

# IOW (In Other Words)

Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda

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The role of ministry is often described as work of service. And in a community of faith, that can mean many things, including leading Sunday services. This is a ministry that is often also shared with lay leaders.

Now, just as many of you might do at different times of your lives, I have also held a job in what is indeed formally called “the service industry”, literally serving food or drink. And sometimes, members of our community fulfill that role at our church gatherings, when some of us serve food for the community, along with taking care of the other logistical aspects that this entails, like setting up the space, cleaning up, taking down. In other words, we serve each other at our church, in many kinds of ways, some sound more literal than others, but they are all kinds of service.

Now, like some among you, I have done this semi-professionally. For a couple of years, I held a part-time job with an event staffing agency. In

other words, we were “freelance butlers” of sorts... and that’s what we called each other in our agency’s culture – the “butlers”. And our jobs included table and bar service for different kinds of events, from small house parties, to large gala dinners. And yes, in addition to my license to solemnize marriages, I also have a Smart Serve certificate... in other words, a “bartending license”.

One of the gigs that I once worked at, was a private fundraising dinner – it was a schmancy affair at a swanky home, in a high-end Toronto neighbourhood. The menu had been meticulously chosen, the desserts looked like works of art, and the décor was fancifully laid out, with purpose-made mood lighting, flower arrangements, a colour-theme, and trendy candle-holders that were whimsically suspended inside cute bird-cages around the main guest table.

The meal service was pretty standard – hors-d’oeuvres, cocktails, sit-down, salad, main course, schmancy dessert. We’d done this plenty of times.

My fellow butlers lined up to serve the salad. A small platoon of us filed out and each of us served the diners, two plates at a time.

Just as I was rounding the halfway point around the table, I suddenly found myself seeing stars and then felt a warm drip around my ear and side of the face.

It turns out that I had crashed into a birdcage.

The kind of birdcage that held an hour’s worth of melted paraffin wax, which was now dripping down my side unto my agency-approved black vest, black tie, black shirt, and black pants uniform.

Also, it was on my hair.

In a moment of crisis-management brilliance, I arranged for a co-working butler to serve the rest of my allotted salad, while I sheepishly

walked over to my supervisor, with wax slowly hardening on my clothes, to explain the situation, and fill out the OSHA-mandated incident report.

My supervisor was... graceful enough. She didn't make a big deal out of it, but did helpfully suggest that I relieve my colleague on dish duty, so that they may take my place on table duty, as my uniform was no longer up to industry standard.

While no blame was named, I did feel rather foolish at my misstep, and many questions came to mind as I started piling dirty dishes into plastic bins. How did I not see the birdcage? Could I have avoided the birdcage? Why am I the only one to have crashed into the birdcage?

My relationship with the birdcage featured deeply into my sense of ineptness at my job of putting down plates of salad. I felt foolish, and had existential questions about my ability to perform in the service industry.

At some point into the main course, one of my senior colleagues joined me on dish duty. Turns out that the seemingly static birdcage had a way of sneaking up on people.

With a slightly banged-up head, and an even more banged-up ego, my colleague's company offered me an odd comfort. I may have been a fool, but I wasn't the only one.

A few minutes into dessert, my supervisor walked into the kitchen – “The photographer just got waxed!” she declared.

A very professional-looking fellow with silver hair and an expensive camera walked in. Paraffin featured heavily on his corduroy jacket. He was talking about how we would word the invoice for dry-cleaning.

By that point, I no longer felt foolish. It was clear to me that it wasn't a matter of me absently bumping into a birdcage, or my colleague being equally clumsy.

In other words, the problem was systemic.

Something about the layout in the venue's décor lent itself to workers being wacked on the head and waxed over their bodies and clothes.

Now, I believe that the interior decorator for this particular event never had it in their program plan to harm workers, or spill hot paraffin over them. I am convinced that that particular outcome was never part of their intent.

And yet, their layout had a measurable impact on the people responsible for making the event happen. Some of them were newbies, like me, but it also included more seasoned service staff, as well, as full-out professionals, with years of experience.

It wasn't a matter of an individual's personal ability or shortcomings – it was the structure in place that was inherently problematic, and prone to cause harm to an entire category of people involved in the event – in this case the service workers.

My friends, in our communities, our living covenant calls on us to grow into awareness toward nurturing right relations with each other. The examples of the silver, gold, and platinum rules, offer us perspective on the kinds of questions we can ask of ourselves, and others, when deciding how we can treat those around us... examining how we love ourselves, how we can love our neighbours responsibly, and moreover, how can we allow the wider community – and the systems in it – to foster loving spaces. Spaces where we can be mindful of our intentions – *and* their impacts. And spaces where we hold each other accountable, not just as individuals, but as a community.

My friends, as we continue to build beloved community, we may grow into awareness of how our separate selves collectively make the space for warmth and light.

In Solidarity,  
So may it be,  
In other words,  
Amen

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*Suggested Hymns:*

**Opening Hymn #126 Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing**

Words: v. 1 Robert Robinson, 1735-1790, adapt.,

~)-| vs. 2-3, Eugene B. Navias, 1928-

Music: John Wyeth, *Repository of Sacred Music, Part II*, 1813

NETTLETON

**Hymn #125 From the Crush of Wealth and Power**

~)-| Words: Kendyl L. R. Gibbons, 1955- , © 1992 Unitarian Universalist Association

Music: Peter Cutts, 1937- , © 1969 Hope Publishing Co.

BRIDEGROOM

**Closing Hymn #124 Be That Guide**

~)-| Words: Carl G. Seaburg, 1922-1998, © 1992 Unitarian Universalist Association

~)-| Music: Thomas Benjamin, 1940- , © 1992 Unitarian Universalist Association

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