

THE END IS WHERE WE START FROM

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Sermon

I was reading a short story the other day by Joy Kogawa titled, *Obasan*. It is about a girl with her family that was sent from Vancouver, BC, to a small town a hundred miles inland during the year after the attack on Pearl Harbor, 1949. On the train, the narrator looks about and thinks, "We are leaving the coast - rain, cloud, mist - an air overlaid with weeping [and] not one of us on this journey returns home again." Of course, many who went to the internment camps returned to the same cities, perhaps even the same neighborhoods they were taken from. But those places were changed so that they were not "home" again, at least not in the same way. The statement clearly reflects the feeling of that moment, but it made me think of how we are often on a journey like that in our lives. Age, illness, career changes, a death of someone near us, or our own deaths. Perhaps it is the cruelty and injustice of others that forces us on a journey from what we knew, from comfort and security into new situations. Tides and time are always working change in us, and, to quote the writer Thomas Wolfe, *You Can't Go Home Again*. It seems as though life is all about endings and loss.

However, as the child of this church, T.S. Eliot put it, "to make an end is to make a beginning, the end is where we start from." Or, if you don't want to be so literary, the electronica band Daft Punk put it this way, in their album *Random Access Memories*, "Like the legend of the Phoenix, All ends with beginnings/ What ."(“Get Lucky”) in a sense, then, Nothing ever utterly ends. My formal ministry with this church will end, but our relatedness, and even relationships will continue, however vastly changed. Even if no one ever tells a Coyote story in this sanctuary again, Coyote will still be slinking around, listening for the sound of my flute, and playing tricks. That is because Coyote is the foolish craftiness in each of us.

The fact is, even when it seems as though an ending is a complete severance, there is continuity. My UU elder colleague, Walter Royal Jones, who was central in helping craft our current UUA statement of principles and sources once said, "There is no destruction so complete that nothing remains after." Perhaps there is only ashes, or dust, but the quality of dust and ashes is unique to that which was burned or pulverized, the elements remain, ready to be recalled.

More than that, there is another element. Roy Jones asserted, because everything in the present depends upon everything of the past for its origin and being, we find evidence in every moment of something so enduring that we could call it eternal. There is a quality of being, I have felt it, I have seen it, I know it. A quality of being reveals something that transcends time, that is curled in each moment of time, that can yield up to us a taste of timeless wholeness, if we simply awaken to it. If we simply let it extend and deepen our own being.

But, by invoking transcendence, I am not trying to diminish or eliminate loss and grief. I am trying to help you be present with grief and move through it, because, Grief is a difficult discipline. Did you know that Rev. Eliot, wrote a book titled "The Discipline of Sorrow?" He

wrote on grieving as a spiritual challenge. He knew sorrow, loss and deep grief. But, he asked, where does it take us that train, carrying us from home? When something is gone we feel the loss.

Sometimes, even things that were irritating or bad can be grieved. I remember a friend of mine who complained to me about his neighbor who went out every night, about 11:00 and called his cat in, every night. And, he had this high pitched sound he used to call the cat. It was irritating, to say the least. But when the neighbor moved away, and he was so relieved. But my friend found the quiet to be strange. Pleasant to be sure, but still odd. For a while he missed the irritation.

Buddhist teachers will point out that this is the essence of *tanha*, the craving, both aversion and desire, that causes suffering. We cling, and grasp and try to hold on to the things we like and to push away the things we don't like. And if we can be present with these things, in the timelessness of the moment, that is the essence of liberation. But this is part of so-called Western teaching as well. In my current neighborhood, the "groovy Grove," there is a Shakespeare quote from *The Winter's Tale*. It comes from Paulina, a friend of the unwise king Leontes, who tells him of all his sins. When the king becomes grieved at what he has done, she tells him: "What's gone and what's past help, should be past grief." Let go, she says, don't grieve the past if you can no longer fix or change it, let it go. But what should be and what is are two different things.

In fact, there is always a potential for change, for help. Paulina does not want her friend stuck in grief, but she does want him to change. She continues to remind King Leontes of his errors for the rest of the play. She wants him to remember and regret, because change, because help, is still possible. The life and love and daughter he had, have all ended and gone, but their end is where he must start from, to remake himself and to remake the world, by the power available to all. This is the Unitarian Universalist message, this is the truth that we have always held to, and we have always held up for all to see, in our theologies, Christian and otherwise. We affirm that progress towards wholeness and holiness, is always possible. That is why today the choir sang songs of praise for the holy. That is what we struggle toward, not getting stuck in loss, not getting stuck in grief.

One key way that this possibility or power arises and endures is through memory. In Eliot's poem, "Little Gidding," named for a town in England, he elaborates on this:

"This is the use of memory:/ For liberation - not less of love, / but expanding of love beyond desire, / and so liberation / From the future as well as the past."

"History" he says, "may be servitude, History may be freedom."

We can be trapped in grief and remembrance of what is past and gone. I remember hearing a story of interviews about this church. We are rightly proud of our past, of William and Abby Eliot and all that was accomplished in their time. And, I think it was when you were in the search for me, members were interviewed about our accomplishments. We wanted to know "what have we accomplished, where are we now, and what would we like to accomplish." So,

we asked each other, "How are we doing as a church?" One of our elders considered this question for a bit and made the interviewer laugh by saying, "Well, we have not founded any new Universities lately." Memory can become a trap. Remembrance can be servitude, and enslave us to old standards, old ways. Or, if we remember well, we can use memories to liberate us, to show us how to forge a new future.

Abby and William struggled against racism and slavery in their day. We can grieve for their limits, or their failures, or cling to their successes. Their memory can empower us to move forward into new hopes and possibilities. Just like it was with Coyote in the story this morning. He literally "recalls" those who were destroyed by the monster of death. In his remembering they come to him, and thus he is able to bring them back to life. They can cross over easily, as the First People always do. But the more important result from the ending of the first part of that story, is that there arise new stories, told by new people who are scattered across the face of the earth. As I travel into the West, I take with me the gifts of your love expanded in memory beyond my particular desires for this church. You have changed me, these years have helped me grow stronger and more deep. Your faces and lives will go with me. In these I carry seeds of experience that will engender new realities and shape new relationships.

T.S. Eliot, in *Little Gidding*, continues:

"See, now they vanish, / The faces and places, / with the self which, as it could, loved them." He is speaking of endings, but then the next line is, "They vanish...To become renewed, transfigured, in another pattern."

Always there is sorrow, loss and grief. Always there is suffering, or as Eliot and so many others would say, always there is sin. Eliot quotes the late medieval mystic, Julian of Norwich, "Sin is Behovely," she says, it is necessary. But it is not something that keeps us stuck in grief. They mystic and the poet both say, in Universalist spirit, "All shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well," for the past past is transfigured, "By the purification of the motive / In the ground of our beseeching."

So, I beseech you today to use this ending as a beginning; a moment to start again the work of change and help, to work for love and justice.

Today is Pride Parade day and some of us will be part of that. Protests and days of solidarity are essential. It was good to see how many gathered at the transgender remembrance space, in the Grove, just south of Manchester, to affirm and uplift each other as a response to violent hatred. It is encouraging to join with others in saying "We will not be dragged down by this gun violence. We will not accept the thousands of gun deaths each year as normal or good. We will continue to strive for wholeness, understanding and well being." But more important are the daily tasks, the changes in living that are needed to undo the divisions and break the binary prisons created by our labels.

Keep opening up possibilities. Keep finding new ways to bring more dignity and honor, compassion and sympathetic joy into human living. Do this to honor the connection we have, continue the work we have shared. Yes, continue to fight against racism guided by the healing

spirit of wholeness. This work may take lifetimes, but notice all the ways we have reconnected to this work as individuals and as a congregation. For example, The Don't Shoot coalition gathered here, in the hall just below us, to craft the legislation that would give teeth to laws already on the books, to undo bias in policing. We work so that our system of justice will be more truly equitable, compassionate and fair.

There are other ways of using memory and awareness to create wholeness. The other day, my wife and I went to the Tavern of Fine Arts? It is only a mile from here. We have been there often. It is an intimate performance space that hosts an incredible diversity of performers. On this evening, there was an African American man, singing. He was a talented local guy who liked to cover Stevie Wonder songs, among other things. As it turns out, most of his close friends and supporters are also black people. As a result, Amy and I were the only white people there. We stayed, and really enjoyed the evening. The other people there seemed happy too. But, to me, the fact that social segregation is practiced so automatically and unconsciously everywhere in this city, by most people, was painfully obvious. So, I encourage you to find those unconscious barriers, everywhere, and step over them, just to represent the spirit of wholeness. I encourage you, as a regular religious practice, to find the little ways to undo racism, as well as joining in big movements and actions.

And, keep fighting poverty. One of the great resources for doing this work is the Holy Ground Collaborative. Most of you are not engaged in that shared work. But where else can you connect with Jews and Baptists, Episcopalians, Presbyterians and Christian Scientists to undo poverty. Right now a group is trying to create a micro-lending program so that low income people in this area of the city will have an alternative to "Pay-Day loans." You can be part of that. You can join in supporting the food pantry, the hot meals, and the Operation Food Search program that happens in July. This is work we can use to make this world a better place, remembering always those who have done this good work here in the past, and then moving forward into a future of new possibilities and new accomplishments.

We have done so many good things together. We have shared some very sad times and events together. One accomplishment we completed together was to renew and reorganize the governance of this church. Governance does not make us good. But, it is the way we organize, coordinate and ground our goodness and good actions. Take for example our Behavioral Covenant. There was a fine moment in a meeting a month ago when we were discussing differences of opinion, and mistakes in communication. We were creating a shared understanding of a past and present mess. In the midst of this, someone spoke about moving forward and used the words of our Covenant saying, we should forgive each other when we make mistakes. That is when the magic happens, when words and structures and decisions become actions that serve Love and Justice.

There are too many people to name who have been my partners in this work. But I want to state, simply, the names of all who have been President of the Board during these past few years, because they represent you all. When I was called to be your minister, Kathy Wire was

president. Following her was Jama Dodson, then Sue Herzberg, then Dianne Fawcett, then Janet Oriatti, and then Tiffany Sewell. And now Tiffany has decided to do it again. I am immensely grateful that she is continuing as President. She will help create continuity as you remember the past and create a new beginning.

So, at this moment, as we are riding this train into the future, knowing that none of us will ever come back to this place, this moment in time, let us acknowledge all that is ending. And then, let us begin to imagine new possibilities, new friends a renewed feeling of home. We can do this easily, because, the end is where we start from.

Benediction

I am sad to be leaving you. Some of you I have gotten to know wonderfully well. Others of you I am just getting to know, and others I do not know at all. But, that does not make my leaving any less sad. Those of you who know me well know that I am fond of a particular piece of British literature. So, for my closing benediction I have chosen some of the last words of Gandalf. He said: "This is your realm, and the heart of the greater realm that shall be. [An] Age of the world is ended, and the new age is begun; and it is your task to order its beginning and to preserve what must be preserved. For though much has been saved, much must now pass away; [So], here at last, dear friends, on the shores of the Sea [of Time] comes the end of our fellowship in Mid[-America; well he said Middle Earth, but..]. Go in peace! I will not say: do not weep; for not all tears are an evil."