The beloved Canadian singer-songwriter Gordon Lightfoot departed his "one wild and precious life" on May the 1st this year. He was 84 years old.

His very well-known song "Early Morning Rain" was written in 1964...just after my life began.

As I grew up, the song was an almost continual presence, not only on the radio but at Girl Guide camp, in the basement rec rooms of my friends... and virtually everywhere a guitar was played.

The song was popular not only because of its catchy melody and easy-to-play chords.

"Early Morning Rain" spoke to the universal human longing we so often feel, to be somewhere we're not.

The nagging feeling that we should be on our way to somewhere different...yet we are stuck here on the ground.

The song's storyline also alluded to the ways we sometimes look for escape and fulfillment through externals... such as alcohol and sex.

In a line that sounds quaint today, and perhaps indeed inappropriate, Lightfoot sang: "The liquor tasted good and the women all were fast."

(I adapted that lyric when I learned it at age twelve.)

But the song speaks of the heady excitement of the night before...followed by the cold rain of the morning after.

In the sober reality of the light of day, the narrator sings:
This old airport's got me down,
It's no earthly good to me,
Cause I'm stuck here on the ground
Cold and drunk as I can be.

You can't jump a jet plane
Like you can a freight train
So I'd best be on my way
In the early morning rain.

(We'll have a chance to sing the song together a bit later.)

Now, Gordon Lightfoot grew up in Orillia and later lived in Toronto's Rosedale neighbourhood.

He didn't jump freight trains, and of course, songs need not be autobiographical.

But through story and metaphor, they often tap into human experiences we all share.

We've probably all felt the longing to escape at times... along with the grudging acceptance that we are stuck in the here-and-now, whether we like it or not.

The Irish poet Padraig O'Tuama put it very well:

There are the places you wish to go,
there are the places you desperately wish you never left,
there are the places you imagine you should be,
and there is the place called here.¹

¹ Padraig O'Tuama, *In the Shelter* (Broadleaf, 2015), p. 24
I think it's significant, too, that Gordon Lightfoot wrote "Early Morning Rain" when he was living in Los Angeles and looking after his five-month-old son.

It's said that he put the baby down for a nap in his crib, thinking "I'm going to write myself a tune."²

As anyone who's been at home with a baby understands, there are many hours when we might feel stuck....

When we might long for a life that is larger and more expansive.

By writing the song, Gordon Lightfoot brought that longing into consciousness.

It would have been valuable even if it were only for him.

But as turned out, of course, the song provided a commentary for many people's lives...with all of the arrivals and departures and longings that every life contains.

"Early Morning Rain" is, of course, a pop song that emerged in our primarily secular culture.

There's nothing religious about it.

But the longing to go "where the morning rain don't fall and the sun always shines"...

The wish that we could rise above the clouds of our human limitations...

Well, this is a familiar spiritual or even religious theme.

One that connect us with other people in all times and places.

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Early_Morning_Rain
It's a theme that leads us into deeper exploration of what it means to be human... and how we are called, Life or God or Spirit... into deeper engagement with the world.

As we wonder upon such questions as "What is calling me at this stage in life?" or "What is this restlessness that has arrived in me?"....

We may be led more surely toward our soul's truthfulness... and our ability to live and love well, wherever we happen to be.

We've heard a few examples today of the poetry of Rumi, the Sufi poet who lived in the 12th Century.

He once said: "That which you are seeking is ever seeking after thee."

"That which you are seeking is ever seeking after thee."

That is to say: the divine longing that calls us beyond ourselves is always meeting us exactly where we are.

We may think we're arriving and departing... and in many ways, we are.

Yet in the process of these arrivals and departures we may also find a place of stillness...or even peace.

In her poem, *The Summer Day*, where she affirms the value of going nowhere in particular, Mary Oliver called it the sense of "being idle and blessed."³

There's a poem we often use in the Winter Solstice service here at First.

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Right now, we're just a few days past the Summer Solstice: the point at which daylight and darkness are perfectly balanced...before the days become shorter.

It's interesting to think back to the Winter Solstice, when we gathered to celebrate the return of the sun.

These are words from the Irish poet T.S. Eliot that have often been included in our Winter Solstice service:

"At the still point of the turning world.  
Neither flesh nor fleshless;"

"Neither from nor towards;  
at the still point, there the dance is."

"But neither arrest nor movement."

"And do not call it fixity,  
Where past and future are gathered."

"Neither movement from nor towards,  
Neither ascent nor decline."

"Except for the point, the still point,  
There would be no dance,"

"and there is only the dance."

In 2009, the writer Alain de Botton was given the incredible job of "writer in residence" at the Heathrow Airport in London, England.

This vantage point allowed him to observe the dance of human comings-and-goings in ways that were particularly meaningful.
In a passage that echoes the familiar Zen wisdom "Wherever you go, there you are" de Botton writes:

*As David lifted a suitcase onto the conveyor belt, he came to an unexpected and troubling realisation:*

*That he was bringing himself with him on his holiday.*

*Whatever the qualities of the Dimitra Residence [his destination], they were going to be critically undermined by the fact that he would be in the villa as well."

De Botton also observes that “Travel agents would be wiser to ask us what we hope to change about our lives rather than simply where we wish to go." 4

He also highlights what I've long felt is one of the most moving theatres of human experience: the airport's arrivals and departures lounges.

As someone who left home to study at university, and then spent the next thirty years flying home to see my parents, I witnessed and experienced arrivals and departures many times.

The emotional parting at the departures gate... feeling guilty about having left home in the first place... and then turning to wave goodbye at the last possible second after passing through security.

Then, months later on the other side, joyfully reuniting.

Riding down the arrivals escalator, spotting my parents waiting for me, and seeing which of my fellow passengers matched up with people waiting for them.

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4 Excerpts from Alain de Botton, *A Week at the Airport: A Heathrow Diary.*
Needless to say, not everyone is met at the airport with a welcoming embrace.

But the longing to be met with such a welcome may be a universal human experience.

As Alain de Botton tells it:

Even if our loved ones have assured us
that they will be busy at work,
even if they told us they hated us for going
traveling in the first place,
even if they left us last June
or died twelve and a half years ago,
it is impossible not to experience
a shiver of a sense that they may have come along anyway,
just to surprise us and make us feel special.

Summer is often a time of arrivals and departures... though many of us now are intentionally reducing our air travel as its harmful impact on the earth is now well-known.

Here at First Unitarian, we've recently witnessed the departure of Reverend Shawn Newton-Gauthier--as he has moved across the country.

Meanwhile, I will be departing from parish ministry in the fall, but remaining in the same geographical area... where I will be singing and guest-preaching.

There have been many "arrivals" and "departures" in my life.

Many times when I've taken what appeared to be a wrong turn--that eventually did lead to where I needed to be.

Throughout the comings-and-goings I have tried, though inconsistently of course, to maintain an awareness of what T.S. Eliot called "the still point."
The homing centre that I find upon quiet reflection... that guides me toward a life of meaning.

This summer, I'll be taking a bit of time in many services to invite you to reflect on the day's themes...so let's do that now.

I invite you to take a minute or so to jot down or simply reflect on significant arrivals or departures in your life...

Times when you arrived at something or somewhere important...

Or times when a particular person arrived and made a difference in your life...

You may also reflect on departures that have been significant... either your own or someone else's...

And perhaps what carried you through those departures.

Take a few minutes to jot down a few meaningful arrivals and/or departures, and put them in the chat if you wish.

In a few minutes, I'll lift up a few of them…

Thank you all, for your thoughtful reflections today.

In the reading "The Guest House," Rumi recommends that we do something completely counter-intuitive.

That we welcome the arrival of all who enter the "house" of our life...all the unwanted guests of difficult emotions, painful experiences, unexpected events that divert us from our ego's cherished itineraries.
These arrivals, he tells us, are in fact "guides from beyond"...teachers that assist us in growing in the directions we're meant to grow.

Could it be possible, that the unwanted arrivals carry wisdom with them?

Or, that a departure was necessary, in order for something new to arrive?

I hear these possibilities in the reflections you've offered today...and in all the ways that our arrivals and departures are carrying First Unitarian to a new place.