

“Ministry at the Crossroads”
A sermon for March 22, 2009
By Rev. Felicia M. Urbanski, Interim Minister
Unitarian Fellowship of London, Ontario

Reading:

Taken from "Still Comes the Call" by Rev. Stefan Jonasson:

“I have always had this urge, this burning desire, a deep hunger -- to discover what is true, to do what is just, to help those around me, and to find meaning in all the vicissitudes of life. And I have yet to find another vocation better able to satisfy these hungers than the ministry, even though it has taken me a very long time to admit that it is a calling.

Parker Palmer advises us, "Before you tell your life what you intend to do with it, listen for what it intends to do with you. Before you tell your life what truths and values you have decided to live up to, let your life tell you what truths you embody, what values you represent." He goes on to say, "Vocation does not mean a goal that I pursue. It means a calling that I hear. Before I can tell my life what I want to do with it, I must listen to my life telling me who I am. I must listen for the truths and values at the heart of my own identity, not the standards by which I *must* live -- but the standards by which I cannot help but live if I am living my own life."

And so it is that, at our best, those of us who are ordained to the ministry arrive at this place because we have listened to life telling us who we truly are, and we have found no better way to practice the truths and values by which we cannot help but live than by serving the church through its ministry. For those of us who have made the ministry our life's work, and for those who value the church as an institution for good, there is no greater cause for joy and celebration than the recognition that this call comes still to listening spirits who are prepared to take upon themselves the mantle of this vocation and go forth to proclaim clearly the life-enriching message of our living tradition, while embodying its values in their very lives.”

Sermon

I told Paul Nesbitt-Larking on Friday that I would intentionally be deviating somewhat from my announced “blurb” in this month’s newsletter. That my sermon today would definitely be about ministry and that I am intending to get people really thinking about what you want to contribute as individuals to the Ministerial Search Committee’s series of focus groups. I sincerely hope that each of you will participate in the discussion planned for today after the service, or after next Sunday’s service, or at the Monday group. This is a crucial time for all of you.

What I’d like for us to deal with for the next 20 minutes or so concerns your own “crossroads” as a congregation in relation to shared ministry and how this is both an

exciting yet a scary period of time. My original intention was to talk about how the office of professional ministry itself has changed so dramatically over the past 25 to 40 years – how we all are part of a giant paradigm shift. I'll still refer to this idea because I think it certainly impacts our understanding of what's going on. But what I really want to address are three things: what this time called "the interim period" is all about, how you are greatly empowered by the search process that you're going through, and how necessary it is to do the hard work during this interim time in order to pave the way for a successful relationship with your next settled minister.

First of all, I hope you enjoyed the reading that I selected for Paul to read this morning. As many of you know, my friend Stefan Jonasson has been a big influence on me personally. I often wondered why he went into ministry himself, and from this sermon excerpt that Paul read I think we get a clear sense of what this idea of "calling" is.

In fact, the annual meeting of the Canadian Unitarian Council in Thunder Bay this spring has as its theme "Answering a Call". What I've surmised is that this is about shared ministry. We all have a 'call' in a sense: Each of us lives our lives to the best of our ability, listening to something deep inside which calls us to pursue some kind of a vocation, and this need not necessarily be paid employment, but that it is really something greater. Each of us is called to something. As we gather within faith communities, that calling often manifests itself in volunteering for any number of things that supports the community, and this can be in addition to our calling to love our families and to be a good citizen in the greater society.

Now a person who feels "called" to professional ministry in a specific setting, whether that be within a congregation, or a hospital, or a prison, or in community service of some sort, is required to first of all discern if this important and difficult is really for them. Theological education is part of this discernment process. Yet, as I've come to know, being a professional minister is so far beyond just acquiring a certain set of skills. It is not simply all about crafting great sermons, or writing exquisitely well, or even about effective pastoral care. It's really about knowing oneself and how one relates to other human beings. It's about being constantly aware of how you impact other people, and how other people impact you.

What I'm saying here is that *ministry is all about relationship*. It is complex. It is often challenging. Relationship is the key element in that much-talked-about concept of "shared ministry".

You see, over the past 25 to 40 years there has been a huge change in the purpose and functioning of congregational ministers. Just one generation ago, it was common for the minister, along with a small handful of members, usually men, to make all the decisions for the church. A rapid eroding and evolution of this structure took place as people worked towards total inclusivity. No longer were women relegated to the church kitchen, but could take on more and more leadership roles. Committee structures were created in order to include as many people as possible – to make church leadership available to all rather than just a privileged few.

What happened then was the creation of a huge structure of boards, councils, committees, sub-committees, etc. So much so that church analyst William Hobgood said that there were “congregations spending more time trying to fill committee rosters than in actually doing the committee’s work”...that “satisfying the organizational patterns became the church’s driving force”...and that “inflexible structures do not lend themselves to creative life”.¹

Sound familiar?

Well the good news for us is that yesterday your Board held a very productive retreat. It involved working out the way your congregation organizes itself, how things can be understood easily by everyone. The work that we did together aimed at simplifying and streamlining the governance structure. This has been talked about for several years now, and it is finally going to be implemented at some point in the near future. This is a scary and challenging concept for some people – but oh, so very necessary if you are to move successfully into a future that embraces the promise of creativity and flexibility.

I’ve learned that professional ministers across the continent also have been going through such scary and challenging changes. Although he or she is still probably the most visible person in the public eye, the minister is no longer the focal point of the congregation’s life. Rather, it is a great *sharing of power*. It is the success to which the minister can engage and inspire the gifts of the members themselves that makes for truly great shared ministry.

You are now on your search for the best possible match in your next settled minister. Consider this the exciting part of your current journey. Each member of the congregation, each and every one, whether you have been here for 50 years or have just joined today, has the right and privilege to VOTE for this person. No one in some mysterious head office is going to tell you what to do. You can celebrate and appreciate this power and privilege! This is the beauty of congregational polity. The sole decision is in your hands, your very capable hands. This is the time when the meaning of membership really shines forth! It’s not just an idea, but a tangible reality.

Starting today, the focus group process will allow you to take further steps in determining what it is you truly want and need in your next settled minister. You need to help them develop the criteria from which they will make their selection of the final candidate. Over the next year, your search committee will be reviewing applications, scrutinizing the qualifications, conducting both phone interviews and a select number of live interviews, hearing sermons at what we call a “neutral pulpit”, which is a congregation where several “pre-candidates” will share their preaching skills and your search committee will be in attendance to hear them. Last year, my Waterloo congregation’s search committee members told me that they each spent about *20 hours a week* during the height of the search process. Can you imagine? You’ll need to support your own dedicated people as they experience times when they feel that they like become strangers

to their own families for about a month or more. It's not an easy job, but one which, when completed, will reap benefits for years to come.

The period of in-between time is what we intentionally call the interim time: It started for you about a year and a half ago when Laurie Thomas arrived, and if things go as planned and I continue as your current interim minister for another year, it will end in the summer of 2010. The interim time is in essence a transitional time, and transitions are never easy. There are important tasks to dive into, and the one which entails "engaging and honouring the past" is probably the most difficult.

I am learning that the past here at the UFL is complex. Your experience of the ministers you've had in the past is very complex. The stories I've heard of the past most often range from the incredibly glorious to the shockingly outrageous. This makes it quite difficult to continually minister from a vantage point of neutrality, yet, I must remain neutral. Some people may get the impression that I'm trying to be more of an investigator rather than a minister, and perhaps the process of engagement is messy. Yet, there is much value in hearing all of these stories. The picture they paint is neither one which is totally positive nor totally negative, but rather one with is both. The past is a matter of "both/and" rather than "either/or".

Is it possible to see the past in a realistic way? Perhaps everybody has their own interpretation of it. Yet, there has to be a collective way to eventually and gracefully let the past go. I'm not saying this is easy, but it is like one of those necessary losses in life. Personal growth can occur when we learn to let go and can then move forward, but oh, it is such difficult work. It probably works this way as a group, too.

I'm wondering if there is a way to let go of a previous minister's vision, as noble as that vision may have been. I also wonder if it is possible to let go of a previous minister's experience with this congregation, as real as that experience probably was for him or her.

After all, your new settled minister will have a new vision for the Unitarian Fellowship of London. He or she will also forge a new relationship with each of you, and will experience each of you in a different way than anyone has in the past.

Professional ministers, whether we are interim or settled, are with you for a limited time, whether that be two years or twenty years. The UFL is what will live on. Your congregation, although the members also come and go, live and die, is something which will last.

I think that the imminent task that is before you now is to engage and honour the past by allowing it to be what it is: the past. It is a collection of memories, some warm and wonderful, others perhaps full of conflict and hurt feelings. It is something that is important to talk about and to get out in the open. But the eventual goal is to be able to cope with understanding that past, naming it, and then letting it go.

It's a difficult process. The past can't just be kept hidden, especially during this interim time, because you won't want your next settled minister to have to help you unravel it and figure it all out. You want to be able to pave the way for this new person to come in and share all they are, unencumbered by the past.

What I invite you to do now is to talk about things. Talk with me, talk with others you know in the Fellowship. Share your feelings. We need not avoid hearing different opinions. If you'd like something to be happening now that was like the past, then let's figure out what that was and why it was so good. Perhaps it can happen again, now, in a new way. On the other hand, if you're afraid of something leading straight in to what you remember is a mistake from the past, then let's talk about that too.

What I do know, is that talking is good. Hiding never helps.

This reminds me of a really good story that my colleague Barbara Merritt tells. She entitles it "Hiding the Mess", and it goes like this:

About six cups of raw oats fell on the kitchen floor. The top had been left off the box, and the cascade of grain was impressive. I had gotten out the broom and the dustpan and started to sweep it up, when my four-year-old asked if he could have the job. I said, "Sure," and went on making the coffee. A minute later I looked around and saw, to my amazement, that he was studiously pushing small piles of the oats under the refrigerator, into the fireplace, and under the counters.

I screamed, "No! That's not how you sweep up oats! Put them in the dustpan." And he quietly replied that he had been "hiding" the oats. When hearing my story, my brother-in-law's only comment was, "That nut didn't fall far from the tree."

True. I have been known to "clean up the living room" by gathering up the piles of mail and books and putting them in the dining room. I have "shut doors" when company was coming rather than take the time to make a room presentable.

But later that day, I found that the instinct to "hide the mess" goes deeper than that. I was at the hairdresser, and I explained to her that I was a nervous wreck about an upcoming speech. I wanted her to give me a haircut that made me look "cool, composed, and in control". I was hoping that the right coiffure might effectively hide my anxiety level.

Then my back went out. My doctor suggested that it might have something to do with the stress level I was carrying around about the speech. I told him in no uncertain terms that this was a ridiculous idea. My back went out because I lifted a mattress the wrong way! (How surprised I was to discover that, immediately after the speech, my back felt perfectly fine. Even my body knows how to hide its pain away.)

The messy side of life is normal, healthy, and part of the creative process. Nature itself is wonderfully messy. Observe the pollen and the stringy stuff that fall out of maple trees in the springtime. Daffodils are glorious but look rather bedraggled in late spring. Not all of life is pristine, beautiful, and orderly. Neither are we.

It's all right to hide the mess from the general public. Emotional overexposure is culturally fashionable at the moment, but it does not necessarily contribute to the common good. Everyone does not need to know everything. But we shouldn't have to hide the mess from ourselves or from the people who love us. Because in what we call "the mess", creation itself is at work. This universe, our universe, is a place of life, growth, change, spilled oats, and great confusion. And out of that odd combination, the human spirit grows.²

I have to say, I can really relate to that story! I'll bet lots of you can too. It's only human to want to hide our messes.

Instead, let's engage together at this crossroads. Let's offer each other a listening ear, and a warm embrace.

¹ Page 16, William Hobgood, *The Once and Future Pastor* (1998)

² Pages 4 & 5, Barbara Merritt, "Hiding the Mess", from *Amethyst Beach: Meditations* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2007)