

**Why I Love Cemeteries**  
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Remembrance Sunday

In my teens and early twenties I took several bike trips, just a few days each, camping in a field or campsite or staying at roadside motels along the way. Among my favorite places to stop for lunch, however, were cemeteries. And for whatever reason I can still picture in my mind's eye a particular cemetery somewhere in rural Connecticut. It was a beautiful warm summer's day, old cemetery along the side of the country road, well-kept but not perfectly manicured, kind of settled into the landscape.

Peaceful, quiet except for the occasional passing car.

Good place for a sandwich lunch.

As long as I remember I've always liked cemeteries, enjoyed wandering cemetery paths, particularly older cemeteries that are, like that one in Connecticut, settled but not perfectly manicured, gravestones not laid out in straight rows, but rather on sometimes meandering paths – something like the Hingham Cemetery right here.

Another part of the pleasure – or if not pleasure the way we more often think of pleasure... maybe interest or fascination – that comes from wandering a cemetery is reading the headstones, noting the dates and sometimes the relationships. Here an old man or woman, over there someone cut down in mid-life, here a child or a mere babe. One imagines the stories, the beauty of a great, long life, or the grief and suffering measured by a life too short, as we usually think of it.

It is all there – and though quiet, not quite silent, since the gravestones do in a way speak, though in simple terms of dates and names, occasionally along with a brief quotation or wisdom line.

I walk the paths of the Hingham Cemetery from time to time – sometimes at the end of a long day, just to find a measure of quiet amidst the headstones, the weeping angel, the veteran's memorial, the monument to the first settlers... and of course at other times to tend to the business, as it were, at hand.

And the longer I've been here at Old Ship, the more folks I knew and many of you knew whose physical remains are resting here: Wilmon and Katharine Brewer, Leavitt Howard, Betty Pierce, Bob Palmer, Jan and Ed Colby, Barbara Lane, Dorothy Havens, Judy Hardy... the list of course grows...

I've got some distant ancestors back there too: among them Ripleys and Hobarts, including our first minister, Peter Hobart – along with several others of my predecessors as ministers of this First Parish. Some buried in what I call, appreciating the double meaning, the ministers' plot.

Then there is our own memorial garden, where among other dear ones I've known and many of you have known, are the remains of my parents. So I visit there as well.

A number of years ago a former member of Old Ship who had moved out west (well before my arrival here) wrote to us to make plans to be interred in the memorial garden when her time came. She said in her letter that she knew she would be among friends – if not all people she knew personally, then surely spiritual kindred. What a lovely thought!

Well... one way to describe the experience of wandering through a cemetery, walking the paths, reading the inscriptions, is that it offers perspective on our own lives. We know that each of us comes into this life (since here we are)... and after however many years leaves this life (the evidence is pretty clear).

And with just a little reflection we observe at least two things:

First, we may get the perspective that comes when we see spread before us the beautiful equality amidst the headstones, since no matter how long we each live or what sort of life we have lived (or how big or small the headstone) we all share the essence of life's nature – we live and we die, and in the end saints and sinners, as we might put it, rest together.

Today is, as you may know, All Saints Day on the Christian calendar – but tomorrow, All Souls Day, really is more our kind of day as Universalists, descended as we are from those early Universalists who believed that a loving God would save *all* souls eventually, saints and finally redeemed sinners alike. After all, a sinner? Maybe most of the time, maybe all of the time, though it's an admittedly sometimes harder case to make, a saint who hasn't yet discovered his or her true self within, the compassionate self at heart.

Now, I said there were two perspectives we might get as we walk through a cemetery. The second is related to the first. For me anyway, I am reminded that though I am only one and I only live, as we all do, a brief while, within my span I can make my singular contribution, as we all do, to the larger life in which we live and move and have our being, as together we sustain the life we share over time.

There are of course other ways to gain “perspective” on our lives. I first learned the word “perspective” as a child. Our father would sometimes take us for a walk around the block if something was bothering us – he said it was for “perspective”; and he explained what that meant, that it meant to put whatever was troubling us into a larger context, maybe to see that whatever it was wasn't such a big deal after all, and at the same time maybe to stir our minds and our feelings so that we might see a solution or response to our problem we hadn't discerned before.

Sitting by the side of the vast reaches of ocean, looking up at the far vaster night sky, offer perspective as well.

There are in short many ways to return ourselves to a more accurate assessment and experience of our place in the world, in the web of life, in the entirety of the cosmos. Then the better to return to the tasks at hand with what we might call a proper humility: Here is who I am, here is what I can do, and I can rest from time to time, content that others will take up the task when I am unable. As the words from Wendell Berry at the top of your order of worship put it:

The love and the work of friends and lovers belong to the task and are its health.  
Rest and rejoicing belong to the task, and are its grace.  
Let tomorrow come tomorrow. Not by your will is the house carried through the night.

Back at the end of September I offered a few remarks and a “blessing” at the re-dedication of the Ames Chapel, a little chapel first built in 1886 here in the Hingham Cemetery that had just been quite beautifully restored.

I was likely asked to have this honor since the 8<sup>th</sup> minister of our First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church), H. Price Collier, had offered the invocation and benediction

at the original dedication of the Ames Chapel in 1887. Well... twelve ministers and 128 years later, there I was again.

So much has changed in our world in those 128 years, but as the title of the 1993 Hingham Town History affirmed, "Not All Is Changed."

It's not only that buildings like the Ames Chapel or like our Old Ship Meeting House, and like hundreds of other homes and buildings throughout our town, are still here, or that our town meeting form of governance is still the foundation of our local political arrangements, or that most of the faith communities that were active in 1887 are active still.

All of this is true enough.

But most profoundly it is also true that, as I've been saying, the very nature of our human lives has not at essence changed whatsoever. How could it? We live. We die. And in between we do our work as best we can and love as fully as we can.

Now this sentiment might *only* be sad, *only* poignant, if it did not also evoke a sense of the *preciousness* of *this* life, *these* years however few or many they may be; and so evoke as well our desire to *appreciate* this gift of life, to appreciate the beauty of the creation, to appreciate and care for one another with love. (Perspective again.)

Further, it seems to me that it is precisely because we *do* know and feel the preciousness of life, however infrequently we may speak of it, that we human beings are moved, perhaps like no other species, to honor and remember those we've loved who have died, thereby putting us more fully in the stream of life, the very particular stream of our personal lineage, parents, grandparents, and on through the generations, as well as the stream of all of life which we all share.

The Ames Chapel, built lovingly all those years ago, was named for Annie Ames, about whom we apparently know very little, other than that she was part of the Barnes family, one of the founding families of Hingham. But regardless of what we know or don't know about Annie Ames, we do know this, we know it for certain: we know that she must have been loved, loved enough that those who loved her wanted her to be long remembered in this way.

Of course all the headstones and memorial plaques on the hillsides and plains of our Hingham Cemetery, all of them far simpler than a chapel, are likewise testaments to love that reaches across generations. So, since, as I've already noted, a number of my predecessors and ancestors found their final rest among them, as I walk the paths of the cemetery I find not only perspective but a real comfort, realizing, as I've been suggesting, that though my individual life is short, I really am part of a great stream of life.

May we then, whether having a sandwich on a summer's day in an old burying ground, or walking the paths of Hingham Cemetery, or simply the paths of our daily rounds.... may we feel the embrace of the spirit of the ages, the lineage of life and love within which we all live as we pass love and kindness from hand to hand, heart to heart, generation to generation.

So may it be.