

A poem by Robert Frost:

Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening

Whose woods these are I think I know.  
His house is in the village though;  
He will not see me stopping here  
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer  
To stop without a farmhouse near  
Between the woods and frozen lake  
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake  
To ask if there is some mistake.  
The only other sound's the sweep  
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,  
But I have promises to keep,  
And miles to go before I sleep,  
And miles to go before I sleep.

I'm not sure why this poem leapt to mind this week. It's one that I had to memorize in fourth grade and I'm always amazed the way I can recall the entirety of it while I can't remember if I ate breakfast this morning. Human minds are interesting things. Things sometimes only come up when we need them.

The woods are lovely dark and deep, but I have promises to keep, and miles to go before I sleep.

Promises – we are looking at promises today. Those explicit or implicit pledges we make and keep or break throughout our lives. The church is going to be voting on a congregational covenant next week after the service – which is a kind of promise we make to one another about how we will be in relationship with one another.

But I am thinking of a more personal sense of promise. Maybe expectation. As those of you who've read your email know, I made it public on Friday that I will be leaving UCH in June at the end of this church year. For our visitors, our tradition does not send ministers via a central headquarters. While the UUA facilitates the process, each relationship is between a minister and the congregation. My contract goes year by year but is renewed automatically until either party wishes for a change. There may be an expectation or hope that it will continue – but it is open and fluid.

Which brings me back to my looking at promises. Why it feels like I am breaking one to make this decision to step down from this ministry. It feels that way to me.

Why am I leaving? First, like I said in my letter, I am not leaving out of disappointment or dissatisfaction with this congregation. You have blessed me abundantly these past six years. This is a very personal decision coming out of a very difficult period of my life.

Most of you know this story but I need to say it aloud one more time and hope you will humor me. My father died of ALS – Lou Gehrig’s disease in June of 2016. It was not unexpected; he’d been suffering for over 17 years with the last five being particularly hard. My mom had been his caregiver during that time and my hope and expectation was that she would finally be able to enjoy life for a while. She was only 74 and seemed very healthy. But a short five weeks after dad passed, my mom suffered a massive stroke which took her entire left side and much of her vision. That year was spent driving back and forth to Ohio to try to find some way that she could regain some semblance of a normal life. But with a series of complications, after about six months she realized she wasn’t coming back and made up her mind to be done. She quit eating and died in May – within 10 days of the first anniversary of my dad’s death.

Crappy – sad – challenging – yes. But not too much out of the things that many people have to navigate in life. But we had another layer going on. In April, while my mom began her dying trajectory, Karen’s 85-year-old father fell off his bicycle – yes, for real – and broke his hip. This necessitated moving both her parents into assisted living when it became plain that her mom’s dementia was more advanced than anyone had realized. Lots and lots of trips to Wisconsin, supporting one set of folks at the same time as saying goodbye to my mom in Ohio. A really poignant day came when that sale of Karen’s childhood home closed on the same day we handed over the keys to my childhood home. There was a lot of saying goodbye.

But wait – there’s more. That fall Karen’s mom was diagnosed with lung cancer and died the following spring, three days before Karen had surgery for a newly found uterine cancer. Seemed we passed a hump, but no. Karen’s dad had a stroke in October, Karen’s cancer came back in December and her dad was diagnosed with bone cancer in January. He died while she was in the hospital with complications from the chemo treatments in March.

Now – I know that each and every person has their own story of tragedy and woe. Of unfair hardship and terrible loss. None of this story is outside the ordinary experience of most every life. Except that it all happened within a three-year period – and all while I was trying to stay present and responsible to this church community. And really, it is only now that the full force of it is becoming present in my life.

This church has been amazing. You’ve been kind and compassionate and sent a billion cards and there is nothing more that I could ask of any of you. And we just got the very good news that Karen’s health is good and it feels like all the of tension and angst and stress that I’ve been holding these past years has come up to look me in the eye and say enough. Suddenly, I’m exhausted. I’ve decided to take some time to make space for my long-deferred grief. I’m keeping a promise to myself, to love this life that I have, to mourn, to breathe, to sit and watch the squirrels play.

Jesus said to love your neighbor as yourself – which is such good advice and something I’ve tried to follow my whole life. But a very important and oft overlooked portion of that directive is the loving

yourself part. You have to respect your own life, care for it, appreciate and be kind to yourself, in order to be able to do that for others. Otherwise you risk running a deficit and growing resentful and judgmental. So the promise I'm keeping is to me. To make space to do the grief work necessary, even it means feeling like I am letting people that I love down.

That is one of the hardest things for me – to disappoint people I love. But often some of the hardest are also the most necessary. Those of you who are parents know that sometimes you just have to let your kids fail – even when it hurts – because that's the only way they'll discover their own resilience and inner strength. Sometime we have to say no – to an invitation, or a job, or even a request for help. Because saying yes when we don't have the capacity can end up causing more harm than good. This is always a challenge in churches – needing folks to do all that needs to be done in volunteer supported organization – but not wanting folks to give more than they have the capacity to give. We all have to learn that elusive word “No” so that our “yeses” can have the power they deserve.

Each of us has promises we make and promises we keep. We have those things we've said yes to without thinking it through – and things that evolved into other things without our input. The most important thing any of us can do is to stay present to our own lives. Stay present to what is real and true in this particular moment in this particular place and respond with our full selves in that moment.

I remembered a poem called “the Invitation” by Oriah Mountain Dreamer. Here's a small excerpt:

It doesn't interest me if the story you are telling me is true  
I want to know if you can disappoint another to be true to yourself. If you can bear the accusation  
of betrayal and not betray your own soul.  
If you can be faithless and therefore trustworthy...

Can you disappoint another to be true to yourself? Can you be faithless and therefore trustworthy? Each of us is called to be faithful to the life that is given us. Faithful to the experience of life – that one shot that we get to explore, to practice, to learn and grow and love while we are on this earth. The promise of life is possibility. Our response can be a promise of presence. We can give – joyfully and freely – when we give from our abundance. From the fullness of being connected to the whole of life. We have to do that gut check – or listen to the center of your chest. Wherever it is in your body which connects you to your deepest truth.

Some of you may be disappointed that I'm leaving and mad at the church. Some of you may be excited at the possibility of getting someone who might not threaten to take down the tree! But no matter what your response to me and my news, this church, this community, is what is of primary importance. Ministers come and ministers go – but you, the folks sitting in the uncomfortable chairs, are what make this church what it is. As much as we might rail against it, one of the only constants in life is change. Even the most solid of mountains are wearing away, inch by inch, as the years pass. Robert Walsh reminds us that when things we trusted most shiver and shift that we might:

...Trust more the tensile strands of love  
that bend and stretch to hold you  
in the web of life  
that's often torn but always healing.

There's your strength.  
The shifting plates, the restive earth, your room, your precious life,  
they all proceed from love,  
the ground on which we walk together.

Love is the one element in life that can enter any situation. Can offer us connection, solace, joy. These next few months we'll take the time to say goodbye. Your board is on top of exploring options. You'll probably get an interim minister to shepherd you through this transition. But no matter what changes come, the love that has been here these past six years is real. I have loved serving you, have loved knowing your and sharing your lives. That love will endure.

So... Breathe – it's going to be okay. Your last interim, Helen Carroll, did a lot of heavy lifting to help move the church out of the engrained patterns of a thirty-year ministry. The next one will not be anywhere near as hard. This church is in good shape. It's alive and flexible. There is depth of connection and engagement. I know that you will have a long line of really good people wanting to come and serve such a vibrant and healthy church. I have no doubt it will be okay.

Mark Morrison Reed, a UU minister who grew up at First U in Chicago gave the Berry Street lecture at GA a few years back, reflecting on the challenges of ministry. He wrote:

Being present is what it takes to love a congregation. We do ministry knowing that someday the relationship will end. The challenge is to be there despite this.

... Ministry takes enormous courage or romantic obliviousness to the repercussions of giving one's soul to the church. Mary Oliver's poem "In Blackwater Woods" describes what is required: "To live in this world[she says] you must be able to do three things: to love what is mortal, to hold it against your bones knowing your own life depends on it, and, when the time comes to let it go, to let it go."

I have loved you deeply and with my whole self. I've been blessed beyond words by my time with you, the relationships forged, the things we've learned along the way together. Now comes the time of letting go. Me releasing you to enter into a new relationship with someone who see the world with entirely different lenses. You, releasing me to follow the call of my heart. In the next few months we'll take time to say goodbye as honestly, as presently and as gratefully as possible. Because that's what love requires of us. Like the Dandelion promised the little Marmot. Everything will be just fine.

We each have promises to keep – and miles to go before we sleep. **Amen & blessed be.**