

“The Art and Practice of Ministry – Part 1”

September 18, 2016

We find ourselves this month at the beginning of our year together—and also near the beginning of your collective quest to call a new minister to come and live and serve among you. All this has led me to contemplate ministry. What do ministers do? Or what are they trying to do? For me, the whole subject is conscience stirring. It forces me to think about what people me and people like Richard Seebode, Jane Bickel (two former ministers here at PUC), are supposedly up to. And to consider the standards (Isaiah, Theodore Parker, Olympia Brown, Kenneth Patton) by which our craft is—and always should be—measured.

As your Interim Minister, I’m trying to foster a conversation that asks many questions, none less central than “what is ministry?” Old timers say one should preach on ministry at least twice a year. So I will preach on that question repeatedly. But I must tell at the start, I always find this incredibly difficult, mostly because ministry is, I think, an almost impossible job.

- 2nd oldest profession;
- Rabbi Jerome Malino: “If you’re not almost losing your job, then you’re not doing it.

This often leads to problems...

- Young seminary graduate: preached his first sermon on “Following the Teachings of Jesus.” And then his 2nd, 3rd, and 4th sermons. Until...
- Theodore Parker preached on abolition something like 75 times in a row.
- William Ellery Channing’s anti-slavery sermons irritated his largest contributors, many of whom made their fortunes in the shipping and textile industries.

The problem: There are several implicit contradictions woven right into the fabric of ministry. *Success* in the ministry, it seems to me, is the art and practice of *turning* these *contradictions into creative contrasts*.

- It’s like the “+” and “—” of electricity;
- Teamwork and competition within a company;
- Or the sometimes lead/sometimes follow involved in marriages. The art is turning it into a dance—creative contrast—instead of a brawl.

Well, how does one do this? How to avoid the pitfalls and turn the interactive relationship we call parish ministry into a dance? The first step, it seems to me, is to *recognize* and *identify* some of the implicit contradictions; whereby we’re less likely to be trapped by them unconsciously.

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The first potential contradiction grows out of the various roles ministers are asked to assume. Get clear on what you really want, and then express it—to me, to my successor, but also to yourselves. Do you want me, do you want your next settled minister, to be a

prophet, a scholar, a comforter, a friend, a toastmaster, an administrator, a PR man, a hipster, or an Old Salt? Probably—if you’re like just about every other church—you want all of these things. Well, good luck! Since that’s impossible, just be attentive to when your minister is wearing which hat. And talk to him or her—*talk to me*—about which hat you want the minister to wear today.

Take, as just one example, the prophet role.... Churches *say* they want to be challenged; to be inspired and motivated to new heights, new levels of social action and personal growth.... But the truth is that most of the time we don’t want to be challenged all that much. We want to be patted on the back. We want the minister’s spiritual blessing on our all-too-conventional lifestyles and social complacency. We want to be affirmed and supported in our social and psychological ruts.

That’s all right, but.... Many of us tend to think in terms of the ‘60s civil rights and anti-war movements and to forget that, by and large, the church, along with the University, is a great supporter

—a bulwark, really—
a foundation

of the status quo. And the Unitarian Universalist church is not that much of an exception. Even in the ‘60s most churches were conservative and most Unitarian Universalist churches were pretty staid.

Churches—even UU churches—are essentially conservative organizations. In the late ‘40s and early ‘50s when A. Powell Davies of All Souls Unitarian Church in Washington, DC was preaching to four members of the Supreme Court every Sunday *he was not preaching revolution*. And ministers—or professors—that do (like Jesus or Socrates) tend to get in hot water, to say the least.

Consider: many of the denominational heroes we celebrate today had, when they were working, one heck of a time.

- Ralph Waldo Emerson resigned from the ministry under pressure;
- Olympia Brown was forced out of her own pulpit in Bridgeport, Connecticut; and
- Theodore Parker was shunned for years by nearly all of his colleagues.

Keep in mind: religion is an *irritant*, not a salve. The prophetic message (whether East or West, activist or mystical; from Jeremiah Wright to Stephen Fritchman to Sister Simone Campbell—the “Nun on the Bus” who was the Ware Lecturer a couple of years ago at our Unitarian Universalist General Assembly) ...the prophetic message puts the lie to complacency. And what’s funny about all this—a contradiction—is that at the same time religion is an irritant, the minister is called upon to be a healer and physician. To balm our weary souls and help us go forth and carry on.

“Say something spiritual,” I’m forever hearing. “Remind me of the grace that abounds. Give me a glimpse of infinity. *But don’t run over twenty minutes!*”

connected. And second (Universalism): that we're ALL SAVED the way we are. The gig is up! Just accept it. Accept yourself. Accept each other, *with all our foibles*. Thus we can be open and honest with each other. We don't have to wear masks at all.

This is nothing to be embarrassed or afraid of; indeed, it's our greatest asset, our profoundest truth. Here, in this sanctuary, this place of art and music and self-discovery, and foremost of search....

Here among friends, or soon-to-be friends,
here we can come off our high horses,
take off our masks,
offer one another our hands, and hearts,
and enter into the dialectic of *beloved community*.

For in reality, true ministry is a *relationship*—a relationship between an open, loving congregation and an open-minded, growing, learning-to-love pastor. A vital ministry emerges *between* a congregation and its minister. Or doesn't.

I've been in the professional ministry for thirty-seven years come December. I've come to know a lot of ministers. Across the board, whatever their style, their theology, their gender or orientation, we Unitarian Universalists have a remarkably talented and able group of women and men out there in our ministry. Some of my colleagues have truly great capacities—and though I haven't known any of them, I'd be inclined to include your former ministers John, Bob, Jane, and the rest in their number—essentially committed and loving human beings doing their best. But none of us is perfect. Or without flaw. Certainly I am not. Any more than anyone. So please, don't look to me for perfection. Look to me for *a relationship*.

A relationship nurtured by mutual humility and openness to change. And by openness to each other's weaknesses, as well as our strengths. So that we can grow—*together*—in the art and practice of ministry.

This is my prayer.

Amen. Shalom. Namaste.

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