

“A SERMON ABOUT ... ME”

Delivered at the First Parish in Wayland, Mass.,
on November 3, 2002
by the Rev. Ken Sawyer

[Every year at our church auction, people get a chance to bid on the right to assign a sermon topic. This year, the winning bidders, the team of Jack Peters and Bob Mainer, decided I should preach about myself.]

My parents met at the Columbia Graduate School of Social Work in New York. My mother was from the city, having grown up in Harlem. Later her folks would move to Westfield, New Jersey, where my mother and I spent the first months of my life, after I was born in Summit, New Jersey in 1944, while my father was serving in the Pacific with the Navy. He wouldn't meet me until I was almost one.

My father was born on Nantucket, where his mother's family, the Folgers, had long lived. But he grew up in Gardner, Massachusetts, in the midst of the towns where the Sawyer side of the family had lived for centuries: Lancaster, Hubbardston, Templeton, Berlin. My mother's ancestors lived mostly in central New Jersey. The Davis side of her family included several of the most prominent 19th-century ministers of the Seventh Day Baptist Church.

Almost all my ancestors on both sides had arrived from England by the middle of the 17th century, except my mother's mother's father, a free thinker who fled Saxony, and his Swiss-born wife. On my father's side I am directly descended from people named Ebenezer Warren, Peleg Folger, Aholiab Sawyer and his wife Bathsheba (Barrett).

After the Second World War ended, my parents and their first child (me) lived in Oakland, California, Lincoln, Nebraska (where my sister was born), both Champaign and Urbana, Illinois (where my other sister was born) before we moved back to New Jersey (where my brother, the youngest of us four, was born).

My father was a Community Chest or United Way director. Once we kids were older, my mother worked as a county child welfare supervisor, after a stint as the truant officer of the high school I attended. One of my sisters is a counselor, the other worked as a special ed teacher, both in Montana, and my brother is a fire fighter in Colorado. Nor are any of their spouses in lines of work the main rewards for which are monetary. It seems to be a family thing.

My parents live in Montana, too, having moved there in 1969. There was a job opening there for my father, and they could enjoy fishing, hiking, and other outdoor activities more easily than in New Jersey. Even back in Jersey, though, I often fished with my father, and every summer we all went camping in the Adirondacs.

I attended grade school in an inner suburb, Roselle Park, just outside the city of Elizabeth, New Jersey. It was a great place to be a kid, just a block and a half from the bus stop where one could get the bus into Elizabeth to go to the YMCA or the YMHA for swimming or boxing lessons. In the neighborhood we played softball in the street, or we simulated warfare, modern or wild Western, down in the vacant lot by the tracks.

Every Sunday, the six Sawyers went to the Unitarian Church in Summit, a good half-hour trip each way. In my own memory, I loved Sunday school, and the occasional Sunday I sat with my parents for the church service. Being in the only Unitarian family I knew of in Roselle Park, I was glad to know enough about my own religion to hold my own in debates with friends about theology, which we did have, sitting on the curb or stretched out on the lawn. Eventually, when I was 12, we moved to the Jersey shore and became active in a new Unitarian fellowship that met in places like the YMCA.

I had an aunt and uncle I spent time with, too. He taught me how to read the financial charts in the paper, how to convert numbers into other bases than ten, cool stuff like that.

As a family, we visited museums, zoos, and historical sites. Favorite places of mine included the science rooms at the Newark Museum, with working models of basic machine parts, like gears and cams, and rocks that glowed in the dark under special lights; the zoos in Philadelphia and Staten Island; the Museum of natural History in New York, and most of all, at that museum, the Hayden Planetarium.

I have always loved the night sky, and as a boy I thought a lot about it, the immensity of space, the allure of space travel. My sixth grade friends and I formed the RPRC, the Roselle Park Rocket Club. We designed rocket ships in which to travel to the moon and to Mars, and even had the atoll picked from which we would launch (Palmyra Island in the Pacific).

A year or two later, I worked on the mental exercise of trying to conceive of infinity, at which I eventually succeeded. These days, scientists think that the universe isn't infinite after all, but if they change their minds, I'm all set.

Just as important to me was the vastness of time, which, coupled with the vastness of space, made it obvious to me that human life was inconsequential to the universe. This comported nicely with my reverence for nature in all its rich

diversity, of which humans are just one of the animals that happened to happen for a while on one little planet.

You understand, at this point, in my early teens, I also had my mind on girls, sports, and rock and roll. Just the other day, I was thinking of names that one doesn't hear any more, and I realized that I still know all the lyrics to a song called "Blanche" by the Three Friends. I played cornet in the school band (having abandoned my earlier studies on the accordion). I was on the cross-country team. I started smoking; luckily, later I quit.

But I was also working on the bigger stuff – actually, the biggest stuff, the questions of the point of life, of how to live in a world where everything dies, where one will die oneself, where everything is contingent, lose-able in a heartbeat. I know many of you have had your own encounters with the soul's deepest quandary. For some reason, I decided to take it on at 15.

My father was a voracious reader, and there were always new books around the house. I remember reading a translation of Andre Gide's *The Immoralist* and deciding contemporary French fiction was nifty. So I was ready to read Albert Camus' novel, *The Stranger*, and that changed everything. By the time I was out of high school I'd read almost everything Camus wrote and whatever I could find about him.

He gave voice to my own beliefs, that the universe simply exists, devoid of any ultimate meaning or purpose; that human life, touched though it is with love and joy, is tragic; and that our best response is to offer what comfort and support we can to those who share our doomed situation, investing life with meaning and purpose by the humane values our actions defend.

At 58, I'm less morose and far less bitter about the situation than I was as a teen, but existentialism of the tender, everyday sort that Camus proposed, touched with his love of nature, remains the faith that informs and sustains me.

One of you asked what role God played in my thinking, then or since. Not much, especially now, but I think that will need another Sunday to say. I'll try to do that before long. In the meantime, in answer to another question, No, I don't believe in the Devil.

Anyway, to get back to Red Bank High School, none of this is nearly as important as something else that happened to me there. My sophomore year, the fall of 1959, I took a classmate, Carol Wolcott, to a dance at the boat club. Senior year, we started going steady, and we have been ever since, which is one of the three really great things that ever happened to me personally. After I graduated from college and she from nursing school, we were married in 1966 in the building that the Unitarian fellowship had put up by then. Two years later we had twin daughters, Rebecca and Amy, which is the second really great thing in

my life. By now, Carol and I have two grandchildren, Tucker and Tory, and there you have the third.

One of you had some questions for me about my time at Amherst College, like why I went there, which I did. At high school I had heard from an advisor that Amherst was particularly hard to get into, so when the admissions office encouraged me to apply for early acceptance, I did. And then they offered me a scholarship. It probably didn't hurt that my father had gone there, too.

Back in high school, I did especially well in math, and I thought that's what I would major in. As it turned out, I majored in English. By then I thought I would become a writer. Actually, though, I enjoyed my religion courses more. Mostly, I worked at the college radio station, a pretty good preparation for ministry, as I had to try to overcome my Jersey accent, diction, and too-rapid pace of delivery. And most important, one learns to respect the dictates of time.

I still wasn't heading for ministry, though (or I could have majored in religion). Instead, post-graduation and newly married, I headed into a year of basic training, first in the Peace Corps with Carol, and then in the Army, interspersed with manual labor. By the next fall I was enrolled at the Harvard Divinity School, though I still wasn't heading into ministry. It just wasn't clear what to do next, so Carol got a job as a nurse and I enjoyed studying religion. After all, a Harvard degree couldn't hurt. It was 1967 and things were fluid like that.

Until we realized that we were going to have a child, which to our great good fortune turned out to be two, although we wouldn't know that until after the first one was born. But the prospect of even one child made it worth considering what I was doing there at Harvard if there wasn't some job in the eventual offing.

By then I had realized that ministry might be just the job for me. It involved aspects of a lot of other interesting jobs all mixed together: a minister is something of a writer, an actor, a counselor, a manager, an activist, etc. You work with people, and I like people, but also alone, enough to satisfy one's introversion.

Mind you, the choice was much more odd than anyone would think today, when people seem eager to go into ministry. In the late '60s, it was widely assumed that churches were on their way out, curious remnants of some earlier age. I have heard other ministers of my age refer to the same fact, that telling any one that you were going into ministry was like saying you'd chosen a career in buggy whips.

But I had always liked churches, and what could happen in congregations. And I was lucky enough to begin my ministry with a great little group of folks at the First Church of Houlton, Maine, up on the Canadian border. I was there for

four years, which is as long as any of their ministers have stayed in their 172-year history. It's a place to begin, or to end up, and they know that and are great at being that kind of church, one that welcomes a neophyte like me, lets you stumble your way into some measure of competence.

In 1974, I was called to this congregation, and here I am still, as I hope to remain. I have a number of your questions I have yet to get to, and among them is one that wonders when I'm going to retire. The writer assures me she isn't urging me to do so soon. Rather, she says some people would welcome the assurance that I'm going to be around for a while. Given what's happened to my retirement account these last few years, I may be around so long, the Red Sox will win the World Series. Actually, though, not being terribly imaginative about such matters, I've tended to assume that I'll retire when Social Security kicks in at 67, assuming all goes well until then.

I will have a sabbatical or two by then, and one of you wondered what I'd do if there were no constraints. I'd travel, read, work on a booklet I've always thought I'd prepare about my predecessors here at First Parish, do some sculpting and drawing, catch up with things around the yard.

A few more questions and I'm done, you'll know all there is to know about me. One of you just said, I should tell you I get nervous before services. Well, of course I do. I think worship is an awesome thing, and it humbles me to be in some way the agent of its occurring.

Two of you asked about my spiritual practices. Like many ministers, for me the most obvious and powerful one is writing sermons [a kind of spiritual journaling]. Plus I garden, I walk, I ponder in silence. And I gather with you in worship. Does a person need a faith community to reach higher planes of spirituality, one of you wondered, and I don't know. I know my own spirit is enriched by being in this religious community – by its discussions, its social times, its special services, sad and happy alike, and here, now, on Sunday morning, in worship.

What the coolest gift I ever got, one of you asked. Let me exclude the really personal ones. That leaves my twelfth birthday, when my parents gave me a radio of my own, my siblings gave me Oreos and dill pickles, and I got to stay up late, eating Oreos and pickles, listening to Elvis Presley singing Heartbreak Hotel.

One of you asked about my typical work week, which includes committee meetings, counseling, staff meetings of various sorts, paper work, some denominational activities like my being on the board of the UU Urban Ministry in Boston, planning and giving weddings and memorial services, and getting ready for Sunday morning.

I guess I'm not going to get to every question, but I'll do one more in closing. Someone asked what the most challenging and fulfilling aspects of my ministry are. I think the most challenging is getting a sermon together. For generations it's been assumed that a sermon takes twenty hours to prepare, or about an hour for every minute of the sermon. But that includes an hour here, an hour there, spent reading, discussing, or reflecting over weeks, months, or years. The actual writing is more like 6-8 hours. But it's the hour or two before the writing begins that I think is the hardest part of the process, and the most challenging part of the profession – working up the audacity to put down words that you'll presume to say in public.

The most fulfilling part of ministry is the sense that one has been some help in the creation of a real good religious community, one where people are valued for themselves and encouraged toward their future growth, one where people find solace in sorrow and joy in their successes, one where the best values are recognized and passed on to children and lived out in the larger world.

Which is why I so delight in being part of this community with you.