

Teachers' copy – with thanks for all you do - Ken

## **“TURN THE PAGE OVER – THERE’S MORE”**

A Sermon Given at the First Parish in Wayland, Massachusetts

On September 24, 2005

By the Rev. Ken Sawyer

[I plan to give the opening story extemporaneously. But it goes something like this: I was at a ministers' meeting recently. (I know I now have your rapt attention. Ooo – a story about a ministers' meeting – those are always wild!)

At some point mid-morning we broke up into groups of nine or ten to do an exercise, each group doing the same one, the instructions for which were printed out on a purple sheet of paper. Someone from each group was given a copy. The person who brought the sheet to our group was the person in charge of the whole production and so, rather than leading the small group as well, she asked me if I would, handing me the sheet, which was filled, top to bottom. It had opening words, a quote from an eminent Unitarian Universalist theologian, some ground rules, some questions we were to discuss, then a final quote and four lines at the bottom identified as the closing words.

No problem. The discussion went fine. As we neared the end of the ninety minutes we had, I stopped long enough for the group to decide on a time and place for our next meeting, because one of us was not going to stay for the afternoon session, and then I read the Closing Words. As I told you, they were four lines long. I should have saved a copy. Instead, here's a favorite benediction of mine from the back of the hymnal:

May the Love that overcomes all differences  
which heals all wounds,  
which puts to flight all fears,  
which reconciles all who are separated

...You see the problem. “That’s not a sentence,” I said out loud, but rather than dwell on the error I hastened to ad lib an ending. Amen.

At that point, a minister sitting across the circle from me said, “Turn the page over. There’s more.” And there was. The rest of the closing words were there, along with instructions to pick a time and place to meet next, which we had fortuitously done already, and a place to enter that information along with the names of the participants.

“Turn the page over. There’s more.” After she said that, another colleague said, “Well, there’s the sermon title.” And we laughed and laughed – I told you, ministers' meetings are wild.] But actually, it's true, thought I – that is a good title, which could be applied to our own lives, and to a lot of other things, including Unitarian Universalism, about which I am given to talking some Sunday early in the church year.

First, our own lives, which can seem at times to have reached the bottom of the page. Rabindranath Tagore once wrote, “I thought that my voyage had come to its end

at the last limit of my power – that the path before me was closed, that provisions were exhausted and the time come to take shelter in a silent obscurity.

“But,” in the terms of his theology, Tagore went on, “I find that thy will knows no end in me. And when old words die out on the tongue, new melodies break forth from the heart; and where the old tracks are lost, new country is revealed with its wonders.”

I used that quote at the sunrise service on Easter, 1982. It’s an Easter kind of a message, that life goes on, that even after apparent death life reasserts itself, even after Jesus’ death his message and his movement went on, even after the leaves fall in autumn, even after the bleak chill of winter, spring returns. Faith and nature turn the page over.

But of course life goes on reasserting itself in us and in the world in any season. Not in every single season, or on some reliable schedule, and often more by grace than by effort. We come to find ourselves on a new page, on tracks in a new country, one with wonders.

Oh yes, one with new chores, too. After all, that was what most of the page contained when I turned it over. And new perplexities, new disappointments, new failures, new losses. In fact, a lot of us would just as soon stay on the page we’re on, even if not all the sentences make sense. I live on a street that only has one point of entry. It is, therefore, a dead end street, and the town put up a sign last year that said so. Every time I enter my street, I pass the sign, Dead End. I want to add the words, “but nice.”

I know some people’s response to the song with which we began the service [“Come, Come, Whoever You Are”] is that they are not “lovers of leaving.” I can’t imagine the song would make much sense to many of those folks who have evacuated the Gulf Coast area this month.

But there do come times when a new page would be welcome, when we caravan not in despair but in hope, even love of the newness, the possibilities, the sense that’s there’s more, and that much of it will be welcome.

Last week’s sermon began, “The director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York recently said of one of the Museum’s supporters, David Rockefeller, no less, the former, long-time president of the museum’s Board, ‘He’s the lifeblood of the institution. Of course, his benefactions range from the hundred million he just pledged us to the great Cezanne “Boy on a Red Vest,” but his greatest gift to the museum, I think, is his constant belief that the future is going to be at least as interesting as the past. It’s amazing, to be ninety years old and that curious.’”

I noted then that there are a number of sermonic paths one could take from that quotation, including the one that I did take then, the idea of benefaction. But I said another could be “the idea that the future will be as interesting as the past.... Maybe another Sunday,” I said. That turned out to be today.

Before moving on to consider briefly that our own religious movement deserves a look at more than is on the first page, the most apparent, I will offer three quotations I came upon, going through my Easter file looking for the Tagore quotation, comments on life’s recurrent renewal in anyone’s story. The first from Bill Houff, a UU minister, who notes that

There are few things more difficult in life than starting over.  
And yet that is what life is about –

Being born ... and dying ... and being born again....

Each beginning is unique; we have never met it before,  
And initially we wonder how we will change to meet its challenges.

Beginnings are such a problem for some people  
That they decide to have no more.  
They have arrived; they may even try to go back.

But existence is not put together that way,  
And when we elect to allow no more beginnings  
We open the way for the dyings to take over.

Death and rebirth –  
... Each is contained in the other – rhythm and balance,  
Within which lies the wholeness of life.

When we accept the dyings, then the beginnings come easily.  
And where the beginnings are welcome  
Death, in truth, loses its sting.

Beginnings without end....

The Chinese poet and philosopher Wu Ming Fu wrote,

The seed that is to grow  
    must lose itself as seed;  
And they that creep  
    may graduate through  
chrysalis to wings

Wilt thou then, O mortal,  
    cling to husks which  
    falsely seem to you  
    [to be] the self?

And then these heartening words from the UU minister Ken Patton:

Dawn is forever  
    always breaking somewhere  
    on a line of earth.  
All permanent things  
    have an uneasy edge of change  
    a crack where the future is sprouting.  
Never believe it is night.  
Wait.

Dawn is forever.

Nature is forever turning the page.

And so can our religion, revealing more and more. In what time remains I want to talk about Unitarian Universalism, at the start of another church year at First Parish, 177 years after we took the Unitarian side in the theological dispute that split the 200-year-old Congregational Standing Order of churches in Massachusetts, with the conservatives here in what was then East Sudbury leaving to form their own Trinitarian Congregational Church.

Now you may not be surprised, sitting in this building nearly two centuries old, to hear that this congregation has been around for a good long while, and Unitarian or Unitarian Universalist almost as long as the building's been here. But maybe it is news that this religion of ours has a past that extended, one that stretches back in other countries twice as far and more.

It is sometime said that our churches do a good job of conveying a basic idea or two about the faith we practice, but not enough beyond that, so it can seem our message is, you can believe whatever you want here, period – and people can do that and stay home.

But there's more, much more. To anyone who sees just that and feels there's something missing I say, turn the page over. One way of doing that is attending long enough and often enough that the religion begins to unfold for you, or flesh out, whatever metaphor you prefer.

There's reading you can do as well, starting perhaps with the UU Pocket Guide, once you're ready to move beyond the fine set of pamphlets we have, the production of some of which was overseen by me, and one of which was written by First Parish member Deborah Marshall. The Pocket Guide will be the text of the monthly study group I'll be leading this year.

Or go to the UUA website: [uua.org](http://uua.org). It's a doorway to a huge amount of interesting, useful, and inspiring material.

A person might think, upon first learning of us, that we are light on theology. Which is true in the sense that we have always been, as it was said in the nineteenth century, a practical religion, one less concerned with doctrines than with deeds, less with eternal salvation in the next world than with justice, love, and peace in this one.

But if theology interests you, you can turn the page – we have produced some powerful thinking, from Francis David to William Ellery Channing and Theodore Parker to Charles Hartshorne and James Luther Adams to Paul Rasor and Thandeka.

A person might think at first, if they went to one of our churches outside New England, where the buildings are often of recent vintage, that ours is some movement that sprang up recently, like the Unification Church. Of course, we all know better than that. Turn the page over, we might say, there's not just a history on the other side, but a long and rich one.

If you are accustomed to a Catholic CCD or Protestant Sunday school or Hebrew school program, our religious education program could seem a bit lean, maybe deficient – but turn the page over -- a lot of time has been spent creating something different but just as valuable.

Our worship here may be so different from what a person grew up with or what they expected, they could think it casual, with little thought given to how all the elements of a service interact to create a spiritual experience for the congregation. But turn the page over – every moment has been thoughtfully considered, in a tradition that goes on evolving as it has for centuries, adapting tradition to new needs, new ways of accomplishing meaningful worship.

Social action? Some on first glance accuse us of being prone to every politically correct cause or position, typically with a liberal bent. But turn the page over – our positions are much more thought over, our actions much more carefully focused.

On page one it may seem like we are a bunch of local folks who happen to share some outlooks and who like to get together ... which is part of who we are, no doubt ... but turn the page over and you realize that we are part of a continental and international religious movement, diverse in its expression but united in common resolve from India to Romania to Great Britain to the Philippines, headquartered in this country in Boston.

So let us turn the page over and discover in Unitarian Universalism a religion as deep and wide as we need, just as we may turn the page over and discover life reasserting itself in our lives, enticing us into the future, with new melodies breaking forth from our hearts.

We turn the page over – and discover there's more.