

Twenty-Five Years of Ministry ©

A sermon by Rev. Roberta Finkelstein

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First Unitarian Church of Wilmington, DE.

Twenty-five years ago today I was ordained to the Unitarian Universalist ministry. It was Mother's Day, and I was missing my mother. She had died, suddenly, in my first month of seminary, and I was heartbroken that she didn't live to see me ordained. Rabbi Edwin Friedman asks, "Which of your ancestors ordained you?" I know that my mother ordained me. From her I inherited a fierceness in defense of the vulnerable, persistence in the face of patriarchy, and the practice of unconditional love. I was delighted to have my brother present at my ordination, representing my family of origin. He surprised me, and blessed me, that day, by invoking our mother, assuring me and the gathered congregation that she was indeed in the room witnessing to her daughter's ordination. Barry was there, of course, beaming with pride. And Danny. Danny also surprised me by taking the microphone and saying, with great certainty, "I am glad my mom is becoming a minister cause now she'll know the answers to all my questions." (Remember when you thought I was all that Danny?)

Rev. Gordon McKeeman, my internship supervisor and mentor, preached the sermon, entitled *The Great Magic Trick*. The magic trick he was talking about was ministry – that shared endeavor that makes it possible for groups of hungry, hurting, yearning individuals to come together week after week and create an intentional community; a community of head and heart and hands, a community dedicated to taking care of each other and a hurting world, to hearing each other into speech, to inspiring and supporting each other. The great magic trick.

One of the fondest memories of my ordination was the laying on of hands, that moment when the gathered clergy surrounded me and literally laid their hands on my head and confirmed my call to ministry. Then I made my ordination vows. Since then I have repeated those vows to every congregation I have served. In fact, I have told each of my congregations that I said those words to them back in 1992 even though I didn't know them yet. By ordaining me, the folks present back then were, in effect, hearing my words of promise and holding them in trust for you.

There was an awful lot I did not yet know about ministry and congregational life back in 1992. I may be revealing a trade secret here, but when ministers converse online together, there is quite often a thread called "stuff they didn't tell you in seminary." Like how congregations actually work. I learned most of what I know about the way congregations work from the congregations I served.

From the Bull Run Unitarian Universalists I learned that church fights aren't always about what they seem to be about. The color of the bathroom walls or the shape of the light switch plates or the location of a storm drain is almost always a substitute for something deeper and scarier. A new or spiffed up building might attract new people. I might not know everybody, or everybody might not know me. I might feel less important; my vote might not matter as much. Being able to distinguish between a technical problem (oh, who cares, paint it white) and an adaptive problem (let's start a small group ministry to make sure that as we grow everybody has a place where they are known) – that is one of the skills I learned on the job.

During my interim in Frederick I learned that congregations don't always learn the right lessons from their history. Frederick had started the Welcoming Congregation process a decade before I arrived. There had been a huge conflagration. They had concluded that they just couldn't do it. What they really

needed to learn was how to have in place a covenant of right relations that allowed them to navigate differences of opinion safely. They were a Welcoming Congregation when I left.

From the folks in Portsmouth New Hampshire I learned the power of secrets. Secrets, when kept, do damage long after the people involved are gone. Secrets, when told in honesty and mutual trust, lose their power to harm and to shame.

In Orlando I learned about the power of simply showing up. Every year, a lesbian couple in the congregation went down to the Court House on Valentine's Day and applied for a marriage license. The year I was there I went with them. When asked by a local reporter why I was there taking part in an exercise in futility. I told him I was there in hope that love would prevail, and this would be the year I could sign the license. It was not. But that day did come.

In Burlington, Vermont, I learned how to survive a really long winter! If you are going to live in northern New England, you must go outside. Every day. No matter the weather. I also learned how to create a safe space (or a brave space) for people to come together and remember that their commitment to their Beloved Community was stronger than the issues that divided them. They truly lived out the litany we spoke last week. "We forgive ourselves, and each other. We begin again in love."

In Westport, I learned that you really can't fight City Hall. The very first project we undertook there was the installation of an elevator making the building accessible. We thought it would be a quick win for a congregation that badly needed something to feel good about. I have recently learned that sometime in the next 3-4 months, that elevator will finally, after four years, become operational.

One more thing they didn't tell us about in seminary which I learned in Sterling VA: what to do when the raccoons you suspected were living in the attic get amorous one spring day and, in the act, crash through the ceiling, landing on a stained-glass chalice and smashing it to smithereens. Can you imagine a more perfect metaphor for Unitarian Universalist ministry? In a month when the theme for worship is embodiment? Think about it. We are so justly proud of our healthy and open approach to sexuality. In *Our Whole Lives*, we teach our youth that physical intimacy is normal and natural. We encourage them to enter relationships that are based on mutual respect, shared responsibility, and love. Well, those raccoons were clearly in love, and although I didn't get to debrief them for very long, they were clearly engaged in a mutually respectful relationship because they assisted each other in their rapid escape from the building. I'm not sure about the responsibility part. Neither of them offered to pay for the repairs to the chalice.

But the chalice was repaired by the artist who made it in the first place. You see where this metaphor is going. The chalice, symbol of our faith, was broken under unforeseeable circumstances. When repaired, it was even stronger than it had been before. Plus, there were some interesting new seams. Leonard Cohen said it best. "There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in." Scott and I will be creating a summer worship service around the words and music of Leonard Cohen. Keep an eye out for the summer worship schedule.

Now lest you think that I was completely feckless when I started out in ministry, I want to tell you that there were some things I did know about ministry and our faith twenty-five years ago that I still know to be true. I knew that Unitarian Universalism is a religion that is worthy of the best we have to give. I knew that the great strength of Unitarian Universalism is our radical inclusionary principle; we are committed to creating communities where people with different

theologies and philosophies can come together to explore the nature of life and love. More importantly, we come together to find answers to the question of how we can live out our faith in tangible ways. After twenty-five years, I still take delight in being a professional facilitator of that process – insuring that our congregations do the great magic trick of holding in creative tension all those ideas and hopes and dreams and experiences in such a way that all who are willing can experience spiritual growth and transformation, and can better prepare themselves to offer their gifts to a hurting world.

Back then I knew that we were a non-creedal faith. We were, instead, covenantal. What I know now, after all these years of ministry, is that the covenant that calls us into community is an ideal that is all too often broken. I am no longer surprised that Unitarian Universalists are so quick to endanger the health of their beloved communities by allowing gossip and rumor and resentment and entitlement and narcissism free rein. I am not surprised by how often we must hold each other accountable, to acknowledge our failings, to ask for and offer forgiveness, to begin again in love. We live by covenants that call us to our better selves, that call us into relationship, that call us into community. That is why the shattered and repaired stained glass chalice is such a precious memory to me.

Our covenant also calls us to identify and nurture whatever is of ultimate worth to us. Our religion is, you might say, God optional. But it is not ultimate worth optional. We need to know where our ultimate loyalties lie.

At Nelson Mandela's historic inauguration in 1994, Miriam Williamson offered this poem:

Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.

It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us.

We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented & fabulous?

Actually, who are you not to be?

You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world.

There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you.

We were born to make manifest the Glory of God that is within us.

It is not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.

As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.

Williamson's words are often mistakenly attributed to Mandela himself. At a time when his nation needed a bold vision of what a free South Africa could be, what better way to address individual South Africans than to remind them that every one of them "was born to make manifest the divine within?" You don't have to believe in any kind of traditional God to know the truth that there is something noble that resides in our souls and is constantly seeking expression. Finding that nobility, within yourself and within your covenanted community, is the essence of Unitarian Universalism.

So here we are. My twenty-five years of ministry in partnership with your one hundred and fifty-one years of ministry. And we have two more years of partnership. I am confident that we will not play small, that we will serve the world to the best of our ability. Embodying hope for the future, unconditional love for creation, joy as we support each other in our various attempts to be human, comfort and healing in our various losses and griefs – we will let our light shine and we will move closer to the day we envision in our closing hymn, # 146.