Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

The marks they've left on us.

Rachel Mackintosh © 2 November 2026

"The desire to be remembered lives within our genetic makeup. It is the age-old reason people carve their initials in trees, place their hands in cement, and chalk their names on rocks. They want to leave their mark. They want to be remembered. But for the living, the real marks the dead leave are the ones they've left on us. A hug. A smile. A timely word of advice. We want to remember those we've loved and lost, not only for them, but also as importantly for ourselves, to mend, to heal, to live, and never to forget."

But if I
should not hear
smell or feel or see
you

you would still
define me
disperse me
wash over me
rain

When we begin our Auckland Unitarian year after our summer break, we begin with a water ceremony. We reflect that water connects us with all the elements of this planet, and with each other, as water molecules flow through the water cycle, through the earth and the sky and through living things. Water flows through us.

We are connected by water to everything in the world, including to our history; we are connected to our dead.

I don't know about you, but I think in cycles — the water cycle, the moon cycle, the seasonal cycle. Joni Mitchell's Circle Game:

> And the seasons, they go round and round
> And the painted ponies go up and down
> We're captive on the carousel of time
> We can't return, we can only look behind
> From where we came
> And go round and round and round
> In the circle game

Every time it is the anniversary of Clay's death, it will be All Soul's Day. That's tomorrow. I am captive on that carousel.

Captive? Is that the only way to see it? Blessed?

The words I opened this musing with were words that Clay used to end his sermon on All Saints Day 2020, 1 November.

“ … for the living, the real marks the dead leave are the ones they’ve left on us.”

Clay was not just my spouse, he was the minister and the heart of this congregation for nine years: years that emeritus minister Max Moss described as a golden age.

So Clay left marks on many of us.

Those marks may consist of misremembered points we thought he was making when he was convinced he was saying something else.

He had a story — not from this congregation but another one — of a couple who came to him and thanked him for saving their marriage. They quoted back to him something they had heard him say some time before.

Thing was, he hadn’t said it, nor was it anything he ever would say.

So, we may find that the marks we leave are not those we intend.

One of the marks Clay left was his humour, his not taking himself too seriously, willing to tell that story and laugh at himself even as he undertook the serious work of being the spiritual leader of this congregation.

Another of the marks Clay left in his role of minister of this congregation was laid down in one particular service I recall from July 2022.

My recollection of Clay's musings that day is that he said that he saw everything through theological lenses.

I have carried that image with me since then. The image of the lenses that shaped how he saw the world; in his case, theological lenses. I always found Clay's theology intriguing, since he described himself as a non-theist. What is theology without Theos? What will a theological lens reveal if it has a non-theist shape?

When I try to describe Clay's theology to others, I risk misremembering and making it something entirely different from what he intended. I say something like … theology without God is about discovering our meaning in many dimensions, integrating the intellectual and emotional with the mysteries we cannot explain. Living in the tension between knowing and wondering.

If Clay saw things through theological lenses and that meant he was able to challenge us about how to live intellectually, emotionally and spiritually, that's a pretty useful mark to have left.

But I feel that this mark must be a faded version of something deeper. A faded version of the depth that could be expressed only by a brilliant mind and tender heart after more than 40 years of study and practice. Such was Clay's gift to us.

One advantage of our technological age is that we can go back and see what he actually said:

> [My] theological lenses are trifocals. One-third is celebratory or poetic theology that seeks to entice us to envision what Jesus called the Kingdom of Heaven, a place here and now. It weaves words, themes, and images in and out of one another to evoke the fullness of that vision. It finds expression in the arts: hymns, poetry, iconography, and the like.
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> The second third concerns communication. It focuses on reasoned arguments or justifications of our commitments, both practical and intellectual, while seeking new ways to express them. It evaluates other perspectives to determine if they support, enhance or undermine those commitments.

> The third sharpens the critical eye. It is sometimes called scientific theology. It interrogates our presuppositions, norms, and language. At its best, it's the most stringently self-reflexive: eliminating lazy or complacent thought and action, purifying its discourse.
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> Each lens has its limitations, but together they are self-correcting. For instance, critical questioning validates Paul's celebration of righteousness, peace, and joy as marks of the kingdom of Heaven (Romans 14:17). The justice Amos calls for "that rolls down like waters" communicates commitment to the kind of world we would like to live in (5:24). The peace "that passes all understanding" that Paul offers Philemon [pron: fie-LEE-min] in return for freeing one of his slaves (4:6), and the "inexpressible and glorious" joy John assures us will be ours, that Peter says "no one can take away" (16:22) are instances of scientific theology dissipating the limitations of the other two and enhancing the clarity of our vision.

Looking back on Clay's actual words — and not just the misremembered, faded versions we carry with us — we can see how much resonance there is. He was a non-theist who could find words to live by in the Christian and Hebrew Bible. He challenged us to see that we, as a largely humanist congregation, may have thrown out the baby with the bathwater if we have discarded certain art, poetry, justice that rolls

down like waters and, most importantly, if we have discarded the possibility of heaven on earth, here and now, for the sake of rejecting an interventionist God who offends our intellect.

And let's revisit that little phrase in the middle there … where Clay talks of a "commitment to the kind of world we would like to live in."

Clay's theological lenses were, as he said, self-correcting. And in my translation, in the faded mark left on me, I had neglected the political dimension. We are all part of a polity — an organised society. Clay's theology also contained a commitment to create the kind of world we would like to live in. That is a political commitment. A commitment to our polity. When we give to Médecins sans Frontières through our Peace and Social Justice group, when we bring donations for Merge Café, when the Americans amongst us — like Pope Leo — mail back our votes to the US, when we go to the polls here, when we donate to Rainbow Youth, when we join with other communities in Te Ohu to call on political decision-makers to tackle homelessness, to repeal move-on orders, to fund a functional public health system for all … when we do these things, this is also theological work, this is a legacy of Clay's leadership, and also a continuation of our own.

So we can carry the marks our dead have left on us in our imperfect memories. We can deepen the marks

they've left on us by returning to the source, and rediscovering forgotten elements.

And let's now have a look at what prompted those musings from Clay. What had he been looking at through his theological lenses?

He had been in the outback of Queensland, following a 200-kilometre sculpture trail of works of recycled metal, by Australian sculptor, Mylinda Rogers:

[Link to slide show]

And here are the words that his theological lenses inspired in him from that experience:

> Her often whimsical work touched my desire to play. To be more than what I do. Recycling materials that will exist long after we do invites me to remember that all of me is beautiful and eternal, no matter how rusted, technologically useless, prickly, isolated, or seemingly worthless. Their being interspersed casually in the environment raised my consciousness of how we all are part of an interconnected web and challenged me to care for the rest of what often seems hopelessly tangled. It welded me to the region's history, grounding my present to consider a future my forebears could not foresee. Lastly, it ignited my imagination, freeing an essential ingredient for being fully human and surviving our world in crisis.

In the dry and dusty outback, Clay's theological lenses brought us his vision for the kind of world he wanted to live in: for him, that was a world where we are connected in all our beauty, through commitment, and through love. It is a world in which justice will roll down like waters and leave its marks on us all. It is a world in which, when love finds us, we will be moved to sing. Even angels will hear the news, what once was lost is found.

Amen

Meditation / Discussion Questions:

- What lenses do you wear?
- What will be your unfinished business?