

Service of the Living Tradition

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One of the most common questions I get, particularly in my first year as Senior Minister, is “Rev. Josh, what is your vision of the church?” It is a common expectation that the Senior Minister just has that teed up ready to go for all occasions regardless of the context or asker. It is the Senior Minister’s equivalent of the elevator speech some have used to explain Unitarian Universalism to people who ask them. Sometimes I had a good response, and sometimes I didn’t. In almost every occasion in which this is asked of me, the question is in regard to our church specifically. Actually next month I will be going in depth into this vision for First Unitarian Church by using the new long range plan as the jumping off point for a three sermon series entitled “Renew at First U.”

However in our prose reading this morning Rev. Roy Philips lays out a wider vision of the church. His is not confining himself

to our congregation, or even his own, but it is a vision of the liberal church writ large. In other words Philips is asking “What is the Unitarian Universalist church really about? Why do we bother to organize in this particular fashion? To what end or purpose does it serve?” He lays out four such purposes: to create a world in which people know their own worth and experience awe, they feel the worth of others, they have opportunities to express their talents and gifts, and they are able to use these talents and gifts to enrich the world in some way. That is a very compelling list. Note what is not here. There is no call to baptize the nations or convert the heathen. After all most of us are the heathen! No. These four purposes hold true if you are a Christian or a Hindu or an atheist. This vision of the church addresses the individual, their relationships among other people, and our need to make the world a better place. In many ways he is very Emersonian; he is interested in our experiences. Thus the UU church’s purpose has three loci: the individuals, their relationships (which we sometimes call covenant) and the transformation of the wider community in which the church is embedded. These are the constituencies, if you will, of the church’s ministry.

I find this very compatible with my own call to ministry. I was in college in my senior year not yet knowing what to do with myself after graduation. One evening, I was a part of an interfaith dialogue event with a group of students from the Reformed Jewish campus ministry. As we were talking I realized that I loved that conversation. I was relatively new to Unitarian Universalism at the time, and this was really the first instance of someone asking me what Unitarian Universalism was rather than me doing the asking. It was fun. It was electric! The energy in the room was palpable. I knew that I had to be having that conversation for the rest of my life. Although a friend had suggested that I look into seminary, I scoffed at the idea because I was not Christian. Now I knew that it was what I had to do.

To put this story into Roy Philips' terms, I felt that I found a way to put my talents, skills, and gifts to work in the world in a way that was meaningful and creative. Indeed, that was precisely what I had been struggling with during my final year as an undergraduate. I would say that is the best definition of a "call" that I can think of. Yes there are many ministers, UU and otherwise, who would attribute a supernatural source to their

call. I can understand that, but for me it was just about finding my spot.

There is another key aspect to ministry that is implicit in Philips' vision of the liberal church. It is having the vision itself. William James said that we are all looking for something larger than ourselves that we can give ourselves to. For some it is God. For others it is life itself. For still others it is the truth with a capital "T." But whatever it is that you regard as your ultimate concern, it is important to embody it; to make it real in your life rather than merely in your imagination. Unitarian Universalism is not just a collection of nice ideas. It is an institution with a purpose, mission, and vision to be a transformative power for good in the world. Because we feel that the world needs to hear of our good news.

Thus ministry consists of having some sense of theological or spiritual grounding, feeling that you have a place in the world where you can express your gifts and talents, and that you keep mission and vision the church in the forefront of all you do. I did not include in this list: go to an accredited seminary and receive a Master of Divinity degree or jump through the hoops that the UUA throws up at professional clergy. That is because ministry

is something we all can do. It is not just the domain of two people paid by First Unitarian Church. Indeed Rev. Barbara and my job is really to equip *you* to do the ministry of the church.

That is what we have come together to celebrate today at the Service of the Living Tradition: the shared ministry of First Unitarian Church. This morning we are honoring people who are celebrating significant membership anniversaries this year. One of the most important anniversaries of membership, you might have noticed, is the one year anniversary. After a year people have seen the church in good times and bad, seen themselves in good times and bad, and any illusions of having joined some mythical utopian community have probably been knocked out of them after a year. So it is now that we move to the next stage of deepening in a real way with our religious community. This deepening increases of course for our ten year, twenty-five year, forty year, and fifty year anniversaries too. All of these folks have given significant amounts of time, money, energy, talent, vision, and effort to make First Unitarian Church a real life, breathing, wonderful place to be. It is not easy service, and we are grateful for their striving on our behalf. It is that work we do to make a church run and hum, that is what ordains you into our shared

ministry. All of you in the church who have taken positions of leadership or who have volunteered to help out in some capacity; you too are ordained into our shared ministry even if your membership anniversary doesn't end in a round number this year. All of you make First Unitarian Church the great place that it is.

As I was considering all of this, the commitment these folks have made over the length of their membership, I could not help but think of Marge Piercy's poem "To Be of Use." "The work of the world is common as mud. Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust. But the thing worth doing well done has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident." Therein lies the rub does it not? What kind of work are we asking people to do? Is it the work that is really an opportunity for you to express your gifts and talents to the world, or is it simply work just like any other only lacking a pay check? For us to live out Roy's vision of the church, we need to push ourselves to the former and not settle for the latter. Ministry is both the goal and the path. It is what we strive to do in the world, to be a healing and hopeful presence, while at the same time actually providing that for the people engaged in the work of ministry.

Believe it or not this is not impossible. I think of Rick, one of the most devoted members of the church back in Omaha. Rick was on the Board, chaired the Buildings and Grounds committee, and his wife was as involved as he was. I always thought of Rick as one of my go to guys for problems around the building. This was a church with no custodial staff, so I relied solely on volunteers for all that stuff. Once Rick redid the entire Men's room with this really nice wooden paneling on the floors.

One day I asked Rick what he did for a living. He worked for First Data Corporation, one of the big companies in town, as an executive. His job was to design databases for clients and streamline the ways they used the internet. A perfectly respectable thing to do, but to Rick it was just staring at a computer screen all day. He loved fixing up his house, and so when he had the chance to work with some new building material at church, such as wooden floor paneling, he jumped at the chance. You would not have guessed it from his job, but Rick's talents and skills, the thing he was "called" to do, could only really find its fullest expression at church.

I think there are a million stories like Rick's out there. Tons of things that people are capable of doing, but have no outlet for

because of their jobs or their life's circumstance. The church is equipping people for shared ministry when we create those opportunities for our people. But there is a catch. Believe it or not it is a big catch, even though it sounds very simple. The catch is this: we have to ask them! Sometimes a call to ministry can very literally be just that: someone asking someone else for help, or to volunteer, or to pitch in, or to serve in leadership. Believe it or not, but I have found that when you ask for something, occasionally you get it! So often though we are afraid to ask. We fear rejection, that someone will tell us no, or that we will scare them away by offending them, or perhaps we don't think that what we are asking someone to do is really a very worthy thing; we may not believe in the vision ourselves. But let me testify to you now: asking is no sin.

Of course this comes up not only with asking folks to volunteer to do the work of the world that is as common as mud. People become acutely fearful when asking for money. I don't know, perhaps it is a deep seeded psychological thing that money is charged with so much cultural power that it intimidates us. But again, this fear is, I have found, more in the person doing the asking than in the one being asked.

When I first walked into a Zen Buddhist Temple, I was a junior in college. I had not yet had my call to ministry. And I noticed right when you came in there was a really big fishbowl with no water in it. Next to this bowl was a small sign that read “Dana Bowl.” “Dana” is the Sanskrit word for generosity, and in Buddhism it is one of the perfections that a bodhisattva, or practitioner cultivates. The idea here was that you placed a donation into the big fish bowl. At first I was shocked that this was there. They wanted my money! But as time went by, I saw that this was really no different than passing the plate like my old church used to do, and we do today. No big deal. Fast forward a few years, I found myself in a different Zen Center walking in for the very first time. By now I knew what to expect; only I didn’t. Guess what was not there at this new place: a Dana Bowl! In fact there was nothing mentioned about giving to the community. No sign, no stated expectation.

Oddly enough I found myself disappointed. I was looking forward to giving something. Giving something to a community, be it money or time or effort, is a way of being a part of it. It is a symbol that says, “I am with you and a part of you.” Without a Dana Bowl, I could not make that gesture. I could not throw my

lot in with that particular group of people who submerge themselves in the tasks of life. Being denied that opportunity made me feel like a bit of an outsider. They don't need me obviously.

So we should not be so shy in asking people to serve. What we should really be doing is creating work that is satisfying, clean and evident. When we do that, then we are creating a call to ministry. Someone out there will hear it and respond. But we should never fall into the trap that denying people such opportunities is somehow welcoming. We reveal our own shame, our own disappointment in our vision and in our faith when we do that.

Before us stands a company of ministers. Rev. Barbara and I have debated what you call a group of UU ministers; a flock? A gaggle? Or knowing the egos of some UU ministers perhaps "a Pride." I don't know. But the folks we honor today for their membership anniversaries are in fact honoring us. They honor us with their years of service and commitment. They are the shared ministers of our congregation along with all who give of their resources, time, financial, and other. Let us strive to make real the vision of our church that they have worked so hard toward.

For First Unitarian Church *is* a place where individuals experience awe and a joy in being alive, they do become aware of the worth and dignity of others, we do develop our gifts and talents, and we do enrich with world, not just with what we do but also with who we are. The path is the goal.

May we never shy away from being someone else's call to ministry. May we never fail to have the ears to hear our own call. May we never forget to thank those who have come before us, and prepared a way for us to be of use in this community. For if it is honorable and worthwhile work, then our lives are forever enriched by their striving. Amen Blessed Be.