

July 16, 2006

“An Opening Farewell”

Rev. Julie Kain

First of all I want to say a big thank you to everyone who has come out this morning braving the weather to come out here. Usually, in San Diego if you hear that it is raining, but I really do appreciate your presence despite the heat, feel free to fan yourselves. I've been thinking that it's kind of like Pensacola is sending me this warm welcome with a little bit of thunder storm and showers thrown in even before I've left. Sometimes it's fun to think that everything that happens is all about me. But probably our weather today is more related to global warming, something that actually affects all of us here on the planet and future generations. But I'm not here to talk about that, worthy topic that it is.

I'm here instead to talk about goodbyes. I'm here to talk about endings and beginnings. Today I feel it important to acknowledge that among the many changes at First Church, one change in the making is my departure from this place, this ministry, this particular UU community. But, remember what I just said, it's not all about me. So, I'm also here to acknowledge that every single person in this room, whether it's your first time in this church or maybe even your first time to a UU church, every single person in this room has already experienced in life significant endings and beginnings. This is a topic we can all relate to.

There are lots of different ways for us to reflect on the course of our lives and the meanings we have made from it all. Some people believe everything happens for a reason that, there truly is a deep and personal reason for all that transpires in our lives. Others believe that we can create our own reality, that through the intentions of our hearts and our minds we can actually manifest the lives that we lead on the physical plane. And still there are others of us who believe that there is really no larger plan at all, it's really just the degree to which we are projecting our perceptions upon reality. You've probably heard somebody say, "It's random anyway so why make a big deal about it. Let's not make any extra mumbo jumbo about life and let's just take it for face value." Do you recognize yourself in any of these beliefs, perhaps in one of them or all of them at one time or another? I do.

But back to this thing about endings and beginnings, what I've noticed is that it makes a pretty big difference if either of these kinds of milestones in our lives are a result of our own decisions or as a result of circumstances predominantly beyond our control. It's a strange thing about life that we tend to think in either/or and so often it really is both/and, a strange mix of the two. I consider myself a good Humanist. I truly believe that each of us has an inherent power to shape our lives in an intentional way regardless of the circumstances in which we are placed. Yes, we will always have internal and external limitations placed upon what we are able to accomplish, but fundamentally as a result of our simple human nature which is both a miracle and a mystery we actually can make choices in our lives that can serve as a rudder that can influence the direction of the course our lives take into the future horizon.

It's easy, really easy to forget that at times. It's easy to feel totally at the mercy of the current flow of our lives and temporarily be unable to see that we do have real options and potential choices yet available to us. Sometimes it takes thinking outside of the box of what has become so thoroughly familiar to us to see the true options and choices that we have. I'm here to tell you that there are always more options than one. It's only a matter of being open to them and allowing them to become a reality. Take for example the options each of us have when we are faced with saying goodbye in our lives to a time or a place or a person or perhaps a much loved time in our lives, such as our health, or even a part of ourselves.

Saying goodbye regardless of how we choose or don't choose to do it is a very tender place to be in; it's a numinous, in between place. It can feel awkward and disorienting. Because it is fundamentally in between, it is very difficult to find a place to stand. In order not to lose our balance completely, which certainly does happen from time to time, it is best to be gentle with ourselves and each other as we are navigating transitions in our lives. We can allow ourselves to go a little slower and it can really help considerably if we can find it within ourselves to accept some of the emotions we might experience that are quite natural but usually we try to avoid at all costs.

So even though we may need to squirm in our seats for a couple minutes, let's be brave and look at a few of those pesky emotions that accompany us through our transitions. These are the emotions associated with the stages of grief so masterfully articulated in the work of Elizabeth Kubler-Ross and her studies on death and dying. Saying goodbye, any major goodbye, is like a small death in our lives and so these same emotions apply only in varying intensities. Have you ever heard of the first one: denial? No not the river in Egypt. We say, "No, this really isn't happening at all and hey even if it is, doesn't have anything to do with me. No siree Bob, I am not affected. So, I think I'll just stay over here, keeping my mind on my own business, and waiting until all of this commotion passes. Nothing's really changed so what's the big deal?" Denial is a sneaking thing. Sometimes we don't even know we are doing it. That is actually the point.

How hard can it be just to take time and ask oneself how you really feel about it? Well, in fact, it can be really hard because we don't always know what we are getting ourselves into and sometimes it gets quite messy. We start discovering that we are feeling maybe angry, or annoyed, or even depressed; all very natural during times of transition. The anger and annoyance factors often catch us out of the blue, we are going along on our way and BOOM somebody does something or something happens and suddenly we are instantly furious as if we have some kind of short fuse and usually the little things that don't bother us at all turn into much larger disturbances in our lives. Often times we try to figure it out but really we're not even quite sure what's making us so angry. This is natural. At times of loss we feel vulnerable and hurt and often disappointed. We get angry about life and sometimes at other people and even things. Have you ever broken something when you're angry and it feels really good? If we make a little space for that anger to just be what it is and not to feed it by ignoring it or

letting it take control of everything, if we just make a space for the natural anger that is a part of transitions, we can actually feel better about acknowledging the loss, acknowledging that something has actually deeply affected us.

How true it is the old saying, we don't know what we have until it's gone. Losses, transitions, endings, and beginnings are all times in which we become painfully aware of the very underpinnings of our lives, those key things that often we grow to take for granted over time. They may be the things that we've grown to cherish in our lives without even realizing it. They suddenly become things that we don't want to live without. We may also become aware of the accumulation of disappointments that we have carried and acquired along the way. These are the dreams, the desires, and expectations that never came to the light of day in the ways that we had hoped. When we say goodbye in this life we are not only saying goodbye to the things we experienced good or bad, we are also saying goodbye to the things that never had a chance to happen as we wished. They are the missed opportunities, the compromises, large and small, that we make as life goes along.

Yes, there is actually a lot at stake if we are actually willing to stop and ask ourselves "what's going on with me?" in this process of transition. It can take a lot of energy, physical, mental, and emotional, to attend to the challenges of growth that are presented to us as major changes that are happening in our lives. Again, how important it is to simply be gentle with ourselves. Have you noticed that if you are not just feeling kind of depressed and down you might be doing this other thing, replaying things over and over and over in your head wondering what if I had done this or if that person had done that, think that maybe we could still try this or we never tried that. This is what the trained health professionals call 'bargaining'. We try to work and rework the situation until frankly we just wear ourselves out and we eventually do have to move on to other things.

Hopefully, eventually, perhaps, inevitably in healthy circumstances, we are able to move on. We find a way to come to terms with all this upheaval in our lives and somehow, perhaps even magically, we are ready to take that next step and let what has happened be, leave it alone. Yes, our lives have changed, but now it's time for future possibilities, future excitements, and the present is, well, not really so bad either. Yes, we have blessings, many blessings, to count. We've made it through some hard times and here we are. We can see a blue sky, a beautiful flower, a silly dog that makes us laugh, the fresh smell of rain, the songs of a bird. Yes, life is still good despite the chaos we go through. When I was growing up we moved a lot.

I went to as many schools as there are grade levels from first through high school and I suppose this actually helped me to get to know people in different places quite quickly and then I was quite familiar with the process of moving on. One thing that I know is that I developed the ability to take my sense of home with me wherever I have gone. But still I have my own rough times with saying goodbye. We make attachments that are very hard to loosen. After a significant death in my life, several years ago now, I found great comfort in the beauty of the natural world and in times of transitions I

always return to that. I bring my awareness to the rhythm of the seasons and the cycles of life and death that surround us everyday. I learned to rest into the times of great sadness in my life in a new way without the heightened sense of isolation and loneliness without as many moments of anguish and despair. This is life too. I am part of something much greater and it always continues to move forward into newness and growth. Loss, transitions, endings, and beginnings, are like small deaths in our lives. They give us an opportunity to take stock of where we are and perhaps sometimes they enable us to reach for a long held dream that we have maybe been leaving for the future. We are not always able to say what longs to be said when we are saying goodbye. We are not always able to hear the things that we long to be said to us. Sometimes we have tears and with the tears are words. Other times there are tears with no words.

I feel deeply grateful for my time at First Church and the opportunity to meet the many wonderful people here. It has truly been a growing time. I've noticed that after a long and fruitful ministry with your Ministers Emeriti you've been going through several years now of major shifting and the shifting will continue. At times it has been difficult and I know painful especially for some of you who have experienced a great sense of loss in your community here. What I want to say to you on this day is that this too shall pass. It is important to grieve. It is important to make choices where your needs are met. But it is also important to hang in there and keep trying even when things are uncertain or they're not working out quite right. This community is strong; I have witnessed it everyday, because it has been built on faith and love. You will find your way in these next few years and you at First Church will find your stride again. I will no longer be one of your ministers once I have left San Diego, but I will continue to be faithfully in the larger Unitarian Universalist community to which we belong. We are saying our goodbyes now but the connections we have made with each other will endure. In my most difficult times I have found that I believe in a greater wisdom at work in the world. I aspire to serve that greater wisdom and I believe that it holds the course of my life even when I do not understand it myself. May each of you find the comfort and strength that you need in times of uncertainty and doubt and may you feel blessed by the spirit of life and love at work in our world whenever you need it most.

Amen and Blessed Be.