

Twenty Years and Counting

Rev. Dr. Richard Speck

July 25, 2010

When Josh and Barbara invited me to give the sermon today, I started thinking about what I could say to you today that might have some meaning for your lives as well as mine. As I was mulling this over, I remembered that I am coming up on the twentieth anniversary of my ordination to the Unitarian Universalist ministry. What have I learned about life and faith in those twenty years? What have I gleaned about our life affirming Unitarian Universalist faith that keeps me working for it? How has my being a minister shaped my life and work? What have I discovered in a larger ministry that is beyond the parish ministry for which I trained? And then I realized I only have twenty minutes to convey all this.

I was ordained September 9, 1990 by my home congregation of the Unitarian Church of Birmingham, Alabama. I had graduated from Meadville/Lombard Theological School the previous June with my doctor of ministry degree. It took four years of hard work to prepare for that day. I had several invited guests to participate. A classmate who had graduated with me was serving a church in Atlanta and led a responsive reading called "Preachers" that was written by Ken Patton.

"The preachers, remembered for standing above the congregations, are often alone, and carry the world into their solitude. They are elected to care, putting the issues of caring into weekly statements. The brief announcements on the seventh day are fed by secret monologues for six days, rehearsals of need. The people forget the hurt of the world in their busyness; the preacher reminds them of their need to care. They remind the people of the evils of enmity, the warnings of death. They live in an inner world of worry, living out their messages, gathering images, shaping spoken arguments from fragments of inward arguments."

The reading concludes with a simple statement: "Futile as it seems, when their preachments are over, in giving thought, and giving thought voice, the world is brought somewhat to mercy and care." Reading those words again after two decades has reminded me of why I chose this profession – to bring the world some of the mercy and care that I have to give.

The Rev. Dr. William R. Jones delivered the sermon speaking about the task of ministry which is to bring more justice into the world. Faculty and mentors from the school took other prominent roles. I still have copies of that service that I cherish. I brought one with me which is near the chalice.

I spoke these words as I accepted this ministry. "With humility and gratitude, joy and appreciation, I accept the ministry to which you ordain me. Mindful of its privileges and its responsibilities, I pledge myself, so far as I am able, to speak the truth in love, without fear of persons; to encourage growth and sensitivity in myself and others; to diligently fulfill the offices of ministry according to the custom and needs of our church; and in all things to do my best to live justly, love mercy and walk humbly, in truth and love among you and with all who live within our larger community."

So now I have been serving our faith for twenty years, first as a parish minister in Vero Beach, Florida for nine years and now as the District Executive of the Joseph

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Priestley District in the middle Atlantic region. I was in my early forties when I entered ordained ministry. I had already had a career in health care as a Respiratory Therapist and had seen death and pain up close many times. I have observed through out my ministry that one can never plan for everything in this existence. Life is a series of events that come into your presence that you never expected and couldn't have prepared for. For example, one year a hurricane damaged the meeting space of our UU congregation in the Virgin Islands. I volunteered to fly myself and two other men from Florida down to assist them in rebuilding the roof. Here I was helping put corrugated steel panels on a roof that was thirty feet off the ground and a sudden rain squall came up. Before we could secure one of the panels it sailed off the roof into a tree high off the ground. As the youngest and most agile of the three of us, I was elected to climb the tree and saw off the limbs below where it had embedded itself. I spent some awkward and scary moments holding on to a branch with one hand and sawing with the other to get that eight foot by four foot steel panel down to the ground so we could use it. I learned that these types of challenges are placed at our feet all the time, maybe not so dramatically. We need to be resilient and draw upon our past experiences in figuring out what is the right thing to do.

I have learned that grace happens to each of us. I have been given kindness by strangers when I was feeling especially vulnerable and caring concern from friends and family. Love is never ending even after death. I still carry in my heart the memories of those who have gone into that great mystery that is beyond this existence.

The ministry makes you an acute observer of people. Humans are funny creatures that can make you laugh with their peculiar behaviors and mannerisms. I have also seen that they are also capable of immense evil in this world. In my twenty years of ministry there have been atrocities in Rwanda, the Balkans, Iraq, and our own country as evil has been sent to innocent human beings by other humans.

I started off as a solid religious humanist. Through the years of reflection and study I have become much more eclectic and open to new understandings of the universe and my place in it. I now describe myself as a religious humanist with theistic tendencies. The world I observe is more complex than one set of theological definitions can describe.

As a Unitarian Universalist minister I have observed our congregations and our larger heritage. I continue to learn more about the many men and women who sacrificed for the right to worship as they saw proper. It distresses me that many of our members are woefully ignorant about how our faith has evolved over more than four hundred years. If I were to ask you to identify some of the key events in our history, how many of you here feel that you could pass such a test? How many of you ever heard of the Edict of Torda? On March 18, 1568, The Edict of Torda, otherwise known as the Act of Religious Freedom and Conscience, was issued by King John Sigismund assuring religious freedom in his principality of Transylvania. The Edict of Torda was revolutionary for its time and was issued by the only Unitarian king in history. It is foundational to our faith in religious freedom.

We continue to have a revolving door as people discover the wonders of a free faith and then don't go deeper and eventually leave out the back door. Our congregations have not been great at integrating new people into our midst. Nor have they provided that deeper understanding of faith that is critical for our growth. I am glad to see that First Unitarian is starting to address some of these needs through the upcoming Sunday School slated for the fall.

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We tend to lift up those people who challenged the status quo in religious thought such as Channing, Emerson, and Thoreau as our exemplars and not celebrate those who built the church as a living entity such as Henry Whitney Bellows or Samuel Atkins Eliot. There are plenty of churches named after the first three but not one for the latter two. If you don't know who the latter two ministers were, look them up.

As a minister I have learned that I have had a lasting impact on people who I have served. When I was the minister in Vero Beach a member of the congregation had gone to Orlando for a special procedure. Bill had been in fairly good health, continuing to play golf almost daily and a regular attendee at the retired men's breakfast that happened each week. I got a call from the hospital chaplain that something had gone wrong during the procedure. Bill went into cardiac arrest and had died in the procedure room. Jeanne, his wife, had gone with him thinking that he would drive her back home after recovering from the procedure.

I was told that Jeanne had hired a cab to drive her the ninety miles back home since she was unable to drive given her emotional state. I rushed from my home to their house to console Jeanne but found she wasn't home. I went to the next door neighbor who didn't know about Bill's death. I called close friends from the church trying to find her. I was still attempting to locate her when the cab drove into the driveway.

Jeanne had been dreading getting home and having to enter the front door without her husband of almost fifty years beside her. I was there to help her start the grieving process and stayed with her for several hours until her family had arrived. For years afterwards she would thank me for being there for her at that critical time in her life. It wasn't anything profound that I said that day, it was my physical presence representing the church in her life that made the difference. Each of us can be that comforting presence in another's life. It is at these moments that we are called as people of faith to reach out and care for one another. Ministry is all that we do together.

Another thing I have learned over twenty years is to let go of knowing how my sermons will affect people. I used to judge myself on whether a sermon was good or not. But when I thought that a particular sermon was dreadful, I would get someone coming up to me at coffee hour stating that what I had said impacted them deeply. I have learned that people will hear something different than what I had said. They take my words and filter them through whatever is going on in their lives and come to a particular meaning behind what they heard. I have learned to accept the grace that comes when I have touched another's life through my service.

And lastly, I have spent ten years as the Middle Judicatory serving almost seventy churches in parts of five states. Our churches range in size from thirty to one thousand adults. What I have experienced is that we Unitarian Universalists are a cantankerous bunch. We have a tradition of opposing authority from the outside in religious matters but have carried this into how we act with our own elected and called leaders. I have seen congregations make leadership so hard that presidents have quit the church in pain and anguish. I have seen people be nasty to one another and especially the minister. Churches are hard on ministers. The average tenure of a clergy person is only seven years. People need to learn how to disagree in love with one another and think their way into a solution, not just calling for someone to quit or be fired.

Leaders can't institute major changes in less than five years in any organization. It is human nature to resist change from what we have known. But if we are to live into

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our mission as a church in the world, this calls upon us to embrace change. It may be hard, but we can do it. Ministry is all that we do together.

And I have seen remarkable transformation in our churches. First Unitarian is now developing the new Allies for Racial Justice and partnering with Canaan Baptist Church to begin the work of bending toward justice in our community. This church has been extremely generous in helping start many churches in Delaware, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. I hold up this church as a model for other larger churches to emulate.

I have enjoyed being a minister for twenty years. I know I have touched other people through my words, my presence, and my work. But I also know that what I have done through the professional ministry can just as easily be done through other ways of being in the world. It doesn't take a minister to care for the grieving. It doesn't take a minister to work for justice. It doesn't take a minister to give of your time and talent to our common faith so that tomorrow and the many days after tomorrow will be better for your having lived. What it does take is a deep faith in helping and being of service to others. And that is something that each of us can do, regardless of our age, our ability, or our place in the world.

Ministry is what we all do together. May we deepen our ministry with one another and our larger community so that the world be more fair for us and our children. Amen.