

The Dance of Shiva

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This week I assigned myself the curious chore of going through all of my old files that have accumulated over the past seven years of ministry. It is a curious chore because I have found it to be more than merely clearing away a bunch of old papers. Cleaning out my filing cabinets, reviewing each piece of paper, deciding whether or not I will use it in the future, it really has been more of a trip down memory lane. It is the archeology of my ministry at First Unitarian Church – turning up some valuable artifacts amidst the long forgotten expense reports and meeting notes. More than once I have found myself in a similar position to the great French writer Proust and his “Remembrance of Things Past.” Some of those papers spark old memories just looking at them.

One of the most powerful finds was the folder marked “Installation.” It contained all of the papers associated with my installation as Senior Minister here in March of 2009. Most notable among these were the Acts of Installation; the words spoken by me and to me that officially installed me as Senior Minister. In them, I said: “I pledge myself, so far as the power in me lies, worthily to maintain the freedom of the pulpit, to speak the truth in love, both publicly and privately, diligently to fulfill the several offices of worship, instruction, counsel, service, and administration, for the renewal and consecration of life, and in all things so to live as to promote righteousness, love and excellence among all people.” How humbling when the work of ministry is put in such lofty terms!

I find it ironic, and yet very fitting, to contemplate the beginning of my ministry near its end. I feel very similar to James Ford; the past and the future are all one thing. “A coagulation of all things passing – beautiful, sad, all of it. So lovely. What a gift.” Maybe it is the Zen Buddhist in James, and myself, talking but there is a tragic beauty in the transience and temporariness of

life. Endings and beginnings flow into each other. Or as the Beatles once sang “Hello Good-bye.”

Actually this is a very old idea that endings and beginnings flow together. In Hinduism Shiva is one of the three principle deities. Traditionally Brahma is the creator God, Vishnu is the sustainer God, and Shiva is traditionally the destroyer of the universe. But the thing to remember is that Hindus do not conceive of time in a linear fashion as we do. They believe, to quote Battlestar Galactica, “All this has happened before, and all of this will happen again.” Time loops around they say. So that in the moment Shiva destroys the universe, he is also recreating it. The ending and the beginning merge into one thing.

Compared to the fire and brimstone visions of the apocalypse so common in Western religion, Hindus have a far more benign understand of the end of days. Shiva destroys the universe; by dancing. He dances and the universe comes apart. You may have seen statues of this dance, the Nataraja as it is known. A silhouette of it appears on your order of service. Shiva takes everything apart, so that it can be put back together again.

The scholar Wolf-Dieter Storl poetically sums it up: “What is dance” he asks, “but the continual loss and instantaneous regaining of balance? Shiva’s dance is the fine edge of the universe tumbling into chaos and destruction and the simultaneous recreation of poise, in a continuous, ecstatic, spontaneous whirl of creation-destruction-creation-destruction?” Atoms and quarks are constantly coming together and coming apart. As Ford points out, some of these endings and beginnings are arbitrary; true only from a certain point of view. In a real sense, every moment is an ending and a beginning.

Yet, like the couple about to get married, there is sense in which life will be different from here on out. In two months’ time I will no longer be your minister. Sure the world will go on spinning, but that one fact will have changed.

One of the other documents I found this week that made me pause in my revelry was my sermon from last December when I told the congregation that this would be my final year as Senior Minister. Believe it or not I don’t often go back and reread old sermons, but I took a moment to reread that one. Of course there

was a good deal that we didn't know then that we know now. It was quite a gamble to make that announcement without knowing where I would ultimately land, or what the future for the congregation would be. Thankfully those unknowns have now ultimately been answered.

There was one portion of that sermon that I thought it revisiting. Church really is like a giant game of Jenga that a minister and the congregation plays over the course of their time walking together in covenant. Like all games, it must ultimately end. But if you want to play a new game of Jenga you have to do two things: knock down all the pieces from the past game, and reset the structure for the new game to begin. In many ways that in-between time is what Roberta's ministry will be about; clearing the decks for the next minister to rebuild something new and different. It is a Shiva-esque ministry: you first have to tear some things down before they can be rebuilt. Imagine a fully constructed monument of Jenga blocks, and me trying to lift them up undisturbed as a structure and try and hand them off to Rev. Roberta Finkelstein! Ha! Surely one or two must fall. Maybe a lot of them need to fall down, in order for her to reset the board.

I have mused about this in various meetings with staff and lay leaders who have wrung their collective hands over how various processes, programs, or projects will carry on without Michelle or I present. I certainly understand the concern. In uncertain times of transition it is natural to cling to that which is constant and (supposedly) unchanging. Yet I would urge you to think of yourselves as part of Shiva's Dance. Embrace how things will fall apart more so than how they will continue. There are new as-yet-unknown possibilities that can come into being when things fall apart.

A case in point came to my attention while I was cleaning out files. I found the notes from my very first Executive Team meeting. I hadn't even chaired this meeting; Arline Sutherland, the interim minister, was still leading the ET. I mused over some of the notes I made. "What? There is no buildings and grounds team? How do they manage that?!" I wrote. In those early days such a team did not exist; hard to imagine now. On the one hand I could have bemoaned the lack of committee infrastructure in those days. So many things seemed broken. And yet it was precisely because such things had fallen apart that I was able to

work with the staff and lay leaders to create something new that needed to emerge at that moment. When Terry left us, something similar happened – new groups of lay work teams emerged out of what at first appeared to be nothingness. Destruction leads to creation, to destruction and creation...Shiva's Dance goes on. Or as Leonard Cohen once sang "Ring the bells that still can ring Forget your perfect offering. There is a crack, a crack in everything That's how the light gets in." Without the crack there is no light coming through.

One of the files that I packed away this week was entitled "Doss Tree Memorial." I am sure many of you remember the service last fall when we dedicated the three trees and some cairns to the memory of Rev. Bob Doss's ministry to First Unitarian Church. It got me thinking about ministerial legacies. By the way, if you ever have a notion to put a plaque up with my name on it, I want you to create the "Rev. Dr. Josh Snyder memorial roof," I put so many roofs on this damn building in my seven years, I think that would be the most appropriate way to go. I can imagine maybe there is a little step ladder people can climb up to the roof to read the plaque.

This may be a tough sell to a room full of Humanists, but I will say it anyway: Ghosts are real. Yes we former ministers haunt our congregations, and we don't have to be dead to do it. The things we do, the sermons we preach, the structures we put in place, our habits and patterns and traditions, they don't all get destroyed by Shiva's Dance of destruction-creation. If nothing else they linger in the memories of our congregants for years, perhaps decades to come. Granted I don't know how or in what way I will haunt you. Just little half remembered things that I did and said over the years might come back to memory – for good or for ill – long after I have officially left. You know at one point I toyed with the idea of asking Scott to play the Cups Song from Pitch Perfect as the Postlude for this service. But I thought the better of it when I remembered there is a line in there that goes, "You're gonna miss me by my hair, you're gonna miss me everywhere, oh you're sure gonna miss me when I'm gone!" I miss my hair too.

There is a new idea floating out there among Unitarian Universalist ministers called the "Ministry of Absence." You see there is a very old notion called the Ministry of Presence. The

Ministry of Presence says that we do ministry just by being present with people. There are no magic words to say, no grand wisdom to impart to anyone, just the simple presence of the minister with the people as the representative of the Holy. The Ministry of Presence is a time honored practice of pastoral ministry.

Yet we are finding that there is also something to be said for the Ministry of Absence – of intentionally not being there. This is the case when a congregation goes through a ministerial transition of any kind. The outgoing minister cannot interfere or have continuing relationships with the former congregation. Now it isn't like I am going to pop by after I move to San Antonio Texas! But sadly, if you email me, Tweet me, like me on Facebook, I cannot respond. This is arguably the hardest aspect of leaving a congregation, and for the congregation who has lost a beloved minister. As hard as it is for both parties, it is necessary for us to practice the Ministry of Absence. Why? Because if I am hanging on and on, having never really left, then there is no room for the new ministry to emerge. The decks need to be cleared for a new ministry to come into being. While the UUMA doesn't call

it this exactly, I would say, it is yet another example of the Dance of Shiva – something needs to be taken apart in order for a new thing to come together. In this case it is the painful coming apart of our relationship. Or as James Ford put it, beginnings and endings are all one thing. If you have never really said good-bye to your former minister, how can you ever say hello to the new one? Besides you would be missing out on all those as-yet-unknown possibilities that a new minister brings to fruition. I saw this happen in Omaha to great effect.

It turns out my files housed a good number of memories. I am a bit of a pack rat as it turns out when it comes to church documents. It was a life in ministry contained in one metal box. The Charge to the Congregation I spoke at Michelle's ordination. The sermon I preached at the choir retreat my first year here. The UU Seder I did with Robert Gadon during one of the old Wednesday night programs back in the day. The start up and covenanting we did with Catherine shortly after I got here. Not to mention the Ingathering when all of the Program Staff threw fish at each other. I found the gradual evolution of how we do Ends Monitoring. Don't worry Board members – I threw most of

those away! There were plans and compromises and talking points that Marina and I developed for various budget proposals throughout the years. The dedication of my youngest son Matthew which this congregation did. And so many cards thanking me for sermons, weddings, memorial services over the years. In some cases just small notes thankful for a few words, a few minutes of my attention, that reminded me of the power that ministry holds in the beloved community.

And so it is now my turn to thank you. Thank you for the opportunity to serve you as Senior Minister these past seven years. Such a simple sentence that barely conveys the emotion behind it. The day the search committee called me and offered me this job is a day I still consider to be one of the greatest moments of my life.

Just as we call our memorial service a celebration of life, so too is today a celebration of a ministry well spent among you. Thank you for allowing me to serve as your minister. It has been an honor to live and serve and be among you. Just as we ministers haunt our congregations, I know that there are people

here that I will take with me to San Antonio. You may not know it but I will know it. I have learned so much by being your minister. I am so grateful for the gifts of insight all of you have given me. They were insights into myself and how ministry works. These have been invaluable.

And so the Dance of Shiva will carry us both forward into new adventures. I am excited to watch from afar the next stage of your development. May you, May I, May we all be blessed wherever it may take us. Amen Blessed Be.