

Transition Series: Endings

Several factors make this a difficult sermon to write. Initially you might think it is because we don't like to talk about endings, and that is a part of it. If we think about the end of winter or the end of a drought or the end of pain we are a little more eager to talk about endings. In general though, we don't like to talk about the end of things we are familiar with, that we enjoy or like. But the other factor that makes this difficult is that there is so much to say about endings. Some of the ending work here at ULV will not begin until I am actually gone so today we are going to go over a process. If you get stuck in your transition period after I'm gone, I might suggest going back to the work we're doing, either reading in the book or coming back to this sermon, to get unstuck. Another factor that is a little difficult is that the temporary nature of things that we are discussing exist in our outer world experience. Much of what we will talk about keeps us in our head. It is important, as we move through the process, to remember to keep grounding ourselves in the unchanging nature of our I AM. The outer changes but our spiritual self, our higher self, retains its original nature.

Brumet begins this work by saying we tend to either understate or overstate the importance of each ending. We have lots of endings in our lives, from the end of a day to the end of a series on television to the closing of a favorite store or restaurant. We respond differently to each ending.

Why would we understate the importance of an ending? Humans continue to labor under the belief we can control our emotions. We suppress ones that make us uncomfortable. Grief makes us uncomfortable. Any one here really comfortable with grief? No. So if we understate the importance of an ending we **think** we can minimize the grief. No big loss, no big grief.

We also think we can shortcut a dynamic in grief that is the *cumulative effect*. Ever notice that a simple loss can hit us really hard? Or a loss we might otherwise handle pretty well can seem so much bigger than we can handle? With each new loss we tend to revisit all the loss that has come before. We understate the importance of a loss to try to avoid going very deeply into our sense of loss and touching the unhealed wound of all our unresolved grief issues. Every loss we avoid processing leaves unfinished business that comes up for healing the next loss we experience. Unfinished business, like dirty laundry, doesn't go away. Pretty soon we have a big pile of unfinished business just waiting to ambush us once we begin to process an ending. If you have been a member for more than 10 years, you may have unfinished

business from the exit of prior ministers. My leaving may bring up your unfinished business and it may be difficult to separate processing the past from how you are experiencing my leaving. Take a breath. It is easier to process as you go along rather than being debilitated by a loss unexpectedly but wherever you are is where you begin. So choose now to heal the unfinished business so a new beginning is fresh.

The other end of the pendulum is overstating the importance of the ending. How many of you have experienced the end of a television series like the death of a friend? I mean you've come to know these people over several years. You spend hours with them at least once a week. And now suddenly they are gone! Why bother watching television? Or getting up on Wednesday?

With rerun networks now, it is funny to go back and watch some of those old shows. They don't seem as magical as they once did. The ending is now in perspective.

There is no denying that certain endings, including those with the finality of physical death, have a huge impact on our lives. What is important to keep in perspective is that every ending is a part of a transition process for us that will lead to a new beginning **if we let it**. How could we stop the transition process? We get stuck at the ending. We overstate the importance of an ending and give it power to end our access to happiness—to cut us off from ongoing life. There is a counseling book that is titled “Keep the Book Open”. It is advice for people counseling individuals going through major traumatic events like the tornado in Nashville. The author tells the story of a counselor meeting with survivors of a natural disaster in which many people lost most of their possessions. One man had a photo album. He told stories with each of the photos of happy times with people he loved in familiar places. At the end of the album were a couple blank pages. The counselor advised the man to keep the book open to new memories. Life goes on. There are friends and family we haven't met, who aren't born yet. Endings are a part of a transition process and one side of a coin with a new beginning on the other side. High school graduations are interesting because the ritual is called “commencement”. It is as if we feel we can't acknowledge the ending. It is often the end of childhood. It is the end of free education for most. It is the end of usually 12 years of an education process we have willingly or unwillingly participated in. It may be the end of living in a community with parents and long-time friends. But we are uncomfortable talking about endings so we call the ritual commencement. New beginning, no ending.

What could be *problematic* about that?

We lose track of the lessons we've learned on the path to now. We fail to allow ourselves to celebrate the accomplishments. We suppress our sadness and choke down our emotions. Does this **sound** like unfinished business?

Well, kinda, yes I guess it does! Healthy endings allow us to acknowledge the lessons, sometimes difficult lessons, we've learned along the way. Healthy endings celebrate the accomplishments—like the end of sports season banquets. We let ourselves feel the feelings knowing we are more than our feelings and knowing that in a process, no feeling possesses us forever. Healthy endings understand that the end, however painful or uncomfortable is not the end but the gateway to a new beginning. As Rev Brumet says, an ending is the Divine seeking to express through us more perfectly. Like a katydid sheds its old shell, we end a chapter to allow the Divine to expand through us.

Brumet breaks Endings into 4 parts, which I want to briefly touch on. Just so that when the feelings arise after I'm gone that won't feel so foreign and perhaps you will remember to not judge yourself for feeling the feelings of endings. The first part is "Disengagement". Last week we talked about engaging as participation or giving attention to. When a minister has served as long as I have it is natural for people to seek ways to continue to interact and engage the minister. Natural but not healthy for the transition process. If you never let go of what was you cannot be open to what will be. Churches may fail to engage with a new minister if the past minister remains in ongoing relationship with the congregation. It makes it tougher for the new person. I will not hinder the process and will disengage for at least a year. I will not guest speak here. I won't teach classes here, not even via Zoom. I won't maintain ongoing relationships for a year. I know this seems harsh but I will unfriend you on Facebook. Why? Because I love you and I want you to disengage so that you have an open heart for your new leader. I know it doesn't mean we stop loving and caring about one another. That is the spiritual connection unrelated to the physical world. Healthy endings involve an actual end.

After awhile you will begin disidentification. You will begin to pull back from identifying me as the only suitable minister—if you ever thought that. Please don't confuse this with disidentification with the spiritual community we are a part of! I am leaving and you, hopefully, are not. Although that may happen. People may leave and that is their process.

You may experience disenchantment. Often communities feel abandoned when a minister leaves. The spell of the intimate relationship between minister and congregant is broken. I believe that has been an experience here with some past exits, so recognize if you are a longer time member, some of the disenchantment you feel may be a combination of feelings about my leaving and feelings about other leavings. “We don’t really **need** a minister.” “It will be **easy** to replace this minister.” “What did she really **do**?” Like understating the importance of an ending, disenchantment seeks to minimize our loss feelings by discounting the value of what is lost. Ego mind is trying to protect us from experiencing hurt and disenchantment may also feel like anger. Transition doesn’t have to be difficult or painful AND we can allow the discomfort to bubble up and be released. There **is** a kind of magic in a healthy relationship and endings burst that bubble. Disenchantment is a natural feeling.

Finally, endings bring a sense of disorientation. What was routine and familiar is interrupted. A new routine hasn’t been established yet. Even if we were uncomfortable in the old routine, we knew our position and we knew where we were going. We may find ourselves feeling unsure about the path forward. Remember last week, “Trust the process.” Transition is a spiritual growth journey so listen for your own inner guidance.

You haven’t **stopped** being a spiritual being in this human experience of endings. So in endings, how do we ground ourselves in the truth of our nature? For me, the grounding is gratitude. If I find myself in a transition period, focused on what I have lost, I bring myself back to center by turning my attention to the gifts I have received from what is gone, the good that is still mine, and the good yet to unfold. One of the tests I learned in healing grief is whether or not you are able to find gifts. If you are still bitter or angry or vengeful about an ending, you have unfinished business. It’s ok. It just might continue to show up for healing. If I can look at an ending and see gifts in the entire experience, I am better prepared to truly let go and be open to a new beginning.

Try this affirmation: **Grounded in gratitude for the gifts of the past, I let go of what was, open and receptive to what will be.**

The trapeze artist lets go of one bar, suspended in air for a moment before grabbing onto the next bar. Next week we’ll explore being present to the void that lies between what was and what will be.