

Unitarian Universalist Church of Wakefield
September 28, 2014
“Love Lets Go”
Rev. Maddie Sifantus

READING In Blackwater Woods Mary Oliver

Look, the trees
are turning
their own bodies
into pillars
of light,
are giving off the rich
fragrance of cinnamon
and fulfillment,
the long tapers
of cattails
are bursting and floating away over
the blue shoulders
of the ponds,
and every pond,
no matter what its
name is, is
nameless now.
Every year
everything
I have ever learned
in my lifetime
leads back to this: the fires
and the black river of loss
whose other side
is salvation,
whose meaning
none of us will ever know.
To live in this world
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.

*SERMON HYMN 1064 Blue Boat Home

SERMON Love Lets Go

So, here we are, all of us, us “ kindred pilgrim souls,” sailing on this blue boat home of our hymn. Here we are, you and I, sailing through our lives, young and old, and in-between, navigating the rapids, drifting through the placid pools, looking for the horizon, looking back at where we have been. Here we are, sometimes adrift with no wind in our sails, wondering if we will ever move again. And here we go, shooting ahead on a wicked wind, pushing us hither and yon to we know not where.

Here we are with our ship’s companions, companions of all colors, of all interests, of all theological backgrounds. We have our companions here in this space and our companions in the wider community of Wakefield, and our still wider community of our nation and the whole blue boat of our earth. Here we are with our companions, casting questions into the deep, into the void, into the tradition. Here, with each other, we attempt to live those questions into the answers, or some answers, or any answers—as we sail together, walk together, crawl together, grieve together, rejoice together. As we care for each other and give thanks for the waves upholding us and our sailor songs which can carry us—one day—home.

Almost six years ago—on October 19, 2008, to be exact—I began my sermon with those exact words, after singing our now favorite hymn, *Blue Boat Home*, which that day was an insert in the service because this congregation did not own the teal hymnal, *Singing the Journey*. There have been a lot of changes for all of us since that day. For one thing, when I came on board, I brought with me all my copies of the teal hymnal that I had used to help introduce it on its publication

at various churches and meetings. This past summer we bought more copies with funds from the Memorial Fund so we would have enough for everyone. Speaking of the Memorial Fund, there are beloved fellow travelers who were there that fall day who have since taken their final journey—I think especially of Serena Murley who sat *right there*, Ann Murfitt who sat *right there*, Mike Blake who sat *right there*, and Marcia Calvin—with the nametag that read Lucy’s mother—who sat *right over there*. Then there have been family members who we have said goodbye to within these walls—both of Janine’s parents, Kelli’s brother and members of the greater Wakefield community. There have been joys and sorrows and milestones shared as we have walked together on the path of our faith.

There have been child dedications—I think of Morgan Fae, Sarah Trow’s daughter, the Gallagher children and other members of the community who wanted their children dedicated in an historic liberal congregation like ours where each child is a holy child. There have been flower communions, Advent vespers, Maundy Thursdays and Easters. There have been Winter Solstices and Christmas Eves, Common Reads and auction sermons. There have been fabulous Standing Room Only concerts and Rise Up Singing. There has been meditation and Singing Meditation. There are been new members coming through the door, like Joe Cresta who is now your President, and old, beloved members such as Bob Hooker who recently moved away. There has been a wonderful Bicentennial Year with a fabulous Bicentennial Celebration on April 28, 2013. There has been an ongoing successful Capital Campaign to address the steeple project and which painted the exterior of our historic building. And there have been Water Sundays.

Those of you who were here on September 7th undoubtedly noticed that I was not present as I had been for the last years on our Ingathering Water Sunday when our Affiliate Minister, Ralph Galen, stepped in for me. It turned out that my blue boat had shifted its sailing route over the summer in a most surprising to me—

but not surprising to many—change that has ended with me receiving a call to a full time settled ministry at the Universalist Unitarian Church of Santa Paula, California. It was an odd day for me to not be here among you, bringing water from my summer travels in California, New Hampshire and Rhode Island, as had been my plan when our church year ended in June. Instead I was preaching my second of two sermons to the small, historically Universalist congregation in Santa Paula which was followed by the congregational vote to call me to be their next *settled* minister.

There is a process ministers go through in our denomination which we call “settlement.” You may remember when I came here that October that I had just left my twenty year ministry with the chorus I founded, the Golden Tones. I was at that point poised to go into search for a full time congregation...but life had other plans. I was still recovering from a nearly fatal car accident and it turned out that doing a short part-time parish consulting ministry was better for me. I came that day to fill the pulpit and your then president, Wendy Dennis, took me out to Harrington’s for lunch. She asked me if I could help out—that you were between ministers and realizing that you couldn’t or didn’t go it alone with all lay led services. Sure, I said to her and to myself—I can go into search next year. So it was that I came for six months and have stayed for six years, because I saw a vision we could work on together and because I fell in love with all of you.

We have done a lot together in these years. We have had a wonderful Thanksgiving Interfaith Service with a combined choir in this space, the first Thanksgiving after I arrived. We have done some visioning with the Gathered Here groups of a couple of years ago and putting leaves on a tree of life, saying what this place means to us. Shortly after I arrived, the Outreach Committee formed, a new brochure was created and three ministries of this congregation were established: Welcoming, Social Justice and Music. We took part in events in the

town. The board created a Behavioral Covenant. And we ate together, we laughed together and sometimes we cried together such as in our special service after the Marathon Bombing.

As Carl Rogers said in his book, *On Becoming a Person*, “Life, at its best, is a flowing, changing process in which nothing is fixed. I find that when life is richest and most rewarding it is a flowing process.” No matter how much we try to “fix” it, to keep our boundaries firm, to keep our family safe, and everything orderly—we are actually in the flow. The trick is to have all hands on deck, working together to navigate the maelstrom, caring for each other and outcomes. But even when that is the case, it is sometimes time for one at the helm to move on. It is such a time for me.

May Sarton, a particular favorite writer of mine once wrote:

Now I become myself. It's taken
Time, many years and places,
I have been dissolved and shaken,
Worn other people's faces,
Run madly, as if Time were there,
Terribly old, crying a warning,
"hurry, you will be dead before -----"
(What? Before you reach the morning?
or the end of the poem, is clear?
Or love safe in the walled city?)
Now to stand still, to be here,
Feel my own weight and density!.....
Now there is time and Time is young.
O, in this single hour I live
All of myself and do not move
I, the pursued, who madly ran,
Stand still, stand still, and stop the Sun!
Well, we know that none of us can stop the sun.

Now there is time but time does *not* stay forever young nor do any of us.
When I signed on for my six months, my son and family were just moving to

California. They had lived in Manhattan for many years and then in Princeton but the west and sunnier weather called them. Now they have been there six years with no signs of moving back East. They started asking me to move probably months after their arrival. But I felt called to be here, I was not ready to leave my circle of friends and colleagues, and, as I told them, I have to have a job! As much as I love my grandchildren, I was not ready to be a babysitter and give up my calling to ministry. And I was a Northern California girl—Hollywood was just not my thing. But last spring I knew that serving two small congregations at the same time was not going to be sustainable for me in the long run, no matter how much energy I had. And I became aware that two California congregations were looking for settled ministers so I clicked on them in April, just to see. I went into the whole adventure with no expectations but full of discernment and openness. I went out to Hollywood for my birthday and did a phone interview with Santa Paula while I was there. I enjoyed talking to them but didn't take a ride up to see the place. They were interviewing other people and I was only visiting for three days. When I did hear anything, I thought, oh well, and went about the rest of the church year and planning the next as I do each May.

Then all of a sudden I got a call right before I was to leave for our General Assembly in Providence...on my house phone. No one calls my housephone but fundraisers and people trying to sell me something. I heard a voice saying that it was MaryBeth from the Santa Paula search committee. I had totally stopped thinking about them so had a pause to figure out who it was I was talking to, so I missed what she first said but I figured out they were still looking at me. She said that my "name kept coming up." Off the cuff I said, "You mean like a bad penny?!" Hardly the response for a potential new ministry or job interview! She asked me if I was still interested in their congregation and I heard myself saying YES. From that point on, things sped into top gear. At General Assembly I was

talking to the District Executive from the Pacific Southwest District while sitting outside the Convention Center. I had a pre-planned trip to visit Nigel and family the second half of July but ended spending one weekend pre-candidating for Santa Paula—spending the weekend in the town, interviewing, meeting the search committee and then preaching in a neutral pulpit at First Unitarian Los Angeles. I could tell you a lot more about all of it, like how many signs there were that this was a place I could call home but the short story was that by the end of that week, when I was up visiting the former minister of this congregation, Mary Louise Schmalz, they called and asked me to be their candidate.

So it was that I needed to go back for Candidating Week as soon as possible. Part of Candidating week is two Sunday services with meetings before the first one, meetings all week between them and then the congregational meeting to vote to call after the second one. The first Sunday, Labor Day weekend, my son, Nigel, and family came to the service. It was the first time they had ever seen me lead a service, other than the Bicentennial Celebration Nigel played the drums for. How wonderful for me to have them there! And as most of you read, the vote was 110% to call me. And I felt like this place will be my home. That is saying a lot since I have lived in my house in Wayland for over 38 years.

So it is exciting and more than a little sad for me. I have loved being here for almost six years. I have loved all of you. But there comes a time when love lets go. And when it lets go there is feelings of loss, mine and yours. As our Wayside Pulpit says in words by Greta Crosby this week, “Loss makes artists of us all as we weave new patterns to the fabric of our lives.” We will be weaving new patterns here for the next three months, you and I. We will be carrying out the visioning which is already underway. We will be planning for moving forward with the help of the New England Region of the UUA. Evidence of that is their representative, the Rev. Parisa Parsa, who is with us this morning. It remains to be seen how you will move

forward after Christmas, but know I will help in any way I can to make the transition as smooth as possible. Change can be good. We can be artists, painting new paintings, weaving new fabric, sculpting new constellations. One hope of mine is that we will have a cluster meeting of the congregation presidents and ministers in our area talking about how to better collaborate going forward. Can staff be shared? Can our teenagers attend OWL elsewhere? There is a lot going on in the UUA now about new ways of being together in association.

So what happens now? Now we have the gift of time to say goodbye to one another. Life here will go on, today with the a Conversation of Faith after coffee hour and then a field trip into the UU Urban Ministry with Joe and me. There will once more be a Common Read, Rise Up Singing will be on the third Friday, the Winter Solstice will take place with its battle between the light and dark. Life will go on with different ways for me to visit with each of you. I will tell you how much of a privilege and a joy it has been to be with you. I will tell you how we made real progress here, becoming an outward looking congregation that is well known in the community. I will tell you how you have the strength and skills as a congregation to move forward, with excellent leadership. I will tell you that there are excellent trained interim ministers who will be excited to know that you have already been working on a visioning process.

And one day we will say our last goodbye in this Sanctuary. It will be Christmas Eve and we will sing, as we do every years, Handel's Hallelujah chorus with whoever has come to be with us that evening. It might be a different Hallelujah than usual but I will be singing it knowing that hallelujahs will keep being sung here for years to come, that you will go on caring for each other and caring for our world, bring the message of liberal religion beyond these walls. Yes, I will be sad but I go know you are strong, happier and healthier and that I am going where I can have a more sustainable life with one congregation and my

family nearby. I have loved you—and I do still—I have held you against my bones, which were still broken when I arrived but are mostly healed now, and now it is time for that love to let go and go on to my next calling.

May the love the love we share surround us and move through us...

CLOSING WORDS

Mary Oliver

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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.