

**Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Laramie**  
**March 10, 2013**  
**Rev. Dr. Penny Rather**  
**“To Live In This World”**

**Reading**

This morning’s reading is from the film “American Beauty.” It is a soliloquy spoken by Lester Burnham after he has been shot to death:

I had always heard your entire life flashes in front of your eyes the second before you die. First of all, that one second isn't a second at all, it stretches on forever, like an ocean of time... For me, it was lying on my back at Boy Scout camp, watching falling stars... And yellow leaves, from the maple trees, that lined my street... Or my grandmother's hands, and the way her skin seemed like paper... And the first time I saw my cousin Tony's brand new Firebird... And Janie... And Janie... And... Carolyn. I guess I could be pretty pissed off about what happened to me... but it's hard to stay mad, when there's so much beauty in the world. Sometimes I feel like I'm seeing it all at once, and it's too much, my heart fills up like a balloon that's about to burst... And then I remember to relax, and stop trying to hold on to it, and then it flows through me like rain and I can't feel anything but gratitude for every single moment of my stupid little life... You have no idea what I'm talking about, I'm sure. But don't worry... you will someday.

**Sermon**

I must say I have to disagree with Lester Burnham.  
If you saw the film “American Beauty”  
you may remember this morning’s reading  
as the final words of that movie,  
spoken against the backdrop  
of an aerial view of his neighborhood.  
I saw “American Beauty” when it came out  
in the fall of 1999.  
I had just taken refuge as a lay Buddhist  
and begun studying at a Buddhist seminary.  
And I was captivated and inspired  
by the very Buddhist sentiment  
of this soliloquy.

Except for his next to last sentence.  
“You have no idea what I'm talking about, I'm sure.”  
I do have some idea what he is talking about.  
And I bet some of you do, too.  
No, we may not know what it is like to die.  
But we do know what it is like to live,  
and from time to time we do notice the beauty in the world,  
and maybe even remember to relax

and feel a deep and abiding gratitude  
for every single moment of our stupid little lives.  
Preparing for death is one of the functions of religion,  
and in preparing for death,  
we learn how to live.

We Unitarian Universalists are fond of saying that  
ours is a life affirming,  
rather than death defying,  
religion.  
Which is not to say that we don't pay attention to death.  
As a matter of fact,  
one of our most prominent UU ministers,  
the late Rev. Forest Church,  
defined religion  
as "A human response to the dual reality  
of being alive and having to die."  
We know we are alive.  
And we know we will someday die.

Acknowledging that,  
and knowing how to deal with that,  
is a big part of our spiritual journey.  
Most religions have practices and rituals  
related to death – helping us prepare for death.  
Christians commemorate Jesus' death and resurrection  
in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper,  
reminding themselves of the eternal life he promised.  
Many of the rituals of the hajj,  
the pilgrimage to Mecca,  
are Islamic rehearsals for death practices.  
And the white robes Muslims wear on that occasion  
becomes their death shrouds.  
And the Buddha said that of all meditations,  
the meditation on death is supreme.

We don't know what happens when we die.  
I imagine that there are a number of different beliefs  
represented among us this morning –  
but none of us really knows.  
But the fact of our ultimate death  
makes life all the more precious.  
It reminds us that we'd better make the most of it.

One of the most important teachings of Buddhism  
is that everything is impermanent.

Everything.

And we saw in the Story For All Ages this morning,  
that Judaism and Islam also teach impermanence.  
So death is just one of the endings  
we have to navigate  
on this physical and spiritual journey of ours.  
Life itself,  
whether our own or that of a loved one,  
is only one of the things  
we have to learn to let go of.  
At birth, we gave up  
the safety and warmth of the womb.  
We let go of our parents' steadying hands  
when we took our first steps.  
And their constant care and guidance  
when we went off to school.  
Day after day,  
year after year,  
we have said goodbye to people, places, experiences.  
Homes, schools, careers, friends.  
We have let go of  
marriages, mentors, and self-images.

Each ending is also a beginning.  
Each pair of endings and beginnings,  
a little death and rebirth.

Spiritual practices, such as mindfulness meditation,  
can help us manage little and big endings and beginnings.  
We can prepare for death  
by the spiritual practice of paying attention  
to the way we handle lesser transitions.  
And in turn, we are able to manage those littler endings better.  
One aspect of Buddhist mindfulness meditation  
is called "Touch and Go."  
"Touch and Go" is a way  
of responding to both pleasant and painful situations –  
emotions, experiences, endings.  
It is the middle way between ignoring or suppressing them  
and getting caught up in them,  
controlled by them.

We start by practicing "Touch and Go"  
in formal meditation practice.  
When thoughts arise – as they inevitably do –  
we notice them fully and then let them go.

And then we practice “Touch and Go”  
in small everyday situations.  
And then bigger situations.  
So that it becomes a habit so ingrained  
that when we face that biggest letting go of all –  
death itself –  
it just comes naturally.  
I think Lester Burnham’s soliloquy  
is all about “Touch and Go.”  
When his life flashed in front of his eyes  
he touched the memories –  
of Boy Scout camp and autumn leaves,  
of his grandmother’s hands and his cousin’s car,  
of his daughter and his wife.  
And then he let them go –  
remembered to relax and stop trying to hold on to them.  
And that’s when he gave up feeling pissed off  
and felt gratitude for his life.  
Because when we experience endings,  
the greatest suffering comes not from the loss itself,  
but from trying to hold on to things that are impermanent.

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We will be saying goodbye to each other  
in less than three months.  
Not as big a loss as Lester’s to be sure.  
But not a trivial change either.  
I’ve been your minister for over eight years.  
We’ve celebrated, struggled, grieved, and grown together.  
Our futures are unknown.  
How we respond to this ending –  
and the new beginnings that come with it –  
will be influenced by the habits we’ve build up  
from all the previous endings in our lives.  
And it will influence the ways we respond  
to endings yet to come.  
So let me suggest that we practice “Touch and Go.”  
It will help us end well.  
It will help us make new beginnings well, too.  
And it will help us cultivate a habit  
that can make future endings –  
even unto death –  
more like Lester’s.

We need to touch the sadness of parting,  
the things we’ve accomplished,  
the things left undone,

and the fear and excitement about what comes next.  
We need to touch these things in order to experience  
the reality of this ending.  
And then we need to let them go  
so that we can move on.

**Touch the sadness, and let it go.**

I came here eight years ago on a three month contract.  
I didn't know how long it would last.  
It was my first parish ministry,  
and I was excited and scared.  
The commuting arrangement was less than ideal.  
But I quickly grew to love this congregation  
and the people who make it up.  
You.  
So when, after a second contract period of a year,  
you called me to be your settled minister,  
I felt right at home.  
I haven't gotten to know Laramie  
or be involved in its local issues  
as much as I would have had I lived here.  
But I grew to look forward to my trips here.  
The commute was not that bad –  
though there have been a few white knuckle drives –  
and I became thoroughly familiar with the route,  
knowing where I would most likely see antelope,  
and looking forward to that first glimpse of Laramie  
from 14 miles out.  
I have been with you in worship, in committees,  
religious exploration, pastoral care, fund raising,  
social gatherings.  
Rejoiced at marriages and births,  
seen toddlers move on to grade school  
and middle schoolers go off to college,  
been with you through illnesses and lay-offs,  
and mourned the deaths of members and friends.  
Of course I am sad to be leaving.  
I – we – need to touch that sadness.  
And then let it go so that we can move on  
to the next chapters of our lives.

**Touch our accomplishments, and let them go.**

We need to celebrate the things we've done well together,  
and then let them go so that you can have a fresh start  
with your next minister,  
and I can have a fresh start in retirement.

We have worshipped together,  
gone deeper with theme based ministry,  
and instituted a worship Associate Program  
that gets more of you involved on Sunday mornings.

We have learned together –  
about Unitarian Universalism, Buddhism, the Bible,  
Islam, Evangelical Christianity, Immigration,  
End of Life Planning.  
Your support helped me earn my Doctor of Ministry Degree.  
And we have learned about each other in Covenant Groups.

We have seen this religious community reach a higher level  
of institutional maturity:

Keeping a minister long enough to grant her a sabbatical,  
and successfully carrying on during those four months  
two years ago.

Making our way to greater fiscal health  
by moving toward a healthier distribution of giving,  
and building up a financial reserve  
that can get us through hard times,  
and that enabled us to pay for the extensive –  
and expensive! –  
curb repair required by the city.

Without a capital fund drive.

We've gotten new windows and a new roof,  
paid off the mortgage,  
and paid for a ministerial search.

We have developed a Policies and Procedures Manual,  
a Covenant of Right Relations,  
a Growth Plan,  
and better employment procedures.

We should celebrate these accomplishments  
and then let them go so that they don't  
become laurels on which to rest.

**Touch the things we did not get done, and let them go.**

In order to be in touch with reality,  
we need also to acknowledge the things that did not go well,  
or did not get done.

Programs, policies, and procedures we have neglected,  
or started and stalled.

We still struggle with leadership development,  
recruitment, and succession,  
and to spread the work of our shared ministry more evenly.  
As I plan my preaching schedule for the rest of the year,

I find there are at least four sermons I want to preach in each of the next three months!

And I have files of things I've cut from sermons, thinking I would come back to them later.

There is so much more I want to explore with you!

And I will miss the spiritual discipline of preaching and preparing to preach.

We need to acknowledge the shortcomings of our time together,

and let them go lest they lead to discouragement or become roadblocks to trying new things.

**Touch the excitement and fear about our next chapters, and let them go.**

I don't know what retirement will bring.

Sometimes I am excited about the possibilities for travel, for public ministry, for time with my family, for reading, writing, gardening, .....and making pickles!

Other times I am afraid that

without a certain amount of outer motivation

I might become a couch potato.

Or that without explicit reasons to see people

I might allow myself to get isolated and depressed.

You will have the excitement of a new minister who will bring new ideas and gifts to this congregation.

But you don't know when or who that will be.

And that can be scary.

We need to touch the excitement and fear,

and let them go so that we can move forward with open hearts and minds.

As we say goodbye over the next three months, let us remember that everything is impermanent.

Our shared ministry will end – we knew this from its beginning.

Our sadness will end.

Our excitement for the next phase will end.

Our fear of the next phase will end.

And if we practice "Touch and Go,"

honoring the truth of our experience,

and remembering to relax and not hold on,

we will be blessed with gratitude for our time together,

and ready for the next big adventure.

And we will have nurtured a habit

that will make future endings all the better.

For in the words of poet Mary Oliver:

To live in this world  
you must be able  
to do three things:  
to love what is mortal;  
to hold it  
against your bones knowing  
your own life depends on it;  
and, when the time comes to let it go,  
to let it go.

May it be so. Blessed be. Amen.