

A Sermon Delivered at the First Parish in Wayland
on November 7, 1999
by the Rev. Ken Sawyer

I have had Elizabeth Tarbox on my mind a lot this week. Elizabeth was the author of two meditation manuals published by the UUA, the first in 1993, when she was minister of our church in Middleboro, Mass., and the other five years later, by which time she had become minister of our church in Cohasset.

For the few decades of my ministry, it was my practice to devote a Sunday service almost every year to welcoming the meditation manual. Then, there was always just one each year, published in the early spring, in the manner of other denominations which published pamphlets of readings for Lent. In fact, I think ours were originally called Lenten manuals, and they had about forty selections. The Unitarians and the Universalists each began the practice in 1955, and then with merger, one booklet a year would come out, sometimes a collection of the works of one writer, sometimes an anthology. One anthology even has a piece by me.

That fact notwithstanding, the manuals have contained some of the best writing our denomination has produced in the last almost-half-century. There is a new book that contains one editor's favorites from all the manuals.

Sometime in the last decade, I stopped giving the same attention to each new one. In the last few years, there stopped being one but two each year, and shorter. Elizabeth Tarbox's first manual was called *Life Tides*, it was the only one published that year, and it had forty selections. Her second, *Evening Tide*, was one of the two shorter manuals published last year.

A more important change had taken place between the two books, though, and one more important than her move from Middleboro to Cohasset. The change is reflected in the titles of her manuals: first *Life Tides*, then *Evening Tide*. Between books she learned that she was fatally ill. This past week, she died. She was 55, four months older than me.

So as I say, she has been on my mind a lot this week. But I had been thinking of her even before the news of her death arrived. I had been thinking about her writings, in thinking about this service and the readings I might use.

I knew what the service was going to be about. It wasn't going to be about any theological or philosophical conundrum, or any social or churchly issue, or any topic of ethical or moral import. I knew the service was going to have another sort of pastoral intention: to offer a time of peace and restoration, of spiritual nurturance mostly of the quieting, calming sort.

One place to look for such readings is in our meditation manuals, and those by Elizabeth Tarbox were on my mind to consult. I have used them before, a time or two, in particular the meditation called "The Changing Season," which was our morning's meditation this morning and one time before. It is from the first collection, as was our first reading, written before Elizabeth realized that the autumn of her own life was so near the killing frost.

Throughout her ministry, she was among our best writers, not to mention that her passions happen to coincide with some of my own. She loved the seashore and the bird life there, and rare among published authors, she loved crows, as do I, but though I know not every does. There's a piece on crows in both books, and some day when we have the time, I'll read them here.

But today I bring her memory to mind to recall her skill at describing not crows, but two things: nature's power to instill and maintain inner peace, and also the power of a supporting communal context, a church in particular, to contribute to the same end.

I could have picked a dozen great examples of how well she can evoke the peace that nature can provide to any of us who seek it well. I chose

ARIZONA SUNRISE

That were from the first book. She retains her naturalist's eye and craft of expression in the second book, but it comes in the midst of deeper struggles.

REVERY ON AN AUGUST AFTERNOON

It is also in the second book we find the chilling scene Elizabeth pictures in a piece called "Polar Vision," where in effect she gives up her petitionary praying, accepts the world as it is, cold as it may be, and finds a stunning resolution.

POLAR VISION

But even more often, she writes not just of the sustaining throb of one's own beating heart, but of the peace and power we get from others. This is also from the second book:

THANKS TO THE FRIENDLY, FAMILIAR

She had used gulls before, in the first book.

STORM WATCH

“If we stay together...” It is a theme that echoes through Elizabeth's writings. I will close with two readings from the second book, the first her affirmation of the life of the church, called ,

A STORY OF FAITH

And finally, her little essay, “Gratitude Is Not Enough.” She mentions sutures and a requiem, which is as close as she comes to giving any hint in the whole second book that most of the pieces were written as she was growing ever sicker, her death growing ever closer.

It is possible that she wrote this piece before the diagnosis was given. She does speak of having good health. But the piece is full of subtleties, even some bitter irony. It may be that she meant that she had health enough to be grateful for, just being alive.

GRATITUDE IS NOT ENOUGH

For conveying so poignantly the peace to be found in nature – even if the company in our solitude is only a gull, or only our own warm heart's beating -- and the support to be found in a community of faith like our own, we remember Elizabeth Tarbox in gratitude and pain.

I hope that her words of inspiration have brought thought “to comfort or challenge you; and may you go from here renewed and ready to answer the call of your destiny, to jump back into the tide of life once more.” [“High Tide, Low Tide”]