

A Lawyer Enters the Phone Booth
... A Preacher Emerges
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Fayetteville
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What does it mean to be a minister, a pastor, a clergy person? In particular, what does it mean to be a Unitarian Universalist minister? And specifically, what does it mean to *me* to be a Unitarian Universalist minister? And why did I decide to become one?

Imagine this scene. It's 1946. We're in Homer, Michigan, a small railroad town in the southwestern part of the state. It's Sunday morning, and we're in the Presbyterian church. It's a special Sunday, and in the pulpit is their minister emeritus, now a very old man, the Rev. Herbert Erastus Davis. Sitting in the front pew are four generations of his family. The youngest is little Dave Hunter, a four-year-old. Little Dave hears the old man preach. He doesn't really understand a word of it, but he is spellbound; he is in awe of his great grandfather's preaching voice. It sounds like the voice of God – a voice that could strike terror deep into your heart but at the same time a voice that is filled with love and compassion. By the end of the sermon – and the good reverend never shortchanged his congregation – young Dave has made up his mind; he has resolved to become a preacher himself.

Now there's a small problem with this story. It didn't happen. My great grandfather died in 1916, at the age of 64. He had retired a number of years earlier, because of deafness. In fact, I had little awareness growing up of my late great grandfather. If my grandmother ever told me stories of her father, they didn't stick.

I made that one up, but here's a memory that's real, and I believe it's reliable. I was brought up Presbyterian, and my family was an active one in our local congregation. I remember one Sunday school class in particular: the teacher asked us what we wished for. The other kids named bicycles or ponies or baseball gloves. I said "world peace." I didn't care that my classmates might laugh at such a hope. If I were to answer that question today, by the way, I would add "with justice" – "world peace with justice."

I remember from the same era – no later than 1953 – deciding to read the Bible. I don't remember how far I got, but there's no way that a nine or ten-year-old can make it through forty years of wandering in the wilderness.

In any event, at some point during that era I decided that if Christianity really has the truth, if Christianity has the saving message that it claims to have, then I should preach the good news, I should share the gospel, I should become a Presbyterian minister. Some would say that I had heard the call.

That resolution faded during my teenaged years, as my increasingly critical mind grew skeptical about the basic doctrines of Christianity, as I understood them. Ministry joined the list

of occupations that I aspired to but eventually forgot or rejected. That list includes farmer (following my mother's father), streetcar driver (I still love rails and whatever rides on them), high school history teacher, and international banker.

You'll notice that *lawyer* was not on my list. Around fourth or fifth grade, my teacher did suggest to me that I might become a lawyer some day. The assignment she had given us was to write seven times eight equals fifty six in as many different ways as we could. My list was far longer than anyone else's, and I hadn't even heard of number systems with bases other than ten. To her thinking, my obsessiveness was an indicator of lawyer potential.

Do any of you remember the SDS flyer on manpower channeling? For those of you who don't remember the 1960's, SDS was the Students for a Democratic Society, the leading group of the New Left. The manpower channeling flyer explained that the purpose of the draft was to persuade young men from privileged families – families like mine – to stay in school and to channel them into professions like law or medicine, while at the same time sending young men from poor families, especially from poor black families, to the military, to serve as cannon fodder in Vietnam. I can't evaluate the historical accuracy of the SDS claim, but I went to law school to avoid Vietnam, and thus I became a lawyer. From law school graduation in 1967 to retirement from federal service in 2000, I was a civil rights lawyer.

A foreshadowing of my eventual call to Unitarian Universalist ministry came in 1973, when I met Catherine. One of the things that attracted me to Catherine – we were married the next year – was her intention to become a Unitarian Universalist minister. She had been raised a UU. Looking back, I think that she was expressing a desire that I had, though I could not have articulated it at the time.

Twenty four years later, in 1997, I began my ministerial training, and here I am – graduated, fellowshipped, ordained, called, and installed – and in your pulpit today.

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The question I posed a few minutes ago was What does it mean to be a Unitarian Universalist minister? In some faith traditions, certain things are reserved for clergy. In some denominations, preaching is reserved for the ministry. In Roman Catholicism, only a priest can perform the Eucharist. What is there, in Unitarian Universalism, that only ordained ministers can do? What is there that lay people are not allowed to do?

The short answer is nothing. Any one of you is eligible to teach or preach, to visit the sick and the bereaved, to dedicate babies and preside at memorial services. Now you might think that weddings are one thing that are restricted to the clergy. But the rules about who can perform weddings are established by state law, not by any rule or principle of Unitarian Universalism. You can find my name, by the way, in the county clerk's office, on page 207 of Book I – that entry gives me the authority to assist a man and a woman in becoming a legally married husband and wife. It is my hope that during my tenure here that that authority will be generalized to refer to two *people*, regardless of gender.

On the other side of the coin is the question, What is it in a Unitarian Universalist congregation that the minister is forbidden from doing? What is it that is reserved to the lay members of the congregation? Again, the answer is nothing. There is nothing that you do as a volunteer for this fellowship that a minister could not do. There's nothing that any one on the staff does – Shelley or Melanie or Renée or Chris or Iris or Jerry – there's nothing that they do that, at least in theory, a minister couldn't do, although I certainly couldn't do as good a job as any of them. This absence of limitation presents a special challenge for me, because I was an active lay person for so many years before I entered the ministry. I'm inclined to continue to do as a minister the things that I used to do as a lay person, and I have to remind myself from time to time to hold back, and to think about what my role is among you.

Thus UU congregations and their ministers have to work out a division of responsibilities, a division of labor. They have to decide how a minister's time and talent is best used. This is not easy.

I remember back in the fall of 2003. I had graduated a couple of months earlier from Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C., and I was beginning my part time ministry with the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Greater Cumberland. It was roughly a one fifth time position. I was to be with them one weekend a month. Cumberland was four and a half hours from our home in suburban Philadelphia.

I convinced them to have a workshop, open to anyone in the congregation, before I got started, a workshop to discuss how I could best serve the congregation. In preparation for the workshop I created a form that listed all the ministerial tasks that I could think of. I passed out my forms and asked them to rank them in importance and to indicate how many of my thirty hours a month they wanted me to spend on each task. It may have been an impossible assignment for them. In any event, they couldn't do it. They were unable to quantify how much time they thought I should devote to different items on the list. They were unable to prioritize and say that one ministerial function was more important than another.

There was, however, almost complete agreement on one thing. They didn't think I should spend my time on pastoral care, on making visits to the elderly and the sick. They thought they could take care of that well enough themselves.

One person dissented from that position. He was a man in his eighties, with a number of health problems himself, and his wife was in the nursing unit at the hospital, suffering from Alzheimer's and other maladies of old age. He would welcome visits by the minister.

Of course, I visited the old man and his wife whenever I was in Cumberland, and later that fall I presided at her memorial service.

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If there's nothing a minister does that cannot be done by a lay person, then why – you may be asking yourself – why have a minister? Indeed, many small Unitarian Universalist

congregations do not have ministers and are entirely lay led. This fellowship was such a congregation in its early years.

There are two principal reasons why UU congregations decide to follow the path of ministry. First, lay volunteers don't have the time to do all the work that a minister might do. Second, a congregation may decide that it would benefit from having among them someone with ministerial training and experience. Thus ministers preach and lead worship services. Ministers teach classes, make hospital visits, give guidance to committees. Ministers represent the congregation in the wider community and offer a prophetic voice. I won't try give you a complete list.

But let's look beyond a list of tasks and try to go deeper. What is Unitarian Universalist ministry really about? Why do some people feel called to ministry? And why do they respond to that call? Ministry is not always fun. Ministry is not easy. The hours are irregular, and you never know when the phone might ring. If you want to make a lot of money, this is not the field for you.

You might imagine that there's great ego gratification in being able to stand in front of a crowd like this and have them pay attention to your words. But if you go into ministry for ego gratification, you're not likely to last long.

Some aspiring ministers might imagine that ministry could be their path to high national office – a few years as a pastor, building a statewide reputation; then a few years as the governor of a modest but centrally located state, and then – who knows? – one might even become President of the United States! But UU ministers who considered themselves presidential timber might reasonably be considered delusional.

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There is a clever slogan that suggests that the role of the minister is to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable. If you consider this slogan a poetical and thus memorable way to express an idea, and don't take it completely literally, then I would say that it's right on target. The minister is there to comfort the widow, whose late husband's departure is the source of profound grief, no matter how timely the death may appear, from a narrowly rational point of view. The minister is there, in the hospital room, to hold the hands of the parents whose child may or may not make it through the night – whose child may be four hours old, or 44 years old.

The minister is there – it could be anywhere – to listen: to listen to those who are angry at God for how they have been treated, or angry at life, or angry at their mother. The minister probably can't fix anything – for that you may need a carpenter or a plumber or a psychotherapist – but it's good to know that someone cares; it can help to be reminded that love still exists, even if you can't feel it right now.

The other part of the slogan instructs the minister to afflict the comfortable. Goodness, don't we need that in our society! The preacher's prophetic voice is needed today as much as ever. Pick a topic: war and peace, global warming, economic inequality, unavailability of health care, education premised on low expectations. Too many Americans are far too comfortable. I must admit that I consider myself one of them, too, one of the too comfortable.

There's another aspect of afflicting the comfortable where the prudent minister treads lightly. The comfortable who need to be afflicted are not just out there; they can be in here, as well. I realize that guilt trips are rarely effective in convincing anyone to change. Far better is to offer hope and inspiration, and to set a good example. So I won't hold up to ridicule or derision anyone who could volunteer to serve on a committee or to teach our children or to sing in our choir or to plant bulbs in the memorial garden but has not volunteered. I won't say a critical word about anyone who could painlessly make a high four figure pledge but feels they're generous enough with a low to middling four figure pledge. I won't reprimand anyone who declines to share the good news of Unitarian Universalism with friends or neighbors, not wanting to push their religion on others.

Rather, I would use words to inspire you, to remind you of how satisfying it can be to join with others in your religious community to make this fellowship one of which we can be increasingly proud, to remind you of how rewarding it can be to help a child or a garden blossom, to remind you of how amazing it can be to make beautiful music together, to remind you of how good it can feel to make a pledge that represents your commitment to this congregation and not just what you can get away with, to remind you of the joy that many people feel when they learn that a religion like Unitarian Universalism exists (but I should warn you of the anger that they may feel that you didn't share the good news of Unitarian Universalism with them sooner).

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Okay. I've mentioned the various professional tasks that need to be done, preaching and so on. I've talked about the minister's pastoral role and the minister's prophetic role. I've alluded to the minister's responsibility to further the health of the congregation and of its members. Is there anything else? ***Chris: play #123 (Spirit of Life) mm 17-20 ("Roots hold me close: wings set me free")*** Chris, are you trying to tell me something? ***Chris: play again #123 (Spirit of Life) mm 17-20 ("Roots hold me close: wings set me free")***

Most of you will recognize the passage from our beloved hymn, Spirit of Life (it's #123), "Roots hold me close: wings set me free." [by Carolyn McDade] It's the minister's responsibility to remind the people of their spiritual heritage – our roots – and to keep us connected to them. Likewise, it's the minister's responsibility to help people grow the wings – that's a metaphor, by the way: there are no literal wings involved – that will set them free.

Let's, first, take a quick look at our roots. If we ignore our roots, Unitarian Universalism risks becoming an *anything goes* religion: you can believe whatever you want, and we'll start from scratch each generation and in each congregation. Rather, we should, as I see it,

build on those who came before. They did difficult and valuable work. We should not just casually discard or maintain stubborn ignorance of it. This morning I'll mention just one aspect of our heritage – our critical attitude, as exemplified by both Unitarians and Universalists.

We are known for our critical attitude, indeed, our willingness to be heretics, if that is where our reason leads us. In the late 18th century there were those among the Boston Congregationalists whose serious biblical and theological study led them to have reservations about the Triune God, about the Trinity. They couldn't understand how a man, Jesus, to be specific, how a man could be considered God. They couldn't understand how God could somehow consist of three persons and yet be considered one God. And reading the Bible didn't really help. These folks, who concluded that no matter how special Jesus might have been, he wasn't God, are our Unitarian ancestors

At about the same time, and likewise in New England, there were those who just couldn't stomach the idea that ordinary people like themselves could end up in eternal hellfire. Such an arrangement just didn't make sense to them. And it seemed to contradict the love that they found in their Bible. How could the same God who inspired the recommendation that we love our neighbors also consign even one person to eternal punishment. These folks, who believed that all are ultimately reconciled to God, are our Universalist ancestors.

There's obviously a lot more to our history than that, but let's move on to our wings. In a Unitarian Universalist congregation we try to help both our young people and our adults grow the wings that will set them free – free from doctrines that cannot withstand the light of reason, free from constricted thinking that dares not follow a metaphor to see where it will take them, free from prejudice that categorizes people in arbitrary ways and leads to fear of the *other*, free from parochialism that recognizes the worth only of the local and holds us back from finding value and delight of the culture of people *over there*.

Yes, we need to grow wings to set ourselves free. But while we free ourselves from the things that were holding us back, we also have to think about the positive use of freedom. What are we free for? How do we use our freedom? With our wings we can fly high and see a long ways, but how do we decide in what direction to fly, and where to land?

One answer might be, We do what our minister tells us to do. But I doubt if there's a single person in this room who would buy that. I certainly wouldn't. Together, congregation and ministers can develop and renew the congregation's vision. Your ministers can help you prepare for your flight, reminding you to take some peanut butter sandwiches and clean socks. You can tell us your plans, and in the telling come to understand them better and see some things you might have missed. And we can keep the chalice flame burning, so that when after many adventures you want to come home again, you'll be able to find the way.