

Return to the Most Human

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Unitarian Universalist
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Call to Worship

“Where there is great love there are always miracles!” (*Willa Cather*)

May there be great love here... among us... in this community:

love that helps us care;

love that helps us to heal;

love that helps us to forgive;

love that helps us to laugh;

love that helps us together to be creators of justice and peace;

love that helps us to... keep on.

Today... always...

Readings

The following selections were read thirty-five years ago on the occasion of my ordination to the Unitarian Universalist Ministry by the congregation of First Parish in Cambridge, September 23, 1984. We begin with words of my grandfather, Rev. Howard Yergin.

Words of Howard Yergin:

Who would you like to be? Who do you think yourself to be? Who are you in your own estimation? Let me ask you again, who would you like to be? One must make a choice, for one cannot be everything.

Words of Henry David Thoreau:

We must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake... by an infinite expectation of the dawn...

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.

Words of Walt Whitman:

I see something of God each hour of the twenty-four, and each moment then,
In the faces of men and women I see God, and in my own face in the glass,
I find letters from God drop't in the street, and every one is sign'd by God's name,
And I leave them where they are, for I know that wheresoe'er I go,
Others will punctually come for ever and ever.

Words (adapted) of Ralph Waldo Emerson:

When you meet one of these men or women... be to them thought and virtue; let their timid aspirations find in you a friend; let their trampled instincts be genially tempted out in your atmosphere; let their doubts know that you have doubted and their wonder feel that you have wondered.

Words of Jesus of Nazareth:

Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?

Lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy," But I say to you, love your enemies...

Words of May Sarton:

Return to the most human, nothing less
Will teach the angry spirit, the bewildered heart,
The torn mind, to accept the whole of its duress,
And pierced with anguish, at last act for love.

Words of Wendell Berry:

"...the will of God" as expressed in moral law may... have the same standing as the laws of gravity and thermodynamics... By our own day such evidence has accumulated as to suggest that it may be an absolute law: Love one another or die, individually or as a species.

Words of Willa Cather:

Where there is great love there are always miracles. Miracles rest not so much upon faces or voices or healing power coming to us from afar off, but on our perceptions being made finer, so that for a moment our eyes can see and our ears can hear what is there about us always.

Words attributed to Chief Seattle:

Every part of this earth is sacred to my people. Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark woods, every clearing and humming insect is holy in the memory and experience of my people...

This we know: the earth does not belong to us; we belong to the earth. All things are connected. We may be brothers after all. We shall see. One thing we know which the white man may one day discover: our God is the same God.

Words of Lao Tzu from the *Tao Te Ching*:

The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao.
The name that can be named is not the eternal name.

Sermon

I first preached this sermon (more or less) in 2004 to mark the then twenty years since my ordination to the Unitarian Universalist ministry by the First Parish in Cambridge. And I preached a version of it in Cambridge last Sunday. There were about 100 in attendance, including just three or four who had been at my ordination (and that included Susan!). Time passes!

In any case, the sermon is about the nature of ministry in our liberal UU tradition – ordained ministry *and* the ministries we each have in the world... and why our shared ministry matters.

I begin with some reflections specifically about my ordination, including some thoughts I was having as the day of my ordination approached. To do that, I back up much further.

I never knew my mother's father, my grandfather Rev. Howard Yergin. He died suddenly a few weeks before I was born, and I was given his name, Howard, as my middle name.

Yet though I never knew him, as I grew into adulthood I came to understand and honor the legacy of my grandfather, himself a liberal Presbyterian minister, involved early in the ecumenical movement, a preacher who called people to rise to their best selves.

And so, in reading some of his sermon notes I chose to include his words as the first words among the readings spoken at my ordination. We heard them earlier:

...who would you like to be? One must make a choice, for one cannot be everything.

It seemed to me as though he had written the words precisely for me at that time in my life. For during the weeks and months leading to my ordination, I felt significant doubts about my course in life, doubts about the meaning and relevance of ministry and of religion and even doubts about Unitarian Universalism. Yet my grandfather was reminding me that even (maybe especially) in the midst of doubts I needed to choose. One can, after all, get stuck forever debating a proper course... and never walking a path... any path. After all, Emerson said, as we heard, that I, as a minister, should let others know I have doubted!

So I didn't cancel the ordination!

It wasn't so much that I moved away from doubt as that I began to find ways to *include* my doubts and my questions as part of my path.

In further journal entries as the ordination drew closer, I suggested to myself that doubt could be thought of as a companion, a sort of Zen koan leading me forward if I stuck with it. Then I noted that the world needs people who wonder and ask questions, sometimes out of doubt

Some days later I added: "...the doubt *is* the doubt about life. The good in ministry for me is among other things that it... becomes a crucible for existential doubt and ambivalence, it allows me no escape from the dilemmas of living. Good."

In short, I was beginning to articulate for myself more clearly that ministry is a calling into which we are meant to bring everything... everything. Our doubts as well as our faith, our fear as well as our love, our complacency along with our passion. Everything. Leaving anything out leaves us less than whole, which means less than fully human.

So these lines we also heard earlier from UU poet May Sarton, which have long been a touchstone for me in life and in ministry:

Return to the most human, nothing less
Will teach the angry spirit, the bewildered heart,
The torn mind, to accept the whole of its duress,

And pierced with anguish, at last act for love.

This is of course a call to *all* of us – lay and ordained – in the shared ministry of religious community: to return to the most human, which means we must not turn away from our anger, our bewilderment, our duress... or anything else... but, rather, often find these as doors to deeper and more sustaining living, to love.

As the day of my ordination grew yet closer I articulated this even more clearly for myself. I wrote, “My ordination needs somehow to encompass heights and depths. Life can be so terrible, difficult, empty, and meaningless. Life can be so delightful, easy, full, and richly meaningful. Much of ministry is *being there* for all of the above.”

Being present. For “all of the above.” This is why among the readings I chose for my ordination were also selections about awakening to the joy and miracle of life, the pure amazement that we are here:

Thoreau:

We must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake... by an infinite expectation of the dawn.

Whitman:

I see something of God each hour of the twenty-four, and each moment then...

And it all does – of course! – move toward love. As we heard:

May Sarton said “at last act for love.”

Wendell Berry suggested that “love one another or die” might be a law of the universe.

Willa Cather affirmed that “Where there is great love there are always miracles.”

The rabbi Jesus challenged us not only to love our neighbors, but to love our enemies.

Yes, I believe it all moves toward love. Our lives move toward love like rivers to the sea, *if* we would choose to go with that flow. For if the words “Return to the most human” invite us to awakening and being present to life in *all* of its dimensions, terrible and wonderful, despairing and faithful, horror and miracle, then how could we do anything else for our fellow despairing and joyful creatures but choose love?

And make no mistake, love is a choice:

We can *choose* to turn towards one another or away from one another.

We can *choose* to ignore another’s suffering or respond to it.

We can *choose* to be kind or to be cruel.

We can *choose* to hold on to or to let go of resentments.

None of this is always easy, but we can choose.

Further, I would suggest that in the midst of all this, awakening to life in every dimension, moving toward and choosing love, there is room for God, by whatever name we would call God. In fact, the God of many names and beyond names may be what it is *all* about.

For yes, we begin with the human (that’s *my* starting place anyway), with all that we know most immediately at first hand. But being fully human, for me, includes leaving the door wide open not only to doubt, but also to faith, which for me has to do with the sort of mystical

experience of amazement and wonder captured in Whitman's exuberant surplus of words, as well as to the mystery beyond any words, call it what you will (after all, "The name that can be named is not the eternal name" as the *Tao Te Ching* reminds us).

But by whatever name or no name at all, what I'm talking about is the power in which we live and move and have our being, the "whatever it is" that creates and sustains... and perhaps that destroys as well. The door *wide* open.

So the day of my ordination dawned thirty-five years ago, September 23, 1984, as beautiful an early autumn day as could be.

In the Cambridge First Parish meeting house we gathered to the splendid sounds of their recently rebuilt organ. We sang together. The readings I had chosen and which you have heard were shared.

The sermon was preached by the supervisor of my student ministry at our UU church in San Francisco, Rev. Stan Stefancic. He lifted up in particular our heritage of the free mind and the value of study and contemplation for ministers in particular and for all of us as we strive to bring a humanizing, historically informed influence to bear upon our lives and upon the great issues of our time.

Rev. Ed Lane, minister in Cambridge at the time, charged the congregation to remember their part in shaping ministry and shaping particular ministries. For he noted that the word "ordination" has roots connoting something worn, something woven. We weave ministry together. As we do here.

And Rev. Herb Vetter, the director of Cambridge Forum, where I was serving at the time, with words I can only hope and strive to live up to, charged the minister – that would be me – to "Care! Care! Care! as pastor to the people I serve;" to rejoice in celebrating life passages - birth, marriage, memorial remembrance; and to "Dare to be a prophet in a dangerous world." He exhorted me to "Exemplify the relevant reverend, the type of liberal religious leader needed in our time as we move toward the 21st century..." and to "Be a minister who is ordained to facilitate the ministry of everyone for the sake of all, creating awareness that all of us are called to be ministers practicing our religious vocation in our daily lives."

It was in such a universalist spirit that I had chosen for another reading, the words attributed to Chief Seattle reminding us that the earth is sacred, that we are all connected and connected to all that lives, that we are brothers and sisters after all.

So I was ordained to the Unitarian Universalist ministry. Ordained by one congregation to serve, to be part of weaving ministry wherever my path, my calling, might lead.

This weaving of my ministry has taken place through continuing study and reflection, through the continuing example and influence and support of the people I love the most dearly, and consistently and deeply through the people I have served. As you well know, for most of the thirty-five years of my ordained ministry that has been you, the people of First Parish in Hingham, Old Ship Church.

Where I have been moved beyond tears by the ways in which you have "returned to the most human" as you have faced your trials, griefs, losses, challenges, and as you have manifested joy and presence amidst the miracle and mystery of life.

And where I have been inspired over and over again by your responses to the suffering of others in your lives and in the wider world, filled as it is with injustice, war, and environmental devastation. All as you strive to serve, to be kind, decent, and good, to answer the call of love.

Finally, as we have shared the mundane work of the congregation, I have been moved by your dedication to every aspect of our shared life here, sticking with it and with each other even in the midst of challenge and conflict – including close at hand in the midst of our parish house conversations as we struggle together to find common ground on the way forward for the health

and well-being of this Old Ship congregation – striving always to return to the most human, knowing more and more clearly that we are called to affirm the dignity and worth of one another in the midst of this interdependent web of life we share, and to act accordingly.

Well... all this said and much unsaid, last week I reaffirmed to my ordaining congregation and today I reaffirm to you my commitment to a shared ministry which strives to hold it all and to hold one another in the midst of whatever may come, a ministry which strives to be radically open to the mystery of life, and to awaken and re-awaken to the possibilities of and through religious community.

Remembering that a ministry which ends at the door to the meeting house is woefully incomplete.

For ministry begins in our hearts, then moves to the ways we connect to and care for one another, and completes itself through the ways in which we try with all our hearts together to bless the world and to transform the world towards more justice, peace, harmony with all life... at last and always acting for love.

Let us continue.

Benediction

Words of benediction I spoke thirty-five years ago at my ordination service in Cambridge:

Ordination of one minister
is a reminder that all of us are ministers.

We are all called to comfort those who suffer,
to bring peace where there is conflict,
to seek the truth even in dark corners,
to live what we believe.

We are all called to care.

We have... in these times more than ever...
no choice but to say yes to life,
no choice but to love.

amen.
blessed be.
so may it be.