

The Ministry We Do Together

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In my sophomore year of college Kurt Cobain killed himself. I remember this as a very personal event in my life at the time. Much like John Lennon for the generation before me, Cobain was a sort of personal embodiment of his peer group. In a way I suppose I admired him for being a mouthpiece for many of the feelings of angst that I myself was experiencing then. I certainly did not admire him for his lifestyle, but I enjoyed his music and what it came to represent. And so, as unexpected celebrity deaths go, his suicide hit me rather hard.

I remember going through a strange form of grief upon hearing the news of Kurt Cobain's death. Of course I hadn't know the man personally, so why was I feeling this loss so strongly? It is odd grieving for someone you have never met. It was a feeling that I was not really able to express or put into words of any kind. And so I carried around with me my own baggage of emotions that were unique to me, but defied expression and therefore resolution. That is until I went to church that Sunday.

The intern minister in Ann Arbor at the time was my now colleague Rev. John Gillmore. He spoke about the sorts of things that people must be feeling that leads to taking their life, the pressure of success, the pain of self-expectation, and the difficulty with keeping and maintaining supportive relationships with friends and family. Who are your friends and family when you are that famous? To me this was amazing. In that moment of worship someone was able to give an expression, to name, albeit imperfectly, but still name, those feelings of unresolved grief and loss that I had been carrying around with me all week. And while I can't claim that I was instantly healed in that moment, I can tell you that having those feelings of grief expressed publicly in worship helped a great deal. I now had a context, some way of understanding how I was feeling in that moment that provided me with greater meaning and importance. That was the moment when I realized how powerful public worship can be in the spiritual life of a congregation.

This is an example of ministry. Since this morning's sermon is devoted to exploring what we mean by ministry, and how I envision all of us doing ministry together as a congregation, it is probably best to give you my brief working definition of what ministry is. Ministry is when hope meets despair. While part of me would like to leave this pithy definition at that, I know that this is an assertion that requires some further explanation.

Following his enlightenment, the Buddha gave his first sermon to the five monks that were his former companions. They had gathered in a deer park outside of the city of Benares, and they saw their former friend coming toward them. At first they planned on ignoring him, but they were moved by the aura of peace and serenity that surrounded the Buddha. There the Buddha spoke to them, telling them of his insight. In that first sermon, the Buddha makes a rather profound and important observation: the human condition is fundamentally intertwined with suffering and dissatisfaction. No one, not even the Buddha himself, is exempt from the pain of old age, sickness, and death. Human beings are, of course, not unique in this regard. Horses

and cows suffer from old age, sickness, and death too. But we have an added extra element: we know it is going to happen to us. A cow probably cannot contemplate its own death or non-existence. Human beings are faced with this fact, at some level, every day of our lives. We experience the loss of loved ones, the death of a child or a parent, a friend moves away, our relationship hits a rocky patch or we realize it is in its death throws. There is suffering at a global level, gang violence, poverty, genocide in Darfur, the war in Iraq and the saber rattling with Iran, these too are forms of suffering that touch our lives. And then there are those elements that don't seem to be under anyone's control like tornadoes or earthquakes. Or perhaps it is a more subtle form of suffering such as a general malaise, a loss of direction and purpose in life, a lack of energy and a lack of zest for living. Taken together, we can call this short and far from exhaustive list of evil and suffering in the world, despair. Or perhaps we could say that all of these things are despair inducing. But for simplicity's sake, I will just sum up all of these things under the large existential category of human despair. In many ways it is a universal experience. As REM once sang, in a song intended to persuade teenagers not to commit suicide, "Everybody hurts sometimes."

As I said, despair is part of what it means to be human. But there is another aspect to the human condition, and the Buddha in his own way mentions this one too; it is our ability to think and to imagine new and creative possibilities in life. While we understand the impending reality of old age, sickness, and death, we can also imagine creative ways of dealing with these problems. Medicine can help with sickness and has put death off, in some cases into our eighth decade. Old age has been a source of some concern for many, particularly in the cosmetic industry, but really we address old age by valuing our seniors and their wisdom. Furthermore, we can be creative in our approach to life in the face of death. We love even though we know that our beloved will one day die. We have kids even though we fear for the future, we have faith that it will be a little better thanks to the presence of our child or children. We have the ability to summarize our experiences into religious values and ideals and we share and celebrate these ideals in religious communities we call churches. Institutions transcend us. We are the temporary stewards of First Unitarian Church. With hard work and patience, it will live on past us all to be a place of healing and hope for our children and our children's children.

What are some examples of these religious values and ideals? One could point to the Principles and Purposes: the inherent worth and dignity of every person is a sort of religious ideal that we work to affirm and promote as a congregation. Or from Buddhism the words of Zen Master Dogen when he is teaching on compassion. He says, "Even as a mother protects with her life her child, her only child, so with a boundless heart should one cherish all living beings." That is a religious assertion. It requires imagination and creativity to come up with it and especially to live it. These values give us hope. Hope perhaps in a land somewhere over the rainbow. Or for the pragmatists out there, these religious values give us hope in the healing power of human relationships. That the legacy of those whom we have known and loved continue on in us and in other lives that they have touched in ways we can never fully comprehend. Or for the more theistically inclined out there, that all of us are remembered in the heart-mind of God for all of eternity. All religions have messages of hope. These are just some possible UU examples of how our religious values give us hope. Articulating the message of hope has been the job of Unitarian Universalist theologians and ethicists throughout our tradition.

But there are times and places where these messages of hope, the values, ideals, and teachings of the good news that is Unitarian Universalism, must come into contact with, and engage the forces of despair and human suffering in the world. These values and ideals of Unitarian Universalism become real when they are brought to bear in the trenches of those parts of life where despair and evil are prevalent. These could include, the bedside of someone who is dying, the streets of the inner city where injustice and economic disparity destroy life, or the committee or group in the church that has lost its mojo, its sense of vision and purpose in the world. There are innumerable situations in your life where despair is present, and hope is possible. It is in these places where hope must come face to face with despair and speak a healing word to a hurting world. Anytime and anywhere that hope engages despair: that is ministry. So perhaps instead of having a “Committee on Ministry,” perhaps congregations around the country could rename them the “Committee on Hope Meeting Despair.” That might be a little intimidating though.

But hope meeting despair is exactly what happened that Sunday morning when I went to church following the death of Kurt Cobain. I was carrying around a little bag of despair, and I found some hope to go with it. In short, I was ministered to in that service. The ministerial intern had spoken a healing word to a hurting world, or at least a hurting soul.

Recently I was reflecting on the difference between success and failure in ministry. When I came out of seminary eight years ago, there were a few things that I was very passionate about. Two of them were men’s groups and young adult groups. Covenant groups, which were just on the horizon at the time, I was convinced, were a flash in the pan. I had been a part of very “successful,” as I would put it then, groups of both kinds, and I was eager to start both a young adult group and a men’s group here in my first congregation. I did start both of those groups, but both of them faded away after about two years. Then I became a convert to covenant groups! But in going over some the details and reasons for why these two groups were “failures,” it occurred to me that ministry is not about length of time. Why consider something a failure because it came to an end? Is the goal of these groups to continue in perpetuity forever and ever? If that is the case than everything a minister does is by definition a failure. The Buddha said that everything is transient. And if you don’t believe him, the astrophysicists tell us that in about five billion years the sun will become a red giant and suck the earth into it’s gravitational pull. I suggest you get your affairs in order! In other words, if the goal of ministry is preserving a group or program forever, then it destined to fail. Nothing, not First Unitarian Church of Wilmington, not even Unitarian Universalism, will exist forever. So time alone cannot be the measure of success or failure in ministry.

The real question is, did the young adult group or the men’s group, or covenant groups, touch someone’s soul? Did they, however briefly, transform someone’s life for the better; create a deeper sense of community and meaning in the world during the lifespan of the group? If it did, then that is success. The purpose of ministry, of bringing the good news of Unitarian Universalism to bear on the reality of human suffering and despair, is to transform people’s lives. This is not a measurable activity. You can’t really score it or count it. Ministry is experienced and lived. Transformation is the purpose of the church. It is a daunting goal, but no less is worthy of our efforts.

You have probably noticed, that my definition of ministry as the meeting of hope and despair does not require a special degree or honorific before one's name. The ultimate purpose of the church as an institution is to stand for those values, ideals, and teachings that collectively make up the Unitarian Universalist tradition at this particular moment in history. In this effort the church marshals all of its resources, money, energy, volunteer time, and creativity to making those values and ideals real in the world. Ministry, facing the forces of despair and human suffering, is the purpose and mission of the church. That is the church, not merely a single individual or staff, but everyone is called to that purpose and mission.

Thus all ministry is by definition a shared ministry. Ministry is done by lay person and clergy alike. Ministry is really a perspective. Too often at church we start with tasks, all of the items on our to do lists, because this is very easy. The tasks of running a church keep us busy but they are clear. We can tick them off and feel like we have done something. But performing a laundry list of tasks is but the outer shell of ministry. Shared ministry is asking the question: Why? To what end do we do all of these things on committees, Executive Team or at the Board level? Where is it leading? How does it contribute to the larger vision of who we are as a congregation and how we encounter despair with our message of hope? Shared ministry begins by discerning what really matters, that which is important but not necessarily urgent, and sets that as the larger goal. It is to ask, what gets me excited to do the work, to put in the hours at the committee meeting or the program? What is the pay off in the long run that will have the most meaning for me, to help me get a real sense of having made an important contribution to Unitarian Universalism in Wilmington Delaware? When we start with our passions and gifts, rather than our to do lists, than shared ministry has become a fundamental way of being as a congregation.

How do we do this? Actually it is quite basic really. Church is relational work. This we can never forget. We exist as a congregation through the mutual covenant of membership, and in covenant with the minister and the church itself. These committed relationships of covenant are the foundation that needs to be nurtured constantly. Most of the problems around shared ministry come from focusing too much on what to do, and not enough on how we are to be with one another. What is the nature of that relationship? Are we able to have open, honest, direct, and respectful conversations with each other? Or do we shy away from confrontation because it is scary or uncomfortable and instead chatter with our friends about the things that annoy us? The former respects and takes seriously the mutual covenant of membership by being in relationship with each other even when it is hard to do so. It shows respect and nurtures understanding. We should seek cooperation rather than criticism and judgment of one another. The quality of our relationships is primary to the success of our shared ministry.

So let us take heart. No one of us has to be perfect. As a committed religious community we can each contribute our diverse gifts to fill in with our strengths what another lacks. Together we can make hope engage despair. We can touch souls and transform lives. We can speak a healing word to those who come to us in need. Let us have the courage to do the work of shared ministry together in forgiveness and in love. Amen Blessed Be.

Recommended Reading:

Durall, Michael ed. *Living a Call; Ministers and Congregations Together*

Phillips, Roy. *Transforming Liberal Congregations for the New Millennium*