

The Many Meanings of Ministry

We ministers love to tell stories; even ones about ourselves, or for some of us, especially ones about ourselves. One of my favorite minister stories comes from Rev. David Rankin—he's now long retired. Towards the end of his career he published a little series of vignettes drawn from his years in the UU ministry. This one comes from when David was the minister of the UU Church in San Francisco:

"I needed a haircut. I walked down the hill and entered the barber shop. The barber was a spry, elderly man with a surprising strength in his fingers and an incredible foulness in his mouth. As I submitted to the scissors, he provided the Scripture from Penthouse Magazine, (and) the Reading from a dozen dirty jokes. The obscenities were never ending.

"Finally, when the apron was lifted, he said, 'I don't believe I've seen you before. Do you work around here?'

"Now what should I tell him? Should I tell him the truth? Should I tell him I worked at the church? Should I tell him I am a minister?"

"I turned to the barber, handing him the money, and replied: 'Oh, I work for the National Cash Register Company up the street. I'm in district sales'.

"Even a dirty old man can be embarrassed."

I've never been in the same exact situation as Rev. Rankin describes, but there have been some that have come close. I'm sure most of my colleagues, male and female alike, have their own version of this story.

I take my calling to the ministry seriously, but try not to take myself too seriously in trying to fulfill it. I've really just wanted to be an ordinary guy, who happens to be in a rather extra-ordinary kind of profession or calling. Indeed, one of the few things that gives me discomfort when it comes to being a minister is when people feel they have to act or behave or speak in a guarded way around me when they find out how I happen to make my living. I can see why Rev. Rankin came up with the line he did—he didn't want to have to deal with the barber's embarrassment. He told a harmless fib as a way to avoid it.

I offer this little anecdote as an introduction to a couple of sermons I plan to do this church year about the meanings of ministry in our liberal, free church tradition as you prepare to call a minister. Consider this Installment One.

Many of the reasons as to why certain things are done in the way that they are done in Protestant churches have their origins in the Protestant Reformation, which makes it a good place to start with our topic. While most Unitarian Universalists today would not identify themselves as Protestant *Christians*, this is where our historical roots lie.

The Protestant Reformation was just what its name implies, a “protest” against some of the ways in which the Catholic Church in the 16th century was exercising, and abusing, its authority. What began as an attempt by some 16th century Catholics to *reform* their Church, in time took on a life of its own and became a full blown, multifaceted movement.

It became the Protestant Reformation, and it had its various factions. These factions were united in their opposition to certain aspects of 16th century Catholicism, but they were not all on the same page when it came to things like theology, beliefs, worship styles, and church governance. This accounts, in good measure, for the wide range of Protestant denominations we have today.

One of those Reformation factions was called the “free church wing.” The freedom, in this case, was not the wide ranging freedom of belief we UUs now affirm, but freedom from the overriding authority of any kind of ecclesiastical hierarchy beyond the congregation.

Among the various bodies that grew out of this free-church wing were the Baptists, the Congregationalists, the Quakers, the Unitarians, and the Universalists. We’re all leaves on the same historical branch; it’s just that the Unitarians and the Universalists hung hard left—theologically speaking—over the past century or so. The continuing common ground in each of these denominations, however, is that the final authority, when it comes to governance, lies solely within the congregation.

This means a several things when it comes to ministry in this free-church tradition. One is that the act of ordaining a minister is something done by the congregation itself. Most free-church congregations, we Unitarian Universalists among them, do rely on a denominational body to determine if

the person requesting ordination has the proper credentials to be a minister. It is our UU Association that credentials our prospective ministers. But it is not the denominational powers-that-be who make that person a "Reverend." That is done by action of a UU congregation.

The first time I was ever in this sanctuary was back when you ordained one of your members, Jackie Clement, to the UU ministry. She had met our Association's requirements for ministry, but it was an act of this congregation, as constituted at that time, that made her the Rev. Jacqueline Clement.

The same principle holds for calling a minister. In our tradition it is an act of the congregation that determines who their minister will be. Your Search Committee will in time choose a candidate. But he or she will not officially become your minister until you, the congregation, say so. And in giving that say-so, provided you do, you will be calling that minister into a covenantal relationship with you so that together you will each and all engage in the many acts ministry.

There is a pronounced paradox about being a called minister in our tradition; and that is that a minister is both set apart and called into close engagement all at the same time. Ministers are set apart in that they're expected to have a certain level of knowledge—generally typified by a Master of Divinity degree—and demonstrate certain personal and professional qualities that make one fit for the job. A minister is also set apart by being given a title, and an especially unique kind of role in the life of a congregation—a title and a role that the other members do not have.

But in a fully equal measure, a minister is called to engagement with, and to a relationship with, that very same congregation. Being set apart is not to be confused with being put on pedestal—something I've never had much of a desire for myself, since I'd probably lose my balance and fall off. Ministry, in our free-church tradition, then, is primarily about relationships.

Ministry, as I've been stressing it then, is all about covenant which is our Soul Matters theme for this month. The word covenant, in its most literal sense, means "promise." Ministry is about what a congregation and a minister promise to one another.

On this note I offer the wisdom of the late Rev. Dana McLean Greeley. Dana was the first President of the UUA when it was formed in 1961; and he served UU congregations in both Concord, New Hampshire and Concord, Massachusetts. Dana was once asked what it takes to make great ministers. For all that he could have said, he confined his answer to two words: "Great congregations."

Rev. Greeley wasn't trying to be cute or flip. He certainly knew from a lifetime of experience what an often complex and highly challenging and demanding thing it is to be in the professional ministry. He also well knew of the stresses, strains, and challenges congregations face, along with all of the joy that is found in their midst. But Rev. Greeley was also speaking straight out of the heart of the free-church tradition; that ministry happens, and achieves whatever greatness it may attain, when that covenant between the minister and the congregation is lived out to its fullest.

Given the covenantal and relational nature of the ministry in our tradition, it is really an ongoing process of mutual empowerment. A congregation calls a minister to lead them, and empowers that minister to do so. The minister, in turn, empowers and encourages the members of the congregation to use their skills, interests, passions, and commitments to strengthen and enhance the overall life of the congregation. Ministry in our tradition is about sharing gifts—the gifts that both the minister and the members of the congregation bring to their relationship—to their covenant with one another.

One of the primary reasons that I've remained in the UU ministry for nearly 40 years now is that it's one of the few professions or callings left where one can still be a Renaissance person. Being in the ministry has allowed me to draw on a wide range of interests, passions, skills, and abilities rather than being in a career where one is expected to be especially good, at just a few things.

If there's a downside to being a Renaissance person in the ministry, however, it's that one cannot be equally skilled at everything ministry calls for. It's quite a skill set ministers in our tradition are expected to have: A reasonably articulate speaker, a scholar of a sort, an educator, a spiritual guide, a community builder, a counselor, a care-giver, an administrator, a staff supervisor, a trouble-shooter, a community activist, a social justice advocate, good with kids, loved by elders, able to show appreciation all over the place, an extrovert even if you happen to be an introvert. And that's just

the short list. I have no regrets or misgivings about anything on it. It is what I, and my colleagues, signed up for.

But here's what I also know: It is a rare minister indeed who can operate at an optimum level in each and all of those areas. Granted, we are rightly expected to show a basic level of competence in each of them, but different ones of us ministers are better at different things on that list. Few, if any of us, bat a thousand on every single one. This is why the covenantal, and relational, component of our ministry is so crucial. It is when the minister and the members of the congregation bring their gifts together--gifts that flesh out that laundry list I just ran through--that real ministry takes place.

As you consider then, the qualities, the skills, the abilities, the interests, the gifts that you look for in the minister you are seeking; give thought to your gifts as well. Think on the gifts you can bring—your gifts of skills, abilities, energies, passions and compassion, all the gifts that you can bring to the covenant you and your settled minister will enter into.

Think also, on the gift of the Covenant you now have among yourselves; your Covenant of Right Relations that you put in place in 2006 and reaffirmed at your Annual Meeting last May. Over the next few months, beginning on October 16, you are invited to take part in a series of directed encounters that will allow you to probe deeper into some of the meanings behind the language of your Covenant. More information on the Covenant of Right Relations practicum will be forthcoming in the weeks ahead. Keep your eyes and ears open for it. Your exploration of this Covenant is yet another way of preparing yourselves for your next minister.

I started off with a story told by a minister. I'm going to close with one by a congregant who found herself being ministered to at a time in her life when she needed it the most. Some of you are probably familiar with her work. I'm speaking of the novelist and essayist Anne Lamott.

Ms. Lamott was raised in a strictly secular household, with little if any religious content. As she was beginning to find success as a writer, she also found herself in the grip of drug and alcohol addiction. She quite literally stumbled upon a largely African-American congregation in Marin City, California. Ms. Lamott is white. With her guard initially way up, she gradually let herself be ministered to by that congregation in a way that truly saved her life.

She tells her story in a book titled *Traveling Mercies*. The chapter in which Ms. Lamott relates her slow and halting engagement with a congregation is way too long to read in its entirety here, but I hope the passages I've chosen can do at least some justice to her story. It starts with her happening to pass by a church—called St. Andrews Presbyterian—as she was going about some errands on a Sunday morning, and being captivated by the singing she heard coming through the door to its sanctuary. I'll let her take it from here:

“I began stopping in at St. Andrews from time to time, standing in the doorway to listen to the songs...It had a choir of five black women and one rather Amish looking white man making all that glorious noise...I went back to St. Andrews about once a month. No one tried to con me into sitting down or staying. I always left before the sermon. I loved the singing, even about Jesus, but I didn't want to be preached at about him...every other week they brought huge tubs of food for the homeless families living at the shelter. Eventually, a few months after I started coming I took a seat in one of the folding chairs, off by myself. The singing enveloped me...

“Something inside me that was stiff and rotting would feel soft and tender...Sitting there, standing with them to sing, sometimes so shaky and sick that I felt like I might tip over, I felt bigger than myself, like I was being taken care of...But I had to leave before the sermon...

“(Then) once when I went to church I was so hung over that I couldn't stand up, and this time I stayed for the sermon, which I thought was just so ridiculous, like someone trying to convince me of the existence of extraterrestrials...but the last song was so deep and rich and pure I could not escape...I began to cry and I raced home under a sky as blue as one of God's own dreams, and I opened the door to my houseboat (and) took a long deep breath and said out loud, ‘Alright, you can come in.’ This was my beautiful moment of conversion.”

For the rest of the chapter, Ms. Lamott tells of her year to year journey with that congregation, which paralleled her journey to sobriety and to the formation of her own theology with a very liberal Christian base. She ends with this:

“There would be different pastors along the way (then) a tall African-American woman named Veronica came to lead us...She stepped into us, and

(we) fit. She told us this story: When she was about seven, her best friend got lost one day. The little girl ran up and down the streets of the big town where they lived, but she couldn't find a single landmark. She was very frightened. Finally a policeman stopped to help her. He put her in the passenger seat of his car and they drove around until she finally saw her church. She pointed it out to the policeman, and then she told him firmly, 'You can let me out now. This is my church, I can always find my way home from here.'

To this Anne Lamott adds:

“And that is why I have stayed so close to mine—because no matter how bad I am feeling, how lost or lonely or frightened, when I see the faces of the people at my church, I can always find my way home.”

It is a wonderful story. You have to read the whole chapter to get its full impact. I'll end today by leaving you with a few of my takeaways from it as they relate to this topic of ministry.

This is a story about what it means for a *congregation* to engage in ministry—to welcome those who are seeking a home for their spirit, for their often wounded spirit. That is something a minister, however skilled and accomplished, cannot do on his or her own. As Dana Greeley put it, it takes a great congregation to make a great minister.

And I'm impressed as to how this congregation gave Ms. Lamott the space, the room, she needed to engage with it at her own pace and on her own terms. They were there with welcoming arms; but only when she was ready to be embraced.

I also loved that line about the coming of Rev. Veronica: “She stepped into us, and we fit.” Now there's a seven word description of a successful ministerial call!

Finally, I treasure most the line which is also printed in your Order of Service today: “When I see the faces of the people at my church I can always find my way home.”

Granted, a church—or a house of worship however named—is not a place to hide out from the world. But it is a place to bring your spirit for renewal and

recommitment, so that you can then re-engage with the world. And wherever one's heart finds renewal, wherever one finds a newness of life—that indeed is a holy place.

Let's sing about that together: "When Our Heart is in a Holy Place." No. 1008 in the Teal Hymnal.

Stephen Edington
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