

Creating a Healthy Ending and Moving On

The Revs. Duane H. Fickeisen and Judy Welles¹
Unitarian Universalists of the Cumberland Valley
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*The only way to make sense out of change is the plunge into it,
move with it, and join the dance.*

Alan Watts

Opening Words

Judy Welles

Fifty years ago this week, the Unitarians and the Universalists merged to form a new denomination. This milestone is being celebrated today by Unitarian Universalist churches throughout the country, as we acknowledge a landmark event from our past — but also as we look to a future UUA that will be quite different from the entity that was envisioned in May of 1961 in Boston.

Fifty years ago this week, a congregation worshiped in this room who called themselves the Evangelical United Brethren. (This carpeting was probably new back then.) In 1968 that denomination merged with The Methodist Church to become the



¹The Revs. Duane H. Fickeisen and Judy Welles are parish co-ministers of the Unitarian Universalists of the Cumberland Valley, PO Box 207, Boiling Springs PA 17007; 717/249-8944; www.uucv.net.

United Methodist Church, and it was from that congregation (the Otterbein United Methodist Church) that we purchased this building in 1999.

Fourteen years ago this week — this very week — Duane and I visited Carlisle to meet a group of early visionaries and sign on as your ministers. Although we didn't exactly know what we were in for, it's a step we've never regretted, not even for an instant.

Ten years ago this week, *we* were worshipping here and the carpeting was still here. The walls were pale pink, with stress testing strips across some of the major cracks; the windows were opaque bathroom glass with ugly metal frames. The roof leaked in a heavy storm, and it was unmercifully hot in the summer months. The antique sound system was subject to random bursts of rude noises at the most inappropriate times.

Well, the carpeting is *still* here, but not for much longer. A lot has changed, and will continue to change as this congregation evolves and develops.

And now there's another change coming — your first transition in ministerial leadership. Who would have thought that after all this time, you would be experiencing a new series of "firsts"? But change is natural and healthy (as well as being inevitable). Other "firsts" undoubtedly still await you, and at this moment none of us can envision what they might be. But you will do fine with them; we have no doubt of that.

May this fire kindle within us, as it did for those who lit it fifty years ago, strength and hope, clarity and commitment, gratitude and faith in the future.

Reading

In Blackwater Woods²

Mary Oliver

Reading

from *Transitions*³

William Bridges

Considering that we have to deal with endings all of our lives, most of us handle them very badly. This is in part because we misunderstand them and take them either too seriously or not seriously enough.

We take them too seriously by confusing them with finality — that's it, all over, never more, finished! We see them as something without sequel, forgetting that in fact they are the first phase of the transition process and a precondition of self-renewal.

At the same time we fail to take them seriously enough. Just because they scare us, we try to avoid them. ...

[Y]et endings must be dealt with if we are to move on to whatever comes next in our lives. The new growth cannot take root on ground still covered with the old, and endings are the clearing process.

² The poem may be found here:

http://www.panhala.net/Archive/In_Blackwater_Woods.html It is omitted from this posting due to copyright restrictions.

³ William Bridges. *Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes* (Reading, MA: Addison Wesley, 1980) p. 90.

Sermon

Duane Fickeisen and Judy Welles

[Duane speaking] Throughout the past several months, we've been moving along the winding road toward what we hope will be a healthy ending of our ministry here. Sometimes the road has been smooth and the path clear, at other times it's been muddy and rough and of course we can never see beyond the next bend.

We have helped your leaders consider how to improve the odds for a successful transition, we have handed off specific tasks, and we've encouraged you both to celebrate our shared history and to look forward to a bright future as our paths diverge, knowing that none of us would be where we are without having walked, crawled, and run together for these past 14 years.

With only a few weeks left before we leave, it is appropriate to mark the ending with fond farewells, reflections and memories, and with prayers for the future.

Judy and I want to talk with you this morning about how to create a healthy ending — one that we all take with appropriate seriousness — neither giving it too much nor too little weight. Part of that is to consider what comes next in our relationships with you as well as what has been.

Although Judy and I will read different parts of the sermon this morning, we each speak for both of us, as we have shared the planning and writing of our message today.

Everyone in the room has experienced endings. Some of them were ones we welcomed and sought, some were ones that were thrust on us against our will, and some were just a normal part of life. Some were big deals, leading to life transitions, and others called for no more than a small detour

around a bump in the road.

This week on our way to State College for a meeting, we were already a little late when we discovered Route 74 was closed at the bottom of North Mountain. We had to detour to Route 34, through Sherman's Dale, New Bloomfield, and Newport. It cost us about 20 minutes, but it was a fine day for a drive. In the grand scheme of things it was a minor change, inconvenient and a surprise, but with a unexpected opportunity to experience part of Perry County for what will likely be the last time.

There are many of those "last-time" experiences for us this spring. We've been ending and saying goodbyes in many ways for almost a whole year now. We've been busy preparing for what comes next, too, with selling the house and garden we love, sorting out belongings and files (I overheated the shredder three or four times on Friday this week), and planning the logistics of our move.

I suspect that many of us carry wounds from some of the endings in our lives, and those may well impact the way we approach other endings — either wanting to get them over with quickly or hoping irrationally that by ignoring them maybe they will not happen. One popular essay on ministerial departures likens leaving to running barefoot through a patch of thistles, but recommends not running as fast as possible to lessen the pain.

So we've made a commitment to seek a more healthy approach that marks the ending of our ministry with ritual and prepares the way for what comes next.

The endings that I have found most difficult are the ones that have been either mushy and unclear or too abrupt. I'm thinking, for example, of the contrast between two groups I was part of that each spent intense periods in an intentional

learning environment. Both struggled through conflicts, bonded, and developed close relationships. And in both cases when they ended the members went separate ways, with little reason for long-term connections.

One of the groups decided to continue to meet several times a year. For a while we did gather, but after a time more and more of us stopped coming to the gatherings and the group drifted apart. The regular meetings stopped, but there was no formal acknowledgement and no explicit planned ending.

The other group included an intentional and ritualized ending as it disbanded. It's members expressed gratitude for out time together and grief at the ending, but did not commit as a group to continue to be in contact.

The ending of the first group felt unfinished and icky. There were no opportunities to express thanks or to grieve together. The second ended tearfully and with sad farewells, but it felt so much better later to have had an intentional and caring end.

None of which is to say that there is a single best way to navigate endings or that all of us will experience them in the same way, just as there is no single way we grieve.

Yet by acknowledging our individual feelings — anger, sadness, and despair or joy, gratitude, and hopefulness — and sometimes all of those at the same time, and by giving space for them all, we are more likely to experience the ending as the opportunity it is for transformation and growth — even through our grieving.

[Judy speaking] We don't want to pretend that this is an easy goodbye for anyone. There is so much to say goodbye to, so many memories associated with this wonderful group of

people, with this building, with the greater Carlisle area and the life Duane and I have built here over the past fourteen years.

I recently observed to one of you who was expressing sadness at our departure that you are losing two of us, but we are losing 166 of you. I am absolutely certain that in the months and years to come we will wonder about you, we will dream about you, and we will shed some tears when thoughts of you come up for us.

After all, we have been very deeply involved in one another's lives for a significant amount of time. We have grieved together and celebrated together; we have cooked and washed dishes, undertaken countless projects and launched or completed them successfully. How many meetings, how many phone conversations, how many visits in home or hospital, how many sermons, how many newsletter columns? I lost track ages ago.

It's been a long and winding road, and we have been good traveling companions for each other. We have learned how to be good company together, and been a comfort to one another.

As we prepare ourselves to leave you, one of our paramount feelings is the feeling of satisfaction, of good work done together and lots of goals achieved. Of course this would be true of any brand-new congregation that started with virtually nothing but a dream and has come to all of this a mere fourteen years later. But there are personal satisfactions as well, things we have personally accomplished that give a sweetness to our departure.

In my case, I think especially of the "End of Life Issues" workshops that I offered three times, and the "Building Your Own Theology" class so many of you participated in. We readily became a Welcoming Congregation and have consis-

tently expressed a strong commitment to GLBT issues. The success of our Story Sundays in the past two years has been tremendously satisfying to me, and I think that some of my best work has been in developing the Worship Associates program and working closely with David to build such a powerful music life in the congregation. The Lay Leadership Committee has hit its stride and shows great potential for developing and nurturing serious leadership skills among you.

[Duane speaking] I have enjoyed leading worship and marking life passages, which have been key roles. I am very happy with the small group ministry program, which now has 9 active groups. I've enjoyed teaching and facilitating adult classes on "Living by Heart" and "Process Theology." I worked in the community on your behalf, too, serving on the board of the Clean Air Board and on the Carlisle Mayor's advisory group on the Carlisle Inclusive Community Initiative. In the latter role, I advocated for the proposal from UUCV's Social Action Council that the Borough establish a Human Relations Commission and include sexual orientation and gender expression in the classes protected from discrimination in housing and employment. Alas that effort has not yet gained sufficient support in the Borough Council for a favorable vote.

[Judy speaking] So it is no small thing to be parting ways. "A part of the heart gets lost in the learning, somewhere along the road." Indeed. A part of our hearts will always be here with you.

Duane has just spoken about healthy goodbyes — goodbyes where both parties acknowledge that the relationship that was will be no more, and where loose ends aren't left dangling.

I hope we get to spend the right amount of time with you to say good goodbyes. If you want some time with us, either

together or separately, please ask for it. Let's be sure that we take the time to tell each other what our relationship has meant, what we have learned, and what we will be taking with us on our separate journeys down this winding road.

Some of you have been wondering out loud about further contact with us once we aren't your ministers any more. It's an important thing to wonder about, because it's a place where congregations and their former ministers can stumble in ways that end up being harmful to the church.

As retired ministers, our foremost responsibility is to our colleagues, your next ministers. All of our interactions with you in the future must take place in the context of what will support your relationship with your next ministers and the health of this congregation.

Because we are moving across the country, the question of what to do if we see each other at the movies or the grocery store isn't a big issue. However, if you should be shopping at Fresh Foods in Portland, or we run into you at Powell's Books, we will greet you with glad cries and warm embraces. Nobody has to pretend that we don't exist to each other any more.

Let us know if you're coming to Portland, and we'll see if we can meet for coffee or go for a walk together. We'll be dying to hear about your life, your work, and your family. The UU General Assembly will be held in Portland in 2016, and we'll probably attend. If you attend as well, then let's get together!

However — and it's very important that you understand this — while we would like to hear how things are going here, we will be circumspect in our responses. You will have a new minister by mid-August, and another new minister two years after that. If you have issues with them — questions, com-

plaints, observations, wonderings — those belong right here within this community, and not with us.

We will likewise refrain from initiating comments on what is happening here. Of course we might take the occasional peek at the on-line newsletter, but we trust that your new ministries will evolve in healthy ways that will be good for all of you, and whatever comments we have about your future life as a congregation will be shared only between the two of us.

All of the Unitarian Universalist ministers have agreed to conduct their professional lives according to a Code of Professional Practice which is constantly being revised and updated. We ministers made this code, we agreed to it, and we follow it scrupulously.

In terms of our retirement from this ministry, one pertinent section from the code states:

“When my ministry to a congregation has ended, I will refrain from offering or performing ministerial services for members of that congregation, except at the invitation of my incumbent successor colleague(s).”

Whatever those ministerial services might be: pastoral consultation, conducting a wedding or a memorial service, blessing a baby, or participating in any other ritual that calls for ministerial leadership or presence, we will only consider accepting an invitation to participate if it comes from your current minister.

Now even with the constant revisions that our Code of Professional Practice undergoes, it doesn't specify anything about ongoing personal contact with members of our former congregations. With the rate that things change in the world of electronic communications, we could never keep up or address everything, so it falls more to common sense than to

guidelines to determine what, if any, contact we will have with you.

As far as Facebook is concerned, we will be unfriending the members and friends of UUCV who are currently our Facebook friends. We initially friended you as a way to extend our ministry with you — to have other ways of hearing about your lives and other ways of connecting with you. Because our ministry to you will soon end, so will those Facebook relationships.

In terms of other kinds of communication, we will encourage you to develop as close and affectionate a relationship with your next ministers as you have had with us. Our priority is for you and your minister to move forward together along the winding road that has brought us this far.

So we will answer your e-mails, but only briefly, and we might need to remind you occasionally that we aren't your ministers any more. We have benefited so very much from your love and support here — doesn't your next minister deserve the same?

However — and this is also *very* important for you to hear — we will never stop loving you. We have loved you deeply and energetically for fourteen years, and that love won't stop when we drive away from the Cumberland Valley. It may take a different form, but we will *always* love you and we will *always* cherish the time that we spent together.

[Duane speaking] In the midst of change and transition, it is important to stay grounded in that which abides. The degree of your ongoing commitment to paying forward the gift of this thriving home for liberal religion in the Cumberland Valley is a choice you will make, yet the opportunity clearly will outlast our departure.

While the individual members will change — we will welcome several new members next month — and the character of the congregation will surely change with new generations — what will abide — if you choose to support it — is the presence of a place to mark life transitions, to celebrate joys and to grieve losses, and to experience the love and care of community.

The congregation will continue to offer a sanctuary and refuge for those seeking a safe place to express fully who they are and to develop their full potential. It will also continue to be a base to reach out into the community to work for justice.

Judy and I will always feel pride and satisfaction in our role to guide and help create this religious community, and we trust that there are markers of our ministry that have already become a part of the congregation's essence and history and that will abide.

You are well launched now with good systems of governance and leadership. This building with the recent and ongoing renovations can certainly serve you well as you continue to grow in numbers and depth of programs. It will need ongoing attention to maintenance and more upgrades in order to remain a welcoming space and to honor its history as it serves the needs of the future.

There is no doubt that our ministry together has established traditions and processes. Some of them will continue to serve you while others may linger for too long as blocks to growth. Our successors will surely ask themselves at least sometimes, "What were they thinking when they did that?!"

We will always, always carry a fond affection for UUCV and for you — its members and friends. Our ministry has been shaped by our experience serving you. We have been welcomed into your lives and have watched as infants and tod-

dlers and pre-schoolers have become youth, graduated high school, and gone off the college or out into the workforce, some of them now becoming parents themselves. We have been present through celebrations, relationships starting and ending, and through the end of life as we have walked with you along the paths of joys and sorrows.

We will each carry a deep affection and gratitude for you into our retirement. It has been a privilege to minister to and with you. It has shaped who we have become in our calling to ministry. We will never forget that.

And even though we will no longer be your ministers, and you will form new ministerial relationships, we will always love and care for you. Know that you will be held in our hearts and prayers.

This winding road we've been traveling will soon diverge. Our time together gives us courage and strength to go on, knowing that the community abides.

Over the next month we will have many chances to say goodbye. Let's not squander them by failing to take the leaving seriously enough or by taking it too seriously. Yes, we will grieve the losses. But let us remember that every ending brings with it the opportunity for change and transformation, as we go boldly along the still- and ever-winding path.

Amen.