

Caught Between Two Infinities

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When I was in college I attended a campus ministry run by the United Methodist Church. I hadn't yet found the Unitarians at that point, but I made a number of friends among the Methodists. As you may know there are different kinds of Methodists in the world; some very conservative and some very liberal. This particular campus ministry was made up of college students in Ann Arbor Michigan, so they were among some of the most liberal Christians one could find at the time. It was their custom to have lunch together on Sundays. One Sunday at lunch it was my friend Jenn's turn to do the devotionals. This was sort of like a cross between a prayer and an extended meditation that was shared before the meal. About ten of us walked into this small room to eat. Although I had been in this room numerous times I noticed that there was butcher paper taped to the upper molding of the room. It started in one corner and wrapped all the way around again. There was a line drawn the length of this piece of

paper with various numbers written above the line: 100, 1000, 10000 etc...It was obviously a timeline, but for what?

Well it came time for Jenn to offer her reflection before the meal. She pointed to the beginning of this timeline. It started counting off by tens up to about 90. "For most of us," Jenn said, "If we live to be 90 we would consider that a pretty long life. So let's say you live to be 90. If you are a good person and have faith, then you will go to heaven. If not, then you will be in hell. Imagine what it would be like in hell..." She then pointed to the various numbers along this timeline. "At 100 years in hell you would have been there longer than you lived in this world." Then at 1000, "You would have been in hell twice as long as when Columbus landed in America." And on and on she went. Not so much describing the horrors of damnation as much as she was trying to communicate a simple point: even if you live to be 90, there is a whole eternity that stretches out after that. What you do in those 90 years determines how you spend the next eternity.

Everyone was aghast at this reflection. Normally at these things we would talk about various social and political issues, not reflect on the length of time one might spend in hell in case you aren't faithful enough. But we were all friends, so none of us were too upset. We did tease Jenn about this for years afterwards. Oddly enough, Jenn would go on and graduate from seminary

with plans to become an Army chaplain. However only a few years into her ministry she quit the Army and became an engineer. And thanks to the magic of Facebook, I now know that Jenn is one of the more vocal atheists on my feed. Not sure what that means but as a member of Generation X, I just love the irony there.

Since our theme for the month of October is Mortality, it got me thinking about Jenn's devotional way back when. At a basic level she is right. Our lives are finite. There is an infinite amount of time before we are born and an infinite amount of time after we die. Regardless of how long your life happens to be, it is but the merest sliver of time sandwiched between these two infinities.

While I won't follow my old friend into the orthodox yarn of faith, justification, and the afterlife; she does have a point albeit not perhaps the one she meant. If we live caught between the infinity before our birth and the infinity that stretches out after we die, then the real question is: What will our legacy be? What will we do with that one wild and precious life, as Mary Oliver described it? Well as you may know, today we will remember and honor the legacy of a man who did quite a few amazing things with his one precious and wild life: our Minister Emeritus Rev. Robert M. Doss.

A Minister Emeritus can have a number of different legacies, not just one. Some of you joined this church during Bob's ministry, a few even before. But a good number of folks in our church today have never heard a Bob Doss sermon, witnessed an "On Your Way" story, or attended a "Faith and Meaning" class with him. Who was this man? What impact did he leave on our church? What impact did he leave on our Unitarian Universalist faith and tradition?

Well there are some basic facts that need to be named. Robert Mabry Doss began his ministry at First Unitarian Church in 1963; just two years after the merger with the Universalists. He followed Rev. John MacKinnon and Rev. Charles Philips. He served this church as Senior Minister for over thirty years until his retirement in 1994. During that time he held numerous positions of prestige in our denomination including President of the Unitarian Universalist Minister's Association, serving on the Ministerial Fellowship Committee, and on the Board of Meadville Lombard Theological School. He was active in numerous community organizations as well, with his colleagues.

Bob's ministry spanned the time of DuPont's heyday. As is the case for many of the Wilmington churches, this was a moment of extraordinary growth and vitality. At one point First Unitarian Church of Wilmington was the 8th largest congregation in

Unitarian Universalism. First Unitarian Church was host to a number of community services, concerts, and programs including the candidates' forum for those running for political office in the state. In 1973 First Unitarian Church's candidates' forum was one of the few places to invite a young upstart candidate going up against the established big boys. Joe Biden said he always tried to accept the opportunity to speak here because that forum gave him one of his early chances to get known to the voters.

Bob's early ministry in particular was marked with a good deal of public ministry. When Martin Luther King put out the word that he needed both black and white ministers to march with him in Selma, many Unitarian Universalist ministers heeded that call. Bob Doss was among the ones who risked their safety and went to Selma to march. There is actually a brand new history book written about the Unitarian Universalists in Selma that made its debut at General Assembly last June. Mark Morrison-Reed wrote it, and when I was talking to Mark about his book, he asked, "So how is Bob?" Not only was Bob a subject of that history but a friend to the historian as well. He and Peggy had hosted Mark Morrison-Reed in their home and developed a lasting friendship.

But that was the way Bob was: always reaching out and forming relationships with people. With this new collective sermon writing approach that we are trying this year, I find myself

having all sorts of great conversations with people. So in anticipation of today I sat down with a few folks who were around back in Bob's time and asked them just basic questions about those years of Bob's ministry. Easily the thing that everyone seemed to remember was the presence the man had. How he made you feel like the center of his attention even in a room full of people. It happened when he was preaching of course, but most people didn't remember individual sermons. They remember liking them. Not the impression of Bob that stayed with people was his personal connection to them. Almost everyone had a story of Bob coming to see them when they or a loved one was sick. They remember notes and cards that he sent them. They remember the classes he taught – often with an accompanying story of how long the waiting list was to get into one of those classes. Everyone wanted their personal connection with Bob; and he gave it. Yes you felt it when he was preaching to a roomful of people, but when you were with him, just him, that connection was even deeper.

It has been great hearing these stories, since connections like that stay with people decades after they have been made. Of course I was not around then. But I do have some experience of forming a connection with Bob Doss. There was a day back in 2008 when I had just accepted the Search Committee's invitation

to be the candidate here at First Unitarian Church. I like to say that after my wedding day and the birth of my children it was probably the happiest day of my life. This particular moment I am thinking of fell within those few days that are sort of grey area; I was officially named the candidate but the whole world had not yet found out. And at that particular time I was sitting in my office in Omaha – feeling like I was on top of the world, but not really knowing what to do with myself at that point.

I was in the church by myself, and I got a phone call. The caller ID flashed up “Doss, Robert” and the phone number. I practically did a spit take; if I had water or coffee in my mouth at the time it would have gone everywhere. THE Bob Doss was calling me? After months of studying this church as his ministry, it felt like I was getting a call from a celebrity. So after a momentary adrenaline rush I picked up the phone. Sure enough it was THE Bob Doss calling me. He was very pleasant and congratulatory. It was not a long conversation, but we made plans to get together when I would be in Wilmington a few weeks later. It was such a sweet gesture, and so like Bob. He reached out to me and began our relationship on just the right note. That is the sort of warmth the Mark Morrison-Reed remembered too.

And I am proud to say that I have been able to call Bob a friend ever since that first phone call. There are very few people

who know what it is like to be the Senior Minister at the First Unitarian Church of Wilmington. It is a very small fraternity that he and I are a part of. In my early years here I would sometimes go to Bob for advice and counsel. Once during that time Peggy was kind enough to arrange for a joint outing to Wintertur; the Dosses and the Snyders together. By the way, before I go further with the story about Bob's ministry it is important to talk about his wife Peggy. In a time when the role of the minister's spouse was in flux, Peggy was as active and involved with the life of the church as Bob was. There are few ministers wives who were as devoted to their husband's success and the care for the congregation as her. Peggy, there are three trees outside that we will dedicate, I want you to pick out your favorite one. We will call that one "Peggy" because there is no Bob's ministry without Peggy Doss.

Back to our story: my wife Sharon and I had never been to Wintertur before. At the time we had only one of our boys and the second was on the way. Peggy and Sharon took Thomas to play in the children's garden, while Bob and I sat on a bench and talked. I think it was so that Bob could ask me questions and get to know me. However shortly into our conversation, the reverse happened. He started telling me war stories from the good old days. I would ask him questions; he would tell me stories. Like I

said, it is a small fraternity he and I belong to and no one else truly knows what it's like. So I asked him to impart some wisdom of his years of ministry. He said he would visit anyone who was sick even if it was for a hangnail. I asked him how did he make it thirty years in one place? He said, "Well the congregation changes every five years. It is almost as if you are serving a new church in that period of time. So I would change my approach about that often. Emphasizing different areas and aspects of my ministry. Sometimes it was a growth ministry, or a social justice ministry, or a teaching ministry, or service to the denomination. But it changed every five years." Good advice and a keen insight which I cherish to this day.

Such wisdom about life is a big part of Bob's legacy. But you know the thing I kept coming back to again and again as I talked to people was the quality and quantity of the connections he made with all of you. Bob ministry here was one long sermon; a sermon he preached not so much with his lips and mouth on Sunday mornings but a message he conveyed with his actions every day. Those little moments of love and caring for his people, our people, built strong connections that have endured. That was the message of Bob's life-sermon: the legacy of our finite lives is a function of the connections we have to other people. If we just have this brief little sliver of time to be alive, caught between the

infinity before we were born and the infinity after we die, then let us make the most of it. As Bob taught us, we do that by small acts of caring and love that accumulate into deep abiding connections with other people. And so, like the trees we will dedicate in a few minutes, our legacy is a living thing that grows and gives shade and comfort to people generations after we are gone. You need not know who and why a tree was planted to enjoy it. Just as even if you were not here during Bob's ministry, you are touched by it because he shaped this church so strongly. Thank you Bob for your wisdom, your humor, your love and for the best sermon you ever preached with your one wild and precious life: connect with people in the time you have. Make love your legacy. Amen Blessed Be.