

Farewells
Rev. Jennifer Brooks¹
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The End of Summer

On Nantucket the end of August is a time of farewells. We who are here year-round say goodbye to the family and friends who have visited during the summer. And, over the next few days and weeks, we say goodbye as well to the unique signs of each guest: the leftovers from a memorable dinner, the fish triumphantly caught and left behind; the wet towels inexplicably crammed into the laundry hamper; the matchbox cars that emerge from the washer and dryer, the tiny colorful Leg-os undiscovered until we step on them with bare feet.

And the guests say goodbye: the grandchildren who live too far away to visit any other time, who change so much from one summer to the next but think their grandparents never change; the busy adult children who brought their laptops but somehow depart feeling more relaxed than when they came; the friends who stand at the prow of the boat and wave down to hospitable Nantucketers too seldom seen in America.

Today I speak of friendships and farewells, of love and loss, and of the connections that remain and that, if we pause to consider, surely must amaze us with their power.

My words may send you off onto tangents of memory; it is inevitable and I don't regret the diversion of your attention.

In many ways this place, a sanctuary of love and hope, is intended to hold our bodies while our souls travel to other days and the people who were with us then. If you journey in memory, fare well, and know that we gathered here hold you safely and welcome your return.

A Lifetime of Farewells

Whoever we are, wherever we live, during our lives we say farewell to friends who move away, and they say farewell to their home places. We say farewell to our own home places as we go off to another town, another continent, and make it into a new home. We weave connections and then they stretch thin across the miles. If we are lucky, if we are attentive, the long-distance connections hold, and one day those distant return to us, or we venture out to visit them, following everywhere the bonds of the heart that hum and sing with the vibrations of love.

And nearly every year, each of us, whoever and wherever we are, says goodbye to someone who passes beyond the reach of our hands, beyond the reach of any hands, though not beyond the invisible bonds of love and memory.

We live a lifetime of farewells. The longer we live the more occasions we have to say goodbye. Yet the longer we live, the more opportunities we have to make new friendships, to build loving relationships, even to find new love when we thought that part of life was over. Everyone we love is someone to whom we one day will bid farewell.

Nonetheless.

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If we are wise we keep our hearts open, no matter how many fish may languish in the refrigerator; no matter how many Leg-os pierce the tender sole of the foot; no matter that loss, too, must eventually pierce the heart. Love and loss, both, leave their mark on the soul.

Love is worth it.

What is Constant

It's said that change is the only constant in our lives. And that there are only two things we can be sure of, death and taxes.

Lovers. Nonetheless I often say the words that link two people in marriage. Their commitment is something made in the face of the certainty of change, the certainty of death, and the uncertainty of everything else. There is nothing quite like the act of marriage, committing to love one another despite life's uncertainties: nothing so foolish, nothing so profound.

We all know that marriages end; that living and growing together is not always possible; that although the marriage was not a mistake the changes in every human life may mean that continuing the marriage would be a mistake. People know, as they stand before me to exchange vows, that promises they make during the ceremony may not last a lifetime.

Yet there they stand, with hope, with love, with courage.

So when I think about what is constant in life, I think that the certainty of change and the certainty of death must also be matched with the certainty that love, once experienced, is not lost.

A particular romantic love may not keep two people married, but whatever dissonance may overcome them, the love they shared is indelibly written in the history of the universe.

Love *invades* us. It may begin slowly or suddenly; it may link lovers in a lasting relationship, a passing fancy, or something in between; but no matter what happens *after* that first moment, that first foolish and profound moment when love enters into the heart, that moment is no less real.

Yes, later the heart may break, and that is real, too. But love shared is preserved in time, and one day the heartbreak fades—mostly—and we can travel back in time to recall loving and being loved. We can recall *giving* love and *receiving* love, and it is possible to be grateful for that moment. We can remember how it felt, and one day we may recognize that feeling again.

Parents and Children. Between parents and children there is a different form of love. Some children are blessed with strong and stable bonds of love, from the moment of birth to the end of life. These bonds sustain both children and parents through the changes and challenges life brings. Struggle, hardship may even strengthen these bonds.

Not every child is so fortunate. Some parents may not be capable of giving the love their children need. Yet even children born into these families may find the one caring adult they need to survive and thrive, so that they are able to form loving relationships even if their parents could not.

Anyone who has known love, who is capable of giving and receiving love in a sure and steady way, must be on the lookout for the child who may see in us a potential mentor, guide, friend—the caring adult who can forge that life-saving bond.

Remember the teacher who made a difference? That love is present forever after in the life of the child. Though time and distance separate; though child and teacher part ways, that love is constant, not simply in memory, but in the child's very being.

Friends. We make friends. Places, people, activities connect us to one another. We work together on a project, raise money for a cause; attend the same events; a friendship emerges.

Time and proximity lay the groundwork. Like-mindedness (not in all ways, but in enough) and compatibility of spirit lead to shared experiences and to the intimacy of shared feelings: joys and sorrows, love and loss, hopes, dreams, uncertainties, yearning.

A good friendship makes the good times better and carries us through the hard times. Friends weave so many connections with each other that their sharing and knowing is a strong fabric with an intricate and colorful weave.

Sometimes it shelters and warms us; sometimes like a hammock it bears and rocks the weary spirit; sometimes it is a festive tapestry of celebration. It grows stronger with age; time and distance don't weaken it; the reunion of good friends is as warm with intimacy as it was at last meeting.

Saying Farewell

The time comes when we say farewell. So often it's temporary, a parting of the ways for a few days, a few weeks. Sometimes it's longer, and feels too long. And sometimes it is final, the end of life, expected or unexpected.

Each time we bid one another farewell in the ordinary way is a moment that calls for our full attention, our full presence. In every goodbye there is the foreshadowing of that final farewell. To acknowledge, as we part, the possibility that we may not meet again, imbues each goodbye with the constancy of love shared.

There is nothing casual about parting, though too often we allow it to be. I don't mean that each morning's departure for school or work should be mournful or prolonged. I mean only that the moment of farewell should be one of intention: to notice, to invoke the wish for a good day, to see and cherish one another, to say: "I love you, be safe." Each farewell, given attention and intention, is another cherished memory.

Love and Gratitude

The poet Wendell Berry says that love welcomes the newborn, embraces the living, remembers those who are gone, and "is folded and enfolded and unfolded forever and ever."²

The image of love folded, enfolded, unfolded calls to mind the craft of making steel, strong and flexible, by the flattening, folding, unfolding, and enfolding of the metal again and again, heat of fire and cold of water uniting to strengthen it through in the long art that our ancestors knew.

So, too, the love we know from our earliest days is folded away for a time, enfolded by love we experience in our present moments, and unfolded later again in memory, like a gift wrapped and unwrapped and wrapped again to be opened once more, with delight. A gift it is, but not simply that.

² Wendell Berry, *Andy Catlett: Early Travels*, page 119 (Counterpoint: First Ed. 2006) (hereafter *Andy Catlett*).

Love that welcomes us also (to our sorrow) leaves with those who go; the grief and loss we feel at the departing of friends or family is fire and cold water and the pounding of the smith's hammer as love folds and enfolds and unfolds throughout our lives.

From the gift of love, from its loss, and most especially from learning to cherish those we love (both while they are with us and in memory), we grow stronger and more loving—the *soul* grows more courageous and more beautiful—but only if the events of our lives are joined with our own resolve, and with our recognition of the value of each moment we have shared with those we love.

When the time comes to say farewell, the final goodbye, the measure of how well we have lived is not whether we have been “*loved* enough,” but whether we have been “*grateful* enough for love received and given, however much.”³

Love, well-cherished, is one of life's certainties.

³ *Andy Catlett*, page 120.