

“FIRST PARISH AS RELIGIOUS HOME”

A Sermon by the Rev. Ken Sawyer
Given September 14, 2003
At the First Parish in Wayland, Massachusetts

Every now and then something – a story, a song, an image, an experience, an idea, or maybe just a word -- will sneak up and hit a person with startling emotional power. There are a few hymns we sometimes sing that are sure to make at least a few people cry. A simple act of kindness observed can suddenly fill a person with a inspiring sense of human good, or a meanness observed flood one with anger or despair over the other side of human nature. There are numerous accounts of how the sight of a sunset, a night sky, or the ocean gave people an instant awareness of the oneness of all existence, not as a mental affirmation but as an experienced reality.

Given the view ahead as you leave the church this September morn, across to the trees already turning color, I can't resist a church newsletter column by Clarke Dewey Wells, though I used it before, some September years ago.

“I suppose I should write something institutional or churchly or ethical, but my heart isn't in it. Where my heart is these days is between me and God, or whoever it is that turns the seasons and lays the sun across the trees with that sudden and terrible beauty.

“I've been taught all my life to believe that growing up meant to become less vulnerable, that getting overwhelmed by life is what happens when you are young, that the charge of visions, feelings and nameless longing gradually spends itself in the process of maturing, that as we get older life is less tearing, not as confusing, ecstatic, strange.

“I am here to testify to the opposite and to warn myself and others about what life has in store. I was driving back from Lowell yesterday afternoon on some country roads, and I simply had to stop the car near a stone fence and go through it for an hour.

“It had nothing to do with practical matters or politics or theology or vocation or marriage or my maturity or immaturity. It had to do with autumn trees against the blue and shattering light and where I am with living. I report it to you on the chance that you're as odd as I – that it all gets more intense, not less – and so that if you have to go through the same thing, like stopping your car for an hour, you will not feel crazy, at your age, being torn apart that way.”

The moments that I'm thinking of have a sort of suddenness and surprise, surprise not at the feeling as much as the depth of the feeling. You watch a sad scene in a movie and realize that something about this particular sad scene is bowling you over, or you find some joke to be so funny you find yourself remembering it and laughing again all day long.

Maybe it means nothing sometimes. But it's a curious thing to me, why particular things most deeply inspire or outrage or sadden or elate a person, for it is as if they pointed to the deepest, most elemental places in a person's psyche, to the core of his or her personality – and isn't that where religion resides, and the elements of our personal belief systems, amid what matters to us most?

Unitarian Universalist minister Tom Schade observes that “Our faith advances ... by paying attention to what makes us sigh, what makes us groan, what makes us tear up, what makes us shudder, what makes us gasp, what startles us and surprises us. What makes us ache.”

I notice those things about you all, as I stand up here preaching. There are stories I’ve told, typically ones of some small but startling act of human goodness, that have made people gasp. Other stories have made people cry, or sigh, or groan, maybe sometimes shudder. Laugh hard, too. That’s all part of what it means to be religious together, paying attention to what stirs us profoundly.

I try to notice that life in myself as well, to notice a song that chokes me up, a cartoon that deeply stirs my sympathy for others, an injustice that especially upsets me, a word that again and again has a power over me because it stirs something so deep inside me.

By now it should be obvious from the music that Polly so nicely selected for the morning that one word like that for me is “home,” and that power carries over into my sense of this community as our religious home.

Now let me say right off, I know that the word packs a powerful negative punch for some of you because your own home life was not pleasant or isn’t now, or because to you the word has connotations of perfection you can’t hope to achieve and therefore resent, or the word has an overly sentimental ring to it, or whatever. I probably can’t win you over, and I apologize for all the times I talk about this as our church home if that’s hard to hear.

But to me the notion of the church as home implies the safety, caring, and respect we would hope to have in our own homes. You could go on to note that in the homes we desire there are fun and beauty, comfort and shelter and other attributes we enjoy here as well. But I most have in mind a quality of human relationships, one that should exist in homes, one we aspire to here as well, relationships that are safe, caring, and respectful, as well as sympathetic and encouraging.

It’s the image that comes to my mind when I hear the phrase (I don’t know who first said it) that our goal should be to make the world more homelike. The goal, that is to say, of all people should be to a world where people treat each other with caring and respect. We have got a ways to go.

Even in this town, and probably in the other towns in which we live, people feel okay about treating each other abysmally, and in public, and sometimes in print since the paper feels fine about printing letters no matter how nasty. The notion that there are standards of conduct, like a good home would have, doesn’t seem to have caught on.

Maybe the world can’t be a home, or even a town, maybe there are too many competing interests, too few common assumptions. Even our homes at their best aren’t always places of safety, caring, and respect, though I like to think we come close. I like to think that about our church home, too, where humane relations aren’t just a secondary virtue, nice to have but not really the point – no, for us they are a big part of the point of it all, how we get along together.

Thomas Mikelson, the UU minister who co-wrote our reading this morning, once wrote that “The work of religious community is to create and preserve the safety and trust in which spiritual growth can occur.” Add in the caring, encouragement, sympathy, and respect, and you’ve got yourself a religious home. Which you do.

There's more to the story than that. This is the first of three Sundays which your ministerial team hopes will fit together. We are not just a community but one with particular beliefs, which Vera will deal with next week. And then Erin will talk about our being a religious community that meets where it does, in this place. But today I'm talking about community and the importance of how we treat each other.

Now mind you, I'm not saying we can't disagree. Really, I'm not, although I know some of you think I expect wall-to-wall niceness, and homes aren't like that, either, really. People are cranky sometimes, issues can be divisive. But as in our homes, we know we should control our crankiness, apologize when we don't, and deal with issues, no matter how hard, with mutual understanding and regard. And if we ascribe motives to each other, we'll pick the ones most honorable and decent.

Can we carry this congeniality too far? I don't know, but the question gives me an excuse to work in the one more reading that finally introduces some humor to the service, even though in quoting Robert Fulghum, after quoting Clarke Dewey Wells, Tom Schade, and Thomas Mikelson, I will have used up my quota of middle-aged, white, male, UU ministers for the entire fall.

In the book, *It Was on Fire When I Lay Down on It*, Fulghum writes, "'The great hugging plague' is how it's remembered now. Broke out in our church in the seventies – back in the days when loving everybody was the way to straighten the world out once and for all. The Sunday Morning Greeters Group started it. They decided to hug every single person who walked in the front door. Wanted to make everybody feel loved and welcome right away. They were just going to try it for a couple of Sundays and see how it went. But things got a little out of hand.

"Sometimes as many as six people were standing around the vestibule of the church on a Sunday morning waiting to hug anything that was moving. The Greeters Group even started wearing signs around their necks that said things like, DESIGNATED HUGGER, HUGGER AT LARGE, HUG ME, I'M HUMAN, and GOD LOVES A CHEERFUL HUGGER....

As I say, it got out of hand. It was said that when business was slow, the huggers hugged each other for practice. Some hugged a chair or two, and ... the janitor got hugged as he tried to clean up some spilled coffee. A stray dog strolled in and got hugged, as did several people who were looking for the Methodist church nearby and wandered in by mistake.... There was a rumor that some parishioners just came to be hugged, and went home without going to church. Hugging junkies. It became an epidemic. The great hugging plague.

"Not everybody wanted to be hugged. A somewhat quiet and reserved member of the congregation wrote a letter to me and the board of trustees. Said he had developed a hugging aversion....

"He had some constructive suggestions [like] a second entrance for people who just wanted to say 'hi' or shake hands when they came to church....

"It was while the board and I were working out a response to this concern that the first wave of free-wheeling kissing hit. Seems that somebody had been down to visit the Episcopal church and there was this exercise called the Kiss of Peace, where you held hands, sang the benediction, and then turned and kissed people on the cheek. Great idea! So our huggers were all for expanding the action and doing some handholding and peacekissing at the end of the service. Sure enough, they tried it one Sunday morning

without any warning. Well, it was a Sunday to remember, let me tell you. Guess we weren't quite ready for unprovoked kissing, for the sake of peace or anything else.

“The board of trustees talked about hugging and kissing a great deal more than they ever intended. It made trying to deal with a leaky chancel roof seem simple in comparison. And I felt the need to address the whole issue of public affection in one of those wishy-washy on-the-one-hand-and-then-on-the-other-hand sermons that left me as confused as the congregation. Aagghh.

“The seventies have come and gone. Aggressive affection is out of fashion. People in the church still hug each other, but they are more careful about it now.”

Well, I was here at First Parish in the seventies, and that particular plague passed us by. Not that we didn't hug, as we still do, but not so's I was ever tempted to preach on public affection, thank goodness, and I'd have done about as well as Fulghum, no doubt.

Instead, I get to preach about a different kind of affection, the kind that binds us to each other and to this church, the kind that guides how we behave, the kind that makes this our church home.