

Hail and Farewell: A Theological Reflection on the Art of Hello and Good-bye

A sermon by Seanan Holland, Intern Minister

In the essay *Running Through the Thistles*, from the Alban Institute, there is a brief interview with a psychologist. He summarizes two decades of counseling experience by saying that there are really two basic skills that humans need to learn: how to say hello and how to say goodbye. This is one of those things that, as an adult, sort of stopped me in my tracks and made me rethink the image I had of the world - to see hello and good-bye as one large category of experience. What would it mean for the world if children learned to say hello by taking a toy from someone else, or to say good-bye by pushing. Just thinking on this makes me wonder if there isn't a cultural art, or even a spiritual practice, waiting to be rejuvenated for the needs of our time. We are becoming more transient than in past decades, our cities more densely populated, our circles of membership more numerous with Yahoo groups and Facebook...

I've probably said before that seminary involves a lot of books. And there is an additional reading list required by the Ministerial Fellowship Committee. The two don't always match up, so even while I have been here as your intern, I have been plodding through the History of Western Civilization and the Christian Reformation. The information is certainly interesting, but the reading can become rather dull. Fortunately for me my internship committee recommended that I put the text books down for a while and pick up a novel. And just to be sure I got the point, they provided me with a gift.

Maybe you've read it – *Water for Elephants*. It is indeed a rollicking good story, and it is quite a different read than far-off history. A novel offers a closer experience of being able to peer into the richness of the characters and see who they are and how they unfold. You can imagine that in a story about a circus company, there would be some rich and lively characters. Each person in this book finds their way from somewhere in life,, into the circus business – and it is in that single chapter of their life story, of coming in to the circus, that we learn so much about them. There is no way to know exactly how they will eventually leave the circus, but that chapter too,, is inextricably a piece of who each of these people is.

One of the things that makes for a good novel is its believability, even if it is fantastic – we can see that it is true to life, true to someone's life, even if they are fictional characters. But it is also very different from life. In a book, the narrator knows what happens. In a book, the author already knows the lives of the characters.

When we meet someone new in real life, we don't know their whole story like the narrator of a novel does. And when it comes time for someone to say farewell and leave our little part of the circus of life, we don't know what will become of them. We don't know how the next chapter will unfold – we begin with uncertainty.

Religion is something to puzzle over, the divine, a mystery. Uncertainty is one of the ways we know we are approaching the sacred.

It seems to me that this is where we find ourselves when we meet someone new. It can seem so ordinary, so everyday. But as we say hello, as we reach out to shake someone's hand, we are in a

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Namaste moment – the sacred in me greets the sacred in you. Two lives full of stories stand before each other. But unlike the narrator of a novel, we can't suddenly know all the stories of another person's life. It is hard enough to be aware of how our own stories are at work in that moment of greeting.

Thomas King is a professor of literature and a Native American of the Cherokee nation. He has a wonderful book called, *The Truth About Stories*. He weaves together the stories of his life and the stories of his people in an exploration of how our narratives inform and become part of our very being, the essence of who we are. Part of his story involves an estranged father who suddenly left the family. The father left no explanation, no destination, he simply left one day and never came back. King reflects on how this chapter, this part of the story of his life flows into his meetings with new people. This chapter about his father's departure is ever present in his own mind, and he talks about how each time he meets someone new, he has to wrestle with how and when he will tell someone that he simply doesn't know where his father is. Without even reading the book, I think we can feel the difficulty of carrying such a story through life.

This is the ocean of possibility and uncertainty we are in with each new meeting. We step into someone's gentle presence, unaware that part of his story is a bid for the Olympic Judo team. We shake hands with an unassuming woman who is a national champion Nordic skier. Or we meet a young person who is struggling inside with how to reveal his sexual identity, in a world of stories he cannot claim.

All of us are informed by and live with the stories of our lives.

If we are all strangers somewhere, if hospitality is a religious value, it seems to me that how we simply say hello, how we hail another sacred human being, becomes a spiritual practice. Within this moment, we have the opportunity to demonstrate that the world is a hospitable place. Within this moment, we are interpreting our first principle of respecting the inherent worth and dignity of each person. We can hold our hands, our hearts, and our minds open to the book of someone's life story and realize that we are now part of that story. What role shall we play?

By now, you know that I served for a while on active duty in the Marines. The Marine Corps takes tradition pretty seriously and because of the way we move from job to job and place to place, we have made ceremonies around how we greet and good-bye each other. One of those traditions is the Hail and Farewell party. About every three months, we'd find someone in the squadron willing to volunteer their home to host a Hail & Farewell gathering. I used to see these events as a huge effort by a lot of people that ate into our training time, and even more into the time we had for our own lives. But once I gave up my resistance to these events, I came to see the importance of them. It was one more thing we had to accomplish, but it was one of our ways of valuing people. We'd gather together all of the people who had recently joined the squadron and all of the people who had orders to a new duty assignment.

When you get all these different people together, it's like family – some are democrats, some are republicans – you don't get to choose. The commanding officer would take the center of the floor and offer a short introduction of each person who was joining the unit. And after the new joins had been welcomed, there was a round of applause. And then came the difficult part – the saying good bye. And over the years I really started to pay attention to this as a ritual. I watched how delicately

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my commanders handled this, because each member of the family is different. I watched how they summarized a person's service to the unit-as-a-whole and how they made room for a departing Marine to step from one chapter into the next.

Each person received a gift of appreciation. And we were each given the floor for a few minutes to talk about our own experience of being part of that unit, of being in that family.

After I decided to go to theological school, and my resignation papers were signed, we gathered again for this ritual – people knew I was going to seminary. There was a lump in my throat and I felt a bit unsteady. It seemed like all I could do was just give myself over to the uncertain winds of fate. I don't remember anything my boss said except the last sentence. As he ended the speech, he said, "We're going to be sorry to see you go, but we understand you have tasking from higher headquarters." And he pointed up, toward some divinity.

In that little bit of humor, I felt myself relax. I had been given permission to leave. I wasn't giving myself over to the winds of fate. I was embarking on a new journey. I was beginning a new chapter. And I was able to do this largely because the people around me helped me bring the current chapter to a good end. They had blessed my departure with no strings attached.

If we are all strangers somewhere, and the chapters of our stories overlap... if hospitality is a religious value, it seems to me that how we simply say good-bye, how we farewell another sacred human being, becomes a spiritual practice.

I left active duty in the Summer of 2005. And now I am here with you. It has been a wonderful journey. I came to you with preparation and willingness to be in this experience. I remember one of our first meetings in Founders' Hall – me asking to know something about you, and telling something of myself. The openness of that first encounter is something that I believe I will come back to again and again in ministry. I recall that as the gentle, vulnerable space that a minister seeks to be a part of – a place where we can slowly let our stories unfold with each other. My role as an intern, and the knowledge that I would be here for only a year was never far from me, but since then I have been able to connect with you and discover in tangible ways that ministry happens only through real relationships. I am grateful for the relationships I have made here.

Along the way, you have offered me the room to take some risks and make some internally mistakes. I hope you are all able to imagine what that blessing is like for me. You have trusted Rev. Strauss and Deborah Kahn and my internship committee to be my teachers and my guides. I hope that you also know how valuable it is, not just to your interns, but to Unitarian Universalism, for a congregation to become a teaching congregation.

And over the last month, as I prepared to depart, you sent me off with gatherings and gifts... we have made some time for speeches. And most especially we have encountered each other. The conversations that we have had in the back of the sanctuary or in Fellowship hall have let me know that I have been here. What a wonderful gift to be known. What a wonderful gift you have offered.

When I came to you, there was tolerance, perhaps even the expectation that I would make some mistakes. In that very process, you have been part of my formation. What you have done in

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molding me, in being part of my formation, means that I have crossed some threshold. I must move now from here, to another chapter. I must leave the rookery and go out into the world on my own.

The wisdom of ages of ministry has been written down in books. The UUA's version recommends that interns detach themselves from their teaching congregations for at least a year. What contact I have with UUCR will be through Rev. Strauss and the board. But this does not mean that our encounter with each other will end. You all will be an ever-present blessing to any ministry I am able to offer. And somewhere, several chapters hence, I hope that our stories will overlap again.

The comings and goings of my life and the wisdom of my teachers have given me something to reflect on in the meaning of our hails and farewells to each other. The way one chapter ends is pivotal to the way the next begins. The entire community around an individual contributes to how those chapters will read – those chapters of arriving and departing. This is the gift presented to us by empty hands when we walk in to a new community. This is the gift we have to offer from empty hands when one among us must move on to another part of the journey. This is the gift of the heart we can offer to the sacred selves that come and go from our circle.

Let us imagine this practice of how we say hello and good bye as a way of caring for the interdependent web of life. Our lives are so full with work, church, school, sports, hobbies... the list goes on. Let us imagine what ritual of the mind and heart we might practice as we greet another sacred self in our many circles.

Perhaps it would simply be to silently speak the word "Namaste," and we would be reminded of the sacredness of our moments of coming and going. In our greetings, we would be aware of the whole, delicate book of stories that is another person – even if we could only know a chapter or two. And in our farewells to those departing, we would remember to set them free and bless them on their journey.

For the warmth of your welcome, for the blessings you have offered on the next leg of the journey, and for the richness of the experience between, I am grateful.

Amen

Dr. Mittur Ramprasad

HOSPITALITY

Hospitality shows humanity
In its bare essence of waves of compassion
In colors of goodwill and amity
On rolling ripples of life's vast ocean

Hospitality shows cordiality
On its loving face at all given times
Sharing its genuine geniality
Shying away from making proud proclaims

Hospitality shows conviviality
Giving no excuse or explanation
Showing the very soul of sociability
While doing the loving salutation

Unitarian Universalist minister Rev. Annie
Forrester – on praying in public.

Creatively saying good bye at the end of an event can be as important and challenging as crafting [a] prayer itself. The speakers have spoken, the prayers have been said, the work is done. How do we take leave of one another? How we disperse our community is as important as why we gathered it. We need a spiritual good-bye to one another before we go.