

“Setting Out”

September 16, 2018

First Parish in Lincoln

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Readings:

Just As The Calendar Began to Say Summer  
by Mary Oliver

*I went out of the schoolhouse fast  
and through the gardens and to the woods,  
and spent all summer forgetting what I'd been taught —*

*two times two, and diligence, and so forth,  
how to be modest and useful, and how to succeed and so forth,  
machines and oil and plastic and money and so forth.*

*By fall I had healed somewhat, but was summoned back  
to the chalky rooms and the desks, to sit and remember*

*the way the river kept rolling its pebbles,  
the way the wild wrens sang though they hadn't a penny in the bank,  
the way the flowers were dressed in nothing but light*

Reading #2: Genesis

*And then God spoke to Abraham*

*“Now the Lord said to Abraham*

*‘Go --*

*from your country*

*And your kindred*

*And your father's house*

*To the land that I will show you*

*I will make of you a great nation*

*And I will bless you*

*And make your name great*

*So that you will be a blessing....*

*And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.”*

I walk my dog in the wet grass at the conservation land near my house and look around.

The signs are unmistakable--

In the community garden in the field

Pumpkins ripening

Tomatoes weighing down the vines

Stands of sunflowers stretch up tall to the sky.

At home my garden is its usual late-summer exuberant tangle

Pink and red and orange zinnias, basil, sage, tomatoes, kale,

Bees buzzing, weeds everywhere!

At night, the crickets grow louder, or I think they do.

(“Do crickets grow louder in the fall?” I ask my son. “Google it!” he replies.)

We sit around the fire in the backyard,

Listening to the sounds of a late summer evening--

Darkness drops down, all of a sudden it seems

Like a great shade has been pulled down.

In town, school buses rumble,

Traffic takes new patterns.

And we come here, for Rally Sunday, as families have been doing for years.

The wheel of the season turns

And it is becoming autumn again.

“Live in each season as it passes;” Thoreau said

“Breathe the air, drink the drink, taste the fruit, and resign yourself to the influence of the earth.”

We blew about on the winds of summer and now we’re back

Summoned back to the schoolroom as Mary Oliver would have it

Back to chalky rooms and desks,

But still remembering—thank goodness—

“The way the river kept rolling its pebbles”

And other things from summer.

We’re back,

Or rather, *you* are back, and I’m brand new,

The “new kid on the block” someone in choir told me this morning!

Still getting my feet under me.

Some of you grew up here, others have come for years

Some are new (or new--er)

In this church

Although I’m beginning to wonder if Lincoln isn’t a bit like Vermont

Isn’t it a point of pride there for families who have been there 7 generations

To claim they are the “real” Vermonters and everyone else is a flatlander?

Today we are setting out--

Interim minister and congregation

Standing on the threshold of a new journey.

As I’ve told some of you, I love being an interim minister

This vocation that found me after many years of being a settled minister in a wonderful big bustling congregation just a town away in Concord

In the past five years I have served communities in Gloucester, Lexington and Franklin

Each one very different from the next

Shaped by the land where it’s situated, the history of that particular place, as well as the character and culture of the people who go there now.

Gloucester-- the first Universalist church in America

Founded in the late 1770s during the American Revolution

When Cape Ann was blockaded by the British and the people were starving.

The Gloucester church literally began with people giving food to the hungry  
Trying to live out the love of the God they held so dear.

Lexington was the meetinghouse on the green  
Where colonists came to debate and organize  
And then, on April 19<sup>th</sup> when the British marched into town,  
The place that opened its doors and took in the wounded  
As shots erupted right outside on the grass right outside its front door.

Franklin has rural roots,  
One of a hundred small Universalist congregations that sprouted up  
In the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century up and down the East Coast  
On farms villages and mill towns where life was harsh and  
Hardworking people needed a sense of God, near and real.

And now I come here to Lincoln  
And will learn from you the story of this congregation—learn about your roots,  
how you got started, what changed, how things developed.

I'll ask you what you think is in your DNA here.

I'm kind of a history nerd as you will learn and so I've peeked into Charlie  
Styron's book

Read a little about families gathering at the Flints' house in the 1730s

The congregation organizing in 1747

But that's barely scratching the surface I know

I have a lot to learn but sitting here in this building, this place built in 1842

Right there at the height of Transcendentalism

What Van Wyck Brooks called "the literary flowering of New England"

I have to marvel—to be honest, it gives me the shivers to think of this building

Built in 1842 the same year that Emerson lost his five year old son to scarlatina

And a twenty-five year old Henry David Thoreau lost his beloved brother John.

To be in a building from 1842, it's amazing.

I love to travel and sometimes when I start a new interim ministry

It feels like I've just arrived in a brand new country.

There's a new language to learn

Local customs, traditions, nuances

How do things get decided here, how do new things start and other things come to an end. What do you do for fun?

What do you love about your community and what bugs you?

I'll want to hear more about your experience these last few years as you said goodbye to your long-time minister Roger Paine

Then welcomed a new minister, Manish, with high hopes

I'll want to hear about your ministry with Manish

About the circumstances leading up to his departure last June.

From my initial conversations with the Parish Committee, the Deacons, and some of you,

I've heard there are a range of emotions here.

Some people are grieving, others feels a sense of relief.

That is normal. All completely normal after the departure of a minister.

In the world of ministry, tenure short of 5 years is unusual.

Some call it a "failed ministry"

Although I don't really like that language

Because to me,

Ministry is something we all do—we do ministry together, minister and congregation.

Ministry holds something of the divine, something of love

And however long or short, there's goodness in it.

That said, short ministries do carry with them pain.

As some of you who served on the last Search Committee know

It's an enormous investment of time, effort and resources

To search for, vet, and bring a candidate forward.

For the minister, there is the wear and tear of moving his or her family

Sinking down roots

Investing spiritual and emotional energy

Only to have to pick up and do that all over again.

Short ministries take their toll.

And it's normal that there is a whole range of emotions now.

In the next week or so, the Parish Committee, in consultation with me,

Will form a Transition Team

That will guide this work we are going to do together these next two years.

This is a time to take stock, reflect on what's happened, learn what we can, and prepare to move forward.

It's a time to listen to one another,

Even if, maybe especially if,

We have very different interpretations of what has transpired

In 1898 William James wrote a little essay called "On a Certain Blindness in Others"

His biographer, Robert Richardson, says it was James' favorite of all his short writings.

In it, he quotes Wordsworth, Whitman and Tolstoy but essentially says something very simple

That one of the hardest things we human beings can do is try to really put ourselves in another's shoes.

Most of us cannot, or cannot easily, enter into the lives or points of view of people unlike ourselves. In other words, we have "certain blindness."

Recognizing that does not mean we give up the attempt. But perhaps it helps us have some caution, some humility, as we listen. We approach it with more care, some caution and humility about our own limitations.

In other words, if you experience a minister's preaching as one thing, it may be hard to truly understand what that same preaching might mean to another.

If you experience a person as spiritually alive, authentic, even "holy"--

Or you experience a person as intransigent—

It may be hard to understand someone else who feels differently.

It might be hard to take in another's viewpoint.

And so forth.

So this is a time for reflection, listening to one another, acknowledging our own limitations as we do so.

I've been doing this work a while and I trust that you—like other communities I have served—

Have within you, as a congregation, what you need

To heal, rebuild trust, and move forward.

I'm not saying there won't be white water rapids at times

Or that it will be easy or that it will be quick

But you'll get there. We'll get there.

Emerson said the powers of the soul are commensurate with its needs.

In other words, we have within us what we need.

I believe that is true for congregations as well as for individuals.

You as a community have what you need inside of you to reflect, to grieve, to mend, to move on.

So today, we stand on a threshold, you and me.

About to embark on a journey

And I'm thinking of that ONE word that God said to Abraham

There at the very beginning of Genesis

That started off the whole complicated

Sometimes humorous, sometimes heart wrenching story

Of this people that God had chosen

Who wandered in the wilderness

Were stubborn, complained, got it wrong so many times

This foundational story of our faith

I'm indebted to Thomas Merton, the 20<sup>th</sup> century mystic and monk who gave a talk to the novitiate on this passage from Genesis and helped me to see it in a new way.

One word.

“Go”

“Go” said God

“Go to the land that I will show you.”

Leave all that you know.

Leave the place where things are familiar

Where you know what you are doing (or think you do)

The first word of the story is not about settling down

It's not about being safe or secure or stable

Things being nice and comfy and cozy

No

The beginning lies not in security

Not in staying with what you know

Not in staying put

The beginning lies in setting out

Lies in starting something new

The beginning of the story starts with a journey

And it is a journey

*Away* from what you know

Towards what you don't know

It is a journey that God beckons us to take

That God invites us on

And yes it's a journey into the unknown and that can be scary but the promise is

You will not be alone

God will accompany you

Your fellow pilgrims will be by your side

That is the arc of the spiritual journey  
God is always beckoning us into the unknown  
Asking us to let go  
Of what we know  
And step out into that place of ambiguity  
That place where we do not know  
I would bet that you're a bit like me  
You like to know  
You've built a life on knowing

But like it or not that is the essential arc of the spiritual journey  
The ability to hear the call  
The desire to listen when God beckons  
The courage to set out into the unknown  
We don't travel alone  
We travel with the One who has called us  
And we travel with our fellow pilgrims

Today we stand on a threshold  
Setting out on a journey together  
And I'll close with these words by the Irish poet John O'Donohue:

“When you travel,  
A new silence  
Goes with you,...  
And if you listen,  
You will hear  
What your heart would  
Love to say.

A journey can become a sacred thing.

Make sure, before you go,  
To bless your going forth . . . .

May you travel in an awakened way

Gathered wisely into your inner ground

That you may not waste the invitations

Which wait along the way to transform you.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “A Sacred Journey” by John O’Donohue, *To Bless the Space Between Us*.