

Sermon on the Role of the Minister,
delivered at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda, Sunday March 25th, 2018.
Interim Minister, the Rev. Fran Dearman

Opening Words, by David O. Rankin, "A Letter to My Son"

Dear Oran,

You have inquired about the ministry.

I need not describe the perils, since you have observed the staring into space, heard the late-night calls for help, read the cranky letters, and been affected by a thousand funerals. I thank you for never complaining.

Oran, I imagine you are considering the ministry because you know my secret. Yes, I love it! I love the church: with the scent of the ages in the air, with the light filtering through colored windows, with the music and mystery of eternity echoing off the stone walls.

I love the challenge: of going deep down into the cave of the heart, of soaring above the obvious, of stretching every nerve and fiber for truth and understanding.

I love the people: as they are the source of religious inspiration, as they are the mentors of human courage, as they are the bearers of joy and forgiveness. The saints are in the pews.

Yes, I love the ministry.

But whatever you choose as a career, it will be a form of ministry, since you have been blessed with a sensitive spirit. In the end, we are all ministers to each other, witnessing in our own ways to the ties that bind. Every task is holy when the heart is employed.

In the meantime, for God's sake, get a haircut!

Sincerely,
Dad

Words of David O. Rankin

Invitation to Meditation:

Reading: *Who Is a Unitarian Universalist Minister?* the Rev. Jack Mendelsohn

A Unitarian Universalist minister is a person never completely satisfied or satisfiable, never completely adjusted or adjustable—a person who walks in two worlds: one of things as they are, the other of things as they ought to be—and loves them both.

Ministers are persons with pincushion souls and elastic hearts, who sit with the happy and the sad in a chaotic pattern of laugh, cry, laugh, cry—and know deep down that the first time their laughter is false or their tears are make-believe, their days as real ministers are over.

Ministers are people with dreams they can never wholly share, partly because they have some doubts about them, and partly because they are unable to explain adequately what it is they think they see and understand.

A minister is a person who continually runs out of time, out of wisdom, out of courage, and out of money; a person whose tasks involve great responsibility and little power, who must learn to accept people where they are and go from there; a person who must never try to exercise influence that has not been earned.

The minister who is worthy knows all this and is still thankful every day of their life for the privilege of being—a minister.

The future of the liberal church is almost totally dependent on these two factors: great congregations (whether big or small) and effective, dedicated ministers. The strangest feature of their relationship is that they create one another.

Words of the Rev. Jack Mendelsohn

I invite you to be mindful of ministers you have known. I invite you to be mindful of ministers in the fullness of their humanity. When you call to mind ministers you have known, I invite you to remember two things you recall with fondness from that ministry, and one thing you might wish had been different. I invite you into a time of quiet, for prayer, reflection and meditation.

Sermon: The Nature and Role of the Ministry.

Once upon a time there was a congregation who called a minister to come and dwell amongst them, to share their joys and sorrows, and to walk with them into the future. One fine fall day some members of the congregation invited their minister to go fishing with them.

As lunchtime approached the person who had brought the sandwiches remarked, “Botheration; I think I left the mustard sitting on the roof of the car.” And sure enough, a quick scan of the binoculars confirmed that, indeed yes, the mustard was there across the waters, so close and yet so far away.

“Not a problem”, said the new minister. They stepped out of the boat, they walked across the waters, and in no time at all they returned with the condiment of choice. “Just our luck”, said one of the hosts; “We got one that can’t swim.”

My task this morning is to discuss with you the nature and role of the ministry. It is timely that we should do so, for it is during this time that your ministerial search committee is setting aside the ideal abstraction and looking at real live actual persons who aspire to serve you. It is a time for new beginnings.

Not quite three years ago you began to say goodbye to the Reverend Christine Hillman, who served as your minister for so very many years—a decade and a half. That Christine died while in office is no small thing. I’m sad we lost Christine to cancer. I did not know Christine well, but we were colleagues, and at least once we roomed together during a ministerial retreat. I liked her.

Saying good-bye can be hard to do, and harder for some than others.

Ministers are like library books; every now and then you have to return them to the shelves of the universe, and take out another one.

About a year ago, this congregation named a Ministerial Search Committee to begin the search for a new settled minister. The search team conducted a survey of the congregation’s strength and resources, needs and wants, and what the congregation looks for in a settled minister.

The search team have met frequently since then. They have reviewed files, they have interviewed applicants, they have sought out a spectrum of abilities and experience that will be a good fit with this Olinda congregation and your vision for the future.

Are members of the committee present here this morning? I invite the committee to stand and be recognized. I invite the congregation to thank these folks once again....

Now, it is about seventeen years since Olinda last called a new settled minister, and there are things to learn and re-learn, and there is expertise to call on. The good folks who guide denominational ministry, both at Boston and here in Canada—you know, those folks from headquarters who are here to help us—they see search and settlement process about fifty to one hundred times a year. And Boston has learned a thing or two, over the decades, about what works.

One thing the folks who study this kind of process have learned, is that while you are searching for your next settled minister, it helps to have an interim minister hanging about the place. And we have learned that the role of an interim minister is as a resource to support the search team, but not to get in their way.

You remember Daisy, Daisy, and the bicycle built for two? The role of the interim minister in the search process is like a blindfolded cyclist at the after end of a tandem bike. Pedal, but don't steer.

I can give advice, if invited to do so. I can bring matters to the attention of the team, if I think it relevant. I can connect the team to the denomination, and I can offer pastoral care. I am expected to offer a sermon on the role of the ministry; this is it.

But above all I am to remember the promises I made you in September: that I will not linger here; that I will not myself become a candidate here; and that I will make no comment on any of my colleagues who aspire to serve as your settled minister.

There is a good chance that I might know your candidate. But I shall make no comment. You are the people who will have to decide whether the candidate is the right person to walk with you into the future, and is the minister you wish to call. Please do not read anything into my refusal to say anything. My job is to support the process, not to advocate one way or another. My joy is that you are on the verge of stepping into the future.

That's what the next few months will be about: meeting the future. It will be an anxious time; all change is stressful, even change you've hoped for so eagerly, for so long. It is normal and to be expected that you might be anxious and fearful. But please don't let that get in the way of exploring new paths. Who knows what future awaits you, what potential for new discoveries, new learnings, new endeavours? You just won't know unless you give it a try.

And then there's trust. I believe the Search Committee are doing their job well. I know the hours they've put into it, the seriousness they take to their consultations, and the depth of their commitment. I don't know much about the details. And I don't need to know. I trust that the Search Committee is doing their job well, that they are doing due diligence in checking the references and asking the hard questions. I am assuming they will name a candidate in due course, sometime after Easter. Hey, no pressure here, no pressure!

I will not be here during the candidating week—that will be two Sundays and the week between. I will likely be visiting with my old friend from marine college, Captain Lillian, up in Perth County. In event of a pastoral emergency, your Board and the Caring Committee know how to find me.

That will be your time to get to know your candidate, to check out the fit, to consider the possibilities. And for the candidate to take a look at you; this is a two way street, eh?

Again, my absence is not to be construed as meaning anything other than I'm not here. It's the rules, and it's what works: interim ministers withdraw during candidating week. I'll be withdrawing to Perth County.

But first, I can tell you a little about the process from the minister's point of view.

Long before a minister even begins to reach towards a settlement, there is a rigorous and demanding path towards qualification and acceptance into fellowship with the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association. First, you seek out an interview with your congregational minister, who will likely advise you that if you can do anything else, do that. Ministry is what you do when you can't not do it any longer. Then a chat with the District Executive or their designee. Maybe you'll talk about doing ministry versus being a minister. Maybe you'll talk about how you do this anyway, so you want to learn how to do it right.

Maybe you'll talk about a call, a voice that won't stop saying that this is where all your paths have led you, all your life.

Then interviews with a regional sub-committee on candidacy, and a master's degree in divinity, and a career assessment interview with earnest psychologists. Somewhere in there you'll spend at least four hundred hours loitering with intent at a hospital, learning what kind of pastoral caregiver you will be.

Somewhere in there you'll spend ten months or so as an intern under the wing of an experienced minister, scaring yourself half to death doing real ministry with real people.

And then the terrifying final interview with the ministerial fellowship committee, meeting with a dozen or more of some of the most profound and wise souls in our denomination, both lay and clergy.

And so it begins. Doing ministry, being a minister. Each day is different, never complete, always something new to learn. That's one of the things that draws me to ministry: it's a very steep learning curve, and it never lets up. There is very high job satisfaction in ministry. But ministry is also hard work, and sometimes no fun at all. What people see is the public face of ministry: the worship and weddings and funerals and infant dedications. Yet much of ministry happens behind the scenes, in moments of delight, and terror, and boredom, and frustration, and anger, and love, and humanness and at all hours of the day, and most people will never know. This calling, this career, this vocation, is not for the faint of heart.

Ministry is a truly rewarding profession that takes an amazing toll of time and energy and patience and everything else. Ministry is a job that never ends—there is always something more that you can, and maybe should, be doing. Ministry means having a hundred bosses who all have ideas about what you should be doing. Ministry is 24/7—even in our dreams you are there. Ministry is about helping a community live its life. It is about helping a human institution be the best it can, structurally and religiously.

This past year you have focused largely on internal stuff, as is appropriate for an interim period. But your message needs to be heard in the greater community. People need to know, from your actions and deeds, what Unitarian Universalism is about. They need to know that this religious community is here to help heal the world. Your minister should help take you there.

Ministry is about helping the people in the congregation live into their own lives—love, death, meaning, job loss, new child, children moving out, parents moving in and on, pets dying, new relationships forming, the stirring of life, the stirrings of death, and everything in between. Ministry is about helping people navigate through all it means to be human. Ministry is about reaching for the words; ministry is about trying for answers, and listening for the questions, sometimes beyond words, and then leaning into the silence.

A minister is preacher and pastor, teacher and questioner, ear within the community and voice out into the wide world. Ministers become teachers bearing the tradition, helping to translate the past into the future. Ministry is also about continuity and coherence and perspective and big picture, and sustaining the overarching institutional structures.

And then there's e-mail—an explosion of communication, and there is still all the other stuff that needs to be done. And rarely, rarely will we be loved because we were good at administration.

And on top of all this, ministers have a duty to model self-care. You can't draw water from an empty well. We used to get points for burning out on the job; now we get exhortation to model a healthy, balanced lifestyle. There will always be more to do than there are hours in the day. Only clarity about boundaries and priorities will make it possible to respect the worth and dignity of self and family and long term commitment to call.

I have a rough rule of thumb, that I try to treat myself at least as well as I would treat a dog in the street. I make very sure I get enough sleep, and I take my day of rest. If a minister can't respect her own Sabbath, who can?

Ministry also includes extending oneself in times of need; and pacing oneself over years and decades of purposeful, effective relationships and activities.

Ministers are the folks you call on for depth. Ministers need time to think. Sermons grow out of very long walks, and profound reflection. Sermons take twenty hours, and that's after you've read the books. Ministers need time for deep thinking—and goofing off. And ministers need time to be simply human. Not perfect, for that is impossible. But human.

We're all a mix of incredible skills and baffling inconsistencies and weaknesses. We all make mistakes, and we all disappoint others, and we all jump to conclusions, and we all mess up. The minister you call will never be perfect. But what they can do, and what you can expect them to do, is help you know how to be human. How to live in the face of imperfection, how to be deeply committed to life, to mend relationships where necessary, to make choices that sometimes turn out not the best. Ministers should help us know what it means to be a grown-up, to be the one to step forward first away from anger and frustration and mend fences. To step up and admit errors and small heartedness. To own up to the reality of what it means to be human, and to help others know how to live into their human-ness, also.

Your minister's actions will not always reflect your personal priorities. And that has to be okay. Your minister's fashion statement will not always reflect your personal taste. And that needs to

be okay. Your minister's theology and your own will probably not be the same. In our tradition of the free pulpit, that has to be okay. It does not matter, whether you and your minister agree theologically. What matters is that you cut each other a little slack, and make room for the breadth of diversity that is the strength and the challenge of Unitarian Universalism.

Each minister comes with their own unique array of strengths, gifts, and accomplishments. No one minister can be all things to you or to anyone else. Nobody's perfect. (My mother says, if you're not making mistakes you're not doing any work.) We learn by doing. We learn by taking risks and making choices. Things do not always work out well for us. We do the best we can with what we've got.

An amazing thing will happen when you meet your candidate. Something unique will leap into being when you meet. And this new thing will emerge because of the interaction between you, both minister and congregation. The future is what you will build together. Remember what Jack Mendelsohn said, in the passage we heard earlier: the strange marvel of great congregations and effective, dedicated ministers, is that they create one another.

Your ministerial search committee is currently looking at real live people, looking to see if one of these might be the candidate they seek. I know of no reason why this search should not be successful. I believe that you will find a candidate for settled ministry here in Olinda, and that you and this candidate will bring out the best in each other, minister and congregation.

I wish you every joy of this search; the search will be what it will be, and the search will not be easy, nor should it be. And I believe that all shall be well.

In conclusion, this is where I begin to begin to let go of you, and you begin to let go of me. We took a great risk when we began to walk with one another two years ago, that we would learn to love one another. I will weep indeed to leave you, but that is what I came here to do, to walk with you towards the future. It is time for you to begin to walk towards that potential candidate, and it is time for me to begin my own journey westward, to home and retirement.

At the end of June I shall begin to walk away, wishing you well with every step.

May it be so.

Closing Words

I close with these words of Benediction, the words of Susan Manker-Seale

Much of ministry
Is a benediction
A speaking well of each other and the world
A speaking well of what we value:
Honesty
Love
Forgiveness
Trust
A speaking well of our efforts
A speaking well of our dreams
This is how we celebrate life
Through speaking well of it
Living the benediction and becoming as a word well-spoken.

The words of Susan Manker-Seale

Bibliography for this sermon:

“Awakened from the Forest: Meditations on ministry”, collected by Gary E. Smith, 1995.
The readings this morning were taken from that collection.

Heartfelt thanks to colleagues who shared their stories, ideas, sermons, and readings, and to whom I am much indebted, including:

The Rev. Dr. Lisa Presley, who shared her sermon, “This Special Calling”, delivered as interim minister serving the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Marin, February 8, 2009; wherein were cited the words of Jack Mendelsohn, “*Who Is a Unitarian Universalist Minister?*”; also a Benediction, the words of Susan Manker-Seale.

The Rev. Dr. M. Maureen Killoran, who shared her sermon, “Pastors, Pandas, and Possibilities”, delivered at Sandy Springs Georgia, March 25, 2007.

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