

ONCE IN A LIFETIME

A Sermon Preached by Pamela Patton

Unitarian Church of All Souls, New York City

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What a great joy to be with all of you today, the day I am ordained as a minister. Thank you for being here with me. Thank you for your support and love. My husband is here, my children, mom, my brother, my sister-in-law, my uncle and aunt and cousins, and dear friends. My dad, who died 30 years ago, is here in my heart and in all of our hearts, in a way. And my All Souls supporters—my truly incredible colleagues, our devoted Trustees, and all of you who are a part of this community.

All of you could be doing so many other things right now, and you chose to be here with all of us. We are choosing to be in community, believing in what we do here at All Souls and how we go about nourishing ourselves and our world.

Though I've been experiencing this congregation from up here in the chancel for over ten years, not a Sunday goes by when I don't feel a sense of awe. I sit quietly with you waiting for the service to begin, and I often have on my mind The Talking Heads song Once in a Lifetime from the 1981 album Remain in Light. The song opens:

"And you may find yourself living in a shotgun shack
And you may find yourself in another part of the world
And you may find yourself behind the wheel of a large automobile
And you may find yourself in a beautiful house, with a beautiful wife
And you may ask yourself, "Well, how did I get here?"

David Byrne's lyrics are a call to be fully present. As I take in this bright space and listen to the prelude begin, I sense that we are here together, you who I see in the sanctuary and you who I envision at home on our livestream. I look around this beautiful house and I ask myself, "Well, how did I get here?"

A life in congregational ministry still feels like a surprise. In my 40s I was considering the possibility of a new career. I had a feeling that I wanted to

spend my time differently, in a way that focused on how we touch each others' lives, but I didn't know how I wanted to go about that. My therapist was coaxing me to allow myself to imagine the possibilities for a new career. Even though I had the urge, I kept objecting because I was afraid to start over. I told her I didn't want to be just starting to get the hang of a new profession at age 60. She replied, hopefully you're going to turn 60 anyway, so what do you want to be doing? I will turn 60 in January. So I guess I've arrived.

The interconnected series of events that led to this day—for all of us—are unfathomable. There is no accounting of the hours and days of our lives that can fully explain how I got here or how you got here. I do know that a fundamental reason for my ordination today is you, my congregation. Being ordained by a Unitarian Universalist congregation is unlike many other denominations. Because of our polity, it is you who have chosen to trust me along the way and ultimately to ordain me. And Galen has offered me his trust and his mentorship, and I am so deeply grateful to you all.

What a privilege to be ordained by you and to serve in this beautiful house, where you celebrate joyful events and where you seek refuge for your sorrow, fear, and disappointment. And you're here from religious backgrounds that nurtured a yearning for spiritual community as well as backgrounds that made you skeptical about stepping in these doors.

It's challenging to make space for all the care I hope to offer you. Fortunately my job description includes meditation, prayer, continuous spiritual growth—my vows, my connection to teachers and mentors, time away in retreat, time to be still in silence are integral to my role. This is not just describing my interior journey, but our experience together.

Our community has shaped me to serve as your minister, to keep growing. I have so many stories about how you've shaped me...A few years ago I was leading a Caring Connections Team meeting. Our Caring Connections Team is a group of volunteers who call, visit, and check in on those who need some support. They're an important source of warmth in this community. Anyway, I arrived at our meeting with my organized agenda, eager to get down to business, and our long-time All Souls member, Peggy Montgomery, said to me in her loving teacher voice, "I have a request. Can we please remember to start with a chalice lighting and opening words?" I'll

always be grateful for that reminder to respect the context of our connection, to intentionally create space for ourselves and each other.

My ministry has also been shaped by several years in hospital chaplaincy. Early on I was a chaplain in the Emergency Department at a hospital in Harlem. It was overwhelming at first, so much sensory input calling for my attention and yet I felt pretty useless in the hectic congested space. The ER left no opening for extras who weren't playing a role on the medical team. I sensed that they resented one more body in the way who couldn't assist with treating patients.

I didn't blame them. I didn't think I could help the patients much either because my training was in spiritual care, asking open questions, sitting quietly by the bedside. It was anything but quiet and there were no bedsides.

I remember one patient who was screaming at the top of her lungs, she was in pain from withdrawal from an opioid addiction. As chaotic and noisy as the ER is, screaming can make everything much more tense. I hunched over her, squeezed between a wall and a gurney, mustering all my will and patience to calmly speak into her ear. I thought everyone, staff and patients, would be really grateful if I could quiet her down. It felt like forever, but I finally got her to sleep. I felt pretty heroic. Within 2 minutes I saw a nurse rousing my patient roughly to give her medication or ask her a question, who knows. The screaming immediately resumed. I was beside myself—furious, deflated.

After another few days in the ER, I concluded that it was no place for chaplains, it was a place for medical problem solving. I met with my supervisor and explained, suggesting I focus on the ICU, my other assigned floor. My supervisor was Zen Buddhist priest Trudi Jinpu Hirsch, and she steered me right back into the mess I had reasoned my way out of. She gave me no choice, literally, but she is so skillful. She asked me, "if you could imagine myself to be a deity in the ER, who would you be?" It felt like a quandary of grandiosity, but I trusted Trudi. I explored her question and I came to see myself as Aura, the Titan God of breezes. I practiced imagining myself as a breeze in that space, a non-anxious presence with an open mind and heart to sense where to place my attention and to do it intentionally rather than focusing on the loudest or most urgent demand. I came to see that my role was subtle, that by treading lightly, by smiling with my eyes,

listening kindly, talking gently, I could create a ministry of peaceful presence.

I'm grateful for the experience of connecting with people in the ER when they are in crisis. And I hope I can offer you a peaceful presence at difficult times.

In difficult times, we always ask ourselves "Well, how did I get here?" But in the less demanding times of our lives, in the everyday routine we are often in perpetual motion and less self aware. The song *Once in a Lifetime* responds to this question:

"Letting the days go by

Into the blue again

Same as it ever was, same as it ever was"

Reminding us how we fall into routine and lose track of the awe of being present. Reminding me of what ministry means when it comes to our everyday lives, how I can be a peaceful presence to you as the days go by, as your lives unfold.

Eugene Peterson, an American [Presbyterian](#) minister, theologian and author tell a story in his book *The Contemplative Pastor*. He talks about his pastor who visited his home frequently when he was a teenager. Peterson described that after an awkward pause, the pastor would ask him "And how are things with your SOUL today?" Peterson didn't say much. Who would? He writes, "the thoughts and experiences that filled my life ...seemed small potatoes after that question. I knew, of course, that if I ever wanted to discuss matters of SOUL, I could go to him. But for everything else, I would probably do better with someone who wouldn't brush aside as worldly vanity what it felt like to get cut from the basketball varsity, someone who wouldn't pounce with scary intimations of hellfire on the thoughts I was having about Marnie Schmidt, the new girl from California." Peterson said that his pastor's lack of interest in his "worldly life" made him feel like most of his life was being lived at the sub-spiritual level.

It's easy to feel that our everyday lives aren't worthy of spiritual attention, that prayers and pastoral conversations should be about crisis or what we ironically call "life events." But this is not true. I'm eager to engage with you in the question "How did I get here? What am I doing here?" not as a form of linear analysis of our histories, but as a way of pausing, of becoming intentional about what comes next. Otherwise we're on autopilot, moving

from one reaction to the next. "Same as it ever was, same as it ever was." So unless we ask, we will continue along as we have been, at least until we are jolted by an unexpected event.

My ordination today is once in a lifetime—for all of us because we have created it together. In fostering our connection to each other and our collective effort for peace in our own hearts, together we bring peace and kindness to a world in dire need of it.

We find ourselves in a beautiful house. We ask ourselves, "Well, how did we get here?"

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We are here in the midst of an interdependent web of existence so intricate and vast that it is almost entirely a mystery to us.

This is once in a lifetime.

Peace be with you.