

Generosity of the Soul

Delivered to the First Unitarian Church of Wilmington Delaware

February 2, 2014

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As an alumnus of a school, I frequently get hit up by the development office about my annual donation. Oh I don't mean the University of Michigan where I did my undergraduate work. I am small potatoes to them. But to my seminary, Meadville Lombard Theological School in Chicago Illinois, I am a prime catch. It is much smaller, and since there are only about two degrees of separation from any one Unitarian Universalist to another, they know that I can't run too far away from them. They know where I live so to speak.

A few years ago their promotional material featured a change in the curriculum at my old school where I learned to be a minister. Back then, Meadville was still at its former location on the South Side of Chicago; it has since moved downtown. But in those days they added a twist to the usual requirements of theology, pastoral care, and scripture study. They made it a requirement that all the students enrolled in the school would spend a certain amount of time each week

helping out in the neighborhood. The school established some relationships with local community and youth organizations so that throughout one's seminary career there would be direct face-to-face interaction with people in the neighborhood. The South Side of Chicago is not a great part of town. This new requirement opened the eyes of more than one white middle-class, straight out of college, potential minister. It put them in direct contact with human suffering.

In his book "The Wounded Healer," Henri Nouwen says that ministry is our human response to the world's pain and suffering. There is certainly no short supply of pain and suffering in the world. If we were to really be optimists we could rejoice that there is a constant need for ministry too. Plenty for us to do. Ministry is not the end product of some miraculous string of religious experiences had on some mountaintop somewhere. Ministry starts when we become aware of another person's suffering. Thus it was wise of Meadville Lombard to implement this requirement for people training to become ministers. Make human pain and suffering real for them; not theoretical or philosophical. Make it an embodied experience that they have to reflect on, and act on.

Note that to do ministry one need not have gone to school. This not to diminish seminary education nor the professional ministry, but

sometimes when we think of ministry it is easy to assume that it is what those two up front in the robes do. And just on Sundays. Actually ministry is something all of us do. Anyone who confronts human pain and suffering has come in contact with the beginnings of their ministry. That is the starting point. You might be a doctor, a lawyer, an engineer, or a stay at home Mom or Dad, but at some point in your life you will come face to face with human suffering. It might be your own or someone else's. How you respond to that suffering will define your ministry. When we speak of the ministry we all do together, we call it "shared ministry."

Fortunately for me, the Chaplain at Meadville Lombard at the time when this new requirement was implemented was my friend Rev. David Owen-O'Quill. Some of you may remember Dave; he preached here at First Unitarian Church about three years ago. His job back then was to help the students preparing for ministry reflect on that experience of helping the homeless and tutoring at risk teens. What were they feeling? How did it shape their sense of what ministry could or should be? Eventually he landed upon a question, his favorite question actually, which he shared with us those years ago, and which I have heard people still repeat ever since: "Who does your heart break for?"

It's a good question. It is good because it helps shape our response to suffering. It helps us to focus on who we are aiming to help. Who does your heart break for? That is the starting point for the shared ministry we do together. Shared ministry is the answer to that question, "Who does your heart break for?" It is question answered not so much with our words and thoughts as much as it is our deeds and actions. It is at that point when our hearts break that we feel some calling to act. Shared ministry is a calling toward love and service.

Dave would know better than most. Eventually Meadville Lombard restructured their program and had to discontinue the Chaplain position that he held. Dave's wife Jennifer was serving as the minister in one of the Unitarian Churches in Chicago, so he wasn't going anywhere. Dave didn't have a church available to him as an outlet for his call to ministry; his response to human pain and suffering. But Dave knew that ministry isn't necessarily a job – it's a calling first and foremost. If one has an institution to pay you, great. However that does not stop one from having a calling. So in response to his call he started his own church.

His approach was modeled after what you read about in evangelicals and the so-called "emerging church" movement. Dave got a job in construction, and started posting flyers in bars and coffee shops

on the North Side of Chicago. Eventually there was a bar that allowed him to use their space on Sunday evenings since there usually weren't too many people around. Dave would stand up and start talking, I suppose you could call it preaching, but it was more akin to what I stand up comedian would do than what I am doing right now. There was no guarantee that the people in this bar were even going to pay attention to him in those early days. By the way, this was the dawning of social media when helped him draw attention to this burgeoning church. Eventually he met a woman who had a band and could play covers of rock and pop songs that they incorporated into their services.

After a couple of years, and at least one change of venues, Dave had a small yet hearty band assembled. Yet money was in short supply, so he took to the road to raise awareness and excitement about this new kind of doing church. Some people embraced it, others didn't. It was a pretty big departure from what we Unitarian Universalists think of when we imagine what a church might be. He asked his congregation, most of whom were twenty-somethings working in Starbucks and Barnes and Noble, to make sacrificial gifts to this new ministry. It was while he was on this tour when he preached here at First Unitarian. He gave a presentation to the Board the day before, and preached here urging us all to think about who does our heart break for. Because that is where our collective shared ministry begins.

That is our response to human pain and suffering. It is how we live our faith through love and service.

Our theme for the month of February is generosity. I know what you are thinking, “I know where Rev. Josh is going with that theme!” And yes we will get to generosity of our material blessings a bit later in the month. But before we do, let us consider other ways in which we can be generous. There is such a thing of generosity of the soul, of our heart, of our lives. This is in addition to, not instead of, generosity of wealth. Our shared ministry is our response to our hearts breaking in the presence of pain and suffering. How we respond, what we do as a result of that call, says a lot about how well we live our Unitarian Universalist faith. This kind of ministry requires no fancy degrees or special training. It simply requires that you have the courage to be in the presence of real human suffering, let your heart break open, and respond with wisdom and love through service. That is an act of generosity if ever there was one.

Certainly shared ministry can be done individually, but it is so much more powerful when we do so collectively. Dave knew that it was great for him to have a call to ministry, but for it to be truly effective he needed to bring people together. Doing ministry by himself is next to impossible. There is reason we call it “shared”

ministry – it is our work together as a church rather than as a mere collection of individuals.

The blind woman in our story this morning is a testimony to the transformative power of shared ministry. It would be impossible to create a program or class to reach this woman. Our “shared ministry” as we normally think of it would have a hard time reaching her if our definition of ministry is institutionally based. She can’t hear sermons, she can’t read inspirational stories nor see beautiful works of art. But she has one sense still left to her: her sense of touch. And through it, she is able to feel the love of her religious community. It is such a brilliant metaphor for shared ministry – that her church, together, helps her experience transforming love in the only way available to her. I don’t know if there was any formal program or direction given to this group of Unitarian Universalists in Oxford Mississippi. I doubt it. It was through the generosity of their soul that they made this woman feel a little less alone and isolated. They made her feel like one of them.

May we collectively and individually have the courage to not turn away from suffering. Let us be open and vulnerable enough to allow our hearts to break. And may we find the energy and generosity of soul to gather together our response to that calling. Our ever-deepening

faith of love and service. May it transform suffering into love. Amen
Blessed Be.