

“LESSONS OF A SUMMER”

The Sermon at the First Parish in Wayland, Mass.

The Rev. Ken Sawyer

September 16, 2007

Here it is, the start of another church year at First Parish. It seems like it's time today for the sermon to say, How wonderful it is to be together again, What a fine congregation and fine religion we have here, and It's going to be a great year.

But this is my 34th start-of-the-new-church-year sermon, and I worry that if I give another variation of that sermon, I will run the risk of becoming predictable.

So instead, I thought I would revert to the grade school exercise, What I did this summer, or, better, What I learned since we were last together as a congregation.

You might think that I learned a lot about septic systems, landscaping, and painting, since that's what was going on around me for parts of the summer as this old meetinghouse got a fresh coat of paint, a new septic system, and much-altered surroundings.

Actually, though, what I mostly learned from all that was how dedicated, bright, and hard-working are some of the volunteers and staff here at First Parish, the people whom [Board chair] Malcolm Astley cited and celebrated last week, to whom go continuing admiration and gratitude.

What I'm going to talk about instead of paint and septic systems is floating, kiting, a book I read, a Sunday service I attended at a nearby megachurch, and some of the little learnings I got.

Although speaking of landscaping, I might mention my own new front lawn. Eighteen days ago (the number is significant), I had professionals come and lay down loam and seed. The very next day, the town of Wayland imposed a ban on outdoor watering except by hand.

You may think that doomed my new lawn, but no: It turns out that hand watering worked fine, and the grass is up. The lesson I offer from this is, just because conditions look difficult and unpromising, don't give up. Unfortunately, this seems to have also occurred to the New York Yankees.

I wonder if everyone has a thing or two or twelve that they have never been able to do, even though it seems that everyone else finds these things easy. I can quickly think of four, two of which I am going to talk about. The other two are: bending down and touching my toes, and blowing bubbles with bubble gum.

Erin has given me permission to cite the two that came to her mind: she can't sharpen a pencil or throw underhand. With a pencil, she just ends up feeding it to the sharpener. And she writes that, "The underhand throwing thing is especially traumatic as I was an all-district athlete in several sports in high school, a college b-ball recruit that ended up being captain of the varsity soccer team even though I had never played soccer before my freshman year and I can't pitch a wiffle ball to my niece or nephew! It's all so embarrassing."

I have long since learned that it is not wise to reveal uncommon limitations, because the natural response of many people is to assure you that the activity really is easy, and they tell you how to do it, as if you haven't been told the same thing over and over, taken the suggestions and failed. So I can tell you how to blow bubblegum bubbles, having been told repeatedly, even if I can not blow one.

Still, I have not tried in several decades. And today I am going to talk about two of those things of mine that I finally did accomplish.

Kite flying. Wasn't that a wonderful song Polly found to use as the introit ["The Kite Song" from the play, "You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown"]? I know just how Charlie Brown feels, struggling to get "this stupid kite...in the air somehow." As he says,

Millions of little kids do it ev'ry day.
They make a kite and --"poof" -- it's in the sky.
Leave it to me to have the one fool kite
Who likes to see a little kid cry.

I don't remember crying, but neither do I remember successes. In the song, Charlie Brown manages to get it
in the air!
Look at that
It's caught the breeze now,
It's past the trees now
With room to spare...
Oh --
What a beautiful sight.
And I'm not such a clumsy guy.
If I really try
I can really
Fly a ki[te.]

What a heartening song and message, and one we were happy to share with the children this morning ... although actually, the song does not end that way. No, Charlie Brown sings, "I can really / Fly a ki" and then the kite crashes.

I had a happier experience this summer, although not simply so, and I learned a few of those everyday lessons. The first and main one is the nice lesson that even things we assume we will never be able to do, sometimes it happens that we eventually can.

Obviously, this applies to a lot more serious matters than flying a kite, like the fears we think we will never overcome; the behavior or attitude we think we will never gain but want, or the ones we fear we will never lose but wish we could; or that thing that was so hard to do that we stopped trying years ago.

My grandchildren gave me this kite before Carol and I went on vacation. We rent a cottage on a point of land on an arm of the ocean. There is often a nice breeze, especially in the afternoon. So I put the kite together and did all those things that Charlie Brown sang about ... and it worked. I'm really not such a clumsy guy, or I wasn't just then.

But lesson two came in the following days when the breeze was less reliable. I now knew I could do this thing I always thought I couldn't, but not well enough with winds that kept shifting and fading. Not all our triumphs are total.

But I had a solution, or thought I did, because I knew another point of land only a few miles away where there was often a good, strong, reliable wind. And boy, that day it must have been about twenty miles an hour. That kite went right up and out and out, never once varying up or down or sideways, and if you held the thing that holds the rope just right the rope would fly off that thing, and did until all the rope was out and the kite was way, way off.

Now comes the lesson: Sometimes what we want turns out to be not such a good thing after all. First, there's the fact that getting the kite up and out had required no skill at all, so it really wasn't that much of a triumph. The clumsiest guy in the world could have pulled it off. But the larger problem was, now I had to get the kite back. Pulling against the afore-mentioned twenty-mile-an-hour wind. Rope does not fly back onto the thing that holds it; the thing has to be turned over and over and over. It took over fifteen minutes, in the course of which I got to thinking, there is a lesson in this. Success is not always a good thing.

Another thing I have never been able to do is float on my back in the water. And I think it would be a valuable skill, and it is presumably learnable. I can not resist sharing the poem "First Lesson" by the poet and Unitarian Philip Booth, although it is so thought-provoking and complex you may spend the rest of our time together today off in your own thoughts about the nature of life, parent-child relations, and maybe God. It is too good, though, not to let you have it in your head for the days when you may need it.

Lie back, daughter, let your head
 be tipped back in the cup of my hand.
 Gently, and I will hold you. Spread
 your arms wide, lie out on the stream
 and look high at the gulls. A dead-
 man's float is face down. You will dive
 and swim soon enough when this tidewater
 ebbs to the sea. Daughter believe
 me when you tire on the long thrash
 to your island, lie up, and survive.
 As you float now, where I held you
 and let go, remember when fear
 cramps your heart what I told you;
 lie gently and wide to the light-year
 stars, lie back, and the sea will hold you.

Actually, I did float on my back just fine in the Dead Sea. So I know it can be done, but I've never been able to do it elsewhere, even in the ocean. I try, but my feet go down.

I could have consulted an internet site like eHow or WikiHow, both of which do have instructions on how to float on your back, but I hadn't until this week. But over the

summer, in the cove where we stay, I realized that if I stayed perfectly calm and – here’s what I think was the key for me – I let my feet start to go down, they would only go down so far and I’d still be floating.

The goal I had set – floating right on top like some people do, or like I did in the Dead Sea – was one I’d keep failing at, and once my feet started down I’d panic or at least give up and go vertical. And it occurred to me in the moment when I didn’t do that and floated instead that maybe that panic or surrender was something I did with some other challenges in life, and that maybe other people did the same.

That was the main lesson – that and the importance of relaxing, of lying gently and wide -- although it also occurred to me that when I was young, people like my mother (an excellent swimmer) had probably taught me exactly right – maybe that’s why I finally tried and did it. Maybe lessons to the young sink into some place in their brains where they finally germinate, even if nearly a lifetime later.

Finally included in my summer learning are a book and a service at someone else’s church, Grace Chapel in Lexington, the closest we come around here – and maybe in all New England – to a megachurch, where today at their four services, youth groups, and Sunday school they expect to have about 3,000 people.

I have also been spending time online learning more about Grace Chapel and about the most mega of all the megachurches, the Lakewood church in Houston, and its senior minister, Joel Osteen, who is also a best-selling author, most famously of *Your Best Life Now: 7 Steps to Living to Your Full Potential*.

The seven steps are: “enlarge your vision, develop a healthy self-image, discover the power of your thoughts and words, let go of the past, find strength through adversity, live to give!, and choose to be happy.”

Some people think our UU seven principles are so innocuous that anyone could agree with them, although that is not so – and we think they constitute a religion, a set of values help guide our lives. But yes, most people could agree with them, just as most people could accept that all the goals Osteen recommends are sound and healthy ones. In fact, hundreds of thousands of people have bought his book, paid to attend one of his lectures, or been among the tens of thousands who show up on Sunday, so many that they bought the arena that used to house Houston’s professional basketball team.

Here’s the thing: these are not megachurches of the Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, or Oral Roberts sort that worry religious liberals like us, the ones associated with the political efforts of the religious right that Alex Gibber spoke of at Friday evening’s pot luck. They often avoid as best they can topics like abortion and homosexuality. They are not into contention.

They do have a conservative theology, but that’s not what these churches are about, and the message is far from the Calvinism of the fundamentalists. It is a happy message. God loves you and wants you to be happy and successful and part of a happy family, all available through accepting Jesus into your heart, studying the Bible, and coming to church to worship and to the many other activities.

Maybe it sounds about the same as the worrisome sort, but it’s not – and a look through the websites of really conservative Christians turns up condemnations of Osteen, especially on the matters of sin, salvation and the afterlife. Osteen is quoted as saying on the Larry King TV show, “I’m very careful about saying who would and wouldn’t go to

heaven. I don't know.... I believe here's what the Bible teaches and from the Christian faith this is what I believe. But I just think that only God will judge a person's heart.”

What it *is* like is other positive, uplifting, practical religious preachers and writers like Norman Vincent Peale in the last century and in the century before than, Henry Ward Beecher, subject of the biography *The Most Famous Man in America* by Debby Applegate, a book that will be the subject of the ministers’ study group to which Erin and I both belong.

So you will probably be hearing more about him before the fall is out, by one of us or the other. But Erin said it was okay for me to lift up this aspect of Beecher’s style today. Applegate concludes that Beecher, the best-known preacher of his day, “at his best ... represented what remains the most lovable and popular strain of American culture: incurable optimism, can-do enthusiasm, and open-minded, open-hearted pragmatism.” [p. 470]

In many ways, he co-opted the liberalism of the Unitarians and Universalists of his day in positing a loving God in contrast to the wrathful god of Calvinism, whose chief champion in the previous generation had been his own father.

Now I know that Grace Chapel still professes an atonement theology in which Jesus died to atone for our sins, and there was even one reference in one of the songs at the service I attended about his death finally appeasing a wrathful God. And they say they believe in the second coming of Christ ... but only “at God’s appointed time.” And the sermon I heard – delivered to a packed house, by the way, on Labor Day weekend – dealt with the question, “Did God write the Bible?”, the answer to which was pretty much, yes and no. God breathes through it, but it was written down and then copied and translated by people – basically acknowledging that it is not infallible, though inspired. The important thing is to let it help you live good lives, lives of service and love and joy.

I don’t think we – or the UU churches in Lexington – are in danger of losing members to Grace Chapel, even UUs of Christian belief. Downplayed or not, they accept enough about sin and salvation, atonement and redemption to keep our movements distinct.

But I was glad for the first-hand lesson that – until I hear scary stuff to the contrary – distinctly different though we may be, we need not think of the relationship as antagonistic. We both are trying to offer hope and encouragement and when needed comfort, each in our own way. Osteen says – outraging more conservative Christians – I have my way, I live and teach the religion I believe in deeply, but as to others being wrong, “I don’t know. I don’t know.”

They have their way, and apparently it helps them live their lives, because they keep coming back. And so do we. I’ll tell you, it is wonderful it is to be together again. What a fine congregation and fine religion we have here! It’s going to be a great year.