

3rd November 2024: Plymouth Unitarians

Navigating endings

1. **PRELUDE** 'Letting go', Patrick Doyle

<https://youtu.be/R4so7LELbrw?feature=shared>

2. **QUOTE** T.S. Eliot, from "Little Gidding," *Four Quartets*

"We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

3. **WELCOME/CHALICE LIGHTING**

Welcome to this Sunday service. You are welcome whoever you are. Whether you are a member of this congregation, a regular attender, or a visitor. Whether you come in hope or despair, in peace or anxiety, in sadness or in joy, you are welcome.

Here we have come into this sacred space—
quieter now with our readiness
Hushed voices, hoping, trusting for so many things:
For connection, for communion
For inspiration, for information
For healing, for wholeness,
For words, for music,
For celebration and consolation,
Here we have come into this space bringing all of who we are,
Let us be willing... however we are changed.

Let us begin this time of celebration, contemplation and community by lighting our chalice, as is our custom, as a symbol of our free religious faith.

Our theme this morning – on the closest Sunday to All Souls Day – is ‘Navigating endings’.

But first let us light our chalice candle, the symbol of our free religious faith, and I invite those of you joining us online today to light a candle of your own with me. As we nurture this precious light together, may we become a light of hope turning isolation into community, anguish into peace and sorrow into joy.

Our first hymn marks the different stages of our lives. As each one ends another begins.

4. First Hymn: 96 (P) Lord of our growing years

Lord of our growing years,
With us from infancy,
Laughter and quick dried tears,
Freshness and energy:
Your grace surrounds us all our days,
For all your gifts we bring our praise.

Lord of the strongest years,
Stretching our youthful powers,
Lovers and pioneers
When all the world seems ours;
Your grace surrounds us all our days,
For all your gifts we bring our praise.

Lord of our middle years,
Giver of steadfastness,

Courage that perseveres
When there is small success:
Your grace surrounds us all our days,
For all your gifts we bring our praise.

Lord of our older years,
Steep though the road may be,
Rid us of foolish fears,
Bring us serenity;
Your grace surrounds us all our days,
For all your gifts we bring our praise.

Lord of our closing years,
Always your promise stands;
Hold us, when death appears,
Safely within your hands.
Your grace surrounds us all our days,
For all your gifts we bring our praise.

[David Mowbray]

5. PRAYER Holy is this place, Maureen Kiloran

Blessed is this ground on which we stand.
Holy is this place.

Holy are the places of memory,
the places which have formed us,
where we store the icons of success and shattered dreams
and gather threads and pieces of what we would become. . .
Holy are the places of memory.

Holy are the places of the dream,
the places over the rainbow,
where all children are wanted and all people are fed,

where colours are the source of celebration
and youth and age come to the table as one. . .
Holy are the places of the dream.

Holy are the places of change and pain,
the places of our struggle,
where the rivers of our lives run white and fast,
and we hold on, hold on and grow. . .
Holy are the places of change and pain.

Holy are the places of connection,
the places where we risk our selves,
where hands touch hands, touch souls, touch minds,
and in awareness still, we change our lives. . .

Holy are the places of connection.

Holy are the places of becoming,
the places of clear vision,
where life and world are intertwined
and we can see forever in this moment
and give thanks. . .

Holy are the places of becoming.

Blessed is the ground on which we stand. Holy — and whole-making— is this place.

6. **STORY** This too shall pass

There are many "stories" or folkloric tales about where this saying has originated. It's best known as coming from [King Solomon](#), who reigned in Israel from 970 to 931 BCE. He was a wise man, and was seeking knowledge on how to make a sad man happy and a happy man sad.

He requested from his minister, Benaiah, to bring him a ring with these magical powers. Well, Benaiah searched and searched all over for this ring. Most likely the King knew he would never find it, but Benaiah didn't give up.

He finally went into the slums of Jerusalem and found a craftsman who worked in metal. The craftsman turned to his grandfather with this odd request, who in turn went into his workshop and appeared with a ring.

This gold ring he brought out to the minister to present to the king had this phrase engraved on the inside of the ring, "*This Too Shall Pass.*"

When presented to the King, he was dumbfounded. No one thought there could be such a thing that makes you stop in your path-- reflect on the past, the present and the future and remind you that the state you are in is not going to last forever.

Our second hymns, based on words by the Christian mystic Teresa of Avila also reminds us that everything passes. It's called 'Nothing distress you'.

7. **SECOND HYMN:** 106 (P) Nothing distress you

Nothing distress you,
nothing affright you,
everything passes,
God will abide.
Patient endeavour
accomplishes all things;
who God possesses
needs naught besides.

Lift your mind upward,
fair are his mansions,
nothing distress you,

cast fear away.
Follow Christ freely,
his love will light you,
nothing affright you,
in the dark way.

See the world's glory!
Fading its splendour,
everything passes,
all is denied.
Look ever homeward
to the eternal;
faithful in promise
God will abide.

Love in due measure,
measureless goodness,
patient endeavour,
run to love's call!
Faith burning brightly
be your soul's shelter;
who hopes, believing,
accomplishes all.

Hell may assail you,
it cannot move you;
sorrows may grieve you,
faith may be tried.
Though you have nothing,
he is your treasure:
who God possesses
needs naught beside.

8. **READING** Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 (NIV)

There is a time for everything,
and a season for every activity under the heavens:

a time to be born and a time to die,
a time to plant and a time to uproot,
a time to kill and a time to heal,
a time to tear down and a time to build,
a time to weep and a time to laugh,
a time to mourn and a time to dance,
a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them,
a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing,
a time to search and a time to give up,
a time to keep and a time to throw away,
a time to tear and a time to mend,
a time to be silent and a time to speak,
a time to love and a time to hate,
a time for war and a time for peace.

9. **REFLECTION/CANDLE LIGHTING**

An opportunity to light a candle for a someone or something you've lost.

10. **INTERLUDE** 'In the end', Olivia Fern

<https://youtu.be/T9ABh5z7oIQ?feature=shared>

11. ADDRESS

As my ministry with you is soon coming to an end, endings are much in my mind, and it seemed more appropriate to speak about them today rather than in December.

I have mentioned before that my Biblical Studies tutor always said religion was all about starting again, which in many ways I think it is. But she could just as well have said that it's all about endings. After all, you can't have the one without the other. Beginnings and endings, endings and beginnings, exist in intimate relationship with each other.

Our experience of life is – for the most part – a series days, events, experiences; it's a process of growing and maturing; a progression of learning and development; of aging and dying. Our dying is inevitable from the day we are born. And if that sounds gloomy – it is not meant to. To carry the knowledge of the end – the inevitability of our ending – with us is what helps us give shape to our lives and make meaning of our experience.

After all, everything ends. Each moment, every day, the weeks and months, the different seasons...they all pass. Each year seems to speed by faster than the previous one, the various stages of our lives move seamlessly from one to the other, and in the end – well we end. Or not, depending on your beliefs. But what we do know is that our lives in this particular form, in this body, in this time-limited manifestation will certainly, one day, come to an end. This is simply a statement of fact. It is neither bad nor good. It is what is. And to make our peace with this reality is an important part of our spiritual journey.

I knew when I came here 10 years ago that one day I would leave. I didn't know when or how, but that my time here would come to a close was always an inevitability.

[In Cullompton] There is a board over here – you may have seen it. There's a long list of previous ministers stretching back to xxxx, and I remember looking at it and

thinking 'I suppose my name might be on there one day, and others after me.'

Of course, each ending has its own poignancy – something has been, and gone, but though it may be remembered with affection, it can't be recovered. It can't be relived. (Or at least not yet – maybe time travel will be possible one day.) But I believe that endings are really important, they are integral aspects of our lives.

An ending is a sign that life is being allowed to reinvent itself once more, that we are being encouraged to grow and flourish rather than to fester and stagnate. Endings make space for the new. And, if we do them well, then they also respect and honour what has been, and let it be.

What does it mean to do them well? I think what we try to do is to honour the sacred at all the stages of our lives.. Ritual can play a part in a good ending. Some of you have a ritual at the end of each day. Maybe it's a review of the day, a candle lighting, a prayer of gratitude, a holding of loved ones or the world in the light, a blessing on the day.

We begin each service by lighting a candle at we mark the end with some words and extinguishing the flame. These are simple but effective ways to mark our endings. To mark the sacred.

Even a conversation has an ending, a good bye. We don't just wander off mid-sentence – not usually anyway! Our very beingness is a constant series of beginnings and endings – of hellos and goodbyes, and of thank yous.

Of course, endings may be sad, sometimes extremely so. The loss of a loved one, the end of a relationship, any such jarring, life-changing event can be hugely distressing. We know this, and at such times the grieving may be long, though the nature of it may soften and change. Whatever sense of loss or grief that comes needs to be given the necessary space and time. But then...when the time is right... we can begin integrating it into our lives, building on it, treasuring the good, letting go of what we no longer need to carry, never forgetting but allowing ourselves to move gently forward.

But thankfully, the majority of our endings are less traumatic. They are simply what life does, all the time. And thank goodness for that, otherwise we'd be stuck forever in one endlessly long day! Nevertheless, marking them is still helpful.

I still feel oddly sad that I finished the Coastal Path last year. I miss it. I miss the ritual each autumn of planning and setting out on the next section of the path, the sense of a journey being taken, and completed. I also feel a real sense of achievement that we finally made it to the end. We celebrated with a meal. I'm so glad to have done it. And also I'm sorry it's over.

But, I can't have it both ways. Or at least I can, as long as I can see the irony, the inherent contradiction, which life always is. We create precious memories, but they're only memories at all because they've ended. It's one of life's conundrums.

I remember attending a live concert in Cornwall, some years ago now, in which the a string quartet performed a piece they'd written themselves for the first time. They told us it hadn't been recorded and wouldn't be, so this would be its only ever performance. There would be no looking it up later on YouTube or Spotify. And I remember how, knowing this was the case, I hung on every note and treasured it. And then it was gone. I felt a sadness. And yet the very knowledge that it would be over was what made it so special. I wish I could bring that focus to every moment.

I so wanted to be a minister, and was so excited to come here and be given the chance to be that. I'm immeasurably grateful for the opportunity, and the trust shown in me, your willingness to turn up on a Sunday, and the enormous privilege of having got to know you. Particularly for the times I've sat by bedsides, listened to your stories or walked alongside you. It's been meaningful, challenging, sometimes exasperating, at other times bewildering, but it's never been dull, and I've never regretted it for a moment. When I first started Sheila said to me 'Well you might be here until you retire!' and indeed I have been. And now it's time to go. I realise that it feels as right to stop ministering now as it felt to start all those years ago. And I have to listen to that.

And of course, I feel sad in a way, there's that poignancy of time passing, things coming to an end. And I'll miss it, I'm sure, just like I miss the magic of walking the coastal path. But my time here been so meaningful to me because – like life itself – I knew it would end. And because, like that piece of music that wasn't recorded, it can't be repeated.

Our invitation in life is to cherish what we have while we have it, live it as fully as we can, and recognise when its time is done. Then we can mark the ending in whatever way feels right, give thanks for it, learn from it, treasure the good and precious memories in our hearts...and keep going.

May it be so.

12. **3rd HYMN 133 (G) How can I keep from singing**

My life flows on in endless song
Above earth's lamentation:
I hear the real though far-off hymn
That hails a new creation.
Through all the tumult and the strife
I hear the music ringing:
It sounds an echo in my soul –
How can I keep from singing!

What though the tempest round me roar,
I know the truth, it liveth.
What though the darkness round me close,
Songs in the night it giveth.
No storm can shake my inmost calm
While to that rock I'm clinging:
Since love prevails in heaven and earth,
How can I keep from singing!

When tyrants tremble, sick with fear,
And hear their death-knells ringing;
When friends rejoice, both far and near,
How can I keep from singing!
To prison cell and dungeon vile
Our thoughts of love are winging:
When friends by shame are undefiled,
How can I keep from singing!

American Gospel Tune, Early Quaker Song

It is good to end a service with hope!

13. **CLOSING WORDS** – Rumi, translated by Coleman Barks, [*Essential Rumi*](#)

The breeze at dawn has secrets to tell you.
Don't go back to sleep.

You must ask for what you really want.
Don't go back to sleep.

People are going back and forth across the doorsill
where the two worlds touch.

The door is round and open.
Don't go back to sleep.

And we end with a song that celebrates how we always rise again. Following any
ending there must be a new beginning.

14. **CLOSING MUSIC** 'Rise', Eddie Vedder

<https://youtu.be/kjDxxKMDf0Y?feature=shared>