



First Congregational Church (UCC) of Ashfield
429 Main Street – Ashfield MA 01330
Creating Community, Welcoming All

August 22, 2021 Sermon: Figure Out What You Hope For... Live Under Its Roof by Bruce Bennett

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to You, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

At the graveside service of our long-time church member Randy Beauchemin last Tuesday morning, I gave the eulogy. Before that, as I was preparing the words I would say, I looked to what others had written as a starting point:

I read an incredibly beautiful piece by Randy's guardian, Debra, who used to be the director, now-retired, of the group home in Amherst where Randy lived for the last 14 years of his life. He moved there after having lived with us in Ashfield for 20 years. Eventually, we weren't able to do his physical care anymore, and we couldn't find any more people we could hire to help us.

Also, I read the obituary on the website of the funeral home. And I read the thoughts expressed in the sympathy cards we received from church friends and others.

From reading these sources, I learned how others saw "the Randy of 2007 to 2021." Diana and I knew something of that period of Randy's life too, because we would visit him at the group home, but our most vivid impressions had been from "the Randy of 1987 to 2007," when he lived with us, and also before that, "the Randy of 1963 to 1987," from the stories we had heard about his early years.

When I looked up the Bible passages listed in the lectionary for today, I felt there was a link within them to Randy's life. And I felt there was a link from Randy's life to everyone's life. I will try to break it down for you, to distill it to its essence. Three droplets. Each is in a well-known quotation. All three are connected. They seem to go along with the major stages in Randy's life.

Randy's first 24 years of life were extremely hard and unstable, and he suffered multiple losses. But, during this terrible period in his life, he figured out, apparently on his own, how to be outgoing and winsome and charming, and to grab whatever amount of control over his life that someone with his severe developmental disabilities could muster.

The quote I thought of which seems to fit this stage in Randy's life [Let's call it ***stage one.***] is "**Fake it till you make it.**"

The next stage of Randy's life, when he came to live with us, from 1987 to 2007, was one when we came to realize that Randy didn't want to get very close emotionally, even though he very much wanted to be the center of attention.

We worked hard, with the help of professionals, to create a home experience for him which allowed him both a full life and the safety of healthy boundaries. We all experienced lots of ups and downs, but things seemed to go gradually in a good direction. Let's call this period ***stage two.*** The quote which came to mind that seems to fit this stage is one from the novel Mother Night by the wonderfully wise Kurt Vonnegut. He wrote this about it:

"This is the only story of mine whose moral I know...I don't think it's a marvelous moral; I simply happen to know what it is: **We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be.**" [*italics mine*]

Now the third and last stage of Randy's life, at his Amherst group home, is what we'll call **stage three**.

When I read Debra's piece about Randy, I realized that she, and the others from the group home, by and large knew him only as "stage three Randy." It dawned on Diana and me that they didn't know what Randy was like beforehand, but also that they may have just thought Randy had always been the way he was with them.

What was *stage three* Randy like? Well, let me read you a few excerpts from Deb's piece to give you a feeling of how they saw Randy:

"Some people looked at him and that's what they saw - the things he couldn't do. But that's not what we saw, and that's not who he was. We saw the many things he could do. He could smile, he could laugh, he had a great sense of humor. He could feel unbridled happiness. He could love without condition. He could make you feel like you were the most important person in his world. He inspired others to try harder. By seeing him work hard to overcome his own challenges, it reminded others to work harder, as well. He helped teach us about our own strengths and gifts. He also taught us how to be happy because he took joy in so many things. "It was hard to have a bad day if you were doing something with Randy. His enthusiasm and excitement were contagious.

"We could look to him as an example of perseverance and inner strength, as he continued to fight battles in health and increased limitations that would crush many of us. He showed us what it is to be strong... In this way, he was a hero..."

I gave a lot of thought to Debra's words about Randy, and in what ways his having lived with us in Ashfield, and then at their group home in Amherst, might have contributed to his growth. Here is part of what I said about that in the eulogy:

"In Ashfield we lived with a Randy who, deep down beneath his winsome personality and his charm, was still struggling mightily with a fear of total abandonment and abject helplessness. Living with our family...it was probably too intense an environment for someone with his history. Perhaps he would have done better in a good group home setting like this one...all along.

...[I]t has been such a blessing for Diana and me to have been able to see a fully-matured Randy blossom and thrive in Amherst. We have gradually become able to let go of the residual painful feelings which we've been carrying alongside the memories of all the good times we had with Randy when we were together in Ashfield.

We are so grateful to Deb and all the wonderful staff at the group home. They have all been so kind and attentive and loving all these years. It was also so good for Randy to have been able to spread his attention among multiple staff members on three different shifts. Both because of who you all are and how you interacted with him, and because of how, as a large team, you were able to provide him with the feeling of a big emotional safety net, you all made it possible for Randy to realize his potential, to become the person he was meant to be."

Ok, now it's time to mention the third quote. It's the one at the top of today's bulletin. It's one of the quotes offered by the Rev. Dr. Cheryl Lindsay in this week's issue of her UCC Blog *Weekly Seeds*. The quote is by the well-known writer Barbara Kingsolver: "***The very least you can do in your life is figure out what you hope for. And the most you can do is live inside that hope. Not admire it from a distance but live right in it, under its roof.***"

I think that's what the group home staff were doing for Randy, giving him the opportunity to live inside his hope. Maybe Diana and I at least began that process. We and our kids helped him see through experience that people in his life could go away and come back, not go away suddenly and be gone forever, as had been his earlier experience. Maybe that experience allowed him to risk attaching himself emotionally to us despite the fear of our suddenly disappearing, like everyone else in his life had done previously.

But maybe Randy wasn't yet ready to enter fully into that process because he wasn't yet ready to love. He had already been burned and was, as the saying goes, "twice shy." He probably didn't yet really know, as the song goes, "what love is," and didn't have sufficient reason to take the risk again.

There is that old saying, possibly Buddhist, that "when the student is ready, the teacher will appear." I don't mean to burden you with a fourth quote. I just realized that maybe it helps explain Randy's life, and our lives, and our chosen scripture passages too. In the New Testament **Letter from James**, "written to all God's people, scattered all over the world," the author urges this: "You must understand this, **my beloved**: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger... **be doers of the word**, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. **23** For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, **immediately forget what they were like.**" [I invite you to take another look at the image at the top of your bulletin.]

So. at the group home, there was a whole community of compassionate staff people who gave Randy the wherewithal to take the risk again: to figure out what his hopes were, to learn what love is, to learn that - as another song goes - "money can't buy me love", to learn to love others in order to be loved.

Debra's written words, and the spoken words of staff members at the graveside last Tuesday, after the service, let us know that they and Randy were in love.

Let us all know our hopes like this...let us all love like this. Let us all live our lives like this.

Am I loopy from too much time at the computer? If so, why do New Testament writers speak to their readers as their "beloved"? Why do the Old Testament Love Songs of Solomon depict the love of God as love poetry? So we can deeply know what love is...that's what the wise ones say. "The voice of my beloved! Look, he comes, leaping upon the mountains, bounding over the hills..."

Alleluia and Amen.