

# Teach Them How To Say Goodbye

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## Part I: Leadership Moment “Christine Has to Say Goodbye”

Christine has to say “Goodbye”

Well...not just yet, but at the end of August.

She has to say goodbye as our senior minister so that Angela can take over, and so that she can move on in her “retired” life of not being the Senior Minister of First Unitarian.

And for one year, she also says a very complete goodbye to us. She won’t be around the congregation, and she won’t be in contact with the congregation’s people. She’s got work to do getting used to the idea that she’s not in charge around here, that she has an identity besides that of being our minister, and a ministry to the world, and not just to us.

And we have work to do, getting used to looking to Angela as our senior minister, and Angela has work to do, stepping up into leadership without looking first to Christine.

Ministers and congregations through the generations have found this adjustment to be a difficult task, and it can be catastrophic for everyone when it is not done well. Therefore, the edict, enforced by the ministry, has developed of “at least a year completely away,” for departing ministers. Christine and Angela have known about this for their whole careers. For those of us just hearing about it, it seems kind of harsh, I know. However upon reflection, I’m sure that you will see the wisdom of this. We want to make a good bond with our new Senior Minister. We want her to be secure in her leadership, and we want Christine to be able to return to this congregation in the role of honored member. So....everyone has to hit the reset button.

And so, In August, we will be saying goodbye to Christine for a year. You don’t have to avoid her if you see her in the grocery store, but she won’t be at church, making new friends from the congregation, coming to events, or, especially, serving as a minister for the people of this congregation. No, not even for memorial services. That will be Angela’s job. If all goes well, sometime late in 2018, we will welcome Christine back. She says she wants to help in the garden and sit with her husband for entire services, week after week.

And speaking of William, this separation does not necessarily apply to him, and he and Angela have agreed that he will continue to be around next year. He gets a year to practice not being the minister’s husband, but he can only do that if you don’t deluge him with questions about Christine every time you see him. OK?

OK. It seems like a big job, doesn't it? Now we will learn how to do it. (Here followed a performance of "One Last Time" with Christine sharing the part of George Washington with Chris Clawson. You can see the official performance of this song here: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=YRHOcskOudg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YRHOcskOudg))

## Part II: "One Last Time"

Vance: We're going to learn from George Washington, as a matter of fact, who was in a similar position a little over 200 years ago. After being twice elected President of this new nation (unanimously!) He decided to retire and not run for a third term and ...he had to say goodbye. His farewell address is an American Classic.

In the hit Musical, "Hamilton", Washington's young assistant, Alexander Hamilton has to come to terms with his mentor's choice as Washington himself does a masterful job of saying Goodbye.

## Part III "How to Say Goodbye"

One of the things we do when we say "goodbye" is to tell stories; to say why this relationship was unique and wonderful. So...here is a story.

When we were planning my installation, way back in January of 1989, I was asked if I had any special requests for music, and, mindful of the fact that this congregation was very oriented to classical chamber music in those days, I suggested a work by Aaron Copeland, called "In The Beginning". I have always loved it, and it seemed topical, so it was the interlude, sung by a local singer, Kathleen Clawson. We didn't meet again for many years but I would notice her name on programs or see her perform and remember that connection to my beginnings here in Albuquerque.

So it was great fun to discover a few years back that our new accountant, Alan Clawson, was Kathleen's husband, and through him, we met their son Chris and discovered that he, too, was a fine singer. It was Chris, of course, who sang the part of George Washington just now...so...my ministry is has been bookended with music by two Clawsons...was well as aided in the office by a third. That long trajectory with people and families means a lot to me, as I say goodbye.

Young Mr. Hamilton, shocked and grieved that his mentor is going to refuse to run for a third term, mourns. In the space of a couple of dozen fabulous lines, his shock turns to disbelief, to argumentativeness, to depression, to acceptance. All of those are common ways we express grief, and we grieve, not only when somebody dies, but when things are taken from us, when our life changes, when kids grow up, when friendships end, when we ourselves face death... and when our minister retires. *Our lives are full of losses. Some are necessary ones that no one escapes except by the greatest loss of all, which is death. We all have to grow up and leave our childhood behind, we all have to grow*

*old and leave our younger bodies and selves to move on. Then there are all the extra losses that come with the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune...robberies and divorces, school moves and job losses, health issues, friendship dramas...almost all the events of our lives, even the good ones, come with losses. You know what a bachelor party is for? It is a final fling of singlehood, and it is usually celebrated with too much drinking because in spite of the joyous wedding about to be celebrated, everybody is more than a little sad about what is being left behind.*

There's a lot of saying goodbye in our lives. It is important to do it well, to feel what we feel, and to say what we need to say. We have to, to move on.

If we don't let ourselves notice and mourn our losses, a weight of un-said goodbyes accumulates in our heart. It weigh us down, it gets in our way, all that extra baggage. It keeps us from forming new relationships, from tackling new tasks, from joy. Oh yeah...we've got to learn to say goodbye.

George Washington, a wise man, who has been thinking about this departure for a while, patiently answers Hamilton's questions. No, they won't think he is weak. Yes, he has to do this. And why? Because,

*"If I say goodbye, the nation learns to move on  
It outlives me when I'm gone.*

And of course, a long-lived and healthy nation was the object from the first. George Washington didn't agree to become president because of the honor of the thing or the amount of golf he could play. He did it to create a nation and he knows that to have it thrive, he has to get out of the way.

It's true of nations, of companies...which often don't survive the departure of their founder, of families, which can come apart if the goodbyes didn't get done well, of raising children.... The parents who just can't say goodbye to their sweet and adoring 10 year old who needs them for nearly everything, are in for a turbulent decade, and their child's growth will be impeded as well. We all have to learn to say goodbye so we can move on and thrive.

President Washington is also wise enough to know that knows that this hard wisdom doesn't come naturally. He know that he and Hamilton will have to teach the American People...who by all accounts were hanging on to their president for dear life, all too apt to love him into the kingship which would have destroyed this barely born experiment in democracy... teach them how to say goodbye.

I get it. Nobody likes this. I myself, glad as I am to be leaving the world of full time...more than full time.... work, have noticed myself thinking that, rather than face this Summer of goodbyes, perhaps I would prefer to die in office after all. But one of the things that is drummed into minister's heads in theological school and ministers meetings is that you owe it to your people to say a good and thorough and time consuming goodbye. Ministers play a powerful role in people's lives, half leader, half wisdom figure, half god, half mom...are you getting a feeling of a bit larger than life here? All the more important, then, to say Goodbye well.

I am not inclined to doubt what I learned because I learned it the hard way...right here. My predecessor, Todd Taylor, a generation in ministry older than I, a generation which had not been instructed in the importance of ministerial endings, had "just up and left", I was told. He was a wonderful minister, the best the congregation had experienced, and, your predecessors in this church said, "We loved him and we didn't even get to say goodbye."

"We didn't even get to have a party!" I was told....over and over. Nobody knew why he had left, it seemed, although I had been told why, both by the district exec and by Todd himself. He had inherited money about this time of the year found that he now was financially secure enough to retire, and had given his three month notice. In those days, ministers took a three month summer leave so it had been a very abbreviated goodbye. Todd was of the old school when that was not so unusual. As a matter of fact, there was a goodbye party. I found the pictures. But one hastily arranged party is not really enough, and the emotional truth of the congregation was that they didn't get to say goodbye.

And, you know, it really showed. While some people greeted their new minister with open arms and hearts, many other arms were folded across chests. The president of the congregation said a few words before leading the congregation in the words of installation to the effect that "Ministers come and go. Let's not take this too seriously." "Uh oh," I thought. "This might be harder than I had imagined." Which it was!

There were lots of factors at play in the trials and tribulations of our first oh, um....13 years together, and I am most willing to say, like George Washington, that, while I didn't make any intentional errors, I know also that my "incompetent abilities" were a part of those years, too. Still, it would have helped, in lots of ways, actually....if the congregation had resolved its grief over their last minister's departure by saying Goodbye to him more carefully.

So, I've known from the beginning that however long I stayed here...and at the beginning I thought that that would be four or five years, I would say a good, goodbye. Angela will, no doubt, have plenty of things to mutter about as she really digs in to all the incomplete projects, messes, and precedents I've left for her, but this goodbye thing...we're going to do it up right. Four sermons on different parts of saying goodbye, parties and gatherings and appreciations, visits to the branches, and rituals and last meetings. Many candles lit and goodbye's said, notes penned and cards read, and tears shed....that too.

We'll also have fun...really, we will. And we will part unburdened and ready to face our future.

OK. So here are the elements of a good, goodbye.

First: You want to say, or imply, that this relationship, or the part of it that is ending, has been an important relationship. You imply this just by taking the time and emotional energy to say "Goodbye," and it never hurts to actually say it aloud.

The younger generation thinks that it has invented a new approach to ending relationships, which is called, "ghosting." (If you listen carefully you will hear echoes of generations past.) To "ghost" is to just walk away and become uncontactable. You leave the party without saying goodbye...or thank you. If

you are ending a relationship, you send your Dear John letter...or maybe you don't even do that. Then, you just don't pick up the phone, you block messages, you "unfriend" and return letters to sender.

In whatever generation it occurs, the "just go" theory of relationship seems like a good idea in the short term...no drama, no tears, but it makes the ending and separation incredibly more painful for the person being ghosted. Because, ghosts may be unavailable and uncontactable, but they are still floating around, and they are very uncomfortable companions...for the ghoster and the ghostee both. They weigh us down.

And that is the first step...to create a significant time and way to say, "This relationship was so important to me. I learned something, Experienced something. I am so glad, even though it is ending, that we knew each other."

The second step is to tie up loose ends. So, according to circumstances:

Thank you. When relationships are ending or changing, it is important to express whatever gratitude we can. Thanks for the memories, the good time, the care and consideration you gave...If we are honest we can even thank our enemies for toughening us up.

And then, there may be a need for an, "I'm sorry." For whatever, even if you don't know, for what. George Washington didn't know of anything he'd done wrong, not on purpose, anyway, but he knew he must have made mistakes...we all do.

And then, if need be, there's the "I forgive you". In the Musical, Wicked, which ah hah a great goodbye scene between the Good Witch of the North and the Wicked Witch of the West, sisters who have been at war all their lives, one sings to the other, "And just to clear the air, I ask forgiveness for all the things you blame me for." And the other graciously answers, "well as to that, there's always blame to share, and none of it seems to matter anymore." Do you feel lighter already?

Sometimes there are things to talk out here, because understanding always helps clear the air. "This in no way excuses how I hurt you that time, but here is what was going on with me when I did that hurtful thing. I'm sorry. Please forgive me."

The third part of a good, goodbye, is putting our feeling into words. I appreciate you, if it is true, It has been good knowing you. I love you... so important, so hard for some of us to say.

And...this is implicit in love but sometimes it needs to go out in the open: Because I love you I want you to continue to grow and change: to have new lovers, to love your new minister, to grow a beard, to move to Italy. Don't let me or my memory hold you back. You have my permission to change!

And then, last but not least, "Goodbye."

And say goodbye knowing what it means. the English word, "goodbye" is a contraction of "God be with you." In other words; it is a blessing. It is the same in Spanish: Adios...a-dios, means, "to god", and in French, "adieu." Although we often part company with some variation of "see you soon!", a real

goodbye is different. What we really mean when we say, “goodbye”, is “This is a parting”, but it also means, “and blessing on your way.” “Farewell...fare-well” is a more secular way of saying the same thing.

A good goodbye is a blessing. It is a blessing to you and the one you say goodbye to because it gives closure to a relationship, and that closure frees us to make the new relationships that will bless our lives in the future.

Yep, and the more wonderful our relationships are, the harder it is to say goodbye. To be having a hard time saying goodbye is to know your life has been blessed.

My life has been blessed by you, the people of this church. It has been wonderful to be your minister. It is going to be hard to say goodbye. But, by gosh, we are going to do it...the sacred work of saying Goodbye.