

Farewell Sermon to the Unitarian Universalist Church, Sunday June 10th, 2018
“Summer Is Coming: A Reflection on work and play and retirement”

Interim Minister the Rev. Fran Dearman, AIM

Materials accompanying this Farewell Service included:

Opening words # 685, words of T.S. Eliot, on beginnings and endings;

Responsive Reading # 607 “Beloved Presence”;

Opening Hymn #21 “For the Beauty of the Earth”;

Story for All Ages, “Wabi Sabi”, by Mark Reibstein (2008);

Invitation to Meditation #686, words of Mark Belletini;

Reflective Hymn #411 “Part in Peace”;

Closing Hymn #1057 “Go Lifted Up”

Closing words were from a reflection on Crossing the James Island Sand Bar:

Crossing the James Island Sand Bar

Among the Gulf Islands just north of Victoria is James Island.
They used to make dynamite there; now it is the home of birds and deer.

At the south end of James Island is a great sandy cliff,
and south of the cliff, drawn down by the tides, is a sand bar, three miles long.
And the depth of the water, lying over that sand bar, is four and a half feet deep.
And the draft of my sailboat, under the water, is four and a half feet deep.
So I steer well clear of the sandbar, south of James Island, most of the time.

But one time, one fine summer’s day, long ago, the sea was like glass, calm and still, at the bar,
and the tide was slowly rising, and the depth of the water, over the bar,
was four and a half feet deep
and a little bit more,
and the lightest of airs filled the Genoa sail,
and so, slowly and gently, wing on white wing,
we drifted across the bar.

And the water was so clear you could see each grain of sand on the sea bed.
And the sea was so still you could hear the birds splash as they dove.
And the tang of the salt was alive in our breath,
and the tiller was light in my hand.

And as we drifted across the still waters,
the pull of our passage drew nutrients up from the sand,
and looking astern we saw fish, half a dozen or more,

following on in the path of our passage, companionable, grazing,
so clear in the calm crystal waters,
not much more than an arm's length away.

Now, sand bars build up, as well as drift down,
so sometimes the keel just touched,
just kissing the soft level sands.

And the wires of the rigging would tremble, in a high fine shiver, like a harp;
moment to moment, the sands plucked the mast stays like harp strings,
in a great marine harmony,
and the sea still as glass as we drifted across the bright sands.

Some things happen once, only once.....
And all the more precious because of that.

Rev. Fran Dearman, 28th June 2009, Winnipeg

Sermon: "Summer Is Coming: A Reflection on work and play and retirement"

"Shall I compare thee to a summer day...."

Wm. Shakespeare, Sonnet 18

Summer is coming, and with it summer's ease, summer's work, summer's undertakings—work and play and some things that are both or in between. And for this congregation of Olinda, the transition from interim ministry to a new settlement.

For me, personally, this summer means a personal transition, a retirement from active ministry into private life. What shall I do with this time? Where is work, and where is play? Many of you here have been modeling that transition for some years, and I thank you for your example.

I grew up in a UU fellowship and congregation in my home city of Victoria BC. My memories around church are of work and play woven fine with one another. One of my earliest memories of our congregation, we're at the old Woolworth Hall, I think, about where the downtown library is now. It's the tail end of coffee hour, it's time to go home, so we children were invited to curtail the game of Chinese Checkers we were playing—all those beautiful shiny bright marbles

inching their way across the board to their new homes in the holes at the opposite point of the star. Two minutes' notice to pack up. How to choose the last few moves? A short game, then, given the time constraint—and yet, my long game strategy was still much in my mind.

Analysis! Criteria! How to decide?

What I do as an Interim Minister is not so different: analysis of systems dynamics, and all those beautiful shiny marbles inching their way towards their new home across a sea of change. My job is to help folks play their way into the future as an intentional transition, as well as help run the store day to day for a year or two while the search for the next settled minister proceeds. And then, gracefully, love you enough to get out of the way and let you get on with it, without me.

It's more than fifty years since my family had the good fortune to become part of the systems dynamic at First Victoria. More than sixteen since that congregation graced me with the gift of ordination in the Unitarian Universalist ministry and sent me off to serve the tradition at Anchorage, in Alaska, the last frontier.

When I returned to Canada, following that five year settlement in Anchorage, I stepped into the specialization of Interim Ministry—serving one or two year gigs with congregations transitioning between settlements. I found this type of ministry suits me very well. It's a lot like my earlier career, as a ship's officer—sign on, do the season, go home. And home is always the beautiful garden city of Victoria, British Columbia.

After some years, some experience, and some special coursing through the Interim Ministry Network, I found myself recognized as a “fully Accredited Interim Minister”. It has been said, “if you can get this woman to work for you, you will be indeed fortunate”!

Olinda is my sixth and last interim position. Today, as this season draws to its close, I have been ten years as an interim minister. It has been twenty-one years since I entered seminary. It is time to hang it up.

I had a dry run at retirement several years ago—it happened that—for once!—all the Canadian UU ministers and all the Canadian UU congregations were happy where they were, and chose not to enter transition in the fall of 2015. Which meant that after six years on task, I got to stay at home, not just for the summer, but all year. No gig! I chose to name that time, that year of deeply restful rest, as Sabbatical—self-funded, with generous support from EI and the BC Medical Services Plan. I felt so lucky to be Canadian, in Canada. I felt so lucky to have a home to go to, in Victoria, where I had friends and family and had lived under the same roof since 1957.

Much of this morning's sermon emerged from that year of reflection; and so I share with you some thoughts from that time, and later, regarding Play, Sabbath, Sabbatical, and now Retirement. I wonder what resonance this might have in your own experiences?

For me, retirement will mean literally a stepping back, stepping back into private life, a time for putting family first. My mother is now ninety-two years old. I will turn sixty-eight this summer. It's a time for me to begin putting my own life in order, so to speak, both work and play.

Let's talk about play.

The very first game ever I remember playing was the button game. There was this huge old tobacco tin just filled with buttons. Pearl buttons off old shirts. Bright yellow buttons off a sundress worn to doll rags. Awesome buttons of stately elegance from a winter coat. And one tiny elegant exquisite little black button on a long shank with a sparkly glass crystal gleaming at the top. The ultimate prize. Our precious. My sister and I would spill out the whole tin onto the carpet and sit there for hours taking turns, each turn drawing out one or two of these treasures, amassing lines and rows and sets and arrays of these buttons, waiting for the precious to leap forth and reveal itself.

There were rules—that's half the fun of play, making up the rules as you go along. And there was a sense of Best Practices. And that Fair was supposed to be Fair. And there was some sense of a goal, some guiding criteria or aesthetic, which might change, from time to time. But the play was really pretty open ended. And the game ended when supper was ready, and resumed the next rainy afternoon.

I have always had difficulty telling the difference between work and play. I have always been so lucky, mostly having work so engaging that I would almost have paid them to let me do it. Almost. Sometimes I think that play is different from work because at play we work hard at remembering that fair is supposed to be fair. There are rules. It's not good if the game is rigged. At play, especially, I believe, we need permission to fail. We need permission to experiment with something that might well not work out as we had hoped. Most of the stuff I play at is stuff I don't already do particularly well. If there were no learning curve, I'd likely have a hard time staying awake for it.

At play, it might be important to detach from outcomes. At the end of the day's play we sweep all the buttons back into the tin. And the next time, we start anew.

When I was at seminary, I found a new button in the tin—scripture! I already had Latin and Greek, but now they let me have a go at Hebrew! Wow! As a classics graduate I loved working with the written word of ancient literatures—the classical western legacy. As a Unitarian Universalist, I choose to play by rules that let me take the Bible as I find it, detached from authority issues. I read scripture as a history of the human search for the holy. I love the language

and the wordplay of metaphor and motif. I especially love phrases that leap off the page and become precious to me. There is one such verse in Isaiah [Isa43:18-21 paraphrase] that reads: “I am about to do a new thing... Can you understand it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.” When I entered settled ministry in Alaska it was exactly one year after 9/11. The invasion of Iraq hung heavily upon us. We would have dearly loved to see ‘some new thing’.

I believe the great gift of play is that it opens us to new things, new ways, perhaps some precious innovation. Perhaps work is where we seek a more predictable outcome. But play is where we open ourselves to new things—one hopes, better things.

I believe there is a special role for churches and other social justice groups that is ‘playful’ in exploring innovations. A church group can trial a novel idea on a small scale to seek some new outcome along a new path, keeping a weather eye for those pesky ‘unknown unknowns’.

One example of this might be seen in some pilot programmes in the Vancouver east end where, by making housing a first priority, not the last, by making harm reduction a first priority, not the last, some lasting impact has been made on some intractable social ills, and many lives are better thereby. Small scale innovations of this sort, proven useful, helpful, and compelling, economical and effective, can then be taken up for best practices. A new thing.

I remain a little confused about discerning between work and play. Perhaps the difference is not so important, as long as we can love what we do and find it meaningful.

But whether we spend our time on work or play, we still need rest.

Let’s talk about keeping a Sabbath—the fourth commandment, [Exodus 20:8-11]

I first gave serious thought to the keeping of the Sabbath when I was sailing in Great Lakes freighters. Break-up to freeze-up, the ships keep moving on, day in , day out, night and day, day after day, week after week. You and the ship and the cargos just keep trucking along at fourteen knots with the occasional halt and glide for canals and loading docks. One day is much like another, tho’ unique in its own way and context. But Sunday is different. First, it’s double time and a half for overtime! And, only necessary work is done.

One time, I happened upon an old logbook, from 1922, when that ship was new. In the front of the log book were posted some rules. One of the rules was, indeed—no unnecessary work to be done on a Sunday. Specifically, no one was to do their laundry on a Sunday; the washing of clothes could wait until “Blue Monday”. No laundry to be done on the Sabbath. Last I looked that was no longer enforced on Great Lakes freighters; but it’s twenty years since I sailed

professionally. Still, on a Sunday, I still choose not to do laundry, and not to do unnecessary work. This has become precious to me.

Of course, for a minister, the Sabbath thing gets tricky. We do have to show up on Sundays, from time to time. So for me, when I am on task, Sunday is a day on. Monday becomes my Sabbath, the day off. I sleep in a little. I linger over the Sudoku. I rest. I read. I dress in clean clothes, perhaps more nicely than usual. Perhaps I'll go somewhere special, a park, a museum, or the library, and let my shadow catch up with me. My Sabbath calm opens me up, and makes room for new understandings.

John Nichols, a UU minister, wrote about the Sabbath in his book of reflections on certain bible passages [JN pp 18-20 Exodus 20.8-11] For John Nichols, the Sabbath is about being empowered to make moral choices, and so the ability to keep the Sabbath is the sign of a free people, not slaves. Some work at times must indeed be done on the day of rest; but we get to choose, and set our priorities, discern necessities. For example, if I break my leg on the Sabbath, I do hope the surgeon will see fit to leave his Sunday dinner and come in to set the bone and sort me out.

In the most basic ways, especially if people make their livelihood by the herding of animals from pasture to pasture, water to water, continually on the move, a Sabbath calm and rest can mean the difference between life and death, especially for the very old, the very young, the ill and injured, and the heavily pregnant. I learned this on Camino, walking six hundred kilometers from the Pyrenees to Santiago de Compostella. A Sabbath rest means that a blister gets a chance to heal, that a letter can be written, that a weary, older traveler can get a little extra down-time.

Our lives are so full of constant stimulations—news, radio, television, e-mail, little twittering things—that I sometimes take my Sabbath where I can find it, throughout the week. Sometimes, just sit. Turn everything off. Sit outside and listen to the wind in the trees. Sit inside with a cup of tea warm in the hand and listen to the rain on the roof. Just sit. Just stand. Just be. Find a stillness. [There are two hymns in our grey hymnal that come to mind: “Find and Stillness”, and Duke Ellington’s “Come Sunday”.]

I believe that Sabbath keeping is one of the really good ideas lifted up in scripture. Details variable in accordance with local conditions. Some assembly required. Deeply restful rest, one day out of seven.

And perhaps, each seven years, sabbatical!

Some professions, including ministry, make a practice of warding off burnout and stimulating creativity by offering their people a periodic leave of absence—sabbatical. I have paid keen

attention to this business of sabbatical. My first observation is that everyone does it differently. One colleague chose to spend his time at home, building an addition to his house, for his growing family. Another went to a quilting symposium, another to cooking school. Some wrote books. Some took long, long hikes through hill country. All are changed when they return. As are their congregations, who have also found new strengths and new experiences while their minister was absent.

Find a stillness. That's another phrase that sticks, from scripture, for me. Remember Elijah on the mountain? The still, small voice was not in the fire, nor the wind, nor the cataclysm. The voice came from the silence, when he was still. [John Nichols speaks to this pp. 27-29.]

When the good people of Anchorage graced me with the gift of sabbatical, my choice was pilgrimage—el Camino de Santiago de Compostella. Six hundred kilometers of it. Forty days and forty nights of literal re-grounding, step by step. It took me a long time to realize that I am in fact a very physical person, that my body deserves the same respect as mind and spirit.

When I am away from home, it is spirit that I cultivate with discipline—daily reading, daily singing, daily stillness and meditation. In the absence of family, far from home and friends, that spiritual discipline keeps me grounded. But in the year of unsought sabbatical (2015-16), sheltered at home, it was well with my spirit. I was especially glad for that gift of time, to be at home with my mother through the rhythms of everyday. So at that time I gave priority to the body—I became a gym rat! long walks, lots of yoga and martial arts, and singing—a very physical sort of spiritual discipline, breath by breath, breathe in, breathe out.

Here, in Essex County, I am grateful to the Sherk Recreation Centre in Leamington, and to the County Classic Chorale, as well as the Lakeside Deli and the Public Library, all of whom have sustained me, in body, mind and spirit, these past two years.

One more thing—even an open ended game, detached from outcomes, needs some goal, however hazy. I have found that it is the long stretches of time between ministries, when I returned to Canada from Alaska in 2007, and when I was at home the year between interims (2015-16)—it was then that I was able to bring time and deep focus to two writing projects. There is a thing I can do that few others would think to do—to write words in Latin that, set to music, a UU choir could sing with a whole heart. The hiatus of 2007 resulted in a piece called *Missa Brevis pro Serveto*; the hiatus of 2015-16 resulted in a piece called *Orion Vespers*, aka *Vesperae pro Serveto*. It takes deeply restful rest and a gift of time for me to craft these words. That is what I have done on sabbatical. That is what I hope to continue doing in retirement.

I might also seek to volunteer with the Victoria Literacy group. Every ship I ever sailed in had at least one member of the crew who could neither read nor write. I would rejoice to help folks find their key to the written word.

In conclusion, I have learned to value play as a way of opening oneself to some new thing. I have learned to value the deeply restful rest that is the blessing of a Sabbath. I look forward to retirement. I look forward to what new thing will come of it. I look forward to that time of detachment from outcomes, be it play or rest or sabbatical or retirement—a time for re-grounding, for new things, for openness to possibilities.

I will turn sixty-eight before the end of the summer. I used to wonder if I were already a retired person without knowing it! And now I am one, as of the first of August. I am so lucky—I have a home to go to. Not everyone can say that, alas. I will be home, with family and friends. And I will be okay.

I am so very glad to have been with you, here in Olinda, these past two years. I am so glad to have been part of this historic congregation, for just this little while. I am so glad my photo will hang on your wall. I am so very pleased your search was fruitful, and that you will welcome Rev. Rod to Olinda at the end of this summer.

If ever I have offended you, I apologize and beg your pardon; please know that I never intended to do so. If ever I was offended, please know that I have long put any hurt behind me. Please know that I shall think well of you, and hope the best for you, as I complete my time here, and my ministry with Olinda.

Summer is coming, and summer's ease, summer's gifts for work and play. I wonder what you will do with this season of golden time, time out of time for rest and renewal. I wonder how you will choose to shape your own summer and sabbath times, going forward through all the seasons, your times of deeply restful rest.

Fare thee well.

And may it be so.

Bibliography: John Nichols, "A Wind Swept Over the Waters: Reflections of 60 Favorite Bible Passages", Boston, 2007.

Rev. Fran Dearman, Essex County, June 10th 2019

This sermon was first presented as "Play, Sabbath, and Sabbatical" at the First Unitarian Church of Victoria, Sunday, June 28th, 2015. The sermon has been adapted to serve as the Olinda Farewell.

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