

Favorite Things

*A service by the Worship Committee
Sunday, November 29, 2015
Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church*

Opening words

What are these things we hold dear and treasure? A rock or feather, a bell, a pinecone or nametag: things we squirrel away and save because they hold a recollection, a person, a place or time. Today's service is for bringing out a few of these precious things and sharing them with you and why our favorite things are special to us. In this approaching season of giving and receiving gifts, let us be mindful of the love and friendship these things represent.

Lesson for All Ages

Today we're going to be talking about favorite things. Some people might have been thinking about that already, in preparation for holiday gift-giving. How many of you celebrate Christmas? Do any of you celebrate other holidays? Do you get presents for Christmas or any other holidays?

What are some of the favorite gifts that you've gotten?

And do any of you like to make gifts to give to other people? If so, what do you like to make? What makes it fun to give gifts to others?

Have you ever noticed how what usually makes something special to us is how it connects us to other people? Sometimes it can be something made by hand, or just something that lets us know the other person considers us important in their lives. Maybe you can think about that, too, as we go into the holiday season.

For now, though, it's time for us to sing you to your classes.

Up or Down? by Rick Kimball

So you are dead. Your day of personal judgement has arrived. To your surprise you find yourself at the pearly gates. Now you wish you had paid more attention to the Christian story. But you have no time to dwell on that. The line is moving too quickly. So you perk up your ears and listen to Saint Peter.

You hear that he's asking a single question and sending people to heaven or hell depending on their answer. The question is this: "What is your favorite possession?"

You are stunned. You had never expected a means test. Your favorite possession? What will you tell Saint Peter? Your whole life flashes before your eyes. Every single thing you ever owned appears for assessment. What will you select? Your new smart phone? No, because Saint Peter might demand a demonstration, and you can barely turn the damn thing on. Your chain saw? The one you use to cut down God's trees? Probably not. The Visa card that lets you have what you can't afford? You doubt that you'll get much credit for that.

A woman in line is showing Saint Peter a giant ruby and prattling on about how much it cost. "Damn the price tag," says Saint Peter. "And damn you, lady." The woman shuffles off to the down elevator. You

shut out the sound of her weeping and pray as you have never prayed before. “Pray tell – what gives things their value?” you ask. Thunder crashes, lightning strikes, and suddenly the answer is yours.

The best of things are more than things, they are links to you and another – another being, another life, another dimension, another soul. The best of things are connective, just as spirituality is. The best of things are not mere possessions, they are part of you. The best of things are often gifts that somebody gave to you and that you will one day give to somebody else.

That woman’s problem was not in showing her ruby. It was finding its value on its price tag instead of in its link to her soul.

Look around your home today. Check out your possessions and decide what you would say to Saint Peter. Think of the guidelines I have offered you, then replace them with your own. We are, after all, UUs, people who find strength in differences. Pay no attention to monetary value as you assess your things. It’s okay if your favorite possession cost a lot. It’s also okay if it did not. And it’s okay if you can’t choose just one. Maybe you can say to Saint Peter, “Hey, I’m a UU, and I like lots of different things, so I brought a little list.”

You must decide what goes on your list. I can’t do that for you. But I can show you one thing that goes on mine. It’s this 3 by 5 card. I have saved it for years. I found it in the question box back when Tirrell and I were leading *Our Whole Lives*, a sexuality program for middle school kids. The question box was where each youth put an unsigned card at the end of every session, a card with a question or comment.

This card says, in scraggly writing, “For Rick. Your cool.” I keep it on the bulletin board in my office. Every once in a while I notice it and smile. I don’t know who wrote the card, or why. Maybe I had said something funny. Or maybe the kid was just relieved that this sex stuff wasn’t so bad after all.

I can imagine what Saint Peter would say if I showed him the card. “So you think you’re cool? Well maybe I should send you where it’s good and warm. That will wipe the smug smile off your face.”

I would explain: “I don’t keep the card as an ode to me. I keep it as a sign of yes, a sign of a church fulfilling its mission, a sign of generational connection around a subject both scary and spiritual, a sign that makes this card a favorite possession.”

Saint Peter might then furrow his worried brow, saying, “Oh these cussed UUs. They make me think every time. But the line is getting longer and I have to decide. Which will it be, thumbs up or thumbs down, heaven or hell?”

I would try for the last word. “Not to worry. I don’t believe in either one. But wherever I go, I want to take my card with me.”

Changing Favorites by Erica Bartlett

I’m glad we titled the service favorite *things*, plural, since I have a very hard time picking one favorite. For instance, how could I choose between this deck of cards, this photo, this book, or this rock? They are all treasured, but for different reasons.

In fact, looking at this motley collection, it may be hard to understand what connects them. What makes them important to me? As I suspect for most of you, it’s the memories.

Take this rock. I got it on one of my many visits to Baxter State Park, and it reminds me of what I love about the park: the beauty, peace, tranquility, and the association of three decades of visits. Simply holding it brings back the feeling of sitting on Big Rock at Sandy Stream Pond, looking at the even bigger rock of Mt. Katahdin.

The cards though, have a completely different type of association. I can't even begin to tell you how many games my friend Shelly and I have played with it. After all, we've been friends for over thirty years, and playing cards together for at least twenty-five, everywhere from our homes to illicit games of poker (for points only) in study hall to college dorm rooms, as well as on long car rides and when camping. This deck reminds me of all that, as well as how blessed I am to have such a long-standing friendship.

But what happens the memories connecting us to a favorite item are no longer positive? Consider this photo from my study abroad in London in 1997. I was there during Thanksgiving, and my American flatmates and I weren't planning on doing much. But David, from Ireland, and Inneke, from Belgium, were very excited and wanted to celebrate. So we had a non-traditional feast of pizza and cookies, and we made paper cutouts of pilgrims and for some reason reindeer for something festive. This picture reminds me of the sheer unexpected fun and silliness of the evening.

But it also saddens me because after a visit to Inneke in 2006, our relationship changed and eventually our friendship dissolved. This photo, once a favorite thing, now carries both dark and light. It took me a long time to be able to look at it and focus on the joy of that moment, not the sorrow that came later.

I have a similar reaction to this copy of *Jane Eyre*, if for different reasons. My aunt Gail inscribed it and gave it to me on my 10th birthday, since it was one of her favorite books. Since her death in 2006, this, too, has become bittersweet. It reminds me of her caring, which I appreciate, but it also makes me sad because she is no longer with us.

I have a feeling that more things will go through this metamorphosis, going from a favorite item to something that brings pain, as I get older and lose connections for one reason or another. And I suspect that I'm not alone in this. But when it happens, my hope is that while I may shut the items away at first, after some time and healing, I can pull them back out, dust them off, and remember again with joy what first made them, and the memories that go with them, so precious.

Swallows & Amazons by Keith Prairie

Its 1965 and a Chevy wagon makes its way up the road. The car is filled with packs and tents for camping, clothes for a vacation and pulls a small boat on a trailer. There are 3 kids in the back and I am one of them. Heading off on a camping vacation from Arizona to Jackson Lake in Grand Teton National Park. The back seat is kind of tight but to make things easier someone has brought a book we all can relate to. It's a book my father says he read as a boy so it has some history and it's about the adventures kids had on a lake in faraway England's lake district during their school holidays. That's my favorite thing: Swallows and Amazons, by Arthur Ransome

(Pg 13 Roger and the wind)

This read in my sister Lynn's voice by Molly

“Roger, aged seven, and no longer the youngest of the family, ran in wide zigzags, to and fro, across the steep field that sloped up from the lake to Holly Howe, the farm where they were staying for part of the summer holidays. He ran until he nearly reached the hedge by the footpath, then turned and ran until he nearly reached the hedge on the other side of the field. Each crossing of the field brought him nearer to the farm. The wind was against him, and he was tacking up against it to the farm where at the gate his patient mother was awaiting him. He could not run straight against the wind because he was a sailing vessel. Sail was the thing, and so, though it took rather longer, Roger made his way up the field in broad tacks.”

And the story continues with a telegram from their father giving them the OK to sail on their own across the lake, past the retired pirate in a houseboat with a cannon and parrot, to a desert Island filled with adventure...

Miles later up our vacation road driving through Utah’s Canyonlands National Park and it’s spectacular sandstone arches, my voice read...

(Pg 100 read by Michael)

“...at that moment something hit the saucepan with a loud ping, and ashes flew up out of the fire. A long arrow with green feathers stuck, quivering, among the embers.

It’s begun,” said Sarah.

Roger grabbed the arrow and pulled it out of the fire. Sarah took it from him at once. “It may be poisoned,” she said. “Don’t touch the point.”...

“Listen,” said captain John.

They listened. There was not a sound to be heard but the quite lapping of the water against the western shore of the island.”

The story continues with a challenge, then a parley, war and eventual alliance with the Amazon Pirates, Nancy and Peggy Blackett. Wonderful times transpire as the Swallows: John, Susan, Roger and Sarah work to outfox Amazon pirates and then capture Captain Flint’s house boat (he is really Nancy and Peggy’s Uncle Jim). And miles later as we pass through Jackson Wyoming and its stacks of elk horns sculptures, my brother Mark reads...

(Pg 292, read by Michael)

“Roger was looking over the side. “Are there plenty of sharks?” he asked.

“Millions,” groaned the prisoner.

Peggy’s handkerchief was quickly made into a blindfold and tied over Captain Flint’s eyes. With Sarah and Roger pushing behind, Peggy, John and Susan between guided him to the plank. Captain Nancy watched with folded arms.

Captain Flint, blindfolded made his way little by little along the plank, shaking all over as the plank bent and quivered under his weight.

Captain Nancy stamped her foot. "Walk you son of a seacock!" she cried.

Captain Flint stepped desperately forward, taking a long stride into thin air. Head over heels he fell. There was as colossal splash that even wetted the Swallows and Amazons on the deck of the houseboat."

Then the Swallows and Amazons fish Captain Flint out of the shark infested lake and have a feast in the galley of the houseboat.

Obviously there are parts I have left out as I hope this book by Arthur Ransome will be one of your favorite things too. But some of what makes it so endearing to me are circumstances under which I experienced the story, traveling with my family, sharing the reading and also our own adventure woven into the story.

Nana's Clock by John W. Paynter

My mother's parents, Harold and Christelle Windle had a chicken farm and hatchery in the village of Cochranville PA, a small farming village in Chester County. My grandfather, who the grandkids called 'Pappy' ran the farm and my grandmother, 'Nana' to us grands, kept the house spotless, cooked delicious meals and gave much of her life volunteering for their church and town and fussing over the grandkids.

When I was a boy, my cousins and I liked to spend time in the attic of the old Victorian farmhouse that they lived in. There were lots of interesting things stored up there; old furniture, clothes, and two old shelf clocks along with piles of other cast-off stuff. I was especially fascinated by the old clocks. Pappy had purchased them at a farm auction for 50 cents some years before and there they were, stored in the attic. The clocks were both the 'kitchen' or 'gingerbread' type of clock, with an ornate oak case and a glass door with visible pendulum. I would move the minute hand to 12 and the clock would strike the hour on a tinny gong but neither one would run when I tried to swing the pendulums. I begged Nana to give me one but she wouldn't, knowing that at my young age, I would probably just take it apart and end up throwing it away.

I grew older and into my early teen years. I was 14 when I again asked her for one of the clocks. She finally said yes but made me promise not to just tear it apart and throw it out but to repair and keep it. I agreed. I took the clock home and began to work on it. A local jeweler put a new mainspring in it for me and I refinished the case. The clock turned out pretty nice considering my age and lack of experience. I was so taken with this clock and the satisfaction of restoring that I started going to yard sales buying more old clocks. Soon my bedroom had 8 old clocks in it, all running, ticking and striking and driving my parents and sisters crazy.

Little did I know how much this old clock would direct my life's path. As a young adult, I began repairing clocks for family friends. Then, I went to work for a clock shop in Wilton, Connecticut owned by a fellow named George Sterling. George taught me many of the basics of clock repair. Through that shop, I met a local home builder whose signature feature was to give an antique grandfather clock with every home

he sold. He and his English wife would travel to the UK often and buy decrepit clocks for these house gifts. Then he would bring them for me to restoration. I worked on many clocks for him.

Eventually, George decided that there wasn't enough clock work for both of us to make a living so I would have to find other employment. I called my customers and told them that I was quitting clock work and they would need to pick up their clocks. When I called the builder-customer, he asked me what I was going to do next. When I told him I wasn't sure he offered me a job as a jobsite handy man/gopher/clean up guy. I took the job. That job led me to a career in residential construction, land development, roofing and carpentry.

My story goes on from there, one thing leading to another, building business, important friendships and loves.

I revived my clock repair business in 1991 and joined a UU church in Ridgefield, Connecticut about the same time. I discovered Maine because of that church and Ferry Beach, our conference center in Saco. I became very involved with Ferry Beach, traveling there often during the '90s. I fell in love with Maine and moved here in 1998. I started attending this church because of people I met at Ferry Beach who brought me here. You know who you are, Carol, Dick, Bobbi...

I could go on much longer about my story but let's just say that my life's path can mostly be traced back to this clock and my grandparents, Chris and Harold Windle. Almost everything I have done in my life can be traced to their influence on me. Nana taught me to love history, art and antiques. Pappy showed me the wonders of nature and taught me the realities of business. This clock represents a beginning of my life's path and so many great memories.

As Myke shared in one of her sermons a few weeks back, "Good luck, bad luck? You never know..."

So, I challenge you all to this: What one thing in your life represents your journey? If you were only allowed to keep one thing in your home, other than family or pets, what would it be?