

Witnesses to Mortality

February 24, 2002

(preached at the Nora Unitarian Universalist Church, Hanksa, Minnesota)

Time is the greatest mystery of all. It is hard to believe that it's been twenty years this month since I first came to Hanksa as a pre-candidate for this historic pulpit. Twenty years since my first trip to Minnesota,--my first trip west of Philadelphia! You have no idea how exotic Minnesota seemed to this native New Englander! And little did I know that my life would be forever changed by that brief visit and by your call to me to be your minister.

Of course, I should have known that my life would be changed. And if there's ever been any doubt, I want you to know that I look upon my stay here in Hanksa, as minister of the Nora Church, as among the most important years of my life. Among other things, my first child was born here, and he turned out to be pretty special! So, my memories of my time here "on the hill" are "simply the best." Sabrina's, too, and she wishes she could be here with me this morning, and she sends you her love.

Oh, I had a lot to learn. And the people of this church taught me well, though when I read some of my old sermons I wonder how they stood it! If I had it to do all over again, I would do it all over again, except I would stay a lot longer. You see, this place got under my skin. And the people I met here--both the living and the dead--have remained dear to me. They--you--taught me everything I needed to know to be successful in the ministry. The failures, as authors are wont to say, are my responsibility alone.

And, you know, I knew nothing when I arrived. Never did a wedding, child dedication, or funeral. Alvin Shelley walked me through my first funeral. I had hardly preached at all. Didn't have a lot of life experience. But thanks to this church, I learned, or at least I made a pretty good beginning at it.

I really didn't know what to expect. And I can tell you that I was not prepared--how could anyone be?--for the deep and abiding relationships that I would find in my ministry here. Relationships which mean the world to me, though you may not even be aware of them. I didn't know how powerful and life-altering these relationships would be, and I think that that intimacy scared me more than a little, and perhaps that is one reason why I left so soon, after

only three years. Though I will say that three years seemed a lot longer at age 30 than they do now, at age 50!

I wasn't prepared for it at all, and I suppose I lacked the maturity to appreciate it. Didn't have enough experience to realize that I was already living my life, and so thought I needed to move on, and get on with it, well before I probably should have. We live, and occasionally we learn.

But this place has remained special to me. Among other things, I became a prairie convert. I came to love this part of the country, and I have tried to get back to it as often as I could. I love the wide open spaces, the big sky, the closeness that I feel to the land out here, and to history. And this particular place, this church on a hill, and the cemetery behind it, has figured in my dreams ever since. The smartest thing I ever did was come here: it changed my life, though the winters taught me it was far from idyllic.

I'd like to think that I am a lot smarter and wiser now than I was then, but probably not. But thanks to you, some themes began to develop which would remain central to my ministry.

I learned about the church as a community and about the various kinds of commitments it involves: commitments of time, talent, and treasure. I learned an awful lot about generosity, and not just of the spirit. I think I learned something about God, what we call God; not, for sure, in the traditional sense; but I think I came a humanist and left a kind of skeptical theist. That's not your fault! and I take full responsibility for it, as my cousin Roy used to take "full responsibility" for the wasps we would occasionally discover in the course of painting a house. It's just that this place and these people gave me a sense of the intrinsic meaning of the universe, and that has never left me. (For the humanists among you, that may seem like the greatest irony of all. To me, it is an affirmation of the paradox that is life.)

This is sacred space, and it has always seemed wonderful to me that this little hill was called "Mt. Pisquah," since the biblical passage in which Mt Pisquah figures is one of my very favorites. It is that scene, which I read to you this morning, where Moses is allowed to see the promised land, but not, alas, to enter in. After all Moses had been through, leading his people for forty years through the desert, still he was not allowed to pass over to possess the land "flowing with milk and honey."

That passage has always seemed to me to be a powerful parable of the meaning of life. We all catch glimpses of the promised land of our hope, but most of us will never get there in person. In fact, I'm not sure that any of us ever really get there, at least not completely. We can never really grasp the heart's desires, and we certainly know that we can never hold on to them. The absences here this morning are the greatest reminder any of us can have of this, and it is one of the reasons why the church is so important, because it reminds us always of our humanity, and of our mortality.

Over the years, I have come to think of myself as, first and foremost, a witness to mortality. The most important task is making sense of death. This is certainly the way I have come to think of my ministry, but we are reminded that all of us are ministers, and all of us are witnesses.

Nothing lasts forever. As the great writer of Ecclesiastes wrote, all is "wind." Try grasping the wind! The Prophet Isaiah reminds us, in words I always use at committal services, that "the people is grass: "the grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it. Surely the people is grass." We are part of the passing tide, here only for one brief and shining moment. Like the grass, we wither and die. And so, we had better appreciate it while we can!

We are all, when you come to think of it, witnesses to mortality. But some of us just can't face it. I think the church is important because, at its best, it forces us to face it. To face mortality, our own and others', to pay attention, to appreciate what we have while we have it, because we most certainly will not have it forever. To be reminded, and to remember. The generations come and go; we are only here for a brief time; and we need to make the best of it while we are here.

Unitarian Universalist minister Forrester Church has said it best, I think, when he defined religion as our response to "the dual reality of being born and having to die." That, it seems to me, is all there is to it. That is what religion exists for: to bring us together in the face of this reality and this mystery of mortality. And, because of it, because of our mortality, to teach us how to treat each other while we are here together. As the poet Amiel wrote, in words that are among my favorites, "Life is short, and we never have too much time to gladden the hearts of those travelling the dark journey with us. O, be swift to love, make haste to be kind!"

It is up to us to be witnesses to this reality of life and death. I can think of nothing more important. And I think I learned that lesson here, and that it really has become the center of my ministry, more than a liberal philosophy or a democratic approach to life, important though these are.

And I don't think it's a completely maudlin activity, this witnessing. Because, how can we truly celebrate life--our lives--if we do not accept as fully as possible the reality of their ending? Celebration, it seems to me, comes from the very knowledge of the brevity and fragility of life. We celebrate because we are alive, on this once only day of our lives. And while this knowledge can be painful, it must be faced if we are to really live and gather the very essence of what it means to be human: to be born, and to know that someday we, too, will vanish from the face of the earth, the beautiful earth with its beautiful creatures, those we love and those we do not even know,--as mysteriously as we came.

How can there be war and terrorism and hatred and cruelty in the face of this awful truth?

Of course, I cannot answer that question, even though the answer seems self-evident to me. It, too, is a mystery, almost as great as that mystery which I mentioned at the outset: the mystery of time. For where does time go? Is it really gone? Are those we love really gone, is the past gone, or is it all some great illusion?

In my better moments I truly believe that none of us goes anywhere. That somewhere in time everyone we love still exists, and we ourselves at every stage of life. That we will always be here, and that those we love will always be here,--not necessarily in the same way, of course. But there are times when the presence of the past is palpable. The key to the mystery of time seems to be right here at hand, but so far no one has been able to find it.

But in this sacred place, I must tell you that it feels close. A sacred place, by definition, contains all time: past, present, and future. I truly believe in such places, and that this church is such a place.

Everything changes. The ancients knew this as well as we do, or should know. Much as I would like to recapture the past of my time here at Nora Church, I know that I cannot do so, though it feels ever so close. The people I knew are close to me; as a poet has said, with truth, "they are hidden among all that is, and cannot be lost."

It is part of my faith that change is good, though sometimes it is awfully hard to affirm it. Perhaps it is good because it is only the knowledge of change, and the experience of it, that allows us to fully live and to fully appreciate our lives and what we have: all the gifts that are ours today, and which we probably don't even deserve.

It is wonderful to share this time of worship with you, to be with you again, to gaze upon mystery, and to remember. May we all be those witnesses of mortality who come to realize and appreciate the blessings of life. In spite of all the pain and tragedy which life inevitably brings to all of us, let us be thankful for who we are and for what we have, on this day, and in all the days still to come, world without end. So be it. Amen.

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