



Auckland Unitarian Church

Love beyond belief

Pomp and Circumstance

Clay Nelson © 17 September 2023

Here is a factoid about your minister I hope to have kept from you for nine years. In secondary school, I was a band nerd. I wasn't the cool one playing the sexy alto sax like I wanted. Instead, I was consigned over my objections to playing the tuba. It was even more humiliating as I was one of the smallest in the band.

What triggered this suppressed memory was the suggestion that I give a valedictory as I ease out of my role. It sounded reasonable a month ago, but now, not so much. In America, the role of valedictorian at the graduation ceremony is given to the student with the best academic record. I only qualified once, at seminary, and my seminary did not have a valedictorian. They knew that being smart didn't mean you were good at public speaking. Instead, the top three preachers in the class, as selected by the faculty, gave a sermon in the chapel the week before graduation. I was one of those.

We don't have a lot of graduation ceremonies in Aotearoa. I consider it a blessing. But not in America. The first graduation is after finishing kindergarten, then middle school and finally high school. Those of us who went to university would have another after completing our bachelor's. I had two more after achieving my graduate degrees. Under the circumstances, that is way too much pomp for one life, and of course, that does not include all those of my father, children, and grandchildren.

As a band nerd, I was called on to play even if I or a family member was not graduating. Graduations everywhere in the US were carefully scripted. Each ceremony began with the band playing the Edward Elgar composition we just heard Soomin play, "Pomp and Circumstance".

Written the year our building was opened, its title is a line from Othello, "Pride, pomp, and circumstance of glorious war." Elgar did not write it for graduations but for King Edward VII's coronation. In England, it was the

song of conquest and empire. In 1905, Elgar received an honorary degree from Yale. His composition was played at the graduation. Princeton, the University of Chicago and Columbia soon picked it up. It was soon ubiquitous. It just became the thing you had to graduate to despite its jarring colonial and war-justifying theme.

The band played it on repeat as the graduates marched in alpha order two by two into the venue and took their seats in front of the speaker's podium. That was not too onerous in a small school, with a couple of hundred students, but if there were 3,000 or more, my swollen tuba lips would need rehab before those students whose names began with zed were seated.

By now, some of you have astutely noticed I have carefully avoided giving my valedictory. In truth, I would rather not. It isn't because I'm not proud of my many achievements and recognitions over a long ministry that gave me joy and sustained me. It has been your accomplishments in the good times and bad times, too, that have made it all worthwhile. You are why I never wanted to do anything else. However, if I were forced to choose just one thing I'm proudest of as a minister, I left the nine congregations and one diocese I served stronger and healthier than when I arrived. If I were to choose a second, it would be my swimming upstream to promote progressive religion. This morning, that includes not giving a traditional valedictory. Instead, I would like to focus on the spiritual importance of a valedictory.

Essentially, valediction is a fancy word rooted in Latin for saying farewell or goodbye. For most of us, saying goodbye is painful, something to be avoided, yet it is a key to our humanity and connection. I feel incredibly human when I lose the right words to say goodbye to those I love. I wish it could be done under anaesthesia. Yet the language must be found and spoken. If you are to know how much my time with you has meant to me. The relationships I have established with you as I move into a new metaphorical pew have been memorable and worthy of recognition and conclusion.

Leaving without saying goodbye can mean that we feel unresolved and unable to have a sense of closure.

We may experience all kinds of feelings concerning this; perhaps we might be left guilty, regretful, grief-stricken, sad, angry or remorseful. There will most likely be a sense of things being unfinished. Without an

appropriate and healthy farewell, it can be hard to move on and get on with our lives if the relationship has been essential to us.

Words of farewell changed us. They remind us of our sacred place's significant physical and audio/visual improvements. They embraced us in your good wishes at Rachel's and my wedding. We were the first faith community to support the Living Wage. Giving sanctuary to the Indian students was transformative. Pride walks supporting the LGBTQI community, and the annual financial support of Rainbow Youth strengthened our identification as their allies. Quiz nights led by a capricious Quiz Ms built up the community. As did our support of the Duffy Books programme, sending kids to camp, singing groups, supporting a dyslexia programme in Tonga, car rallies, adult RE classes, finding tech solutions to keep worshipping when Covid locked us down, having small discussion groups at the close of services, greater focus on climate change and our response to it. Honouring Te Tiriti o Waitangi when opportunities arise.

This partial list of accomplishments created relationships between us. Not acknowledging them is denying what we have and had now and yesterday. For me, it is now. For you, it will be someday. When I look at that list, a high price would be paid to let pain silence my goodbye.

While intellectually, I appreciate the need for words of farewell, that does not mean I look forward to saying them, not that I have a choice as my feelings are beyond reason, having a life of their own. Shakespeare captures my sentiments:

"Good night, good night! Parting is such sweet sorrow, that I shall say good night till it be morrow."

They can be intense and overwhelming. On our recent trip to the US, I spent time in person with my sister for the first time in twelve years. When the time came for our farewells, I was caught off-guard by the sizable lump in my throat and flowing tears. I shouldn't have been surprised. While we have very different personalities, we have supported each other through thick and thin over the years.

I look at such moments as part of our journey towards our final words of farewell. My father, to whom I was very close, died when I was fifty, yet a part of me still grieves. How is it the world can let it be a dance through the good times and bad times, too, without noticing his absence?

At such moments, WH Auden's *'Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone'* makes more sense to me:

Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone,
Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone,
Silence the pianos and with muffled drum
Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come.

Let aeroplanes circle moaning overhead
Scribbling on the sky the message He Is Dead,
Put crepe bows round the white necks of the public doves,
Let the traffic policemen wear black cotton gloves.

He was my North, my South, my East and West,
My working week and my Sunday rest,
My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song;
I thought that love would last for ever: I was wrong.

The stars are not wanted now: put out every one;
Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun;
Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood;
For nothing now can ever come to any good.

Yet even in the midst of such pain, such loss, we are given a gift of precious memories of special moments that will emerge gradually to strengthen us and remain in our hearts forever, carrying us forward.

And that is my valedictory.

Meditation / Discussion question

What would you find most difficult in saying farewell?
Would it be easier to say to some than others?
Why?