

Fran's Introductory Sermon, delivered at Calgary,
September 13th, 2009
Unitarian Church of Calgary

“In the Interim: Rest, reframe, and renew, for the only constant is change.”

Hallo. Here we are. I am the Reverend Fran Dearman, and I am pleased and excited that you have called me to serve as your interim minister here in Calgary.

I thank you for your warm welcome. I thank you for your hospitality. By the way, I have learned to expect a high standard at Calgary potluck dinners! And I thank you for your help in finding my way around and getting settled in.

I join an awesome company. More than half a century of clerical and lay leadership has inspired the Unitarian tradition here in Calgary. During that half century you have called and been served by many ministers—in fact, you can see their pictures on the wall, out in the Barker room, which I am told is the oldest part of this evolving building that shelters us. And this year it is my privilege and my joy that you have called me here. I am proud and glad to be adding my picture to that wall.

There have been many pastors and preachers here before me, and there will be many who follow. With any luck at all, and with thanks for the skill, courage and commitment of your search committee, this time next year you will be welcoming your next settled minister.

And my part in this time of transition is to walk with you through this year of change, help out as appropriate, and then leave.

So this is hallo, but also good-bye. I shall be with you for this year. At the end of June I shall return to my family in Victoria. And at the end of June, you will say goodbye to me and turn to welcome a new settled minister.

May this church and her people continue to nurture body, mind, and spirit, and be a blessing to the city of Calgary. May our meeting be like the leafy canopy of some great tree, where life connects to life, sending forth the fruit of our best resolves.

Let me connect a little, in this first sermon. By way of introduction, permit me to share a little of who I am, where I come from, and where I'm going.

My name is Frances Dearman, named for my father, and a dear man he was. My permanent residence is in Victoria, British Columbia, where I share our family home with my mother Suzanne Dearman and a black and white cat named Boots.

I was born and raised on Vancouver Island, the first of my immediate family to be born Canadian. My early years were spent in a small house that my parents built with their own hands, somewhere along the old road between Duncan and Lake Cowichan. The nearest signpost said, “Slippery When Wet”. There were tall trees, and tall ferns, a lush greenness all around, and misty mornings. It was like growing up in a painting by Emily Carr, deep and rich and mysterious.

My parents were British. They emigrated to Canada after the second world war. I was born to folks who had known war up close and personal. From this we learned an ethic of hospitality, that all things are connected, and we’re all in this together.

In the 1950’s my parents took their children to Unitarian Sunday School in Victoria. The choice they made that day has given me a better life: a faith of freedom, reason, and tolerance, reverence, and generosity, a faith hopeful for peace and justice and loving-kindness.

I like to think of myself as a founding toddler of the First Unitarian Church of Victoria.

The Victoria church called our first settled minister in the 1960’s. The Rev. Marvin Evans was a tall gangly Virginian, trained at Meadville-Lombard in Chicago. I was much impressed by Marvin. He liked to sail. He liked to drink coffee and chat. You could talk to him. And he got to give sermons on neat stuff like the philosopher Martin Buber and the I-thou relationship. Marvin was very real to me, and I could see right off that ministry could be a good thing. But it took me another thirty years to grow into the person I wanted to become, and learn to do ministry.

So I completed a Bachelor of Arts in Economics at the University of Victoria. Then I ran away to sea. Georgian College, in Owen Sound, Ontario, had a co-op program for ships officers. I sailed mostly in Great Lakes freighters, or in the Maritimes. We moved a lot of prairie harvest out of the grain elevators at the Lakehead. We carried grain in bulk, across the Great Lakes and down the Seaway to the elevators in Montreal, and further on down the St. Lawrence River to salt water.

One journey we took a million bushels of oats into the Georgian Bay, to railhead, for transhipment to Peterborough where they make your breakfast cereal. One million bushels.

I served ten years in merchant ships, from the Lakehead to the Maritimes and even up to the Arctic Islands. Sailing surely taught me that everything is connected. And much is connected through the prairies.

Steam-boating is how I first came to the prairies. In summers, on vacation, I’d get off the ship in Montreal and get on a train back to British Columbia. Four days and three nights to the coast. Very restful. Mid-way, the train stopped over in Winnipeg, and we got a chance to look around. You knew you were in big sky country the minute you saw that blue dome over the great hall in Union Station.

You know, I went over there a few months ago, before I left Winnipeg, and that big dome over the main hall at Union Station is no longer blue. Everything changes. But I surely remember it as being blue in the 1980's. I remember getting off the train there to stretch my legs under that big blue sky, with four hours between trains to walk around town, catch a shower at the Y, and dine on Winnipeg gold-eye at the Fort Garry Hotel. Then back to the train and on through the golden west.

It was on those train trips that I learned the prairies are not truly flat after all. There is always a roll to the land, and always something to see: perhaps a hot air balloon, inflating bright striped billows in a schoolyard, or a slough with birds swimming about among the bulrushes, or some kids and their dog, waving at the crossroads as the train goes past. There's always something to look at on the prairies, if you have eyes to see.

For me, Winnipeg was the gateway to the west. Little did I know that one day Winnipeg would be home, if only for a year. And Edmonton was home for a year when I did my intern ministry there nine years ago under the supervision of the Rev. Brian Kiely. And now Calgary is home, if only for a year.

So I first met the prairies on journeys home from Great Lakes freighters. After ten years steamboating I retired from merchant shipping and returned home to Victoria. Thereafter I spent some time with the Naval Reserve, mostly on training cruises in the Gulf Islands, on the west coast. The navy gave me a crew and a seventy-five ton vessel and sent us out to get close to the water. What a great job! The navy taught me to keep warm and dry and keep a steady course in rough seas.

For many years I spent summers on the water. In fall and spring – we don't have winters in Victoria – in fall and spring I attended the University of Victoria. Eventually I graduated with a Masters Degree in Classics. I loved Classics. I got to read Latin and Greek, and history and art and archaeology.

After graduation I went to Jordan for a while, to do archaeological survey and excavation, and a little travelling in the Middle East. Finally I felt ready to become a minister, the kind of minister I wanted to be.

At age forty-seven I entered the Vancouver School of Theology, where they let me read Hebrew. I graduated with a Masters in Divinity. My training for ministry also included a summer as chaplain at Vancouver General Hospital, and a year of internship under the wing of the Rev. Brian Kiely in Edmonton.

Seven years ago I was ordained by my home congregation at First Victoria. I then accepted a call as settled minister in Anchorage, Alaska, where I served five years. Last year I served in Winnipeg as Interim Minister. And this year I am here in Calgary, as your Interim Minister.

And where am I going? Things change, over time. Times change. We change. I loved Alaska, but I had to leave. My white card ran out before my green card came in. And my father died, not quite three years ago. I loved settled ministry, but interim ministry is a better fit for me now. Being an interim minister means I have July and August to be home with my mother and go sailing.

This will be my second interim ministry. To prepare for this role, I attended an interim ministry orientation course at Boston in July of 2008. The folks leading the course were very clear about boundaries and limits, and that my effectiveness as an interim minister grows out of the observation of these limits.

Accordingly, I make three promises. Three promises.

First, I promise to leave. Hallo and good-bye. I am here with you for one year, two at the absolute maximum, and then I will go home to Victoria, and spend the summer with my mother and my garden and my cat. And my sailboat.

Second – you are lovable people, and a person might easily learn to love Calgary and want to stay forever. But I will not linger on. I will leave next June.

And if I ever did aspire to stay forever, and serve as your settled minister, first I would disappear for three years before I ever considered applying to settle here. I promise, if I ever wanted to serve as your settled minister, I would first disappear over the horizon for three full years.

Third and last, I promise to respect and support your search process. Specifically, I promise never to make any comment on any candidate. It's a small world, the Unitarian Universalist ministry. We ministers tend to know, or know of, each other. I will make no comment on any candidate. No comment on any candidate. No comment on any of my brothers and sisters in the UU ministry who might aspire to serve this congregation as settled minister.

And may all good fortune attend your search team and your search process.

And part of that search process is for this congregation to do some deep thinking about who you are, where you come from, and where you are going. You need to know who you are, and where you want to go, before you can know which minister might offer the best fit and help you get there. You need to do some deep thinking about leadership, and how you wish to participate in your religious community. You need to be mindful of how you relate to the denomination, and how that greater circle of experience and expertise might be of assistance and inspiration.

There's more. You need to take a deep breath, and let it go, and just relax a little.

Transitions are challenging. Loosen up a little. Relax. I know you folks are busy beavers and you are capable of working very hard—I saw you do this, pulling together the Western Fall Regional Gathering here last fall. I saw some of the hard work you put in this last summer, renovating the

building. There will be lots to work at during the coming year. I would urge you also to work at taking good care of yourselves and each other, setting your priorities, maybe even letting go one or two things that might be nice to do, but just too much for this year.

Especially with swine flu hovering about, waiting for the winter's chill to swoop down upon us.

The folks who study flu say we can try to stay well by taking good care of ourselves this winter, eating well, getting some exercise, and getting enough sleep. And sneezing into our elbows. Yes.

So from time to time, please, remember to just relax a little. The year will go by fast enough. There will be lots of time for worrying. I would urge you to relax while you can, whenever the opportunity arises. I shall be trying to do the same. So if you catch me taking a nap, I'm actually modelling non-anxious presence. Non-anxious presence.

Meanwhile, here we are, together, a limited engagement, one year only. We're taking a big risk, you know. We might get to know each other. We might like each other. We might learn to care for one another, knowing that in a year's time we shall have to let each other go.

Letting go will be difficult. But letting go makes room for new life.

This time two years ago I was on sabbatical in northern Spain, distance walking along the old Camino pilgrim trail to Santiago de Compostella. Walking six hundred kilometers to Santiago surely taught me that a light pack makes a happy pilgrim. And a light pack means letting go.

May your pack be light and your step be glad, this day, and every day, throughout this coming year of transition.

Hallo, good-bye, and how lovely to be here with you this interim year.

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#685 T.S. Eliot

“What we call a beginning is often the end
and to make an end is to make a beginning.

The end is where we start from.

We shall not cease from exploration
and the end of all our exploring
will be to arrive where we started
and know the place for the first time.

[From UUWorld Vol XXIII No 3 Fall 2009 (p 43):]

Benediction offered by the Rev. Peter Morales, newly elected president of the UUA, at the close of GA 2009 in Salt Lake City:

“We are one people united by what we love,” he said: “We love compassion, we love life, we love freedom, we love justice, and we love one another. That love endures. Candidates, resolutions, and General Assemblies come and go. Love endures. And love will guide us.”

[Ministers come and ministers go, each with their gifts and challenge.

Congregations abide, love and care abide, mystery and the search for meaning abide.

Let us walk through the coming year together in love and care and deep respect, for ourselves, our earth, our communities, and all the world. May it be so.]