

L'esprit de l'escalier

preached by Rev. Colin Bossen, August 5, 2012

As our second reading this morning suggests, we are in the process of saying goodbye. Today is my second to last sermon as your settled minister. Since I am almost out the door, I want to take time this morning to reflect on some of things that I would have said to you if we had more time together.

The title of this morning's sermon is in French. Roughly translated it reads the spirit of the stairs. The spirit of the stairs is a philosophical term that originated with Denis Diderot, an 18th century philosopher whose accomplishments include serving as an editor of the first encyclopedia. The term signifies those things that we think to say after a conversation has ended.

Our order of service this morning was, itself, the victim of a sort of spirit of the stairs. When Shirley printed it up I thought I would include the portion of Diderot's philosophical dialogue "The Paradox of Acting" where he first describes the spirit of the stairs. Then on Friday morning I had a better idea and, instead, offered you Langston Hughes's "A Dream Deferred."

The true spirit of the stairs does not allow for such gentle corrections. The term originated when Diderot attended a dinner party with several of his literary friends. During the party Diderot told what he thought was a clever story. One of his colleagues was not impressed. He insulted Diderot's story with such force that Diderot was rendered speechless. It was only after Diderot left the party that he thought of what he should have said. The party had taken place in a large upper level Paris apartment. It could only be reached by climbing many flights of stairs. Diderot figured out what he should have said to his interlocutor when he reached the bottom of the stairwell. By then it was too late. He could not walk up the stairs, return to the party and offer his witticism without making a fool of himself.

I imagine that many of you have been in similar situations. I know I have. At a party, in a debate or in argument someone says something that catches me off guard. I cannot think of the right response. It is only afterwards, sometimes weeks afterwards, that I think of the perfect retort.

The dynamic of the spirit of the stairs is such that this is not really my spirit of the stairs sermon. That sermon is the one I will compose in my head on August 13th as I fly out of Cleveland Hopkins. Instead, this morning's sermon is the one that I am preaching so that my real spirit of the stairs sermon will be short.

Leaving a congregation is a little like dying. Mark Morrison-Reed warns us ministers that "we must die to the congregation so that ministry might live." We clergy, he admonishes, "are not indispensable, and each of us will be replaced." As many of you know, after I leave next Sunday I will break off contact with the congregation until you have a new settled minister. Some of you have complained to me about this and asked me if it is really necessary. It is something that comes from the professional code of ethics of Unitarian Universalist ministers. The reasoning behind it is simple, the ministry of the congregation is more than the ministry of a particular minister. The ministry is about the relationship you have with each other, not the relationship you have with me. If I did not temporarily sever my ties with you this might not become apparent. I need to die to the

congregation so that your relationship with each other and with your new minister does not become distorted. The last thing I would like you to be is slanted towards the past rather than tilted towards the future.

I have had a fair amount of experience with death. Since I came to the Society in September 2007 eighteen members or friends of the congregation have died. That is a significant number given the size of the congregation. I have colleagues who serve two or three hundred member congregations who have buried less people in the same amount of time. I once asked Christine Neilson, who until recently served a congregation about two thirds size of ours, how many members and friends she had buried during her ten years ministry. "Two," she said.

All of those memorial services, late night visits to the hospital and meetings with bereaved family members have taught me that it is best to leave no unfinished business when you die. Once we die our unfinished business stands little chance of completion. In a sermon preached shortly before he died, Forrest Church warned, "I have... counseled dying congregants whose death sentence seemed to mark the bitter end of a long, unsuccessful struggle to make peace with themselves, their family, or God... At times like that 'If only' are the two saddest words in the English language."

I would like to avoid including "if only" in my memories of the Unitarian Universalist Society of Cleveland. So, in order to avoid unfinished business let me tell you a few things and you give some glimpses of sermons I should have preached but did not.

It would have been good if I had done a sermon on grief and letting go. As I just mentioned, I have conducted close to twenty memorial services for members or friends of the Society. All of those services were for people who were affiliated with congregation before my family and I arrived in Cleveland. In 2005, the year Peggy Clason retired, the congregation had 59 members. That means that almost a full third of the people who were members or friends of the Society in 2005 have died in the past five years.

That is close to an entire generation of the congregation. Indeed, when I started the Society still had three living charter members. Now we have none. There are only eight members left in the congregation who were part of the Society when it was located at 82nd and Euclid. When I began there were not quite twenty.

That is a significant transition in congregational life. And it is one that we have probably not marked as well as we could have. Moments in the Society's history are passing from being preserved in living memory to residing in tattered papers in the archives. I could have built my sermon around Kenneth Rexroth's magnificent poem of grief "For Eli Jacobson." It begins:

There are few of us now, soon
There will be none. We were comrades
Together, we believed we
Would see with our own eyes the new
World where man was no longer
Wolf to man, but men and women
Were all brothers and lovers
Together. We will not see it.

I get the sense that the early days of the Society were a period of vibrancy and hope. Audrey Altschuld, who died this past week, used to talk with me about how beautiful the Society's old building was. It had four Tiffany windows and four windows made by Tiffany's students or competitors.

Other members have told me about how much fun they had when they first joined the congregation in the fifties or sixties. The Society was founded, as an early church history asserts, to be "a Unitarian church that will attract persons of various cultural, economic and racial backgrounds--in short a truly cosmopolitan membership."

In its early years, I think, the Society managed to live into that mission. Photographs from the ministry of Dennis Kuby, who served from 1962 to 1967, portray a multiracial congregation. The Plain Dealer once described the Society as the first integrated congregation in Cleveland. The majority of membership back then may have been white but a significant minority was made up of people of color. The congregation was larger too. It peaked around 450 members before the congregational conflict of the late sixties and early seventies decimated its ranks.

In my sermon, I would have talked about the trauma of living with a lost vision and the difficulty of being part of a dwindling group of members from a particular era. I would have encouraged the congregation to organize events to hear the stories from the Society's members from that era--stories about congregation's involvement in an underground abortion hotline and participation in the anti-war, early environmental and civil rights movements.

I would have suggested that one set of questions before you as a religious community is: how do you minister to those members who joined during an earlier era of congregational life? How do you honor the era that is passing while at the same time live into a different vision? How do you help people recover from the disappointment of failure?

It is not up to me to answer those questions. So let me move onto the next unpreached sermon. It would have been about generational conflict. One of the wonderful things about the Society is that despite our heavy losses over the past few years the congregation has managed to grow. What's more, the congregation has managed to grow with one of the most difficult demographics for religious communities to attract and retain, young adults under the age of thirty five.

The challenge of this growth has been that members of the younger generations have different attitudes towards religious life than members of either the Baby Boom or Post-War generations. Most of them, unlike earlier generations, do not come to Unitarian Universalism as refugees from our other religious traditions. Instead, they come from unchurched backgrounds.

In addition, members of these younger generations have a different comfort level with change and attitudes towards finances than previous generations. The world that they know has always been rapidly changing. They never knew the illusion of stability that was the 1950s. And despite the current economic downturn, most of them have not known the economic desperation of the Great Depression.

In my sermon I would have outlined these generational differences. And then I would have suggested that despite them, all of the members of this congregation are united by a shared love for this religious community. And I would have reminded you of an important reality of congregational polity, you all own the congregation equally. It does not matter if you joined last week or fifty years ago, each of your votes count the same at congregational meetings. By both acknowledging the generational differences and uplifting the love you share for this religious community I think you can resolve some of your generational tension.

Speaking of shared love, one thing that I wish I had done more often was tell you, from the pulpit, that I love you. I know that there have been some complaints from members that I can be somewhat emotionally distant. Perhaps, sharing that sentiment more openly from the pulpit would have mitigated the complaints. Perhaps not. Either way, the truth is that I love this congregation and I am going to miss you quite a bit.

This might be why I am attracted to Elizabeth Spire's poem "Waving Goodbye." There's something about the last stanza that seems somehow related to the process of ending a ministerial relationship:

We looked to the future. Our future
selves. You stood dead center
in the globe and raised your hand to stop
the scene, your palm enlarging
until it dwarfed the tallest trees.
Then waving goodbye, we walked,
as a joke, backward and away,
farther and farther away--
the globe still gazing on us--
leaving ourselves behind
to live forever in that silver room,
to watch and spy on lovers like ourselves.

In this stanza there's an echo of William Faulkner's famous words, "The past is never dead. It's not even past." I am thinking of both the poem and Faulkner's wisdom because I am about to become part of this congregation's history. Maybe I should have preached to you a sermon about how we must honor, and sometimes atone for, our history but never let ourselves be held prisoner by it. There's truth in the truism that every day is a new one. The teaching from Buddhism that I find most appealing is that we can only really live in the present moment, everything else--past and future--is an illusion. As the Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh would advise us, "Life is available only in the present moment."

A focus on living in the present is not a plea for ahistoricalism. We are shaped by what has come before us and we will shape what comes after us. However, we cannot change the past and the future is yet to happen. So, what is most important is always the now. For it is only in the now that we can seek reconciliation for past misdeeds and make choices that will impact our future.

This reflection leads me to another sermon that I might have preached for you. I even have a title for it, "It's Getting Hot in Here." The hot and dry summer has had me thinking a lot about climate

change these past few months. If I was returning to your pulpit in the autumn I almost certainly would preach a series of sermons on climate change and the human created ecological catastrophe that we find ourselves in the midst of. In a recent article in Rolling Stone, Bill McKibben warns, "we're losing the fight [against climate change], badly and quickly--losing it because, most of all, we remain in denial about the peril human civilization is in."

There are at least two things that liberal religious communities like ours should be doing in the face of climate change. The unique thing that we can offer is a place for people to grieve what we, as a human species, have done to the planet. If you want to put it in theological terms, and use a word that I am not altogether comfortable with, you could say that liberal religious communities can be a place where we acknowledge the sins against the natural world that we have committed as an industrialized society. However you feel about the term, something that distinguishes liberal religious communities like ours from many other religious communities is that we can talk about the problems of the world without resorting to metaphysical abstractions. Instead of hoping that God will save us or believing that human wickedness and ignorance is due to some theological stain on our collective character, we can acknowledge human culpability for climate change. And in that acknowledgment we can begin to work to mitigate it.

This brings me to the other thing that communities like ours should be doing in the face of climate change. We should be sites for experimenting with a less fossil fuel dependent lifestyle. First Church in Shaker Heights has installed enough solar panels to meet 80% of their electricity needs. The Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Wayne County, in Wooster, was the first religious community in the country to have Leed Gold certification. Our congregation has a community garden. These are all good starting points but there is much more we could do.

And truthfully, there is much more that I could say. One of the problems with the spirit of the stairs, in my experience, is that it always fills me with more words than I can reasonably fit into a conversation. Or in this morning's case, into a sermon. Near the end of his sermon on unfinished business, Forrest Church says, "Whenever our time comes, all our live end in the middle of the story. There is ongoing business left unfinished. We leave the stage before discovering how the story will turn out."

It is impossible to really take care of all our unfinished business. No matter how much I try to put into this sermon I will always I think I should have said more, or different things. We still have one more Sunday together, but I know that even after my last sermon I will still be thinking about what I could have said differently and remembering that there was something I forgot to tell you. Such is the human condition. Such is the spirit of the stairs. The challenge is not, as Langston Hughes says in "A Dream Deferred," to let those things "fester like a sore." Instead, we have to learn to let go. Rather than cling to visions of unreachable perfection, we are challenged to do our best and then accept our limits.

Ultimately this is what is meant by taking care of unfinished business. It is to know that when our time comes, when our tenure ends, we tried our best and accepted the world as it came. It is to learn the wisdom of Reinhold Neibuhr's "Serenity Prayer":

God grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot change;

courage to change the things I can;
and wisdom to know the difference.

Let me close now not with those words by Neibuhr but another confession of love. I love you. May you be blessed in your future ministry. Amen.