

Goodbyes

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[The Unitarian Church in Summit](#)

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"Goodbye, George": A Story

Larry stood staring out the living room window. It was a beautiful, late autumn day -- the kind of day when dark clouds and white clouds chased each other across a brilliant blue sky, for all the world as if they were playing a cosmic game of "Red Rover, Red Rover, I dare you to come over." But Larry was not watching the clouds tumbling after each other across the sky. Nor was he watching the deeply colored leaves drifting from the branches of the trees and tossing in the gusting wind. The excitement and beauty of the day were completely lost on the little boy, who stood, his nose pressed to the window pane, his attention riveted on the activities under way three stories below him, at the entrance to his apartment building.

A large, flatbed truck with fence-like stakes around the sides of the bed had been backed across the curb and the sidewalk, and was now parked in such a way that the end of the truck was even and level with the porch. As Larry watched, men carried various boxes and pieces of furniture across the porch and stacked them onto the truck. He knew most of the men -- Mr. Gordon and his brother, Mr. Dawson from down the street, and another man he did not know. He watched as they carried out a kitchen table and kitchen chairs, and stacked them on the truck. Then the men disappeared into the building. He could hear them coming up the stairs to the third floor, talking loudly to each other about how lucky they were with the weather, and about how Mr. Gordon's brother could only borrow the truck this one day, and if it had rained, everything would have been ruined by the rain, and how, with any luck, they should have everything cleared out of the apartment by noon. The voices faded as the men entered the apartment next to the one in which Larry lived. Soon the voices could be heard again, this time giving each other instruction and encouragement and warning as the men tried to move heavy furniture down the stairs without dropping or scratching or otherwise damaging it or themselves. Soon, Larry would see them appear on the porch and soon the things they were carrying would be added to the growing pile in the truck.

How long Larry stood and watched, he didn't know. But at some point, he was aware that someone had entered the room and was standing next to him. Looking up, he saw his mother watching him carefully. "Why are you staring out the window, Larry?" she asked. "It's a lovely day, not very cold. Why don't you go out and play?"

"Don't feel like playing," said Larry. "I ain't never gonna play again," said Larry, his nose pushed against the window pane.

"My," said Mother, "never is an awful long time, and you're pretty young to give up playing. This sounds serious. Want to talk about it?"

"No," said Larry.

His mother stood looking out the window with him for a moment. "They'll have that truck all loaded before very long," she said. "It's going to be lonely around here when the Gordons are gone, isn't it? Mrs. Gordon is just about my best friend. I'm going to miss her a lot."

"Mom," said Larry, after a long pause, "why does George have to move away?"

"Well, Larry, people move away for lots of reasons -- new jobs, or to be with family, or just to live in a new place -- lots of reasons. George's father lost his job and they can't afford to live here any more. The Gordons are going to live with George's grandmother until Mr. Gordon can find another job. George can't help it, you know."

"I don't want George to go away," said Larry. "George is my very best friend."

"I understand," said his mother. "Sometimes you feel lonely, and sometimes you feel angry, and sometimes you feel George doesn't care about you any more. But, Larry, saying goodbye to people is part of life. It is hard to say goodbye to people you love, but there is no way to get around it. George has to move away with his family; it doesn't mean he doesn't like you anymore. It's just something that can't be helped. Why don't you go on out and find George and say goodbye to him and wish him good luck?"

"Maybe later," said Larry. "Right now I just want to stand here. I don't want to say goodbye, not now."

"Okay, Larry, but it is important to learn to say goodbye to people you care about."

For a long time he stood there, looking out the window, watching the truck fill up with furniture. Now he saw some little things very clearly. He saw a bright red maple leaf detach itself from a tree across the street. He saw it caught by the wind and tossed high in the air. He saw it dance close to the window where he stood, and then settle very gently through the air until it came to rest on the kitchen table, stacked in the back of the truck. He saw the Jordans' black cat crouching by the side of the house, and then suddenly pouncing upon the dancing leaves which the wind stirred in the gutter. He saw shadows moving across the street, mirroring the movement of clouds across the face of the sun. He thought that he would never forget this moment, that he would never get over the sadness he felt, that he would never again have a friend like George.

After a while, Larry was aware that the truck was now just about full. The men were no longer carrying things out of the building. Soon, they were using long ropes to tie things in place so they would not move around as the truck traveled down the road. It would not be long before George would be gone. Larry turned from the window and walked toward his bedroom. As he was passing the hall door, he heard someone knocking. He opened the door and there stood George.

"It's time for us to go, Larry. Mom says we gotta hurry so we can get this stuff unloaded before dark. It's a long ride to my grandma's house. Here, I want you to have this."

George shoved something into Larry's hand. Larry looked down, and there was a small metal horse. The paint was chipped off it in places and the right foreleg was bent a little bit. But it was one of George's favorite toys. Larry looked at the horse for a long minute. Then he heard Mrs. Gordon calling, "George! Come on, George, we gotta leave right now."

George turned to go. "Wait a minute," said Larry, running to his bedroom. He rummaged through his toy box. At last he found what he was looking for: a large, clear marble with a deep blue streak embedded in its very center. "Here," he said to George, "it's my favorite, my lucky marble. You take it. It'll bring you luck."

"George," called Mrs. Gordon, "we've got to leave this minute. Get yourself down here!"

The two boys looked at each other for a long minute. Then George turned and ran down the stairs. Larry ran back to the window. He got there in time to see Mrs. Gordon climb into the cab of the truck. Then George and his father climbed onto the back of the truck, finding a place for themselves among the

boxes and furniture. Through the window, Larry could hear the engine of the truck sputter and cough before it caught. The truck shivered a bit, and slowly began to move across the sidewalk, bounced down the curb, turned into the street, and headed up the road. Larry watched it until it was out of sight. He turned slowly and walked back to his bedroom.

Lying on his bed, he held the toy horse closely in his hand. He stared at the little figure, and found himself remembering the spring day when he and George had gone roller-skating on the sidewalk which bordered the vacant lot on the corner. They had rolled down the sidewalk laughing and shouting, the wind blowing through their hair. He found himself remembering just a few weeks ago when the two of them had gone out together on Halloween to trick-or-treat in the neighborhood. Dressed as a hobo and an Indian, they had visited almost every house on the block and had come home with a bag full of candy and apples and cookies. It would have been scary to be out at night alone, but the two of them together were not at all frightened. He found himself remembering the day they started school together -- how excited they had been, and how relieved they were when they discovered that they would be in the same class. He remembered the morning they had been so interested in collecting buckeyes that they were a half-hour late for school. Boy were they scared when they got to the schoolhouse and there was no one outside. All the kids were already in class. It was hard to explain to Miss Stouffer what was so interesting about those hard, glossy horse chestnuts.

Larry lay a long time on his bed, stroking the small toy horse, remembering his friend. He still felt lonely; he still felt angry; he still felt unhappy. There would never be another friend like George, and now they might never see each other again. But the small horse made it seem as if a small part of George were still there. No matter where George went, or what happened in the future, the fun George and Larry had shared could never be changed. And the little horse reminded Larry of all the fun; in some strange way, it made the loneliness worse, but it also made the loneliness okay. He couldn't have put it into words, but somehow the sadness he was feeling and the loneliness and the anger were evidence of how important his friendship with George had been and always would be. He would keep that horse forever and forever and forever, and he would keep his memories of George forever and forever and forever, and deep inside himself, he and George would always be friends, and would always be skating past the vacant lot, and ringing doorbells on Halloween and collecting buckeyes on the way to school.

"Maybe people have to learn to say goodbye," thought Larry, "but they don't have to let go of each other. People leave something of themselves with each

other -- memories, experiences that no one can ever take away. I'll always be thankful you were my friend, George. You'll always be my friend. Goodbye, George."

Reading (*with Rev. Beverly A. Bumbaugh*):

All autumn long
we've been saying goodbye --
to familiar places,
to comfortable routines,
to colleagues and friends.

All autumn long,
we've been ridding ourselves
of the elements of a life
that is over.

All autumn long,
we've been readying ourselves
for a new life.

It is not easy,
this saying goodbye to people and places.
It is not easy,
this doing so many things for the last time.
It is not easy
giving up the accumulated treasures
of all the passing years.

Throughout the autumn,
we have been sustained and upheld
by the presence of a great cloud of witnesses.
We have been companioned,
this strange autumn,
by so many who have been part of our lives:

Throughout this autumn,
we have been remembering:
Infants, held securely in loving arms,

brought to this place to be named and welcomed,
children, brimming with energy and possibilities,
young people trembling on the brink of adulthood,
quiet with a wisdom they do not know they have.

Throughout this autumn,
we have been remembering
brides and grooms who have stood before us,
here in this place,
to make public the love which moves within them;
young parents,
struggling to lead their children into moral living;
middle-aged adults who have accepted responsibility
for themselves, the community, the world;
the elders, who have grown into stable,
translucent beauty.

So many people have been part of our lives,
enriched us beyond knowing,
and even as we go through the process
of saying goodbye
and moving from past to future,
we know that we pack along with us
all the laughter and tears,
all the triumphs and frustrations,
all the joys and sorrows
we have shared together.
All who have been part of our lives
remain part of our lives,
no matter where the future may take us.

This thanksgiving season,
when there is so very much for which to be grateful,
let us not forget the abiding gift
each of us is to the other.

Let us give thanks for the women and men and children
who companion us on our way,
who, in speaking our names,
in grasping our hands,
in sharing our lives
confirm our very beings.

Let us give thanks for the men and children and women
who support us and sustain us
in all our coming and going,
for it is in their eyes that we come to see ourselves
and it is in their persons
the holiness of life
reveals itself to us.