

Called and Created: Unitarian Universalism and the Ministry

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Last week I celebrated the tenth anniversary of my ordination into the Unitarian Universalist ministry. Many of my family and friends told me they remembered that day, and it didn't seem like it was ten years ago. In a way I know how they feel. As I thought back to that Saturday afternoon on June 10, 2000 in Ann Arbor Michigan it feels very close at hand. Old friends, teachers and mentors spoke offering greetings, charging me, warning me, and celebrating with me. And yet unlike my family and friends I actually had to do ministry for all those ten years! It is hard but rewarding work. I sat down one day with a calculator and jotted down a few numbers, some metrics if you will, of the last ten years.

In ten years I officiated approximately thirty weddings. Many were not members of any church I served, and more often than I would have guessed, I find myself wondering about how they are doing. Are they still together? I have officiated at approximately a dozen memorial services, most of whom were for members of my church, and often I

found out after death how little of them I knew. Of child dedications there are fewer, say only around ten. I have preached around three hundred sermons. If I were to preach them all back to back for twenty four hours it would take a little over three day, almost four, to get through them all. I can't count how many hospital visits I made; I was a part time chaplain for three and half years in the middle of that decade, so it is impossible to count. But here is my favorite statistic, particularly for my family members who say how quickly the time has flown: I have attended around two hundred and fifty meetings of the Board—we ministers have no term limits for these things. That is approximate two weeks, twenty four hours a day, if placed back to back. No wonder it did not always feel like those ten years flew by.

When I became a Unitarian Universalist minister, John Buerhens was President of the UUA, although about to leave. 9/11 was a year and a half in the future. The sermon, preached by Rev. Ken Phifer although not this morning's reading, was about Unitarian Universalism as it faced the 21st century. It was very inspiring and uplifting as ordination sermons usually are. I was pretty naïve, frankly, about the career upon which I was about to embark. Much of that naiveté I left behind in the rough and tumble living that is life in the ministry, trying to lead Unitarian Universalists in community. Seeing how the sausage gets made can knock the romance out of the job pretty fast. But there are things that I choose to still keep, things that I am still naïve about and

refuse to let go of, lest all innocence be lost and I give in fully to cynicism.

One of the things I kept was an idea I read in a book, given to me by my childhood minister, called “The Wounded Healer” by Henri Nouwen. Nouwen is a famous Catholic writer and priest who reflects in a very deep way on what ministry is. Nouwen says that there are two fundamental aspects or dimensions of ministry: the pastoral role and the prophetic role. Neither can be neglected, and both are intertwined with each other.

The pastoral role is probably the most familiar and readily accessible ministerial role for most of us. It is that thing we think of ministers doing: comforting the sick, visiting the bereaved, providing succor to the congregation to help them live lives of holiness and happiness. Channing in his description of what the age demands of ministers said that ministers should be intellectual giants from the pulpit. I am not sure how well I have lived up to that charge, but I might quibble a bit with Channing, these ten years since that reading was spoken at my ordination. Maybe the demands of his age were for a scholarly clergy who would make their congregants feel smart, and more than a little elitist, but I have found that this age requires a more holistic approach. Granted you have to bring something intelligent to say week in and week out, but better still is something that speaks to the soul. A

piece of good news that calms the heart and puts at ease the mind as often as it stimulates it; that is pastoral ministry for this age.

When I think about when was I the most pastoral in ten years, there are lots of examples to choose from. The rocky marriages that have come before me, the delicate and difficult eulogies one has to write before the deceased's family and his mistress that some of them didn't know about, or the church member ready to quit, take their marbles and go home, because they did not get their way at the last Annual meeting. But the one I come back to again and again was the ten year old boy whose mother asked me to meet with him. He had obsessive compulsive disorder, and would do rituals like touch things, and wash his hands frequently. As is the case from time to time with OCD, his had a religious dimension. He believed that by not doing his rituals, he would have committed some sin for which God would punish him. And so at the advice of the psychologist, his parents brought him to me to talk about God.

In such a situation, Channing's learned ministry is of little help. Seminary definitions of God won't work; a kid won't understand Paul Tillich or Reinhold Niebuhr. Simple minded atheism won't work here—while a valid theological position, from a pastoral point of view simply asserting that God does not exist in essence dodges the whole issue. The kid is going to believe in God, and trying to convince him otherwise is futile. So he described to me the judgmental God he believed would get

him if he didn't do his rituals. He wasn't sure if this was true, but that was what he knew of God. I told him that I believed God was like a loving parent, like his mom or dad. God is not the judge of him or his actions, but rather God is found in his parents, in his psychologist, in the medicine he takes. God is actively trying to help him, not fight against him. For once, it seemed, I actually came up with an answer that worked both for him and his parents. The high point in my pastoral career thus far.

But ministry, as Nouwen would point out, is not simply about making people feel better about themselves. While they may feel good, the rest of the world suffers. Also feeling good may not necessarily be healthy, if that means overconsuming the world's resources, or exploiting someone else. Martin Luther King was the paragon of the prophetic tradition in ministry. He said that too often we say "peace, peace where there is no peace." Or when he said that peace is not the absence of conflict but rather the presence of justice. The prophetic dimension of ministry is about afflicting the comfortable, not comforting the afflicted. It is helping people to come to grips with reality as it is, even and especially when they don't want to and by failing to do so they will suffer a good deal in the long run. Talking to a parent about giving up a driver's license or moving into a retirement home is an example of a prophetic conversation. Asking someone you love to give up smoking and hit the gym occasionally is a prophetic conversation.

Often we think of this in ministry as falling under social justice, and that is an important part of prophetic ministry. However, I find it goes beyond that too. Anytime I or we need to adapt to some new reality, when someone moves the cheese on us and we have to scurry through the maze looking for some new cheese, then we are in the realm of the prophetic. This one is hard for ministers because too often we want to be in the “Satisfaction Business.” Just make everyone happy and they will like me. Make everyone happy and they will pay their pledge, says the more Machiavellian of my colleagues. But the prophetic dimension of ministry, like the prophets of the Old Testament, is not about just criticizing people. It is calling society, the ones you love, to change and transform according to a larger vision, a religious vision, that is both inspiring and healthy.

I have probably not been prophetic enough in the last ten years. When I think back to my most prophetic moment, it was not meeting the Governor of Nebraska, later to be Secretary of Agriculture under George W. Bush, to get him to advocate for immigrant workers right to unionize. Nor was it confronting the mayor on creating a police auditor to fight against racial profiling in Omaha. No my most prophetic moment came, oddly enough, at a funeral. Just when I was probably expected to be at my most pastoral, I had to be prophetic. The two are inextricably intertwined just as Nouwen said.

A young man, about my age, had been playing tennis, and unbeknownst to anyone, he had a heart defect. He complained of being tired an hour or so later, and then was rushed to the hospital and suddenly was gone. He was very charming and popular, in the prime of life, just starting a career. My colleague was away on vacation, and he asked me to step in and do the memorial service for this family who was on the fringe of his congregation anyway.

To say these parents were in denial would be a drastic understatement. They were in complete and utter shock at losing their son. He seemed to be so healthy and strong. How could this happen? As I worked with the family through their grief, and began working out logistics of the memorial service, they made a striking request. The mother didn't want me to say that her son was dead. They wanted me to come up with something else; hem and haw around it, but don't say he is dead.

I was taken aback by this request. Surely I understood why it would be hard to admit this painfully obvious fact. Denial is the first stage of grief, and is necessary for a time, but staying there, getting stuck there, is very unhealthy emotionally speaking. Besides, when was the last time you ever attended a memorial service in which no one said that the person in question was dead! That is typically my opening line! In fact, the whole purpose of a memorial service is not for the person who died, it is to help the living grieve and heal. Just as an aside, while I am

wearing my prophetic hat here for a moment, I implore all of you here this morning: please do not ever request that there be no memorial service for you after you die. You are dead; you don't have anymore problems. But after you go your family and friends are a grieving pile of emotional goo, and they need to say good bye to you. Demanding that there be no memorial service, ties our hands as ministers and it leaves a ton of unprocessed grief that can linger for years and years.

And it was this very fate that I needed to avoid by denying their request. I think in the moment I promised I would do the best I could. But as I thought about it, what that family needed was to heal, to move forward and not be stuck. So I said that this guy had died in my eulogy. The family didn't; they didn't have to. I expected to catch hell afterwards, but got only thanks for speaking the truth that was hard to hear, but needed to be said.

With the pastoral and the prophetic as our twin guides, we must pursue justice and live out our mission in the world, as Ken Phifer implores us to do. We have a compelling and important religious vision in Unitarian Universalism and especially at First Unitarian Church. All that remains for us to do is to live it out. Our mission is to bless the world with our love, with our actions, with our message of hope, and to provide a safe haven for all who come through our doors and out of the harsh winds of economic peril and despair. Our job as a church and as a religious movement is to bless the world while we transform it.

One of my favorite books about ministry, and about being a father since this is after all Father's day, is Gilead by Marianne Williamson. It is a great novel, written from the perspective of an old man, who is both a long time minister and a new father to a nine year old boy. Recently the old man learns that he has a short time to live, and so he writes a series of letters to his son, telling him stories about his life and about his family. In one of the early letters he describes to his son what it feels like to baptize a baby. He says he can feel the spirit of God, energy flowing out of his hands and into the child, when he performs this sacrament. Then he knows that that child has been blessed.

I love that image, and I guess I am a bit envious since I don't know that I have every had that experience in that exact moment. It feels like I should. But I think like all good fiction, this is a metaphor for the work of the church. Sometimes our blessing the world means comforting others. Being with them when they suffer. Standing along side our brothers and sisters in Knoxville Tennessee after a gunman killed two people at a Unitarian Universalist worship service two years ago. We sent cards and good wishes, a small thing perhaps from our point of view, but I happen to know it was a huge deal to that church to get that outpouring of support. We bless others even when it doesn't feel like we are. Our lives touch so many people in ways we cannot know.

Other times, our blessing the world is a prophetic rebuke; or better a call to be all that we as a people, nation, and world can and should be.

It is crying out against BP oil executives who so incompetently handle natural disasters that affect us all. It is to speak up and speak for GLBT brothers and sisters who are us, and yet are denied the legal right to marry. And our blessing can be any moment in which we work for a world transformed and informed by our vision of the good, the true and the beautiful.

As for me, I have received so many blessings in the last ten years. Any time some one has thanked me for a sermon or a memorial service or a wedding, it has meant so much to me. It is the best feeling in the world to serve people in that way. And I have been further blessed in the past couple of weeks by the well wishes from Ann Arbor, from old friends in Omaha, and most especially from so many of you here at First Unitarian Church. The stole I am wearing today is a gift from Bob and Peggy Doss who gave me two of Bob's old stoles as a tenth anniversary present. The other you will see at Ingathering. I could not have asked for anything more.

Thank you all so much. Have great summer, and I will see you all again at Ingathering in the fall to begin decade number two. Right where I should be. Amen Blessed Be.