

OPENING WORDS – 18 Sep 2016  
William Stafford: “A Ritual to Read to Each Other”  
The Way It Is: New and Selected Poems (1960/1998)

If you don't know the kind of person I am  
and I don't know the kind of person you are  
a pattern that others made may prevail in the world  
and following the wrong god home we may miss our star.

For there is many a small betrayal in the mind.  
a shrug that lets the fragile sequence break  
sending with shouts the horrible errors of childhood  
storming out to play through the broken dike.

And as elephants parade holding each elephant's tail,  
but if one wanders the circus won't find the park,  
I call it cruel and maybe the root of all cruelty  
to know what occurs but not recognize the fact.

And so I appeal to a voice, to something shadowy,  
a remote important region in all who talk:  
though we could fool each other, we should consider—  
lest the parade of our mutual life get lost in the dark.

For it is important that awake people be awake,  
or a breaking line may discourage them back to sleep;  
the signals we give – yes or no, or maybe –  
should be clear: the darkness around us is deep.

**Who Goes There?**  
First Parish UU of Medfield – 18 Sep 2016  
Rev. David W. Chandler

Minister jokes begin in seminary: “What do they call a divinity student who graduates with an A average? Reverend. What do they call a divinity student who graduates with a C average? Reverend.”

Ministers warn each other not to become “four feet above contradiction.” The power of the pulpit is persuasive. Sometimes it must be prophetic, but it always pulls in harness with the power of the pew. Let us pull together and use our power wisely.

Every minister laughs at this story, no matter how many years or in what setting: The great religious writer Frederick Buechner recalls his youthful self telling a New York socialite he was studying for the ministry. “Is this your own decision,” she replied. “Or have you been poorly advised?”

These jokes are the rites of passage and reassurance common to all human endeavors. They must be both true and fabulous. I am using “fabulous” in its archaic meaning – not dazzling and wonderful, but having to do with fable. Fables are stories we tell to epitomize not facts or objectivity, but rather the truth of our inner selves and our intuitive wisdom. They help us understand not how the world functions, but how it *is*. They tell us not so much what we should do, but who we are.

In religion, fables are called “parables.” In culture they are “myths,” and in literature, “allegories.” In counseling they are often known as “stories.” Whatever term is used, “fabulous” invites us to answer the question, “Who goes there?” in an out-of-the-ordinary way. We do not give a prearranged password. We do not provide mere description – “five foot two, eyes of blue,” as in the song. The real answer must be in the encounter. It is a place of change for all parties through their inescapable interaction.

“Who goes there?” In most languages the phrase translates as, “Who comes?” This is better wording. The answer must include what is, what has been and what is yet to be. “Yet to be” is of course not known. That is the nature of encounter – a moment in which the direction of things goes off in a new way, and we feel that movement, without any intellectual process. Remember the beginning of “Hamlet”? The ghost of the king –

Hamlet's murdered father – walks the battlements, but will not speak or respond to the watchmen. A wild tale surely must unfold. Shakespeare knew how to hook an audience.

Ministry has its fables, stories that help make some sense about how it is lived. In seminary it was important to remember ministers are “formed” through experience and reflection, not through classroom instruction. In the parish it is critical to practice good ministry by being authentic, not authoritarian. When we laugh about being “poorly advised,” we renew our commitment to ministry as a vigorous calling, not a job. For me, that calling is to serve the people of this congregation – to serve you above all.

The glass slipper does not always fit on the correct foot and ministry fables too are regularly bruised by hard reality. That's how fables are – some days you eat the bear and some days not. But authentic fables – good parables, allegories, myths or stories – are only extenuated by adversity. Their essence is not truly diminished. They continue to connect our workaday lives with ultimate reality, and thereby we are truly saved.

Once upon a time there was a small boy. In the photo he stands solemnly in front of a white frame cabin. You can tell it is a long time ago because the picture is in the brownish tones of the 1950s, and the boy has buzz cut hair and wears a belt-length jacket and corduroy pants and what appear to be sneakers – probably Keds. Behind the boy's right shoulder the side of the cabin looks smashed in.

Late one night in the summer of 1957, a car careened out of control across a clearing until it slammed head-on into the wooden wall of that cabin. The boy was sleeping in an iron cot against the inside of that unfinished wall. His counselor woke up, pulled the chain on the light bulb, and felt a moment of sick dread. The boy's head was under the front wheel of the car. Then that boy sat up and began to cry.

All I remember is falling out of bed, hitting the floor and being scared by the commotion. Of course you have guessed the boy is me. I say “is,” not “was,” because this is my fable, my touchstone of ultimate reality. It has shaped my life.

Who goes there? I must answer – a fabulist comes, telling parables and seeking stories. I do not mean to be oblique or deceptive, but to strike through encounter into the heart of ultimate reality. Mere causality is not enough. Who goes there? We must answer – *here is my story*. We remember every bit but honestly cannot say exactly why or how or when. It happened just that way – we think. What we have done and who we

are and what we will do the rest of our days – all are deeply rooted in timeworn fable.

My fabulous happenstance begins with the obvious – I did not die. I could not have become a minister – or anything else – if I had died. There is no good reason I did not. Another picture shows my cot bent in two like a paper clip -- somehow the spindly cot threw me just far enough. That explanation does not answer the big question, why?

As a child the “why” was a simple miracle of an individual kind. God had a special purpose for me and for my life. Since the incident took place in a camp called Jubilee Ranch, run by an evangelical radio preacher named Reverend Bob Anderson, you will appreciate this perspective was strongly encouraged. There are however, timeless words: “When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things.” No further miracles occurred; no special purpose seemed evident. After putting away childish things I assumed the delightful role of religious debunker.

Near-death experiences are usually indelible. Mine, however, had no perception of death. I suffered no fear or resignation, had no time to contemplate or bargain. It just happened – bang! Perhaps that’s why the power of the experience faded, subsumed under many other layers of incident and understanding.

It seemed to mean nothing, yet remember this is a fable. It is not a story of circumstance but of wisdom, not an explanation but an insight – an Intuition, as the Transcendentalists earnestly proclaimed, the source of capital “T” Truth. Human beings stubbornly insist on meaning and purpose in our lives. We are determined against letting it drain away. In our stories we sum it and spend it and share it again and again. Look carefully at your story – at anybody’s story – and you will find right at the nub, the always-asked question, why? Why, indeed? Every story ultimately reveals the answer.

One Sunday afternoon some years ago I happened to look out at the pond behind the country house where I was staying. I saw a most fabulous thing. The first golden leaves of autumn had scattered across the surface, where the water almost perfectly mirrored the dark green fir trees lining the far shore and the bright sky around and above them. The surface of the water was so clear and the light itself so golden the leaves seemed to float in space, each of them an independent glittering point. They drifted almost imperceptibly on a gentle breeze, each one distinct and fully embodied, and yet visible as a swaying constellation all in mystic harmony at the same instant.

This is how my fable has returned. I was able to see what I needed to know, through a small window that opened on eternity and the cosmic wholeness. A God who sits in his bathrobe in some distant heaven did not especially save me. Something knit into the matter of the universe saves us all. The energy of being, a living encounter with all possibilities, reaches out continuously to enfold every one of us in divinity. This beyond is always in our midst. I have come to see myself gifted with a life that might not have been. The road can be hard but the gift is no burden. No need to worry about, why me? We are all recipients of this gift, all included in ultimate reality. There is no good reason for us to be here. Or maybe there is. We don't know. But we can, in better moments at least, appreciate in our hearts how incomparably fortunate we are to be here at all. Our hands can affirm this reality and extend it in the world. Our stories add to the timeless narrative, line by line, in good will and witness. It is all in encounter.

It does sound a little fabulous, but I affirm it just the same. I welcome the fable you and I are already creating. May it unfold and unfurl as we go forth together.

Amen. Blessed Be. Shalom. Salaam.

CLOSING WORDS – 18 Sep 2016  
Wendy Cope: “The Orange” – Serious Concerns (1992)

At lunchtime I bought a huge orange –  
The size of it made us all laugh.  
I peeled it and shared it with Robert and Dave –  
They got quarters and I had a half.  
  
And that orange, it made me so happy,  
As ordinary things often do  
Just lately. The shopping. A walk in the park.  
This is peace and contentment. It's new.  
  
The rest of the day was quite easy.  
I did all the jobs on my list.  
And enjoyed them and had some time left over.  
I love you. I'm glad I exist.