

“Since It Must Be So”

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December 17, 2017

There's a lot of words in world languages to say goodbye to someone. In English, we wish someone a good bye, or a good parting. The Germans say “Auf Wiedersehen,” or see you later, similar to the French “Au revoir”, or until I see you again. For the Spanish, it's adiós, or, literally, to God, a way of commending someone to the larger forces of the universe.

All of these express certain elements about the nature of farewells. We hope they'll be good. We hope for a way to reconnect., and we're aware that they're often in the hands of forces much greater than us, throwing us into a bit of an unknown for the future. I see these different elements as expressing, not so subtly, our anxiety around change and how much we wish we would not be forced to do the hard work that change asks of us.

Yet, as we saw two weeks ago, trying to keep change from occurring is a losing battle. Change is always happening, whether we want it to or not. This occurs in churches just as much as it does anywhere else, with ministers and members coming and going over the years, and changes, both subtle and dramatic, taking place constantly among us.

When I arrived here two and a half years ago, I did so with a lot of optimism and enthusiasm. I fell in love with this congregation during candidating week, and I meant what I said when I told the search committee that I would have loved to have stayed here for many years to come. I threw myself into the life of this congregation and got to know so many of you on a deep level, and you and your stories will always be in my heart. I heard your hopes and dreams for this congregation, and I am so honored I have been able to be a part of that.

So why am I leaving after a relatively short amount of time? I would be lying if I stood here and told you that this has been an easy settlement. The reality is that ministry is not a one-size-fits-all vocation, and I hope an interim minister will be brought here who can help the congregation work through this transition.

But we have done some amazing work together. Our staff practices are now professionalized in a way they never have been before. The finance committee has invested a portion of the reserve account in low-risk CDs, a move I'm not sure we've ever done before. Some members and I have participated in the formation of anti-racist and LGBTQ organizations in our community that are well situated to continue after my departure. And I hope the congregation will continue the discernment on mission, vision, and covenant that our board of trustees has started, because a congregation without a strong sense of purpose and boundaries is constantly in danger of becoming an anything-goes club.

It is customary in many final sermons to give a charge to the congregation, and so this is my charge to you.

First, continue to deepen your connections with the larger Unitarian Universalist movement. Learn as much about the history, theology, and current issues within as you can, and own those as your own. The UUA exists to help this congregation thrive and grow, and they can't do that if you assume that they are out of touch with the congregation or that their issues are far removed from our own. One thing that I'm amazed by is how similar Unitarian Universalist churches are, no matter where they are in the country. If you could view the profiles of congregations in search this year, you would be surprised how many are worried about growth, an aging membership, finances, and quality worship, from coast to coast and in all

regions. They need you, and you need them, even, maybe especially, when you don't feel they understand you, and vice versa.

Second, lean into discomfort and conflict. Change, even positive change, is going to arouse discomfort because it tells us that things are not the same. This is especially important in church life as we will never all agree on everything, but covenant demands we find a way to be together and not simply leave because we don't get our preferences. In the face of change, there are two options: inadequately fight against it, or lean into it to and learn from the discomfort change provokes. The first will lead to unhappiness on all side. The second offers an opportunity for all parties to come together in dialogue. And, remember, leaning into discomfort doesn't mean going and demanding that someone justify themselves to you. It means genuinely and gently making an effort to understand, even when you ultimately disagree with the person, and being willing to continue leaning in if your way is not the chosen path.

Third, be gentle, no matter what comes next. This is especially true if you chooses to get a new minister, which I hope you will. It's easy to say you're open to new types of ministry. It's much harder to actually lean into such difference. Remember, I started a precedent that I'm not Rev. Sydney. Just as I wasn't Rev. Sydney, whoever follows me will not be me OR Rev. Sydney. Be gentle and forgiving as you learn about each other and grow together.

Finally, never sell yourselves short. I must confess that some of the most painful comments I've heard over the last two and a half years were from people who told me they did not vote to call me because they believed I was the best match for this congregation, but because they were afraid they wouldn't get anyone else. Besides being a surefire way to create pain for all involved, such thinking sells all of you short. You deserve nothing short of the best minister. I hope none of you would advise someone to settle in a relationship just to avoid being alone. Just so, don't be afraid to be alone for a time until the next right person comes along. I have heard a

lot of talk about luck in getting ministers over the years. Stop believing that you're lucky and start believing you deserve the best damned minister who's out there, and that they will find you, if you are patient enough.

As we part this morning, I do want to say all the things those world languages suggest: I hope our parting is good for all of us, I hope to see you all again, and I wish you all god speed through the coming transition. I want to introduce you to one final word for goodbye, though.

The word for goodbye in Japanese, sayonara, is literally translated since it must be so. It reminds us that change happens, no matter how much we wish it wouldn't, no matter what our plans were. I'm leaving at this point in the history of this congregation and in my ministry because I truly believe it is the right time for all involved. I have a wonderful opportunity to explore a part of my calling, and you are in a strong position to continue doing some tough work. Since it must be so, we will part one final time next week. But never doubt that I have nothing but the utmost love for this congregation. Never doubt that you are so vitally needed here in the Upper Peninsula. And never doubt that the mutual influence we have had on each other will ever completely dissipate. Since it must be so, may we depart, not knowing what the future holds, but with the faith that the brightest days are yet to come.

May it be so.