

Sermon

What Goodbye Means c. Rev. Vail Weller

Sunday, June 19, 2011 at Unitarian Universalists of San Mateo, CA

It is hard to believe this day is here. Over the last weeks and months, I have had the chance to speak with you about my gratitude for serving here as your minister these last eight years, to reflect upon what I have seen and loved about this community and about you.

This morning, I want to offer you the hopes I have for you as you continue making your future. I want to offer you a charge. I want to offer you blessings. But first, I want to talk about what goodbye means.

It has been said that any loss can bring up all loss. This is to say that when someone in our life dies, or moves away, it reminds us of the feelings we have had about other losses along the way.

The departure of a minister can do this, too. You might be reminded, consciously or unconsciously, of other people who have “left” over the years, whether by physically moving away or perhaps leaving this life.

We are fortunate, in that we had opportunities to appreciate one another, and rituals to help us move into deeper territory. The gatherings that I have shared over these last weeks with you, and with the staff, have helped me come to terms with all that these 8 years have meant to me.

I have been able to see how much we have accomplished together, and have been able to acknowledge just how difficult some things were. I have been able to offer my tremendous gratitude for sharing this journey with you. It feels much better knowing that nothing was left unsaid. So remember that it is healing and helpful to acknowledge important relationships in your life, and to sift through and articulate what both the gifts and challenges have been. When facing goodbyes in your life, remember that rituals really help.

There are books for everything, so of course there is a little book written for ministers who are leaving a parish. In this book “Saying Goodbye” there is a point made, that has given me pause over the years whenever it has been called to mind.

The writer says that the way you choose to leave a party has a lot to say about how your death will be. Now while I do read my horoscope, and have learned interesting things from tarot readings, I am not a big believer in the crystal ball. I don’t want to know how I am going to die, or when. But I have been intrigued by the idea that how we leave can say a lot about us. *Do you sneak out the back door without talking to anyone? Do you find your hosts to say thank you? Do you stay too long?* There are lots of approaches and we each have our own.

For my own part, I have done all of these things. I certainly have stayed too long. I have slinked out. But most often, I find the people responsible for the gathering, and have said thank you to them, as well as to those with whom I spent the most significant time at the party, whether long-time companions or new friends.

I hope that when my time here in this life is done, I will have done the same. I want to show my appreciation to those who have made my life what it is by enriching it and blessing me. I don't want to leave anything unsaid.

Max Coots has written:

*Let nothing living slip through the fingers of the mind.
All of these are sacred things we will not, we cannot, find again.
Mark the time.*

Goodbyes are difficult because they bring us face to face with the truth that the only thing constant in life is change itself. When things are moving along fine, we are not happy to have the rhythm disrupted. We like things the way they are! Please, can't something remain the same?

This may feel particularly true in these times. We know we are living in an age of rapid transformation, expansion of knowledge, and technology. With so much changing all around us, why can't we just have something solid on which to rest? I would say we need to know that we do have something in which to rest. It is simply shaped differently. We need to rest in the knowledge that our lives serve something larger, and that there is a love - a love greater than we can ever know - that is holding us as the world changes around us. We also can embrace the fact that we are meant to grow and change. This is the natural cycle of things. This is evolution, a holy process.

I have so many hopes for you, moving forward. I hope that you will be strong in your identity as a spiritual community, with an understanding of what it means to be a people of faith.

I hope that you will continue to practice the Covenant of Right Relations. Human beings do not agree all of the time, and the way we communicate with each other especially when we disagree really can make the community healthy or stunt it in terrible ways. Dissention is an important, even necessary, element in human communities and democracies. But we are not here to worship bylaws or policies, or to lift up a few voices over others. We are here to transform ourselves and the world, growing ever more loving, ever more creative in the ways we serve the community, ever more powerful in our faith.

I hope that you will allow your annual financial pledge to truly reflect the meaning of this church and this faith in your life. I hope that you will continue on your way to becoming a tithing congregation, which means members and friends give 10% of their income to support the church. If the church had this level of support, there would be no budgetary issues, ever, and there would be no shortage of creative ministry this church could provide the larger world. But ultimately, this is not about the budget at all. It would be a profoundly spiritual transformation for *you*. Choosing to give generously of your blessings *first* would change your life's sense of purpose, and your priorities would be sharpened. I know you *can* do it; I hope you *will*.

I hope that you will continue to come on a weekly basis to church when you are in town, and when you travel, I hope you'll visit other UU churches. Your presence is what strengthens this community, and it makes a difference when you are here.

I hope that you will speak of your spiritual community to your friends, and invite them to come with you. We know that there are so many others who want a congregation just like this one, but have no idea that it exists.

I hope that you will look for people you don't know on Sunday mornings and seek them out to get to know them better. It is very, very intimidating to enter these doors on a Sunday morning when you don't know anyone here. And sometimes we get caught up with our friends and forget to look around to welcome those who are new. You are the hosts and hostesses here; it's your party. Welcome your guests.

I hope that you will see this congregation with an outsider's eyes, noticing the things that are precious about this place and being quick to offer appreciation and gratitude. I hope that you will offer your staff and leaders regular, meaningful, and extravagant praise. I hope that you will also constantly notice, and address, the things that need to be freshened and updated. Don't get so used to this place that you can't see it for what it is!

I hope that you will move, so that Unitarian Universalism will have an adequate space into which to grow to serve the needs of those thirsty souls here on the Peninsula and beyond.

I hope that you will grow in trust – trust in one another, trust in your elected, paid and called leadership, trust in our Unitarian Universalist Association, trust in the divine. So much is possible for this congregation in this time and in this place. This is because of the stellar quality of people who are attracted to this place, but also due to your leaders, your faith tradition, and your faith itself. As the bumper sticker that I saw last week reads: You are the miracle. Let yourself happen. You are the miracle. Let yourself happen, church!

I hope that you will continue to be willing to change, evolve, and grow. As I have said many times over these years: You are welcome as you are, but we don't expect you to remain as you are! The same is true in life. Throughout life, we will be changing, evolving, and growing. This is what life is for. This is what it is to be alive. This is what it means to be vibrant.

Thank you for the privilege of sharing these years with you. I have grown as a minister, and as a person, through having known and learned from you. I have loved you and have been blessed by your love in return. Thank you.

What goodbye means. Goodbye is a shortened version of "May God be with you". This reminds me of the idea of Namaste, the Sanskrit word used as greeting that says, "That which is divine in me bows to that which is divine in you."

May your best intention guide you. May the love which birthed this universe hold you. May light surround you. May your path of wholeness unfold before you. May God be with you.

Amen.

Ritual of Release

Worship Associate

When we installed you as our minister, we made promises to one another about how we would relate to one another, and spoke of what we hoped to become. Now as we send you off to a new form of ministry, we will release you from your covenant with us.

Board Representative

In your installation, we said:

We desire to install you as our minister. We recognize that this act symbolizes a covenant together. We would have you dwell among us preaching the truth in freedom and love. We would have you support Religious Education, knowing that this is a life-long endeavor. We would have you minister to us in times of joy as well as sorrow. We would have you demonstrate courage and commitment as well as balance and wholeness. We would have you lead us in a mutual quest toward a greater understanding of the religious life, as we seek to discover what it means to be Unitarian Universalists in this time, and in this place. We would have you join with us as we seek to make meaning, to learn new things, to grow out of our comfort zones, and to live our values in our daily lives.

Congregation

We release you from this covenant. We are grateful for this ministry we have shared.

Minister

In the installation service, you said:

We cherish our congregation for its historic achievements and for its efforts to keep abreast of changing times and changing human needs. We celebrate its devotion to freedom, its belief in the inherent worth and dignity of all people, its affirmation of reason, and its willingness to embrace mystery. We cherish the memory of those who founded, nurtured, and progressively transformed our existence as a congregation. We cherish our congregation for all that it now has to give: the friendships it makes possible, the loyalties and common endeavors it fosters, the imagination and creativity it stimulates, the comfort and solace it brings, the challenge and healing it makes possible, the quickened sense of conscience it engenders, the influence it exerts on children, youth, adults, and the wider community. We cherish our congregation also for what it may yet become through our united efforts.

May this church nourish you spiritually, and may it sustain you through the many seasons of your life. I charge you to show up, be present with love, share of yourselves generously, to practice the covenant of right relations, to risk blossoming, and to be led by the voice of the spirit. You are the miracle! Let yourself happen.

Congregation

May the religious community we continue to create call forth greater justice, ring with integrity, and shine the light of love into the world.

All

Amen.

Benediction by Vail Weller

As you go, may the spirit of life and love
and all things holy go with you.
May you know you are loved.
May you know your life as a gift,
And use it to bless the world.
Go with gratitude,
With respect for the web of life,
And with joy – JOY! – in the continuing journey.
Amen.