

“Everything You Need

All Souls Unitarian Universalist Congregation

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Story: Magic Wanda's Travel Emporium by Joshua Searle-White (adapted)

Reflection

In a few weeks, I'm going to be moving. Like the young people in our story I've been doing some packing. I started with things that I know I need to bring, things that are really important, but that I don't expect to use in the next couple of months. It was just a box or two a day. And then one day, I noticed this pile of carefully-packed boxes - none of which contained anything I was actually using.

Some things (like winter boots) make sense. I'm grateful that I don't need them right now, but I'm likely to want them again. Or all those oddly-constructed pottery bowls my children made when they were small – those are not negotiable. But when I really looked, I found some things that were once important to me, but have become less so over time, and I hadn't noticed. Like a dress I used to feel really good in, but we've grown apart. Or notes from old workshops, and books that I really can't imagine reading again but, maybe? Or the dog items that don't fit my one remaining dog. These things held memories, some were hard to let go of, but the pile is smaller now, easier to carry, and the treasures from the past that really matter are no longer buried under quite so many things that don't.

A move across multiple state lines is an obvious time to consider what we really need, and to lighten our load. I am leaving, and I've discovered that moving boxes to Maryland (where my next ministry is) is not cheap. But you who are staying here are also leaving - today, tomorrow, and every day after that. And in some ways, your leaving may be more challenging than mine.

I am moving to a new place with people I haven't met, in a congregation that has its own way of doing things. I have no expectation that anything will be the same as what I once knew. But for those of you who are beginning to re-enter physical spaces that you used to know well, with people you used to be with often, there can be a perhaps unconscious assumption that you'll pick up where you left off - that things will be “back to normal.” We will, once again gather in person, crowds and even singing will happen - the CDC's sudden shift on mask-wearing this week is encouraging. But the world is not the same. This church is not the same. And we are not the same.

The assumption of a return to a world that was can be a map. An idea of what the world looks like; not the actual world. Magic Wanda would tell us to be careful, to consider it, but to find our own way.

After 14 months of pandemic, and what some have called a "racial reckoning," we may have learned a few things about how to be a church, how to show up for one another, and how to live as faithful people and communities in this world. We may have discovered routines, thought patterns, and ways of being that don't work as well anymore. Not everything we carry is still as valuable as it once was.

The question is, in this time of emerging, will we intentionally look at our stuff and make conscious decisions about what's most important and what to let go of? Or will we be so wedded to expectations of normalcy that the future just happens to us?

My wish for you, in your leaving, is the tenacity to hold on to what you really care about, and the courage to lighten your load, to get rid of ways of doing church and ways of thinking about your place in the world that no longer align with who you are, and the world you're in. And I wish for you discernment, curiosity, a willingness to allow yourself to change, and deep conversations about things that matter. At the annual meeting (today, after this service) you'll hear about one opportunity for that discernment and those conversations.

My wish for you, and for all of us, is that we will not set our sights on a return to what we think of as normal, but instead commit to living this life with as much love, kindness, courage, and joy as we possibly can - whatever that may look like in the world to come. And through it all, may we always remember that we don't do it alone. At All Souls, you have some pretty phenomenal traveling companions. With them, and a few carefully chosen treasures from the past, you may find that you have everything you need.

Now, I love the Magic Wanda story. But it does gloss over a big part, and a difficult part, of transitions like this - the part where, as we let go of pieces of our past, we have to say goodbye. To help with this part, let's consult that manual for living: AA Milne's "The House at Pooh Corner." In the final chapter, the animals gather to say goodbye to Christopher Robin who is heading off to school (and none of them really know what that means). Eeyore offers this memorable poem:

Christopher Robin is going.
At least I think he is.
Where?
Nobody knows.
But he is going -
I mean he goes
(To rhyme with "knows")

Do we care?
(To rhyme with "where")
We do
Very much.
(I haven't got a rhyme for that "is" in the second line yet.
Bother).
(Now I haven't got a rhyme for bother. Bother)
Those two bothers will have to rhyme with each other
Buther.
The fact is this is more difficult
than I thought,
I ought -
(Very good indeed)
I ought
to begin again,
But it is easier
To stop.
Christopher Robin, good-bye,
I
(Good)
I
And all your friends
Sends -
I mean all your friend
Send -
(Very awkward this, it keeps going wrong.)
Well, anyhow, we send
Our love
END.

Poor Eeyore. His world is changing. There's loss and uncertainty. There are things in his heart that he desperately wants to say. And he winds up trying so hard to say it right that it keeps going wrong, and he barely says it at all. I know how he feels. Goodbye's are hard.

But the chance to say goodbye to people who are part of our story is a privilege, an opportunity that we don't always get. And though it's often easier to focus on the technical aspects of a departure (like the rhyming, perhaps), goodbye's matter.

You, and this congregation, are part of my story, and always will be. I came here as a seminarian with aspirations, and I leave here a minister. As a teaching congregation, you do good work. I hope you will continue to share this piece of who you are.

Rev Carolyn and I are different, as people and as ministers. And that has been to my benefit - she taught me so much - about leadership, worship, justice, integrity, connection and care. In my doubts, she supported me. My ministry has grown because of her, and I am deeply grateful.

The intern committee, led by Carol Thompson, was always there for me - diligently meeting denominational requirements, and asking questions, challenging me, and caring for me. They, too, are now part of my ministry.

The rest of the staff included me without hesitation - I never felt like "just the intern." And while each is so gifted in their own way, they modeled collaboration at its best. And I learned and I grew.

And I so appreciate your Board and the many people who have taken the time to offer feedback or engage with me in programs and groups, or for no reason at all. Because of you, I was changed.

Like Eeyore, I send my love, and my deep gratitude.

I'm not, by nature, the huggiest of people (although the pandemic may have shifted that a little), but this goodbye calls for a hug. The physical distance is a challenge, but please, give yourself a hug from me.

This is not quite the final goodbye - All Souls is ordaining me on June 6, and I'll be in New London for a few more weeks, so you might see me walking the dog or grocery shopping. But I'm stepping away from All Souls for a bit, as we each continue the adventure of our lives, today, tomorrow, and every day after that.

This life is a journey with surprises around the next corner, places that weren't on our maps, and people and connections that will (if we let them) change us.

I hope you won't settle for anything less, and that you will never let this congregation strive for anything less.

May it be so.

Amen.