

FIRST PARISH IN WAYLAND: SUNDAY, MAY 18, 2008
“Them Changes: Riding the Blue Boat Home”
Reverend Maddie Sifantus

MEDITATION

Let us come into a time of meditation and reflection. May we feel our breath moving in and out of our bodies. May we feel ourselves slowing down, just for this time together. May this be a time out of time. A time out of our busy days and weeks. A time right now to let go of our occupations and preoccupations and just be in this historic place, in this congregation which has gathered for centuries, sharing its joys and sorrows, making its journey together. May we feel our breath moving in and out, making space for peace, making space for new understanding, making space for what is sometimes called the “still small voice.” What might that voice say to us this morning? What do we need to hear, each of us? What is our longing this morning? What is our need for comfort? What is our hope for companionship on the path, this path of life? What are we thankful for?

As we feel our breath moving in and out, we know, as in the words of a prayer said at Yom Kippur,

“Birth is a beginning and Death a destination;
From childhood to maturity and youth to age,
From innocence to awareness and ignorance to knowing.
From foolishness to discretion and then, perhaps to wisdom.
From weakness to strength or strength to weakness, and back again.
From health to sickness and back, we pray, to health again.
From offense to forgiveness, from loneliness to love.
From joy to gratitude, from pain to compassion.
From grief to understanding, from fear to faith.
From defeat to defeat
Until looking backward or ahead, we see that
Victory lies not at some high place along the way,
But in having made the Journey, stage by stage.¹

For the next few moments, as we feel our breath moving in and out, we can feel the peace of this place, and, perhaps, reflect on where we are, each of us, on this journey, this journey of life, this journey of faith which has brought us together here this morning.

HYMN *Blue Boat Home*

Though below me, I feel no motion
Standing on these mountains and plains
Far away from the rolling ocean
Still my dry land heart can say
I've been sailing all my life now
Never harbor or port have I known
The wide universe is the ocean I travel
And the earth is my blue boat home

¹ Roberts, Elizabeth and Elias Amidon (1996). *Life Prayers*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 301.

Sun, my sail, and moon my rudder
As I ply the starry sea
Leaning over the edge in wonder
Casting questions into the deep
Drifting here with my ship's companions
All we kindred pilgrim souls
Making our way by the lights of the heavens
In our beautiful blue boat home

I give thanks to the waves upholding me
Hail the great winds urging me on
Greet the infinite sea before me
Sing the sky my sailor's song
I was born upon the fathoms
Never harbor or port have I known
The wide universe is the ocean I travel
And the earth is my blue boat home²

SERMON: “Them Changes: Riding the Blue Boat Home” Rev. Maddie Sifantus

So, here we are, all of us, us “ kindred pilgrim souls,” sailing on this blue boat home of our hymn. Here we are, you and I, sailing through our lives, young and old, and in-between, navigating the rapids, drifting through the placid pools, looking for the horizon, looking back at where we have been. Here we are, sometimes adrift with no wind in our sails, wondering if we will ever move again. And here we go, shooting ahead on a wicked wind, pushing us hither and yon to we know not where.

Here we are with our ship’s companions, companions of all colors, of all interests, of all theological backgrounds. We have our companions here in this space and our companions in the wider community of Wayland, and our still wider community of our nation and the whole blue boat of our earth. Here we are with our companions, casting questions into the deep, into the void, into the tradition. Here, with each other, we attempt to live those questions into the answers, or some answers, or any answers—as we sail together, walk together, crawl together, grieve together, rejoice together. As we care for each other and give thanks for the waves upholding us and our sailor songs which can carry us—one day—home.

As most of you likely know by now, I have announced my retirement, effective this August, as Director of the elder chorus, the Golden Tones which I founded in 1988. That ministry for me grew out of this very place, First Parish in Wayland. Let me briefly tell the story for those of you who don’t know it. One day around 1980, I walked in the back door of this sanctuary for the very first time. Perhaps like some of you, I sat in the very last pew, wondering what I would find here, sceptical. At the time, my son Nigel was about five years old and was asking those pesky meaning questions. Having grown up Episcopalian, in fact attending the Church of the Holy Spirit just down the way, I thought that I was a spiritual person but that organized religion was not for me. But Nigel was asking those tricky questions. My neighbor

² Peter Mayer, *Singing the Journey*, 1064.

across the street at the time, Barbara Duffield, was a delightful English woman and would have us neighbors over for tea, a wonderful tradition, in my mind. And she heard me talk some about this and said to me, “You sound like a Unitarian Universalist.” And I said, “What the heck is that?”

And so it was that I found myself in the last pew, right back there, on that fateful morning. And Ken Sawyer was up here where I am standing now, and he read that day the reading by Richard Gilbert in our opening words this morning—or one much like it. You remember that it ends, “Wherever you are on your life’s journey, you are welcome.” Well! That was life changing for me. Who knew that my life would change, just by walking in a new door that I had never walked in before? Them changes.

To make a long story short, although I came here looking for a place for my son, which I did indeed find, the bigger news was that I found a place for myself to ask the big questions, to have companions on the path, and to help me see my own path and myself in a deeper way, all of which led to changes. In short order, I joined the choir, led at that time by Peggy Krewson, co-chaired the Rummage Sale, got involved with denominational affairs, and became youth advisor and later youth director. During those years of working with Ken, the staff, committees, and a number of interns, I became aware of that part of me that was drawn to ministry. Pushed to ministry seemed more like it. And that was a place I did NOT want to go. At the time, I felt it was something “out to get me”. Something scary. Something big that would upset everything. Push me into those fathoms, a place I thought I was ill-equipped to go. A big scary change.

Then there came a time when I became aware that it was time for me to leave being Youth Director, for a number of reasons. Things were different in the youth program here back then in the eighties. There have been changes! Back then, it was pretty much me at the helm. I would report in to Ken, the DRE of the time, Ginny Steele, and the RE Committee, but there was no Youth Adult Committee. With all the work I did in our district, the Mass Bay District, as the adult liaison from the youth, and on a continental level attending General Assembly, I knew that changes needed to be made, and I came to know that I needed to leave to have them happen. It is not healthy for any program to be dependent on one person; it takes companions, all the pilgrim souls, to best guide the boat. When I left in the spring of 1988, I made recommendations to the RE Committee about the need for more adult involvement and other things. And I did leave. And changes came to be made. And new folks were identified to take the helm. And it is stronger than ever.

Which brings me to the Golden Tones. We just don’t know when those life altering changes are going to happen. I did not know when I walked into First Parish that first time that I was setting out on a path to ordained ministry. And I did not know when I received a call from First Parish member, Ruth Lamb, who was the co-director of the Wayland Senior Center, that her request for me to direct a sing-along group would completely reorient my life and would be the final push that sent me into the ministry.

Twenty years of the Golden Tones have taught me much about change—especially the changes that all of us face as we grow older. And as I prepare to leave this elder ministry in August, I have been focusing on what I have been thinking of as “them changes”. Those of you of a certain age may remember the song of that name performed by the late Buddy Miles and the late Jimi Hendrix in the Band of Gypsies. That song has been running through my head of late. “My mind is goin’ through so many changes, I’m going’ right out of my mind.” And that is what it feels like sometimes, doesn’t it? We don’t like change, many of us. It is scary—we don’t know

what is on the other side of it—we don't know who we are going to be on the other side of it. It is scary—but it is life on this blue boat home.

Many years ago, early in my years with the Golden Tones, I attended a wonderful conference in New York City called "Conscious Aging". This conference has since taken on almost mythological status in the aging community for being one of the first times that academics, psychologists and those concerned with the spiritual life of elders were brought together to consider what it might be like to age consciously. There were many highpoints. I remember Ram Dass talking about how it was to be with his father who had Alzheimer's, and this was before his own unexpected stroke. The gospel singer Marian Williams entertained us from her wheelchair. Gail Sheehy talked about her book that was new at that time about *Passages*. The late Maggie Kuhn, leader of the Grey Panthers was there, not too long before her death. I don't remember the whole scope of her talk, but I do remember her talking in a very personal way about her experience of growing old and how to cope or even make something new out of the changes. I remember her remarking that as you became an elderly woman, you might find that you outlived all the men around. In that case, she advised, "you just need to find a good woman to love!"

But one of the moments I remember the most was during the talk by Rabbi Zalman Schacter, who was in the process of creating his Spiritual Eldering Institute and From Aging to Saging program. He had his wife with him on the podium and she sang unaccompanied a song I had never heard before at that time. I later have heard it by many different entertainers. It was written in the early seventies by Bernard Ighner:

EVERYTHING MUST CHANGE

Everything must change
Nothing stays the same
Everyone must change
No one stays the same

The young become the old
And mysteries do unfold
Cause that's the way of time
Nothing and no one goes unchanged

There are not many things in life
You can be sure of
Except rain comes from the clouds
Sun lights up the sky
And hummingbirds do fly

Winter turns to spring
A wounded heart will heal
But never much too soon
Yes everything must change

The young become the old

And mysteries do unfold
Cause that's the way of time
Nothing and no one goes unchanged

There are not many things in life
You can be sure of
Except rain comes from the clouds
Sun lights up the sky
And butterflies do fly

Rain comes from the clouds
Sun lights up the sky
And music
And music
Makes me cry

There are not many things in life you can be sure of, says the song. But there are some things. And part of the trick of life is to figure out what those things are for you—and for me. The beauty of nature. The inevitability of the seasons. The importance of friends and family—companions on our journey. The place of faith in our lives—whatever your UU gospel might be.

For me, readings from our Judeo-Christian heritage which resonate with my upbringing have a significant place. For you, it may be the poetry of Mary Oliver or the strains of music. I love the familiar reading from Ecclesiastes, that book of the Hebrew Bible that discusses what some describe as the futility of life and how to be a God-fearing person.³ You remember these words which are often used at Memorial Services:

To everything there is a season,
a time for every purpose under the sun.
A time to be born and a time to die;
a time to plant and a time to pluck up that which is planted;
a time to kill and a time to heal ...
a time to weep and a time to laugh;
a time to mourn and a time to dance ...
a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing;
a time to lose and a time to seek;
a time to rend and a time to sew;
a time to keep silent and a time to speak;
a time to love and a time to hate;
a time for war and a time for peace.⁴

There is a time for all manner of things, and there is a time for change, no matter how difficult it is to make it. It is part of the rising and the falling of the blue boat that we are all on. Part of the flow of life itself. As Carl Rogers said in his book, *On Becoming a Person*, “Life, at its best, is a flowing, changing process in which nothing is fixed. I find that when life is richest and most rewarding it is a flowing process.” Now matter how much we try to “fix” it, to keep our

³ Encarta Dictionary.

⁴ Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

boundaries firm, to keep our family safe, and everything orderly—we are actually in the flow. The trick is to have all hands on deck, working together to navigate the maelstrom, caring for each other and outcomes.

Change is all around. Sometimes it is so subtle, we are not aware of it. But we are all changing, all the time. You know it and I know it, whether we like it or not. When I talk about aging, I often joke that we are aging from the moment we are born. Each day brings subtle changes in our cellular structure. Some changes are dramatic, and may not be easy, even when they seem to be happy changes. How many of us can remember being ecstatic about the birth of our first child, but then struck with some sadness by the letting go of our old life with our spouse when it was just the “two of us”? How many of us here remember the building of our classroom building and the happy influx of new students and families to our RE program that necessitated the need of going to two services... and then the return to one when it was too difficult to adapt to the change?

Sometimes change happens when you absolutely least expect it. Change that we have not asked for or wanted. The sudden loss of a job, a horrible natural event such as those disasters we have seen in the news in recent weeks, an event like 9/11.

Change can happen in an instant, as I can personally attest. Most of you probably know that in March 2006 I was in a horrific auto accident within sight of these walls. That day I had been on retreat on Cape Cod with the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association. I had left the meeting early for a concert with the Golden Tones, across the way, for the Council on Aging, then had gone to a meeting with the Golden Tones attorney in Burlington to talk about by-law changes. A typical day. After that appointment, I passed through my house to check my voice mail, and called our treasurer, Jane Mansfield, to tell her I would be a little late in joining her at the meeting of the Wayland Business Association. Then I got back into my car and was making my way down Route 126 towards our meeting in Cochrasset. I stopped at the light and was starting to accelerate, when all of a sudden, out of the corner of my eye, I saw a white shape loom up to my left and then hit me head on, whammo. There was time enough to get my foot off the accelerator but not onto the brake. As I sat there, still conscious, with my car turned around facing the opposite direction, with the glass trickling down around me, the steam and smoke billowing in through the windshield and my horn stuck on blaring, I could see out of one side of the windshield the senior center where the Golden Tones had performed earlier in the day, and through the other side, the steeple of this beloved church.

Somehow, that steeple and my companions on the blue boat kept me steady in that moment when I knew that change had arrived for me with a giant “C”. I knew I could not move. But I knew I was alive. I could hear the screaming of the man in one of the other cars. But I was calm. I used the meditation practice I have honed here on Wednesday nights to help me be with the pain and the waiting, and I felt a sense of the sacred holding me. In fact, I felt filled with an overwhelming gratefulness that I was “still here.” I can remember thinking, “I can’t die; I’m a grandmother!” And I felt a great responsibility to my ministry with the Golden Tones, as I was a companion to so many in their later years.

Many of my friends and colleagues told me after the accident, this is the time to make some changes! But at the time, what I needed to focus on was getting well—getting out of the ICU, working through the weeks of inpatient rehab, getting through the months of recovery at home, the major surgery of last fall—and making sure that the Golden Tones would be strong and doing the strategic planning that could make them a sustainable and inheritable organization

for the future. So I needed to come to this time of change in my own time—even with that change with the large “C” that happened in that moment.

So now I come to this time when I am going to be saying goodbye to the Golden Tones in August. This will be a huge change for me and for them. My final concert will be on Sunday, August 10 at 6:30 PM in the Community United Methodist Church in Cochituate, another faith community in town with whom the Golden Tones have had a deep relationship. I hope many of you can attend this free concert; perhaps some of you would like to join us in the finale of gospel music. If so, just let me know and I will give you the details. But the work of the Golden Tones will go on. In this time of major change for the organization and the community, the Board will be looking at the mission, program and leadership of the Golden Tones. The group has become nationally known, as it was made a Best Practices of the National Endowment for the Arts in 2006 and is featured in a new book, *Creativity Matters, the Arts and Aging Toolkit*. And they are woven in the fabric of the community of Metrowest, as well as having deep ties here at First Parish. We have had many members from First Parish who are no longer with us, including Dick Gregory, Dick Best, Irving Pollitt, John Pratt, Eleanore and Allen Benjamin. Most recently we lost our beloved non-singing member, John Dunlay. Shirley Pollitt was our board president for many years. Jo Wilson advised me on the advisability of filing for non-profit status. Jack Wilson took our first group photo, as Carol MacGregor took a later one. Ken and Erin have been trusted advisors and a number of folks were on either my Committee on Ministry or our Intern Committee. And the church has been open to the participation of our community ministry interns, as April Spencer has been this last year. And probably most important of all, many of you have been generous funders of our program which has allowed us to exist at all.

My hope is that you will continue to support the program, financially and otherwise, as it goes forward to make a difference in the lives of our community and in the lives of its members. It has been a life-giving group for those involved in it and there will only be more need for it in the years ahead when folks are living longer. Your support will keep a place for folks to keep singing through their lives, as I have called it and bringing a positive model of aging, along with the joy of singing and companionship. May the blue boat keep sailing with new leadership on board and may they do a new dance together, learning to follow, learning to lead.

And that brings me to our last hymn. You may not know that we lost our UU troubadour this week: the Reverend Ric Masten. For those of us in community ministry, he was an early inspiration. Ric Masten performed his music and poetry before congregations throughout the United States in a career spanning five decades. Many of his poems explored how race, religion, women’s liberation, alcohol abuse, aging, and other social issues impact the most intimate personal relationship. And so, to conclude our service today, I would like us to dedicate Masten’s most most famous song to the memory of the Reverend Ric Masten as he has made the most final change one can make in this life by moving to death. “A child is born, the old must die, a time for joy, a time to cry. Take it as it passes by, Let it be a dance.” Let it be a dance.

HYMN #311 *Let It Be a Dance*

Let it be a dance we do.

May I have this dance with you.

Through the good times

And the bad times too.

Let it be a dance

Let a dancing song be heard.
Play the music, say the words
And fill the sky with sailing birds
And let it be a dance.
Learn to follow learn to lead.
Feel the rhythm, fill the need.
To reap the harvest plant the seed
And let it be a dance

Let it be a dance we do.
May I have this dance with you.
Through the good times
And the bad times too.
Let it be a dance

Everybody turn and spin.
Let your body learn to bend
And like a willow with the wind
Let it be a dance.
A child is born the old must die.
A time for joy a time to cry,
So take it as it passes by
And let it be a dance

Let it be a dance we do.
May I have this dance with you.
Through the good times
And the bad times too.
Let it be a dance

The morning star comes out at night.
Without the dark there is no light
And if nothing's wrong then nothing's right
So let it be a dance.
Let the sun shine, let it rain.
Share the laughter, bare the pain
And round and round we go again
So let it be a dance

Let it be a dance we do.
May I have this dance with you.
Through the good times
And the bad times too.
Let it be a dance.⁵

⁵ Masten, Ric. Singing the Living Tradition, 311.