

**DRAFT**

**WHAT DO MINISTERS DO?**  
**Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Clemson**  
**September 26, 2010**

Last week I spoke about atonement, forgiveness and Unitarian Universalist faith. This week I want to talk about ministry and offer up time for conversation for a few minutes.

I just shared with the children and you a story about ministry at that accident scene in Indiana many years ago. Here's another story about how ministry became a calling. It also involves a question some of you asked week about whether forgiving someone for their wrongdoings would in effect condone those transgressions.

I found one answer to that difficult question about 25 years ago. It was 1985 and I was living in Oakland California. I'd started going to the Unitarian Church of Berkeley and was feeling the first restless stirrings and call to ministry.

I decided to go back home to the farm in Maine to see my foster parents as they were aging and annual trips were mandatory. My relationship with them had always been a hard one because my foster father had showered emotional and physical abuse and beatings on me throughout childhood. He was a mean-hearted man who suffered very deeply for reasons I cannot begin to guess.

I felt fortunate that visit because he didn't lose his temper, my foster mother didn't accuse me of being a liberal too often and all was good. On the last day, my foster father built up to a loss of temper. It happened after lunch when he asked me where a bolo tie was that my grandfather had given me. I said it was probably upstairs in my room. His response was to get red-faced and angry saying that I'd probably lost it. My internal response was to think 'here we go again, almost made it through a trip but...' I offered to go upstairs to my room and find it for him. I did so and he followed me with his face red and angry words. Just as I found it in the top drawer of my dresser, he reached the top of the stairs and the entry to my room.

At that moment, I looked at him and had an inspiration. I said **“here, why don't you take care of this for awhile so it doesn't get lost.”** And I handed it to him. I remember to this day that he looked at me for a moment like a child would look being offered a precious gift. He quickly smiled for a moment and I could tell he didn't know what to say.

All the memories of abuse were still there in my mind but now in my heart there was the beginning place of healing... **'here, you take this with my blessing and it is my gift to you.'**

That was another moment when ministry became a presence for me. I learned to trust my reason and my intuition, my head and my heart. More importantly, by confronting anger with gentle compassion, I began to dissolve many years of my own anger toward him. Will I ever forgive him even 25 years after his death? Probably not but in that one moment of insight, I helped him perhaps see a glimmer of light in his dark life. In doing so, I found a flame to hold up just as we do with each good deed.

That's one thing people who do ministry do.

So what else do ministers do – at least the ones you hire or call?

First, for those of you who are new to Unitarian Universalism, I'd like to give you some idea as to what makes a minister. I offer this information from both my personal experience and what I know from colleagues and the UUA. Many of our newest generation of ministers are in seminary later in life after having an average of three prior careers. Increasing percentages are studying at non-Unitarian Universalist seminaries. Most will need to prepare to see the Ministerial Fellowship Committee which "certifies" that students of ministry can be fellowshiped within our association. It's a tough process and not all are accepted. Candidates for fellowship must complete many course requirements and address tough questions such as their theological grounding. They will be required to do a ministerial internship at a UU church. They'll need to successfully complete a unit of chaplain training.

If successful, they will then launch themselves into the highly competitive time of seeking churches, community ministries or other forms of ministry. The average student loan debt of new ministers is about \$50,000. Many have families. Most have a deep sense of calling and will be tested in the forge of the vocation and its demands.

All will seek to serve to the best of our ability. We will all try to be "real" ministers. So here's one reality of some of those statements I read earlier. I should add that these are my personal opinions based on experience and twenty or so years in ministry:

**"Real ministers work only one hour a week."**

As you can imagine, this is far from true. Sunday service is the most visible time that a minister and congregation see each other. The average hours that a full time minister works is more like 50-70 hours. We spend at least 20 hours reading and writing for the sermon. Much time is taken up with meetings, counseling and working with church staff. In ministry, like

most of the helping professions, we need to be flexible and adjust our priorities quickly. Emergencies come up, people fall ill and we must always be ready to adjust. Most ministers have regular days off as well as vacation and study time in the summer months. By the time summer arrives, ministers and congregations need a break and that is one reason why there's a long stretch of vacation time then. Renewal for both congregation and minister is essential during that time.

**“Real ministers never worry about their sermons.”**

Don't believe that one for one single moment. Speaking personally, if I ever get to the point of not worrying about my sermons, I should retire and take up selling cars. The average amount of time I put into sermon preparation including research and conceptual work is about 30 or so hours.

So here I'd like to add a more serious statement about “what GOOD ministers do.”

It is simple: **“Good ministers have healthy humility.”** Now, we might think that's a natural part of being a minister. It isn't. There's a reason why they don't teach classes in humility 101 at seminary. We'd probably skip them after saying **“who, me, I am already humble and proud of it?”**

But I think healthy humility is critical and given our responsibilities to serve others, we need to acknowledge to ourselves first and others as necessary that we cannot hope to do everything or be good at all tasks. I also use the word “healthy” here because I know that false humility can be very destructive. Healthy humility is being willing to say clearly “I need help” or “I don't know but I'll try to find out for you.” Healthy humility also means that we know we always have more to learn about life and can't pretend to know it all. This is another reason why I insist on sitting on the floor with the children whenever I do Together Time. It's not only respectful to them but there's something deeply humble about being at their eye level and seeing the world as they do.

Here's another statement: **good ministers help create shared ministry.** When I looked over the packet the search committee sent me, I wondered what on earth COSMOS meant. I figured out the first four letters – Committee on Shared Ministry – but was puzzled at the O and S at the end. Did it mean “Operating System” so the committee was like a powerful computer with a fast operating system? Perhaps the group reboots or defragments the whole fellowship from time to time?

Or might it mean something like “Of Service” so the whole term would be **Committee on Shared Ministry of Service.** I still don't know what COSMOS means but I like the last title. It means we are all serving a

greater good that happens when we help each other or make a phone call to offer a meal.

Service happens when we cheerfully or perhaps grudgingly drive over to a committee meeting.

Service comes to pass when we share our stories at a covenant group meeting that is called “small group ministry” in many churches.

No, much of the shared ministry we do here doesn’t come with a paycheck. And we’re asked to pledge in addition to our service. It may not seem reasonable at times but consider what a difference a small gesture or an hour in the kitchen or teaching a class may make.

Each time we serve one another, we are helping each other through a world of hurt and sorrow and confusion.

We are giving the gift of ourselves to this home of liberal religious ideas and dreams.

And best of all, we help each other prepare to leave these rooms to where the greater service begins – our homes, our neighborhoods, our cities and all those in our hearts.

I’d like to stop here and ask you this question: **what examples of ministry have you seen or heard here at this congregation? They could be your own or someone else’s. They could be efforts the whole fellowship made 20 years ago or last week.**

Let’s have a time of quiet in the Quaker style of worship and when the spirit moves you, say a few words about what ministry you and we do here.

Consider all you’ve said just now to be like the rain that fell this morning after a long spell when the earth was crying out for nourishment and water. All that we do in ministry is to nourish, to quicken, and to call the seeds of the future into the promise of life.

May it always be so.