Almost sixteen years ago,  
at Arlington Street Church in Boston,  
at my ordination to the UU ministry,  
there were a number of guest speakers gathered  
to bring greetings from various parts of my life.

The Rev. Dr. Dorothy Austin was on hand to represent Harvard.

Dorothy was and is one of my favourite people.

She was also the Associate Minister in the Memorial Church in Harvard Yard,  
and would routinely ask me to lead Morning Prayer there—  
a worship tradition that goes back almost four-hundred years.

Changed significantly from the earlier Puritan practice,  
these short services today, held each morning at 8:30,  
come with a grand organ, a glorious choir, and a five-minute homily,  
sometimes delivered by students or professors or local clergy,  
or even the occasional celebrity.

I was delighted to be a part of it.

And even prouder, when entering my name  
into the big dusty log-book as the speaker for the day,  
to be the first person, apparently in four centuries,  
to record that I preached on a non-biblical, non-Christian text.

Instead, I noted that my text came from the *Dhammapada,*  
an ancient collection of sayings of the Buddha.

While in seminary, I took every course Dorothy taught—  
each of them playfully renamed by students as: “Crying for Credit.”

All of her courses focused on some aspect of death and dying—  
from studying the hard fact of it  
to the bittersweet legacy that grief leaves on our very human hearts.

She had us write our own eulogies.
And deliver them.

She taught us how to manage a casket at a funeral, and how to gauge the wind when scattering ashes.

She would send us alerts and expect us to show up in the Memorial Church anytime there was a funeral on the schedule.

At my ordination, Dorothy’s remarks were planned to last only a couple of minutes.

I frankly expected the dry, standard fare that is so often offered on such occasions.

But, speaking near the top of the service, Dorothy stole the show.

And she spoke for almost twenty minutes.

And while I recall little else from that service, I will always remember the blessing she gave to me as she finally wrapped up her remarks:

She said: “May you have meaningful work to do your whole life long, and may you have life, until your work is done.”

“May you have meaningful work to do your whole life long, and may you have life, until your work is done.”

On what was one of the happiest days of my life, at one of the peak moments I ever expect to experience, as I was culminating years of study and formation and looking to begin my ministry here in Toronto just a couple of months later, Dorothy not only stole the show, but she offered up an intimation of death—and of my death, no less.

It was a true memento mori, a reminder of my own mortality, plunked down right there at the outset of my ordination, right there at the beginning of my ministry.

And it was apt.

It was appropriate because we sometimes need to be reminded that we won’t actually live forever.
And it was appropriate because so much of the work of ministry touches on death and dying, on love and on loss.

Now, well into this strange profession, this “odd and wondrous calling” as it’s sometimes known, I am struck by how much of ministry is bearing witness to change, helping people come to terms with the unfolding of sometimes painful realities, learning to embrace what is, learning to let go and grieve, learning to carry on and heal—and, still, somehow, in the face of it all, finding that sacred capacity within us to feel joy and know ourselves to be alive.

I love the images the poet Li-Young Lee paints in his poem, “From Blossoms,” which, to my ears, hints at all of this:

From blossoms comes
this brown paper bag of peaches
we bought from the boy
at the bend in the road where we turned toward
signs painted Peaches.

From laden boughs, from hands,
from sweet fellowship in the bins,
comes nectar at the roadside, succulent
peaches we devour, dusty skin and all,
comes the familiar dust of summer, dust we eat.

O, to take what we love inside,
to carry within us an orchard, to eat
not only the skin, but the shade,
not only the sugar, but the days, to hold
the fruit in our hands, adore it, then bite into
the round jubilance of peach.

There are days we live
as if death were nowhere
in the background; from joy
to joy to joy, from wing to wing,
from blossom to blossom to
impossible blossom, to sweet impossible blossom.
Those of you who’ve heard me preach over the years, may well realise that this poem is incredibly important to me—if for no other reason than the fact that I offer it up to you about as often as I can possibly get away with!

Because there are those “days we live as if death were nowhere in the background.”

Days that are part of our birthright, part of our inheritance.

Along with everything we must endure with this being human—the hardship and the heartache—we mortals have also been made to feel joy, to revel in the wonder of life’s sweet impossible blossoms.

But, obviously enough, joy and blossoms are only part of the deal.

All that eventually brings us to grief must also be given its due.

Because when we don’t, when we deny death or do whatever we can to avoid grief, those feelings end up separating us from the fullness of life.

It’s so seductive to think we can outwit or outrun grief, but it always catches up with us one way or another, and when not met, when not accepted, when not processed, it, paradoxically, keeps us from being as alive as we could be.

I bring this up today, a couple of months after announcing my resignation, and with only a couple of months before my time at First comes to an end, because there is a goodbye looming on the horizon—one that for many of us, and certainly for me, brings some very real grief.

And I bring this up today, because how we say goodbye will impact the well-being of this congregation in the coming years as you move into the next chapters of ministry here at First.

The UU handbook on ministerial transitions says: “The most important and underrated act of ministry is leaving well.”

Behind that short statement, giving rise to its needing to be said in the first place,
is a world of hurt, countless congregations and clergy left with unresolved grief because they didn’t know how to say goodbye, or they weren’t able to do it well.

Too often, the results of this are serious congregational conflicts around the corner and rocky future ministries that usually end earlier than they should have.

The handbook also notes that while great emphasis is put on celebrating the start of a ministry, congregations and often clergy, too, can easily put far out of mind the obvious fact that someday, this same chapter of ministry will come to an end.

I know some of you thought I would be here forever.

I know some of you thought that I would at least be here long enough to see you through to the end of your lives.

I, for one, am glad and grateful that those of you in this category are still very much alive and with us.

And, at the same time, what most pains me upon leaving is that I won’t be the one to see you through to the end. And I am sorry for that.

As I said a couple of months ago, my ultimate commitment must be to the congregation as a whole.

I know I am not the right minister for your next chapter.

I can see the work ahead, and I know I’m not the best match for what needs to be done.

I also don’t see another off-ramp for several more years, which would be far too long for me to have stayed—and would, I believe, be to the detriment of this congregation I so dearly love.

And so there is real and painful grief that I am actively working through to accept this.

And I know some of you are, as well, with all the stages it brings: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance.

This isn’t necessarily a linear process.
And you may find yourself cycling through those feelings, or holding several of them at the same time.

I know I have.

That’s why I have found it helpful to be reminded of the wisdom that exists within our tradition to help us move through this time.

A few years ago, speaking at the installation service for a new ministry, Kendyl Gibbons, one of our great ministers, said¹:

An installation like this shares with a wedding the same dynamic of joyful connection and hope-filled promises for the future; a covenant of fidelity and support, intended to sustain the adventure of mutual discovery and joint accomplishment.

It is wonderful; a high moment of human intention to be sure; deserving of celebration.

And yet, like a wedding, these high hopes and noble promises can only have their end in some form of sadness.

It can be sudden and dramatic tragedy—the minister dies unexpectedly, leaving the congregation heart-broken and grieving.

Overwhelming conflict comes to a head by ousting the minister, leaving bitterness and anger.

It can be a slow, debilitating erosion of integrity or interest—the people stop coming, the minister stops caring.

It can be nobody’s fault—the local employer closes shop, and demographics doom the congregation.

It can be spectacular moral failure—the minister seduces a member of the church, or the treasurer embezzles the endowment and refuses to pay the minister.

Even in the very best case scenario—

the minister enters a well-planned… retirement
after years of loyal and skillful work—
[and, yet,] both the congregation and the minister will still experience
a period of poignant loss, confusion, and sorrow.

The longer and more successful the ministry, [she says,]
the more painful that eventual separation.

It’s the same with weddings;
the story only ends either with one spouse grieving the loss of the other,
or else with both grieving for the loss of the love
that had once brought them joy together.

There is no fixing this; it’s inherent in the proposition to begin with.

The sustenance of the particular connections
that give shape and meaning to our lives
is always balanced by the grief that comes with losing that bond,
either to mortality or entropy.

…..

As long as we are creatures in a world of matter and energy,
we know at some level that everything is temporary.

There are people who look to religion for an exception to this law,
for some eternal truth or unfailing love that endures
when all else dissolves, and that is indeed what many faith traditions
promise.

[Gibbons adds:] My own life-long religious humanism takes a different
approach.

It seems to me that faith
is not about the search for something that never fails,
but rather the affirmation that the experience made possible
through connection, relationship, and community
is worth the pain of inevitable loss.

I cannot prove this proposition, of course[, she says.]

If you were to say to me,
“I have been there, and the pain of bereavement, or betrayal,
is far greater than any joy I ever found,” I would not argue with you—
only you can know the dimensions of your own griefs and gladnesses.

What I can do—what we all do, I suspect, in this strange vocation of ministry—is testify.

I can tell you the stories of those who have given themselves to love and to covenant, and been so enriched that they would do it again and again, despite knowing that heartache is part of the bargain.

So, Dearly Beloved, this is a time of some heartache.

A time we would do well to acknowledge and to honour.

I have found myself in recent weeks actively putting my affairs in order.

In taking my leave, there is much I need to do to ensure the congregation is on a firm footing for the coming transition.

And, in taking my leave, there is also a part of me that is dying—dying to some of the dreams I carried with me to this place, dying to this marvelous web of relationships that means so much to me, dying to the future that you will move into without me.

Life is full of deaths, some small, some not-so-small. But all of them the outcome, the output, of change, which is inevitable.

So, how, then, do we manage life’s many losses? How do we say goodbye in a way that can help us to grieve?

So much of the wisdom that pertains to the process of dying can also be helpful when dealing with other kinds of loss.

Dr. Ira Byock, whose work across several decades has focussed on the work of dying, speaks of “The Four Things”—the four statements we need to have said to our nearest and dearest before we die:2

Please forgive me.
I forgive you.

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Thank you.
I love you.

These four statements—both simple
and possibly not-so-simple, all at the same time—
come from Byock’s observations
of people reaching the end
with this work left undone.

Here’s the thing, though.

We don’t have to be on our death-beds for these statements to matter.

They are relevant whether we’re the one dying, or the one losing someone we love.

They are relevant to those turning-point moments in life,
when there is some parting of ways,
some change that brings with it the need to say a meaningful goodbye.

And, so, they are relevant for me in this moment of transition,
and maybe also for you.

So, today I want to say that if, across the years,
I have caused any of you hurt in any way, I am sorry.

And I would like to know more about what happened,
so that I can apologise to you personally.

And if you feel a need to apologise to me for something along the way,
know that I am committed to forgiving and beginning again.

And as for saying thank you and telling you I love you,
you will be hearing more of this from me in different ways in the coming weeks.

We are in a time of needing to honour this transition
by celebrating what we have come to mean to one another.

In this, we need not save it up to the very end.

Indeed, it might be more helpful
if we begin to live more fully into this change now.

My predecessor, Mark Morrison-Reed, gave a very important address to our
colleagues some twenty years ago about the art of leaving a congregation.
He talked about the necessity of honouring the boundaries that must be in place after a minister departs.

Boundaries that help make the changed relationship real. Boundaries that help the congregation create the heart space required for the next ministry to take root and flourish.

This is work I am deeply committed to, and it is work I am required to do to honour the professional guidelines of UU ministry.

In the coming weeks, I’ll be saying more about this in First Light.

For now, though, and in the next two months, let us attend to this transition by saying what we need to say and doing what we need to do.

Let us live into a good goodbye. A good ending.

And not just here and with me, but in every part of our lives.

For this is the work of life—no matter how long we have.

The work of honouring the sacred bonds in the great web of being.

Celebrating with joy all that we cherish.

Loving and letting go, savouring life, even though we know it will end. Savouring life, because we know it will not last forever.

In this, in this your sacred, saving work, I leave you with a blessing:

“May you have meaningful work to do your whole life long, and may you have life, until your work is done.”