ministerial search committee feels as he did. Should they **aim low** during their selection process out of **fear** that a truly excellent candidate would probably leave within a few years. Should our congregation **hold back** from investing their hearts into the committee's choice, out of **fear** that they might not stay? In both cases... **to hold back in fear** would be equivalent to taking our steeple down and stacking it permanently near the ground out of **fear** that it might not hold up.

Well guess what? The steeple decayed ... **and we fixed it**. Symbolically, we stood our ground.

And guess what else? Our previous minister left... **and we're fine**. Now we're looking ahead.

Newport beaches got seriously eroded last winter by the hungry surf. And, guess what? The sand came back.

Much of the local bedrock was ground to bits by an even hungrier ocean of ice. And guess what? This action created a hill on Pelham Street that holds up our church, and the island peninsulas that hold up our homes.

As a human being, I have several great loves, my wife, my family, my adopted New England culture, and my church. But I **refuse** to live in **fear** of losing these loves. Instead, I **anticipate** them, having learned from my training that such losses are **theoretically necessary**, based on the physics of entropy in the context of biological process. In the algebra of existence, loss is an essential term on one side of the equation.

To help you with this challenging concept, I'll offer two examples tied to my own personal story of lost innocence at the lake.

Humans do **not** reproduce like turtles, which lay dozens of eggs in the sand each year, hoping that **one or two** make it into adulthood. Instead, our parents followed an "**altricial**" strategy," in which a small number of nestlings are taken care of for years. Thermodynamically, each child is what's called a "**dissipative structure**," a self-contained entity that grows and is sustained only by dissipating a larger pool of energy, in this case the energy provided by parents, relatives, friends, and religious communities.

Notwithstanding the fiction of Peter Pan, this strategy requires that a human emerge from a **stage** in which it is a recipient of energy into a **stage** when it is a provisioner of energy. Adolescence, of course, is the transition period between these stages. During my summers at the lake, I was **more free** precisely because someone else was **less free**. My **gain** was their necessary **loss**.

And now, my second point. For any **isolated** natural system, there are two general **states of being**...that of a **static** system in which nothing changes... and that of a **dynamic** system, in which change must occur. In biological terms, Earth's moon is a static system. There are **no necessary losses** because there's nothing new under the sun needing to be offset with a loss. Planet Earth, in contrast is a dynamic system. Here, it's axiomatic that every biological gain in material and energy be offset by a loss. The generational transfer between parents and children is one example. The ecological balance between herbivory and carnivory is another. The result is a more interesting world.

Human society provides another example of a dynamic system. *Every day* for *every person* is a struggle to hold on...with some days, years, and decades being harder than others, whether due to random events, or to the pre-programmed schedule of life stages. This struggle to hold on is precisely what makes life worth living because every aspect of our lives is an island of local order drawing energy the enlarging sea of disorder around us.

Though I may not strike many of you as a man struggling to *hang in there* (...being in reasonably good health...with a fairly stable social situation...and with a secure job...) ----- I *struggle* just the same. You do too, each of you for a different set of reasons. Perhaps we know too much...Perhaps too little... ..Perhaps it doesn't matter. What I *do know* is that we're in this together. We gather to celebrate our wins and to cope with our losses in the dynamic game of life.

Notwithstanding Sonnet 64..., I've learned as a geologist that that time *cannot* and *will not* come and take my love away, *because*....at the end of the day...the passage of *time* allows for more creation than it does destruction ... a creation that allowed the sterile, noxious, hellish landscape the early earth to become what it is. The loss of one world is a *pre-condition* for the next. The *same* is true with human happiness. The delights of middle age are less straightforward and less intense than those of my youth, but they are certainly more complex and exquisitely seasoned.

With respect to planet Earth, there is no *ruin* on which to *ruminare*. Instead, there is only *recycling*....one big colossal "*interchange of state*" in which

- Continents come and continents go.
- Landscapes come and landscapes go
- Steeples come and steeples go
- Loved ones come and loved ones go
- Childhoods come and childhoods go
- Ministers come and ministers go
- And autumn leaves come and autumn leaves go

Today is May Day. The necessary loss of last year's autumn leaves are now giving rise to spring buds bursting with hope... as am I.

I hope you are too.

Amen.