

Blessing Is From Soul To Soul
ORDINATION SERMON FOR MICHELLE COLLINS
Rev. Clare Petersberger
September 30, 2012

In preparing to preach on this great occasion, I asked your senior minister, The Reverend Dr. Joshua Snyder, HIS ideas for a sermon theme for YOU---the congregation of The First Unitarian Church of Delaware. The pulpit in our free faith tradition is relational and I knew he knew you best.

He replied with this suggestion: "I think one key thing to talk about is "WHAT is ordination into the Unitarian Universalist ministry? Tell us about our faith, our ministry, and why we should be celebrating the beginning of Michelle's ministry."

His final piece of advice was: "I say get your Channing on!" Your senior minister was referring to the sermon preached by The Reverend William Ellery Channing on May 5, 1819, at the ordination of Jared Sparks in The First Independent Church of Baltimore. That sermon is credited with defining Unitarian Christianity in the early 19th century.

In the past, almost two hundred years, we Unitarian Universalists have broadened our sources BEYOND the Bible as we walk together in the ways of truth known or to be made known to us seeking to grow in our humanity.

But what has not changed in the past two hundred years is the responsibility and privilege of each congregation to ordain our religious leaders. We Unitarian Universalists have no Pope, no Bishops, no theological schools to ordain our clergy. From our early history, ministers were called out from among the congregation. They were one among equals in seeking and speaking the truth as they understood it; in being present to and caring for the community; in witnessing to, and working for, justice and beloved community.

They were one among equals until that moment when a congregation said, "We recognize in you your spiritual authority and religious leadership, and have chosen to set you apart. We are ordaining YOU, to preach the word of truth in freedom and love, to care for us in our joys and sorrows, to walk with us as we search for meaning within and outside our gathered community."

Michelle felt called to the Unitarian Universalist ministry after years of membership, leadership, and service in various congregations, and after a process of discernment. She felt prepared to take on the mantel of the office of Minister after years of academic preparation, and training as a chaplain and ministerial intern. The Ministerial Fellowship Committee of the Unitarian Universalist Association interviewed and recommended Michelle as a potential minister.

But it is only YOUR choice and vote as a congregation to ordain Michelle, that means that by the end of this ceremony Michelle Collins will henceforth be recognized as The Reverend Michelle Collins.

What will change during this ordination service? You will covenant, with Michelle. You will promise to allow her to lead you and all people in the ways of truth and love. She will promise to lead you and all people in the ways of truth and love. And then you will participate in the laying on of hands, affirming her ministerial authority through an act of blessing.

This raises John O'Donohue's question, "What is a blessing?" "Blessing," was not a word I heard growing up in a Unitarian Universalist congregation in the 1960's. We didn't even have a "prayer" in the order of service. Having rejected the theology of an omniscient, omnipotent, and eternal God whose power favored some and not others, it did not seem reasonable to make petitions for divine intervention. Instead, meditations were incorporated in worship expressing gratitude for the beauty of the earth; praise for joining with each pilgrim who quests for the true; and hope that we would witness for all people whose rights are denied.

But Michelle reminds me that over the past 40 years, we Unitarian Universalists have begun to intentionally explore a language of reverence and the meaning of "blessing."

For while prayer focuses on our relationship to the universe, blessing reminds us of our relationships with each other---that "each life is clothed in raiment of spirit that secretly links it to everything else."

In 2002, when Michelle began attending The Towson Unitarian Universalist Church, she would sign her e-mails, "Blessings." And what she intended by her signature sign-off was to draw a circle of light around the person she was writing.

Arriving at the word "Blessings" at the end of one of Michelle's e-mails, I was reminded of what John O'Donohue, author of our reading, wrote about his father who was both a farmer and a stone-mason. Before going to work in the fields, or on an errand to town, John O'Donohue's father would turn in the doorway to look at his family and take a deep breath. John writes, "It seems that what he was doing as he left was inhaling the spirit of his loved ones to nourish and protect his journey, coming back to take for himself a blessing-breath."

Michelle's choice to close her e-mails with "blessings" conveyed that she was drawing on the spirit of her reader to nourish and protect her journey while offering her own spirit to nourish and protect the reader on his or her journey. And this was before she went to seminary!

How often in our daily encounters do we pause in our homes, in our jobs, even in coffee hour on Sunday---to intentionally acknowledge the sacredness of another person and take a blessing breath?

Michelle's choice to end her missives with "blessings" also evokes a sense of warmth and protection. This was true when her e-mail was to re-organize the equivalent of Connection Circles at The Towson Unitarian Universalist Church. Not only did Michelle remind facilitators when they had volunteered to staff sign-up tables, she also reminded them who had volunteered to bring homemade cookies for the sign-up tables. Michelle's home-made cookies were a form of blessing---a source of connection different from a greeting or a hug---opening a different door in human encounter. Prepared with care....her cookies signified the intent to nurture a place where people could meet to purposefully acknowledge the divine spark in themselves and another. To this day, the facilitators of our Connection Circles follow Michelle's model and provide cookies when signing up new participants!

And Michelle's choice of the word "blessings" suggested future wholeness. Michelle recognizes our planet as our "original blessing" and cares passionately about our blue boat home. At the Towson Unitarian Universalist Church, she and another member initiated co-chairing our Green Sanctuary Committee. Together, they inspired members who sponsored worship services on stewardship of the earth, a community Forum, with over two hundred people in attendance, a fair of green products, and an energy audit.

John O'Donohue is right: "The beauty of blessing is its belief that it can affect what unfolds."

After Michelle left for seminary her hope for future wholeness for our planet continued to be felt at The Towson Unitarian Universalist Church. Our congregation became accredited as a Green Sanctuary church through the UUA's Ministry For The Earth AND we won Interfaith Power and Light's "Cool Congregation" contest, and \$5,000, for lowering our carbon footprint.

None of us may ever know the ongoing effects of our words and actions. What we do know, is that when we reach out, express, and work for our deepest hopes for the future, it makes a difference. It makes a difference in the lives of those who receive our highest aspirations and good intentions for future wholeness. In turn, this will make a difference in lives these people touch.

When have you felt the power of blessing in your own life?

Perhaps like Rachel Naomi Remen, you had an adult family member or teacher who gave you a tiny paper cup of dirt and encouraged you to put water in it every day until a few green leaves began to mysteriously unfold---revealing how new life is hidden in the most unlikely places and your service to nurture and cultivate it blesses the world.

Or, perhaps, you were like the protagonist, John Ames, in the novel *Gilead*, who had the experience, as a child, of baptizing a litter of kittens. John Ames went on to share, "For years we would wonder what, from a cosmic viewpoint, we had done to them. It still seems to me to be a real question." He goes on to say, "There is a reality in blessing . . . It doesn't enhance sacredness, but it acknowledges it, and there is power in that."

He concludes, "I have felt it pass through me, so to speak. The sensation of really knowing a creature, I mean really feeling its mysterious life and your mysterious life at the same time."

Perhaps you have been most aware of feeling another's mysterious life and your mysterious life at the same time before a family meal, or when a colleague publicly praises your work, or when the person who is homeless thanks you for listening by saying, "Have a blessed day." Blessings are those moments we are called into connection and communion. These moments flow from relationships in which people remember who they are, acknowledge their true worth, and strengthen what is whole in one another.

When have you experienced blessing, here at the First Unitarian Church of Wilmington? Perhaps it was the day you first walked in and felt protected, healed, and strengthened by a thoughtful worship service which did not presume to enhance sacredness, but acknowledged it. Perhaps it was standing in front of the congregation with your baby as the minister touched its head with a rose, while the baby's eyes widened and its hands reached to put the rose in its mouth. Perhaps it was remembering that act of blessing, years later, during the youth group service, listening to those young women and men share their dreams for their own future and for the future of our planet. Perhaps it was standing at the altar with another and exchanging vows to "love, honor, and cherish" until "death does you part." Or perhaps it was after a memorial service, for a person you did not know well...hearing about what gave their lives meaning...and leaving with the thought "I wish I had known them better."

Perhaps you experienced the power of blessing, here, in a smile exchanged while serving coffee, a question asked by a student while teaching Sunday School, being present at the bedside of a church member in the hospital, making a joyful noise in the Choir, making posters for a social justice march, even deciding the theme of the stewardship campaign or the color of new carpets.

Whether we realize it or not, we all have the power to bless. It does not require seminary training. It does not require a perfect ritual with everyone in the right place at the right time. It does not require that our vision be realized in the way that we had hoped. All that blessing ultimately requires is an openness "to feeling the mysterious life of another and your mysterious life at the same time." Such moments call us to serve the wholeness in each other and the wholeness in life. And this, ultimately, is why we gather as a Unitarian Universalist community---to grow in seeking the truths that inspire, guide, and challenge us to serve the wholeness in each other and the wholeness in life.

Now, through an act of blessing, you will ordain Michelle, who I knew, over a decade ago, as a parishioner, have watched called out by a congregation to serve as a religious leader, and look forward to welcoming as a colleague.

Michelle, bright blessings on your ministry!

And to you, the members of The First Unitarian Church of Wilmington, thank you for voting to ordain, to set apart, Michelle as a religious leader. May the act of ordination, which is yours, alone, remind you of the blessings of truth, love, and service, you exemplify as a congregation.

Together, may you always remember this moment---"feeling the mysterious life of another and your mysterious life at the same time." And, thus, may your blessings continue to flow mind to mind, heart to heart, hand to hand, generation to generation.

For blessing is from soul to soul. Amen.