

FARE WELL, MY FAITHFUL FRIENDS!

First off, on this Father's Day, I want to introduce the spine and soul of my ministry, members of my San Diego family. (*have each one stand, as I name you*) They are surely my spiritual rod and staff, and they comfort, as well as goad me, upclose and personal. Russ and Misha Chapman and their three children are active in our Summit UU Fellowship in Santee, and Carolyn has been my life-mate for 36 years and co-minister for 24 years...flat-out, the finest pastoral leader I've ever known, and that isn't just homegrown bias, check it out with anyone who's drawn from her consistently compassionate ministry.

My father taught me that the people you love, ought to engage and enjoy one another, whenever possible. And today is "possible" So, here we all are: my family, whom I love, *meet* my San Dieguito Fellowship buddies whom I've grown to love as well!

During the past two years, I've unabashedly regaled you about my wife and children and grandkids, through various stories and tributes. And why? Because I never forget that I don't minister in a vacuum, alone; for without you San Dieguitans, I don't have a call; and without my family, I can't muster, let alone deliver, my best stuff.

The great 19th century theologian Soren Kierkegaard remarked that most parishioners think that God is the director of this play called "life", that the minister is a primary actor, and that the congregation is the audience. But Kierkegaard disagreed. "No," he said, "the congregants comprise the actors, God is the audience, and ministers are reminders of the lost lines!"

Well, that's pretty close to how I've seen my ministry, these 42 years. My primary job's been to lift up the duties and destinies, the dramatic lines if you will, that all of us tend to forget...lines that recall us to our best selves, lines that place us back on the path toward making this precious Creation more beautiful and just and loving.

So, let me offer a couple "lost lines" or farewell reminders today, then close with notes from my heart.

Reminder I

The older I get, the more I realize the question Who am I?, while important, isn't as crucial as its partner: "**Whose** am I? You see, the goal of the religious life isn't to become a self-sufficient creature. *Yes*, I belong to myself, but the scope of my belonging only starts there...as I stated earlier, I belong to my family and I've belonged to every congregation I've ever served; I belong to this nation as well as to the larger universe. By belonging, I don't mean enslaved, I mean gratefully connected and joyously beholden.

In short, our Unitarian Universalist version of religion is, at core, about belonging, in the fullest sense, to our neighbors, to the natural world, to the entire cosmos. Hence, in our 7th principle, we affirm and promote "respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part." Note that we humans are neither central nor insignificant, but rather integral *parts* of the web. We belong to web. We belong to something longer and larger and lovelier than our own egos and must never forget that.

Let me relate a poignant story to convey the depth and scope of our belonging. It's about the 17th century French Huguenots, a progressive Protestant sect, whose members, like those of so many other religious minorities of that time, our own Unitarian and Universalist ancestors included, were mercilessly persecuted by the established

church. The Huguenots were finally pressured, those who had not already been killed, to flee France altogether. The remaining Huguenots were jammed into a tiny boat and forced to row across the choppy and treacherous channel to safety in England.

As they began to row for their lives, it became painfully clear that there were just too many people in the small craft. Unless something was done, the boat would soon swamp, and all would perish beneath the cold waves. What did the group do? Draw lots and throw the losers overboard? Set upon the defenseless sick, young, and elderly and toss them to a watery death? Decide who were the “least” productive members of the community and force them out of the boat?

I suppose they could have chosen any of those so-called “rational” courses of action. But instead, these beleaguered Huguenots did something else, something far nobler. Without wailing or whining, the people in the boat decided they would take turns, several at a time, swimming alongside the craft. For the many hours of the crossing, as swimmers tired, others would quietly, willingly take their place in the numbing waters. And thus it was that this small boat and everyone who had sought refuge in it, survived the treacherous crossing.

This story of extraordinary compassion and bravery always moves me. For, by a bedrock moral commitment to the welfare of all, based on their conviction that they *belonged* to one another...these Huguenots arrived safely on the shores of England, and since then have prospered down the centuries. I could tell similar stories of our UU heritage as well, where sisters and brothers realized that they belonged not merely to themselves or merely to a chosen community, but indeed to the “Great Big Everything” as erstwhile Unitarian, Kurt Vonnegut called it.

I can't speak for you, but I'm mighty proud to claim the company of religious progressives who've gone before me on this high and holy adventure: persons like Margaret Fuller, Horace Mann, Clara Barton, Whitney Young and countless members of beloved memory who've steadfastly served our grand faith as San Dieguitans since 1959, and whom you'll be reading about in our new and invaluable history book, scheduled to arrive this Fall.

Never forget that we *belong* to the same tribe as Thomas Starr King, for whom the issue of slavery wasn't a mere abstraction for a Sunday sermon. King ruined his health to free the slaves and to save the state of California for the Union, dying at the age of 44.

And we belong to the same tribe as Dorothea Dix, for whom the dignity of every human being wasn't a "hot" idea for fellowship discussion. Rather Dix devoted her entire life to the mentally ill, especially those who were locked away in prison.

Yes, you and I belong to just that kind of free and responsible faith, replete with shameless agitators. What an honor and responsibility to hook up with such a magnificent band of freethinking mystics with hands! And, then, think of it, each of us gets to contribute our own special and stubborn ounces of love to this ongoing caravan.

So, my friends, the question of *who am I* was answered for the Huguenots and our religious forebears by raising the larger question *whose am I?* And they answered it affirmatively, because they knew they owed one another a terrible loyalty, and they willingly paid it.

So, I implore you: never begin or end a day of your life without asking yourself: How can *I* bless the world, to which *I* belong? It's the most basic of all religious questions, because it stretches us beyond our own hides and happiness.

Reminder II

My second reminder would encourage us to live fully *in* the present but not only *for* the present. Often when I awake in the morning, I'll silently offer a modest prayer, something like this: "Great Spirit of Life and Love, thank you for the gift of another unmerited flow of 24 hours. May I remain grounded on the earth while touching the sky. May I fully employ the one body and one mind with which I've been blessed. Today may I aspire to grow my soul while repairing the world. And may I never forget that I'm not called to be Moses or Lao Tzu, but the fullest version of Tom Owen-Towle possible."

I commend to you a similar kind of prayerful opening for each of your days.

And, moreover, I charge this entire congregation to become the best possible current edition of the UU Fellowship of San Dieguito, on this very glorious site, rather than competing with a congregation down the block or scrambling to return to long-gone days of yesteryear. For, as song writer John McCutcheon puts it: "there's no future in how it used to be!"

I challenge you to aspire to be a full-service Fellowship, balancing commitments to personal growth, social justice, and spiritual depth. With a vital music program that touches the inner soul and religious education that transforms the character and conduct of our younger companions, indeed all ages among us. And I also challenge you to

continually find creative ways to use your real estate wisely...welcoming any and all who might seek a safe haven in which to gather for comfort and challenge.

And as you grow in spiritual and physical size, I summon you to be brave enough to re-fashion your old buildings, as well as construct new ones—in short, dare to do something bold and adventurous with your unique site and given resources.

Every night may you go to sleep with a heart sufficiently serene and content, knowing that, individually and institutionally, San Dieguitans are doing your fair-share to heal this particular patch of the globe. Folks, remember that life's most precious moment is right now; the most precious interaction is your current one; and the most blessed community is the one you presently embody. Simply learn to love well all that lies smack dab in front of you!

Yes, live fully *in* the present, but not only *for* the present!

A seeker searched for years to know the secret of achievement and success in human life. One night in a dream a sage appeared bearing the answer to the secret. The sage said simply: "Stretch out your hand and reach what you can." "No, it can't be that simple," the seeker said. And the sage said softly: "You're right, you're right. It is something harder. It's this: stretch out your hand and reach what you *cannot*."

For nothing of worth we ever start is actually reached or finished—certainly that's the case with any shared ministry. I should know, because I've never finished any of my 42 years' worth of ministries; they all keep ending, somewhere right in the middle of our mission! So, my spiritual buddies: whether at home or work, in religion or life, we never quite complete the journey. We do our joyful best, then we must surrender our tasks and our bonds. Yes, every love relationship ends...unfinished, with more to be and do.

Along with Brother Buddha, we Unitarian Universalists confess that all things are impermanent, all things are imperfect, all things are incomplete.

So, my friends, you're not going to create a finished Fellowship here in Solana Beach, but that's still your mission, that's what will bring you abundant life, personally and spiritually...that's still why you exist: to move ever closer toward resembling a Beloved Community, here in North County.

Furthermore, this I know to be true: our shared ministry these two years, short as it's been, has been a most wonderful, inspiring adventure, certainly for me, hopefully for you as well. It's not the length *but* the strength of our bonds of our frail yet fierce love. In my wildest imagination, I never could have predicted the size of our achievements and aspirations, here at the Fellowship...born of our precious and yoked souls.

And although we're physically releasing one another today, I urge you to hold on to our blessed memories of shared affection and joy, laughter and anguish, challenge and accomplishment. We may be leaving lots behind, but we're taking so much with us...I know I am...your faces, your stories of heartache and hope, your courage, your love. Though our paths will now be separate, may our blended lives continue to brighten the world.

If all this sounds mushy or mystical, so be it. All I know is that what we've shared and shaped has been real and enduring...and no one can ever diminish or steal any bit of it from me, from you, from us.

One more thing, my friends; it's in large measure due to our beautiful bond, that you've inspired—yes, refired—me to keep on keeping on, you've kept my ministerial juices flowing, so I'll be laboring in the vineyards of South Orange County, in Mission Viejo

next year, where Irv Himmelblau and Livia Walsh worshipped for awhile, and where one of our former First Church members, Jan Meslin, spearheads the Social action mission.

I guess, I'm just not done trying to bless and be blessed by this zany, wondrous universe...and I hope you aren't either, because I'm biased, I think the world will prove a more just and joyful place, if there were more Unitarian Universalists daring to live out our principles.

I believe deeply in your grand adventure here at the Fellowship, in your larger hope, in your bigger vision, and I'll always remain your boisterous cheerleader, even from afar, even when you can't hear me. For you're inside me, and I'm inside you...forever, and nothing can change that.

So, for all that we've been together...thank you, thank you, thank you. And for all that lies ahead for the UU Fellowship of San Dieguito: yes, yes, yes!

Tom Owen-Towle
June 21, 2009