

VIEW FROM THE PEW
By Rev. Gary Smith
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"The sea does not reward those who are too anxious, too greedy, or too impatient," writes Anne Morrow Lindbergh. "To dig for treasures shows not only impatience and greed, but lack of faith. Patient, patience, patience, is what the sea teaches. Patience and faith. One should lie empty, open, choiceless as a beach – waiting for a gift from the sea."

My ministry began forty-eight years ago this past summer (!) in the National Park Campground amphitheatres of Acadia, where, as a graduating senior from the University of Maine, I was about to enter the Divinity School at Vanderbilt University in far-off Tennessee. I was a part of the National Council of Church's "Ministry in the National Parks," reassigned in the late spring of 1969 from Yellowstone to nearby Acadia, where I was a one-man show. My readings that summer, as I recall, were secular, ten years before I found Unitarian Universalism: frequently Gift From the Sea by Anne Morrow Lindbergh, whom you just heard, along with lots of Kahlil Gibran's The Prophet; and we sang "Blowin' in the Wind" and "Where Have All the Flowers Gone." *"Don't go to theological school,"* a woman breathlessly implored me after an early morning service. *"You'll ruin it!"*

That's one bookend. And this summer, six years after retirement from the active ministry, I was reading Jim Krossschell's One Man's Maine, "Essays on a Love Affair," he says, and listen to this (and then go buy his book), he tells us his state of mind as he enters the State of Maine. *"You slide ... into the Adirondack chair down by the shore, where you get the water in the eye and the ecstasy in the muscles of which Buddha and St. Peter boast, there's that second or two of melting into nature as the luminescent future spans the Bay..."*

Gift from the Sea. One Man's Maine. Maybe bookends of a ministry, so far. Retirement is surely a time of reflection. Where does the time go? What does it all mean? I have reflected on this and much more in these six years since I occupied the pulpit in Concord, and, for a time, we were members at First Parish in Bedford, and now, for the past two years or so, we are members here at Follen, and we sit there.

"View from the Pew," I said when asked for a sermon title, and then three different views from the other side of the pulpit emerged. Here's my first reflection from down there in the pew. I like clear windows. I like to look outside and daydream.

"When I preach," wrote my colleague the late Roy Phillips, *"I try to put the congregation to sleep."* (You are thinking literally now!) Roy said he meant by "sleep" the very dreams that leave us confounded when we awake. *"If I can confound a half dozen or more people during a sermon,"* Roy says, *"I consider it a good day."*

I grew up in a church with stained-glass windows, and so I counted light bulbs in the chandeliers. I counted panes of colored glass in the window. I watched our next-door neighbor right in the pew in front of us sleep and sometimes, to my delight, snore loud enough to wake himself up.

So I have sought out clear glass ever since. Eliz and I remember the beautiful sanctuary of First Unitarian in Providence when I worked for the U.U.A., our national headquarters, and found myself mostly free on a Sunday. To the left of the pulpit in Providence was a large tall clear window, framing a beautiful magnolia tree that we watched through all the seasons. I dreamed there plenty.

And, at the First Parish in Concord, the windows are on two levels. From pulpit and pew, we watch the light and the shadows. At times in the year, the light is just so and shines down through the skylight directly over the preacher's head, and that is when I tried to say very important things. And it was in Concord that I chased the well-meaning ushers away who rushed to close the upstairs window shades to protect parishioners from the sunlight. "Keep the Window Shades Open," was one sermon from those days.

Here at Follen, we sit in this octagonal room with windows all around, and we watch the snow fall and the leaves change and the thunderstorms come. I like clear windows. I feel less hemmed in. I can dream. I like clear windows.

The second view from the pew is a more mystical view, less literal, more transcendental. I love the music in church. I loved music I heard from the pulpit, and I have always loved it from the pew. Some in the Concord choir remember that I sat in the middle of the sanctuary in the hour before worship and listened to the choir rehearse, let the music wash over me, let the voices and the notes feed my soul.

Parenthetically, I spent a career of thirty-nine years in the parish ministry always coming to church early, a habit I cannot break. I love coming here to Follen early, just to sit and watch people arrive, and watch the worship team scurry here and there to put it all together. Emerson once said he liked the quiet church before it all began. I like the bustle.

On the November Sunday following the Presidential election, a year ago, this Follen sanctuary was full, and in front of us was a couple, with a college aged daughter between them. As we sang some familiar closing hymn (could it have been "How Can We Keep from Singing?"), they put their arms around one another and held on tight. I said to them, as we were leaving, that my witness to that embrace was surely the most powerful moment of the morning. "*That's why I came home,*" the daughter said.

One of my most moving memories of President Obama's presidency took place in Charleston, South Carolina, not that long ago, when, in the midst of his eulogy for the

slain pastor there, Obama began to sing. *“Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound,”* and the faces of the pastors behind him in the pulpit began to light up, and they stood up and surrounded him, and they clapped and sang, and music did what words could not. They lifted a people.

Music is an equalizer: be it instrumental, vocal, or chanting. We come to the same level. Two of my grandchildren are in musical theater and I watch what happens when a benevolent director gives parts to the many and not the few. Children are empowered and transformed. There is a vulnerability that takes place when you sing and I sing, a lowering of the barriers that keep us apart.

And that is why it was a teeny bit disheartening to look from the pulpit and see some out there resolutely not singing the hymns, depriving the community of their voice, tone-rich or tone deaf, on key or off. It is the making of the music that matters. From my view now in the pew, I sing, and almost always when you sing and perform, I am moved. Especially when children sing, I swallow hard. Clear windows take me some place. Music takes me some place.

That’s two views from the pew, if you’re counting, I need clear windows and I love beautiful music, and now the third view begins with a confession, as in *“the Concord congregation was right, and I was wrong.”* Eliz and I sit in the same pew, Sunday after Sunday, (when we’re here, a confession in itself.) That’s my third view. I like sitting in the same pew.

I used to make fun of the congregation in Concord for this. I knew where they sat, most of them. I took attendance from up here. I knew where the friendly and expressive faces were when I preached. They knew this. When I returned from a sabbatical leave once, they had conspired and sat in entirely different places on my first Sunday back.

They were so amused as I looked more and more puzzled as the hour passed. And then I got it, and I laughed and they laughed. There are psychological and sociological studies that indicate we tend to head for a certain part of the room for any event where there are rows and there is a stage. It’s a comfort place, a safe place.

But it is in retirement that I realized something else. I woke up to something when I was sitting there and not here. Eliz and I sit in much the same pew each time we come here. And I told you earlier that we’re often the first there. Those who come after us and sit near us adjust where they’re sitting to where we are. Sometimes it’s one pew up; sometimes it’s one pew farther back.

If clear windows and beautiful music take me some place else, this third view from the pew keeps me grounded here. We know the faces of those who sit to our left and who sit to our right, who sits just behind us, who sits in front of us. And here at Follen last winter on one Sunday, during the sharing of joys and concerns, we

learned that the woman who always sat at the end of our pew had lost her caretaker, her adult daughter. She had died suddenly, and so her mother, our neighbor there, was swarmed with hugs and touches. But wait! The woman to our right announced that her daughter, the young woman who sings in the choir, she had given birth last night to a baby girl, and this neighbor a grandmother for the first time.

And this one pew held it all, as the pews all over this room hold it all. We sit where we do so we can have a more intimate community within the larger community. We want to be missed. We want to be held.

And please do not make this view I have of community as an excuse, forgive me, for building a wall around us. I have watched the dear souls in this same pew slide down, move over, move up, for any guest or lost soul. *"The election,"* two women said last November, *"we had to come; we've never been to church before."* *"Welcome,"* we said, *"we're so glad you came."*

View from the pew? I realize again how much I like clear windows when I worship because what is often happening is too big for one room.

View from the pew? I have had reaffirmed again and again how much music moves me: my favorite hymns, the anthems I have heard here, the children who sing here and who sing in Bedford and in Concord, the songs on the bus in Transylvania; all of it. Music in worship holds it all together, holds me all together; helps hold the world together sometimes.

View from the pew? If you're lucky like me, there are small pockets of community all over this room: people who miss you when you're not here, people who will laugh with you, cry with you, cheer with you, despair with you, hold you, go forth with you. Our dear Catholic neighbors in town call it "passing the peace," central to their mass. So it is for us.

Thank you for your generous welcome to Follen. Thank you for all you mean to this world. We're so glad to be here where we can be a little bit anonymous, where I can have the luxury of being on this side of the pulpit now.

"Perhaps this is the most important thing for me to take back from beach-living," writes Anne Morrow Lindbergh. *"Simply the memory that each cycle of the tide is valid; each cycle of the wave is valid; each cycle of a relationship is valid."* May this be true for all of us in the years ahead.

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