

My Life (and Truth) As a Mosaic

Delivered August 17, 2025 by Rod Howe

First Unitarian Society of Ithaca

Good morning!

Intro of Musicians

Mahkia Gumaer, my granddaughter! 15 years old and about to enter 10th grade in the Trumansburg school system. I like to think that she got her musical talent from her father. Thank you, Mahika.

Margaret Nichols has been a member of FUSIT since about 1998 and retired 7 months ago after a long career working with rare books at Cornell. Thank you, Margaret.

Erica Howard is also a FUSIT member and I have been told that she is probably the best oboist in Ithaca! Erica and her wife sing in the choir and Erica has played her oboe for the Sage Christmas services. Thank you, Erica.

Why the music and the video

I was keen to create a soulful mood. And I love the sound of the oboe.

An underlying theme is that time waits for no person as Chaucer

wrote “Time and Tide wait for no man.” Time and the natural processes of the world, like the tides, continue regardless of human actions or desires. Time does not stand still. Not for me. Not for you. Not for anyone. No matter what may be happening in life, good or bad, time continues to tick away, and not always at the pace we’d like. Hence my choice of the theme song from “Six Feet Under” which is deeply meaningful and evokes a sense of melancholy, beauty, and the cyclical nature of life and death.

But why “Stand By Me”? The song offers support, loyalty, and encouragement to those who are facing difficult times. While the song is not necessarily about death it took on special meaning for my family when my sister chose it as a song to be sung at her service (when she was in the last stages of cancer and was picking out the final tiles of her life mosaic).

The “Stand By Me” video is its own kind of mosaic. Just as individual pieces of a mosaic come together to form a larger picture, so too do individual lives (or music) connect and influence one another, forming the collective human experience. The video encapsulates that.

Erica chose *Gabrielle’s Oboe* with its beautiful melody. The piece is often associated with themes of place, hope and cultural

understanding.

Mahkia chose what to play and I like that it mixes the mood up a bit.

Three quotes

Just as when I was working on last year's talk entitled "Little Altars Everywhere" and started to see numerous references to altars, I had a similar experience this year when starting to delve into this mosaic topic. I saw/found references to life as a mosaic in numerous places even when the word mosaic was not being used and certainly in the writings of some of my favorite authors, poets and religious figures with themes of nature, interconnectedness, life fragments, decisions we make, and cultivating seeds that will help us flourish. My whole time could have been used reading quotes. I whittled it down to three quotes.

Wendell Berry (how many have read his novels about the fictional community Port William, KY?)

"We clasp the hands of those that go before us,

And the hands of those who come after us.

We enter the little circle of each other's arms

And the larger circle of lovers,

Whose hands are joined in a dance,

*And the larger circle of all creatures,
Passing in and out of life,
Who move also in a dance,
To a music so subtle and vast that no ear hears it
Except in fragments.”*

Francois Villon: *“Don’t regret the past, sometimes things
happen for a good reason. Life is like a mosaic. From up close it
may seem like a mess, but from afar it creates a beautiful
picture.”*

Frederick Buechner:

*“Page by page, chapter by chapter, the
story unfolds. Day by day, year by year, your own story unfolds,
your life’s story. Things happen. People come and go. The scene
shifts –“*

The Talk:

Mosaics can convey symbolic and spiritual truths and can represent rich, full, and complicated lives. Mosaics, as collections of experiences and perspectives, help to reveal how we are connected to one another.

The concept of a life mosaic is that the important aspects of our lives can be represented by tiles that create unique patterns. And that with intentionality we can actively create our life mosaics by identifying the important parts of our lives, assessing our

current situation, committing to our values and priorities, making conscious choices, seeking balance, celebrating the whole and finally adjusting and refining, as life is dynamic and we can adapt our mosaic as we grow and evolve.

For decades I have been interested in mosaics, patterns, and mandalas. My premise is that by consciously curating the “tiles” of my life, I (and you) can create a unique and meaningful mosaic that reflects my (your) values, passions, and aspirations. Mosaics can be crafted from a variety of materials like glass, ceramic, stone, marble, and even natural elements like shells or pebbles. And of course, fabric pieces (Magdalen!). Ancient mosaics often used stone and glass, while modern mosaics incorporate a wider range of materials, including recycled items and found objects.

And I think we all know the elements that make up a truthful life: honesty, integrity, authenticity, transparency, accountability, respect. In essence, a truthful life revolves around being true to yourself and others by upholding ethical principles and fostering trust in all interactions.

The concept of a life mosaic refers to viewing one’s life as a collection of diverse experiences, relationships, and choices that, when viewed together, form a larger, unique picture. By

intentionally curating these “tiles” – relationships, work, hobbies, and personal growth – and making informed, and ideally, wise decisions - individuals can create a life that is both meaningful and fulfilling.

What my mosaic contains (a curated life)

I really like that word “curated” and the proactive approach it suggests. I am not going into a great deal of detail here. My hope is that it sparks your thoughts .I am quite sure that generally my tiles are not all that different from yours, in terms of what they represent. It is the specifics and the patterns that vary. When I was 29, I could not have imagined what the mosaic of my life would become at the age of almost 69. Certainly, some elements I could foresee as I tend to live my life plan-fully. But we all know that our lives are subject to forces, circumstance and events that we have no control over, could not have imagined and perhaps never, never wished. That is part of the awe and mystery of life. I do think we have the ability to reposition the tiles that represent unforeseen adversities, or at least give them a renewed hue, that allows a different perspective and provides us solace as we re-examine our unique mosaic.

My life mosaic is molded in large part by my Nobles and Howe

families (*mention Labor Day gathering going on close to 75 years*) and Grandparents, parents, siblings, a husband, sons, aunts and uncles, nieces and nephews, cousins. But the mosaic also embeds members of my created family. As well as dear neighbors, co-workers, and friends.

My mosaic includes writings and images of Wendell Berry, Thomas Merton, Mary Oliver, Thich Nhat Hanh, Walt Whitman, Frank Lloyd Wright, his Holiness the Dalai Lama, and Verne Morton to name a few.

My mosaic incorporates: my writing; my educational background and careers.

My mosaic includes my fascination with great blue herons, dragonflies, fireflies. And, past dogs and cats, sheep, goats and angora rabbits. Forefront now is my current beloved dog, Tess. Certain plants like sunflowers, black-eyed susans, butterfly bushes, lilacs, peonies, poppies, and wisteria.

7

Specific sounds like the honking of geese on Beebe Lake and songs/artists that recall special times and for me that would include Bonnie Raitt, Cameron Hawthorne, and “Blue Boat

Home.”

Specific Homes – Randaye Knoll, Villa Rosa in Boston, Marrod Farm and Marrod Cottage and 117 McIntyre Place

Certain places like Architecture Studio at University of Cincinnati, Copley Place, Comstock Knoll, Herring Cove Beach, Tutelo Park, Howe Farm, a Farm in Lyndonville, NY, and what we called the woodlot when I was growing up.

There are times when portions of my mosaic are highlighted in my mind and it may throw me off or give me an incomplete picture until I am able to regroup and see that mosaic section for what it is - just a section and not the whole thing.

For example, it may occur at the intersection and interplay of meaningful dates in a concentrated time period.

Or, if I am spending a lot of time in and near specific buildings, for example, Within a block or so of corner of Tioga and Buffalo Streets: Ithaca Town Hall, building that Dad worked on where I captured him in a picture one day, this church, The History Center.

There are tiles in my mosaic that I would not have chosen (cancer diagnosis, certain anguishing deaths). But stepping back I am grateful for my life mosaic that is wondrous and more

poignant due to the shadows and fractures that are interspersed with tiles that represent happier moments.

There is a tile, or perhaps, a set of tiles that represent the AIDS Ride For Life (*which is upcoming and I am still looking for volunteers for the King Ferry Pit Stop*).

And of course when my time has come I hope that elements of my life mosaic will represent my essence and qualities including resilience, kindness, integrity and stubbornness.

Ponderings/Observations

Consider how an artist might create mosaics out of obituaries.

That makes me think of the Names Quilt.

To me a profound example of life mosaics and the interconnectedness of our lives is represented by the Names Project AIDS Memorial Quilt. 50,000 panels with nearly 110,000 names sewn into its panels. Think of each square as a mosaic of an individual's life and how beautifully profound and sad to see them all stitched together. The last display of the entire AIDS Memorial Quilt was in October of 1996 when the Quilt covered the entire National Mall in Washington, D.C. with an estimated 1.2 million people coming to view it.

And since we live in a college town, a close friend recently remarked on the role of universities as being a mosaic of

thoughts and perspectives. Cornell University has a mosaic and I dare say may be part of the life mosaic of many people in this room.

And since we are in this beloved church, we might extend the life mosaic concept to a church or an institution that is core to our lives. FUSIT has a mosaic and I am sure is part of the life mosaic of many of you here today.

In Closing

I intend to continue to add on to my mosaic with intentionality and with grace to accept the elements that enter my life for which I have little or no control. Further, I intend to interconnect my ongoing life mosaic with others, as the real beauty is when mosaics are linked.

What about all of you? What is your life mosaic and is it adding up to what you want to do with your wondrous life? May you find grace in the ongoing assembling of your mosaic.

May we all keep placing our tiles with care and with an awareness that allows us to craft meaning from tribulations, joys, imperfection, wonder and our connections with one another.