

Turn the Page

A Sermon for the Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst

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Chautauqua Institution in western New York state is a wonderful place where I have enjoyed many happy times with my family. As an Institution it began as a summer retreat for Methodist Sunday school teachers – a place to renew and refresh and be inspired through education, recreation, spiritual reflection and the arts. Although the strictly Methodist alignment has disappeared, Chautauqua remains dedicated to all of these same things today. I call it the balanced life.

These days, Chautauqua calls itself an interfaith community, and there are large numbers of people of all faiths in attendance during the nine weeks of the Chautauqua Season. The religion department works very hard, thanks to the efforts of Joan Brown Campbell and quite often the presence and words of Karen Armstrong, to foster good relationships between and among the three Abrahamic religions of the world, Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

But the 10:45 Sunday morning service in the 4000 seat Amphitheater was, is, and shall remain I imagine, a strictly ecumenical service. That is, although the denominations vary, the ministers and pastors who are invited to preach are always Christian. I would have said they were always Protestant, but this past summer, for the first time ever, one of the ministers of the week was Russian Orthodox. This was a very big step for Chautauqua, and also for the Orthodox Priest, who had to adapt some of his usual service requirements for the week. For example, I and the other participants in a conference for new ministers, were scheduled to take turns assisting him with the weekday morning worship, but in the Russian Orthodox tradition women are not allowed to do this. To his credit, the Priest adapted. The only requirement he insisted upon was that we wear long sleeves and cover our ankles – but since it was July, many of us had not packed anything with long sleeves. As the week progressed the congregation probably wondered why so many of the pulpit assistants were wearing the same identical long sleeved sweater. Having a Russian Orthodox minister of the week was an educational experience for Chautauquans.

But before this year when the Russian Orthodox priest was invited to Chautauqua, I think the most adventurous the religion department had ever gotten was to invite a Unitarian Universalist to be the Institution's minister of the week. It was 1997 and the minister was Forrest Church, senior minister at All Souls UU Church in New York City. Whether or not Unitarian Universalism fits into the category of Protestant, or even "denomination," are questions for another time, but in the instance here, Forrest Church faked it well. Or perhaps I should say he, as did the Russian Orthodox priest, adapted to Chautauqua.

That spring was a difficult one for me in a series of difficult springs. It had been four years since my husband of many years had died. By 1997 I was in a new, but unfortunate relationship with someone I really needed to distance myself from, but you know how these things are – they're hard, especially if you're still hurting from the past. It was also becoming apparent that I needed to decide what to do with my art gallery, and find something more profitable (in every way) to do with my life.

A bunch of us from Meadville drove up to Chautauqua to hear Forrest Church's sermon. We were so proud that Unitarian Universalism was finally being recognized and acknowledged in such a prominent place! My parents joined us, as they were up at our cottage already for the summer. As the service went on, and especially during the sermon, I could feel eyes on me in our group. Some of my friends literally turned around and stared. And I got a few elbows in the ribs too. Someone whispered, "This sermon's for you, Alison!"

Forrest Church's sermon was Turn the Page. He was, indeed, preaching to me, and his words changed my life. "When you have read the same page three times with diminishing returns, turn the page."

I turned the page. I could have spent the rest of my life trying to understand the events and personalities and choices – good and bad – that had gotten me to that point in June of 1997. And the reality is that, of course, I will be figuring all this out for the rest of my life, but I took Forrest Church's advice and didn't let that stop me from turning the page. I'd been reading that same page over and over for long enough. I'm not the only one in my life who is grateful for the sermon that morning – and that I was listening. How could I help it with all those loving elbows in my ribs. A year later I was interviewing at Andover Newton Theological School and making plans to close my gallery. I began my new adventure in the fall of 1999, just after my youngest child graduated from college.

Are you sitting here thinking of a time in your life when you did the same thing? Or of a time when you should have turned the page, but didn't? What about right now, today? What book is it that has you stuck in chapter five? My message to you this morning, with words and by my personal experience, is that it's OK not to have it all figured out before making a move to something else. Sometimes we can get bogged down in over-analysis. Just look at the well stocked self-help shelves at the book stores. Trying to understand why we do what we do is a major life's occupation for most of us. But it can be over done. Sometimes too much analysis can confuse us about how we really feel. Those negative feelings have a tendency to multiply of their own accord and cloud the true picture. Self-absorption can be addictive.

There have actually been studies that show this to be true. For example, a large sample of people in relationships was split into two groups, one that listed reasons why their relationship was going one way or the other, and another group that was asked to rate their satisfaction without any analysis. It turned out that gut reaction was a better indicator of where a relationship would be several months later. Analysis tends to over emphasize the negative. And it is also becoming clear that the classic "de-briefing" following a traumatic experience may not be as beneficial as following our natural inclination to distract ourselves from thinking about it all the time. (from Don't Think Twice, It's All Right, an op-ed piece by Timothy D. Wilson, in the Dec. 29, 2005 New York Times) Some of you have heard me suggest that you should try to allow yourself some moments of joy amidst your sadness or worry or pain. It is advice that helped me get through some very bad times and I pass it on to you.

We can get stuck on a difficult page in our spiritual journeys, as well. We worry that we don't quite know how we feel about death, or how we would define "the ultimate" or that we are shallow to take bits and pieces from various traditions and think that is enough. We think we should be able to tell people what it is we believe, assuming we are the only one in the room who

doesn't know the answer. I say, let it go – don't dwell on the fact that you don't know all the answers. After all, the big questions are pretty un-answerable in the short run – maybe even the long run. The next page, the next religious or spiritual experience may be the one that will make all the difference – for you. Let yourself feel what you are capable of feeling – most of us aren't really aware of the limits we have placed on ourselves by worrying about what it says on page 10. Sneak a peek at page 11 and dare to be a new you.

Even congregations can get stuck in chapter five – and I 'm not referring to bankruptcy. Sometimes after ministers move on, there can be so much inner turmoil caused by the hashing and rehashing of “How could this have happened?” and “What a terrible congregation we are!” that moving on becomes difficult if not impossible. My home church in Meadville refused to do this – to dwell in the negative - when it had a sad parting of the ways with their previous minister. They spent three years without a minister – no interim either – and then found a great match in Kate Walker who has been there for eight years now. It's no wonder that I understood the Amherst congregation's interest in moving directly on from one minister to the next. I had been in your shoes from the congregation side of the equation myself. What you did was turn the page, possibly before completely understanding the past, but it seems to me some of that understanding has found its way here anyway. Sometimes, if we make a conscious decision to do things differently, even without over-analysis, the true motivation for that change finds its way into our hearts just in the day to day living on our new path.

We can turn the page, move on with our lives, before we understand all the whys and wherefores of the past. Forrest Church's sermon admitted that yes, we might miss something in the moving on, but “if you've read it three times and it's making less and less sense, turn the page. Don't assume you have to have everything right with the past and the present before you dare go on to an unknown future. Don't focus so hard on your life that your focus blurs and images double, twice the problems, twice the troubles...what your parents did to you, or some lover, or some hater...a bad boss or a bad gene or a bad friend, or our own bad decision, etched on the page, there to haunt us as we read it again and again, waiting for some new insight, afraid to turn the page.”

For a long time, in what I refer to as my previous life, I carried a little note to myself in my wallet that read “And the day came when the fear of remaining tight in a bud became greater than the fear of turning to blossom.” The pain of reading that same sad page over and over again was dragging my life in a downward spiral. I decided not to go there. I turned the page.

I'm not advocating irresponsible behavior. I am not proposing that we don't need to think through our lives and learn from the hard lessons. I just don't want us, me or you, to waste precious time in the past. There are new adventures to be had, new joys to treasure, new mistakes to be made and learned from. We never know what might await us, if we can find the courage to turn the page.

The good news is that you don't have to do it all by yourself, you know. *Our* hearts and *our* hands are here to help you turn that page. It is something you can count on – none of us need walk on our path alone.