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“When the Way Closes”

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“We must take THE NO of the way that closes and find the guidance it has to offer – and take the yes of the way that opens and respond with the yes of our lives.”

“As often happens on the spiritual journey, we have arrived at the heart of a paradox: each time a door closes, the rest of the world opens up. All we need to do is stop pounding on the door that just closed, turn around – which puts the door behind us – and welcome the largeness of life that now lies open to our souls. The door that closed kept us from entering a room, but what now lies before us is the rest of reality.”

Parker Palmer, Quaker author, teacher, and
Leader in Higher Education
In Let Your Life Speak

Good morning. I am glad to be with you today. I have been here several months now, have gotten to know some of you, and had the privilege of working closely with some others. I am excited about this opportunity for us to get to know each other better.

My sermon this morning is about a theme that I think many of you will be able to relate to in some way, as well as, tell part of my story and introduce you to some of the work I'm doing here as your student minister. I want to talk with you about those times in our lives when things don't turn out as we hope, a time when something we were deeply invested in, something that we thought helped form our identity didn't work out. In the quotes read earlier this morning Parker Palmer referred to them as when the way closes or when the door closes. Maybe the person we wanted to have a relationship with didn't want the same thing, or the relationship we dreamed of spending the rest of our lives in began to unravel, and no matter how hard we tried, it continued to lose its life affirming power. Or maybe this happened in a job or career that we thought defined us. For some realizing a belief system or faith tradition no longer works can have the same disturbing effect. There are many ways the door can close on us.

When this happens our lives are turned upside down. We begin to doubt who we are and how we fit into the world. We can go into a depression that takes us a while to find our way out. These losses might take us by surprise. Or maybe we had a nagging awareness of storms on the horizon that we chose to ignore or didn't know how to respond to. Whatever the case, it can take a while to get our feet back under us.

This happened to me as I entered my thirties. I had gone to an evangelical church all my life. In my childhood an older couple took my brothers and me to their Baptist church. I say older, they seemed older to me then. Thinking about it now I realize they were probably the same age I am today. My Mom didn't take us because she was preoccupied raising seven children. Nor did she talk about religious issues at home.

This couple lived several farms over from us and went out of their way to pick us up as often as we liked. The wife was one of my Sunday School teachers. Her name was Mabel. I loved going to church and being with them. I felt safe and cradled in a love and peace that I didn't always experience in my home because of the affects of alcoholism. I remember once when she invited us to her home to "wander" in her back woods which she called the wilderness so we would know what the Hebrews felt like "wandering in the wilderness".

At church stories about how Jesus loved the children and told the people to take care of the widows and orphans comforted me. My father had died when I was three and even though my mother had remarried I still identified with those stories. That church and that couple reached out to us in ways that Jesus taught and I felt part of a beloved community.

I responded to that warmth and inclusion by joining the church when I was nine years old during vacation bible school. Vacation bible school is a big thing in the evangelical tradition. Stories about missionaries were an important part of the experience. We kids were encouraged to follow their example and were given many opportunities to make a commitment to do so. For many Southern Baptists, the role of missionary was the most prestigious ministry position but more importantly for me it was the only role model I had for a woman in ministry. Later that week I "devoted my life to becoming a missionary".

As an adolescent I had doubts about some of the doctrines I was being taught. I tried to leave the church for a couple of years but missed the spiritual community that gathered together to respond in awe to the mystery of life and encouraged us to strive towards our highest selves. Of course I wouldn't have been able to use those words back then, but I missed something, and returned to church right before leaving for college.

Continuing doubts were offset by my growing understanding of the Baptist belief of the "priesthood of the believer". This meant every individual had the right to use their own intellect to interpret the Bible. And you have to understand Southern Baptists were much more moderate back then, even on things like abortion. President Jimmy Carter's integrity and work towards human rights were an inspiration to me and an example of Southern Baptists at their best back then.

My young adult life spanning the seventies and early eighties was an exciting and turbulent time to be a woman. Feminist thoughts and ideas were impacting all segments of society, including evangelical communities, especially on college campuses. Mixed messages about women and ministry were given in the Christian organization in which I participated on campus. I received leadership training but then experienced limitations in the roles I was encouraged to take. We call it hitting a glass ceiling today. Thoughts about my calling and future ministry continued. My studies included psychology, sociology, and child development as preparation for work with women and children which is what female missionaries usually did.

On campus I met and married a young man who also felt called to ministry. Those raised Baptist may recall that women who felt called into ministry usually became missionaries or wives of ministers. Now I had it covered on both fronts.

After college when my husband started working in campus ministry, similar to what Alice is doing, I worked along side him.

Campus ministry was a liberal place to be. When feminist theologians began to write about women and ministry, I read those that made their way into the evangelical community. I began to hear of women becoming Baptist ministers. This made me wonder about the possibility of co-ministering with my husband. When he made plans to go to seminary I applied as well. Friends and family did not understand this decision and did not offer much encouragement.

My year at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary was a troubled time not only for me but for the seminary and the denomination as a whole. Even though the seminary was liberal, and had even hired a female theology professor, the Southern Baptist denomination itself was becoming more and more fundamental. As the fundamentalists began taking more control, I became discouraged. After only one year my husband decided for his own reasons to leave seminary and pursue another career. When Southern Baptists voted that summer they did not support ordaining women, I withdrew from seminary heartbroken and confused. It felt like a door was closing on a calling I had felt for over twenty years.

Bereavement studies offer us insights into the process of coping with losses of all kinds, including losses such as mine. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross's studies popularized the idea that we go through phases in our recovery from bereavement. Some of you may recognize the acronym DABDA, used to remind us of the following stages: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Although this was written for patients coping with terminal illness it gave us easily understood concepts with which to begin to talk about our reactions to our own particular grief.

Other studies written especially for the bereaved, discussed the stages slightly differently. They identified shock and numbness as the initial stage followed by intense grief and overwhelming feelings and finally moving into a stage of recommitment to life.

As time has gone on we have learned we don't go through stages as much as have our own unique reactions with our own unique timing. But these studies helped us begin to identify and talk about our own feelings whether they be numbness, confusion, anxiety, fear, guilt, rage, or depression, to name just a few.

With my particular loss, numbness set in after leaving seminary. I went back to work full-time unable to consider any new direction for months. A period of confusion and disorganization followed and I struggled to discern, "If I am not going to be the wife of a minister or a missionary who am I going to be?" I went to pastoral psychotherapy and to career change workshops. As is often the case in grieving, earlier losses began to haunt me and I had to cope with them as well. Eventually I enrolled in a counseling training

program, but remained unsure whether this new profession would meet my deep need to be involved in a vocation in a spiritual community.

All these losses caused me to question my beliefs. A couple of weeks ago Jim talked with us in his sermon “The Pilgrimage of Faith,” about how trauma can cause us to leave an innocent faith and enter a searching faith. As Southern Baptists continued to become more fundamental I questioned my ability to stay in the tradition. Leaving an innocent faith can bring about deep grief for some and I felt bereft. This faith had held me and shaped me since early childhood. Not able to leave immediately I tried to make liberal Baptist churches work. Some might recognize this as bargaining.

My search led me to investigate other liberal denominations. Being a self motivated learner, I found books by liberal theologians such as Matthew Fox and Marcus Borg and consumed them. But the churches themselves were never as liberal as the books. Some of you may be able to relate to this disappointing search. Great confusion about my identity ensued. I had lost my grounding: the way had closed to my vocational identity, my church community, and my faith. It was a lonely and confusing time.

I eventually found support to navigate these transitions and to develop a new life affirming belief system in several different twelve step programs. One was Al-Anon for Adult Children of Alcoholics, a program for people who have been affected by a family member’s alcoholism. I learned about these programs during my counseling training. Twelve step programs helped me to find a new concept of God or Higher Power, one that could support me in dealing with my life. The group encourages people to discard religious ideas that no longer work for them. For some this means letting go of things they were taught as children and finding their Higher Power in the power of the group or the power of the process. Some find a life giving force in a Higher Power such as the *Spirit of Life* that we sing about in UU churches.

As can sometimes happen when going through a major loss my marriage did not survive. The group supported me through the transitions of becoming single, dating, and marrying again. It also gave me a role-model for including spirituality in counseling and I began to pursue my psychotherapy license and started working in addiction treatment programs.

But I still missed church, the intergenerational community. 12 step groups don’t have kids. I also missed standing together in awe before the mystery of the universe and the call to social justice. My new husband, Dave, supported me in another search and eventually suggested Unitarian Universalism. We visited a fellowship in 1999 and I fell in love immediately with the tradition. I loved the way the spiritual traditions of all cultures are honored which was demonstrated in the first service we attended by Native American story telling and the Calling of the Four Directions. The second service was a Youth led Service where for some reason one of the youth slid across the front stage. I can’t remember why and I am not recommending it here. Any tradition that had all that and allowed its youth to be that expressive seemed like a good place to me and I quickly became involved in different leadership roles. While attending a leadership camp I was

encouraged to consider going back to seminary which I did with the goal of sorting out my theological beliefs and my old ministerial calling.

One of my seminary classes, Recovery from Bereavement, offered new insight into the grief recovery process with which I identified. It emphasized recovery has two major focuses, the first focus being the managing of all the various feelings. The second focus emphasized the importance of reconstructing meaning after the loss. After major loss, life as we have known it will never be the same, it has changed. Those going through this are thrown into a kind of identity crisis. When it is the loss of a loved one we have to navigate a new identity different from the one we had with our loved one. When it is the loss of a job or a career a new work self must be identified. It can be confusing and disorienting and takes some time to reconstruct this new meaning. We must take what we know about ourselves from before the loss, discover what is true about us now, and reconstruct a new self from the pieces.

Going back to the quote that I read earlier, Parker Palmer encourages us in this process. He encourages us to “take THE NO of the way that closes and find the guidance it has to offer – and take the yes of the way that opens and respond with the yes of our lives.” His second quote recognizes it is not always easy to turn from that door that has just closed and to turn around, and face the largeness of the life that now lies before us. Some times it takes a while to stop pounding on that door. It took me a while to be able to leave the life I had known, to turn around, and embrace all the opportunities in a life I had yet to discover.

I’ve shared some of the places I found support for this process. When the way closes for you where will you find the resources you need to turn from what you have known and face the largeness of a life that you do not know yet as the new person you are becoming? These resources can be found in a variety of places. Perhaps you will find what you need with family and friends. Maybe you will want to start some new activity such as meditation, yoga, or an exercise program to get in touch with internal resources you already possess. Some may want to seek professional support with a psychotherapist, a hospice worker, or grief support group.

First Church provides a number of resources as well. The Pastoral Care Advisory Group trains mature caring persons as Lay Pastoral Care Associates to be listening companions for those going through major losses or transitions. These Lay Pastoral Care Associates work closely with the ministers and expand the support our ministerial staff is able to offer. You can find them at the trencher after services. The Caring Ministry team also supports a Grief and Loss Support Group which Marla English, a long term member, and I are co-leading. The Life Span Religious Education Department periodically offers courses that can support you if you are going through a theological transition, which many coming to UU do. I hope to offer Owning Your Religious Past next semester if there is enough interest. This is just to mention a few. I encourage you to look through what First Church has to offer to see if there is something that can help you if you are going through a transition.

This morning I have shared with you a time in my life when things did not go as I had hoped they would. I have shared how the door closed on my profession, my faith, and my marriage. I have also shared how I found the resources to stop pounding on the door that had closed, to turn around, and welcome the largeness of life that lay before me, with the yes of my life. I hope you too will find the resources you need to say yes to the rest of your life.

Namaste and blessed be.