

Called to Serve

Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda

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11 April, 2021

What does a doula, an officer in the Canadian Armed Forces, and a minister have in common?

This sounds like it should be followed by the punch line to a joke, instead, it is the winding path of discernment for my call to serve at a military chaplain.

I joined the Canadian Armed Forces in March of 2005 as an officer in the Cadet Instructor Cadre, a branch of the military set aside for working with youth. This group is made up of reservists, part-time people in communities across the country who work and volunteer their time to mentor young people as they become good citizens and leaders. There is no training for deployments and there are no moves unless they are voluntary. The training is specific to working with youth, how to empower them and how to set up boundaries for the safety of all who participate. These officers are formally responsible for the administration and training delivery of the Cadet Program. Although I have held a variety of positions at the local units where I worked, including a few years as the Commanding Officer, the paperwork was often done at home because, I often found that the spirit called for me to serve in a different way. This would happen repeatedly over my time with the cadets themselves. The young woman crying on the bathroom floor, and I joined her to listen all while decked out in my full dress uniform. The young person who was hiding in the bushes outside the building in which we met. He knew his parents weren't coming to pick him up for several more hours, even though our meeting was over, and the staff would always stay until everyone was on their way home. Another young person came through the doors crying and when I asked her what was going on, she shared that she

had just witnessed her best friend get shot at school that day, news that had been on my car radio as I was heading in. She chose to come to us before going home. Together, we called her parents to let them know she was safe and we continued to talk for most of our evening gathering. This was important work in my life knowing that I was being asked to be a positive adult role model for those who are navigating the challenging teen years. I didn't understand the ministry that I was so clearly doing but simply acting out of the place where my great joy and great sadness met.

Of course, the work I was doing as an officer with the cadets was meaningful but it only paid 25 days a year. In my "civilian" job, I worked as a doula. Alongside families of all shapes and sizes, I provided physical, emotional, and spiritual support during pregnancy, birth, and the early weeks with a new baby. Strangers invited me into the sacred and vulnerable times in their lives, as a witness and caring presence through uncertainty, fear, and pain. From my perspective, it was also beautiful and holy work. While labouring at home, a muslim couple danced in their dimly lit kitchen to the sung Qu'ran. Later, at the hospital, I helped create space for the father to whisper to into the new baby's ears the call to prayer. The woman who became a mother by choice - choosing to conceive a child without a partner - as she laboured through the night and into morning. We watched far too many late night tv movies. The baby who had their own schedule and who arrived at home before the midwives and before the EMS had arrived. Together with her extended family, we were able to quickly set up what we would need including warm, dry blankets which had just come out of the dryer. I was asked in that moment to be the non-anxious presence, the calm in the storm, and to trust the process knowing that this family had gathered together in love. I think it worked. Mom had asked me to catch her baby, and by a small miracle, since doulas are not clinical care providers, I had one sterile glove in my backpack. As I was preparing to leave a few hours after the arrival of this new life, she asked me how many times I have had to act in this capacity

to which I had to confess, it was the first. Whether my work took me to a home or a hospital, I knew I was walking on holy ground.

Then everything changed.

It was a typical January day and I was on-call for two birthing families. We had a fair amount of snowfall and school had been cancelled for two days in a row. The next day, my daughter, who was 6.5 at the time, woke up with a tummy ache and she stayed home from school. Within the hour, we were at the hospital and before the day was over, I held my daughter as she took her last breaths. To say that this turned my life upside down would be an understatement.

When it came to work, I asked my colleagues to cover the births I had in the coming weeks knowing that I needed to tend to my own grief and I wouldn't be able to be fully present with another in that way. From this place of deep grief, there was also a lot of growth. Life had slowed down to the bare essentials but this time of reflection also revealed something to me: I had believed that I was functioning rather well but in reality, I was still keeping parts of myself hidden. My life remained compartmentalised, each version of my identity coming out in its own setting. One of those identities which I only let come out with specific people and trusted circumstances was my deeply spiritual nature. This had been part of my life from a young age and something that I nurtured myself as my family was not religious or spiritual. A spiral path which has had me revisit old places only to take me deeper each time.

After a few months of not working and feeling unsure if I could go back to birth work, I turned to the military for some employment options that would at least pay the bills. I had run my own business for a number of years, so I applied to take on a role in public affairs or communications for a summer contract. It turns out, the work came naturally and that they later sent me to public affairs school which has led me to the full-time position

I held in a headquarters, where I provided advice to senior leadership about crisis situations. Life had once again begun to settle.

Little did I know what would be around the next corner. In the first two weeks at the school, we took a class on the government where in one of the readings, they defined the word “minister” as one who serves. It was as if the proverbial light bulb went off in my head. I was no longer listening to the instructor but re-visiting the path which my life has taken. A minister is one who serves. To work in the military is often spoken as being in service. Doula is a Greek word meaning “woman’s servant.” Everything that I had been doing in my life made sense. This had nothing to do with the job title I held but about the calling that could be lived out in many ways. I had unlocked a new understanding of who I was.

I was being called to a life of service and it wasn’t going to be as a public affairs officer. I knew I had to start taking my Master of Divinity, something I had toyed with a few times before, so I applied and was accepted. It still took some time to discern where this call was headed. Two years later, it had become clear, as I sat in a tent, checking my emails and reading an advanced copy of the newest defence policy. It explained that the military was aspiring to be more diverse in its understanding of religion and spirituality. I needed to embark on the journey to become a military chaplain, our first UU military chaplain.

I share this deeply personal story, not to draw attention to my own personal journey, but to underline our humanity with its joys and sorrows. Right now is a difficult time for many, if not all of us. Our lives have taken a sudden turn and we don’t know exactly how long this will last or what life will look like on the other side of this pandemic. We are doing a lot of grieving - grieving the many losses including those of our hopes and plans for the future.

This process of discernment isn’t an easy one. I can be trying.

We don't get to see the journey each of our lives will take from start to finish. We live in uncertainty. We do our best to lay out our plans, think ahead about what may come, but we are never 100% prepared for everything. Just as when we head outside at night under the street lights, they only shine enough to see the next section, the next step. We are only revealed the next part of the journey and we will build upon it from there. As we contend with this uncomfortable reality, our spiritual response must be one of cultivating hope. This is the work we do together as Unitarian Universalists and it is something that we can draw out from our principles and sources.

Some people find this hope in God or the divine. As I prepare to minister in a multi-religious setting, I have been giving a lot of thought to how I might define God, the divine, the spirit of life. I believe that the divine is something that is life giving - whether for you that be a creator or the creative spirit within, the renewal of your spirit when you are out in nature or catching up with friends, this is what I find in our sources. So I ask: What is life giving to you? Is it the time you take for yourself to create art, is it listening to a favourite compose, is it your experiences in nature? Are you a story teller who delves into the wisdom from around the globe learning from the many voices? Where are you cultivating hope through these times of uncertainty?

May we stay connected to our truth, to what gives us meaning. May we share these moments with one another because we are the beacons of hope for one another. Even when our journeys are not going in the same direction, we need the company of good hearts to remind us that we are not journeying alone.