

1 July, 2007  
UU Fellowship San Dieguito

“TO KISS THE JOY”

As you see from today’s Readings, this is a sermon about saying, “Good bye.” Of course I planned the sermon because this is my last Sunday with you. I can hardly believe it has been six months! More than that, because I fully intend to retire from active ministry, this is my last sermon as an active Minister. In fact, as an active minister I’ve been to my last committee meeting and last board meeting. I’ve suffered no withdrawal symptoms!

However, I do not want to talk only about the goodbyes related to ministry. This is a season of goodbyes—the end of the school year for some children, the end of college or university for some young adults. Graduation ceremonies which are in reality commencements. As a religious community we’ve said, “goodbye” to four Congregants who died during these six months: Marty Aardema, Bill Chapman, George White and Aimee May.

I have noticed the significant part “goodbye” has in novels; maybe that’s because I’ve been thinking about this sermon. I recently read an old novel by John Hersey, *A Single Pebble*, published about 50 years ago. The book is filled with a variety of goodbyes. Just last week I finished a novel, *Stoner* recently re-published which is filled with transition even in what appears at first to be a stable, unchanging life. Those are only two instances of goodbyes from contemporary literature. Others include:

Goodbye to a young man who had been a prodigal, who came back home but could never quite fit in. Goodbye to a friend from childhood who was dying; goodbye to a young girl going off to college; and goodbye to a school friend whose parents were relocating. The most poignant “goodbye” I’ve read recently is in one of Kent Haruf’s stories—I think *Evensong*—about parents who had to say goodbye to their children who were being placed in foster care.

I need not belabor the point. This sermon is about saying goodbye; it is a sermon about endings, but also something about beginnings. After all, there will be no beginning without an ending.

There are, of course, some unhealthy ways to deal with goodbyes. I’ll just touch on these before moving on to what I believe to be more healthy “goodbyes.” One of the most unhealthy ways to deal with goodbye is denial—refusing to accept reality. I’ve known people who were absent when it came to ending relationships. They sometimes stayed away physically. I’ve seen this happen during the final days of a terminal illness, when a grown child couldn’t bear to be present at the death of a parent.

Another unhealthy way to say goodbye is to get it over with as quickly as possible. I can illustrate this with an experience from my youth. Our church young group once sang Christmas carols at a Veterans Hospital near my home town. After our program my friend and I decided to race back to the bus which we could

see in a parking lot across a dark lawn. While everyone else walked down the drive to the parking lot, we took off on a beeline across the lawn. About three-quarters of the way, running as fast as we could, we ran through a rose garden! My new corduroy pants were ripped to shreds, as were my legs!

That is one way some people say goodbye. They “run through the briars” trying to get the whole business over with as soon as possible. By the way, that is another form of avoidance. I’ve known ministers and congregations which never really took time for a proper goodbye, they just ended the relationship as quickly as possible, or allow the relationship to fizzle away.

Well, those are a couple of negative ways to say goodbye—denial or avoidance, and getting it over with as quickly as possible. However, as we face all of life’s goodbyes, there are some more positive, I think healthier, ways to say goodbye.

I begin with William Blake’s four lines from which the title of this sermon is taken. The little verse is the first Reading for today:

“He who binds to himself a joy  
Does the winged life destroy’  
But he who kisses the joy as it flies  
Lives in eternity’s sunrise.”

Blake is talking about a healthy way to deal with the parting of relationships. I understand these four lines were never published during Blake’s lifetime. They were found in manuscript form, published posthumously in collections of Blake’s

works. Of course he was writing before we came to understand that the generic “he” is not inclusive. For Blake, “He” meant all persons, female as well as male. Perhaps the best way to think of the poem in an inclusive way is the way the choir at last week’s General Assembly sang, alternating the pronouns:

“He who binds to himself a joy  
Does the winged life destroy;  
But she who kisses the joy as it flies  
Lives in eternity’s sunrise.”

What I understand Blake to be saying is that the relationships we enjoy—the sheer joy of those relationships—will be diminished if we try to hang on, like capturing a butterfly.

I believe this little poem by Blake comes from the way two different people respond to children at play. One nanny encourages children in their childlike innocence. The second nanny is cynical and encourages the children to “grow up” and be “realistic.”

Blake’s response to the second nurse is this little verse about enjoying but not holding butterflies. Don’t try to dominate life’s joys; don’t try to possess the beautiful in relationships. Rather, “kiss the joy as it flies...and live in eternity’s sunrise.”

By the way, “eternity” for Blake did not mean some “sweet by and by” of afterlife. Blake wrote about eternity which is part and parcel of life now. Jesus talked about “abundant life” possible now; and Blake echoes that sentiment by

talking about the joy of relationships which are part of life. Those relationships are not to be possessed or captured, but “kissed” as they fly by.

In his comments about Blake’s verse, Robert Raines in the second reading for today suggest there are two major points. The first point is the danger of possessiveness which will diminish the joy of relationships. The second, and possibly more essential point is the significance of change and continuity.

Saying “goodbye” is change, but change which can be part of continuity. Raines notes that change and continuity—namely endings and beginnings—affect all of life, including our personal development. “Only as the old me dies, can the new me...be born.” (Robert Raines, *To Kiss the Joy*, p.84)

The same emphasis on change and continuity is found in the third reading from Wendell Berry. This reading is also in the back of our Hymnbook:

“We clasp the hands of those that go before us,  
 And the hands of those who come after us.  
 We enter the little circle of each other’s arms  
 And the larger circle of lovers, whose hands are joined in a dance,  
 And the larger circle of all creatures,  
 Passing in and out of life, who move also in a dance,  
 To a music so subtle and vast that no ear hears it  
 Except in fragments.”

Berry is talking about the dance of endings and beginnings. This applies to congregations, including this one, as we remember that we are here because of the faithfulness of people who have gone before; and people in the future will be here as we are faithful. We are the present-day links in the chain of the life of The Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of San Dieguito.,

Both Robert Raines and Wendell Berry are pointing to the significant truth that there is a “hello” in every “goodbye.” This does not diminish goodbyes, simply that saying goodbye includes the possibility of a new or different kind of relationship. For example, when people are transferred in their work and have to relocate there can be the pain of endings, but relocation also brings the possibility of new and perhaps deeper relationships in a new place.

More specifically in terms of this Congregation, saying “goodbye” to Jim Grant, who has served six months as “fill-in” minister, means saying “Hello” to Rev. Tom Owen-Towle who will be here for a year. Then “goodbye” to Tom as you welcome a new Settled Minister.

I need not remind you that this Congregation has been and is going through times of transition. Besides “Kiss the joy” perhaps these words from Eric Hoffer, longshoreman and philosopher will be helpful: “In a time of change it is the learners who inherit the future. The learned usually find themselves equipped to live in a world that no longer exists.” Notice the difference between those who are in process of learning—the “learners”—and those who assume they have already learned.

I am intrigued by the happenstance that in this season of goodbyes, and more specifically on the day when you and I say farewell to one another, we have welcomed and dedicated Sophie Love. Ben and Elaine, take it from one whose

grandchildren are about your age, you will be amazed at how fast the years go. As the song says, “turn around and she’s a young girl going out of the door.”

Sophie’s dedication is also a reminder to this Congregation that you have the keen responsibility of caring for children as they transition from infant to child to youth to adult. In no time at all, Sophie will join young people like Isabelle Puckette and Sara Siscoe, going off to college. Your ministry with Sophie and other children will enrich their lives as you have enriched Sara and Isabelle’s life.

The point is that throughout life, we are in transition. The only thing that is permanent about life is impermanence, change. My hope is that all times of change for each of our lives, and more particularly these times of transition for this congregation will be times of learning.

I expect that my “goodbye” to ministry will be the beginning of new learnings. Indeed, I’ve already begun. I want to do some work related to human and civil rights for immigrants, which requires not only learning about immigration issues, but also learning Spanish.

You, too, will enjoy some new learnings. Rev. Tom Owen-Towle is an outstanding Minister. He brings depth and wisdom born of many years of ministry. You are in for a treat as Tom ministers with you here. Then, in just over a year, you will have a new Settled Minister who will bring unique gifts for

ministry. What an exciting time to be part of this Congregation. Very best wishes to you. Thank you for great memories of our time together. Shalom, Salaam, Amen and Blessed Be.

**Readings for the Service, July 1, 2007**

He who binds to himself a joy  
 Does the winged life destroy;  
 But he who kisses the joy as it flies  
 Lives in eternity's sunrise  
 William Blake, "Eternity"

"The continuity of our throbbing life is not permanence, but newness, the constant regeneration of the universe as of its smallest creatures, galaxies and grasshoppers.

" '...I am making all things new' is a long name, but it is one of the names of God. *I am making all things new* is the truth about the nature of the universe and its smallest creatures. It may be the most adequate still photo that we can take. It's the bubbling nucleus of the dream. It's the aching hope in your heart and mind. With the death of permanence is the birth of newness. As Nietzsche put it: 'Only where there are graves are there resurrections.' Only as the old order dies can the new order be born. Only as the old me dies, can the new me, and you be born."

Robert Raines, *To Kiss the Joy*, p.84

"We clasp the hands of those who go before us,  
 And the hands of those who come after us.  
 We enter the little circle of each other's arms  
 And the larger circle of lovers,  
 Whose hands are joined in a dance,  
 And the larger circle of all creatures,  
 Passing in and out of life, who move also in a dance,  
 To a music so subtle and vast that no ear hears it  
 Except in fragments." Wendell Berry



## **The Dedication of Soph**