

Sermon Showing Up

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A few weeks ago, I asked Why are you here? Today, I ask Whose church is it anyway? We rarely realize that what we do with one another is ministry until someone points it out. Let's explore this notion. And what would it look like if we took this idea of shared ministry out into the world?

"Ah. I smiled. I'm not really here to keep you from freaking out. I'm here to be with you while you freak out, or grieve or laugh or suffer or sing. It is a ministry of presence. It is showing up with a loving heart."

— Kate Braestrup, *Here If You Need Me: A True Story*

A few years ago, I was on my way to Boston University,
traveling down a side street
when the car in front of me plowed into a parked car.
I stopped; helped the very young Russian driver:
held her hand, told her yes,
she'd have to call her family and her job.
I called the police and stayed with her until they got there.
When the police and ambulance arrived
she kept my hand while I told her the most important thing was
she was alright and everything else would get sorted out.
After they left, the officer turned to me and asked: "Are you her mother?"
No, I said, and No, I thought, I'm a minister.

I've been thinking these past few weeks about what makes ministry a calling
and what makes it an aspect of a good life.
Because attending to oneself and others is part of what makes a good person.
So how is what I do different from what anyone else would do?
And what does being a church require of its people?
How does doing ministry become a thing apart and yet a thing of our daily lives?

My path to your pulpit was pretty straightforward with a few detours.
September 11th happened, and in the weeks and months that followed
I became increasingly dissatisfied with my life.
Apparently my call to ministry had been knocking at my door for some time
and I had been ignoring it until then.
I'm too old for seminary, I told myself.
I've got a husband, children, an ailing mother, a job that keeps me jumping,
a congregation that needs my lay leadership.
My calling just kept banging away at the door, ignoring me as much as I ignored it.
Finally I opened that door and began years of intellectual wrestling matches with scripture,
emotional wrestling with faith,
and the physical wrestling with a life that required me to be in four places at once.
I trained as a chaplain. I interned at a large Christian UU church.
Everything was so different from my humanist upbringing.
It was exhilarating, and guilt-tripping. You see, preparing for ministry means
everything becomes fodder, becomes grist for the mill of an examined life.
Everything means opening oneself to change.
To be open to this work means to betray one's roots, or else you are not truly open to being transformed.
Everything shakes your foundations. Everything can make your heart break if you let it.
And, darn it, people, ideas, happenstances keep knocking at your door

and threatening your heart.

And, on top of it all, there is this drive to find what is holy and divine about it all.

The first time I met with my mentor Rev. Kathleen McTigue, she asked me, "What will your role be for the congregation?"

I started launching into my learned definitions of Unitarian Universalist ministry 101, and she stopped me, saying: "You embody God for them, you embody God."

Whoa. God, what God, whose God, where's God?

Has anyone ever told you that you embody God?

Let me tell you, it felt like a responsibility and a gift.

Like being told you are loved. Like being called to love.

And I realized that, for me to make sense of any of this;

God had to be love – not because of some glorified euphemism of the 70s

but because it was the only thing that made sense.

God is love meant that being in relationship, imperfect though it may be,

is the path – not just to a pulpit – but to an understanding of why it's there to begin with.

So let's talk about ministry, and let's talk about relationships.

A more articulate colleague of mine defined them well:

<http://www.uuchurchmuncie.org/web/73-sermons/community-ministers-sermons/363-hemeyer-our-shared-calling-january-31-2010.html>

"Our Shared Calling: The Whole Ministry of the Church"

Guest Sermon by Julia Corbett-Hemeyer

Unitarian Universalist Church of Muncie

January 31, 2010

- At its most basic, ministry is about presence—being present for, to and with one another and what is holy, if you will.
- We bring the elusive, mysterious presence of ultimacy into something real and tangible through the compassion and care we have for each other and the work of caring we do in the various communities of which we're a part.
- We consciously and intentionally function in the context of and in relationship with that which we perceive as holy, ultimate, or sacred, however we experience/name that. Ministry is conscious, intentional.
- The ordinary fabric of life offers countless opportunity to live our faith outside the framework of a faith community. Ministry means either assuming personal responsibility to transform the non-spiritual setting or discovering how to live spiritually in a non-spiritual setting.
- "What makes . . . ministry different from simply living life as a good person? In one aspect, not much, as the observable activity will look the same. What does matter, however, is the mindset.

What is shared ministry?

A key aspect of Unitarian Universalism is that the ministry of the congregation is the responsibility of everyone, not just of ordained ministers.

James Luther Adams called it the priesthood and the prophethood of all believers.

Ministry happens in these walls and outside of these walls.

But inside these walls, we learn to attend to one another and rely on one another and appreciate one another in a way that brings a new dimension into our lives.

If we join together, if we sit together and break bread together,
if we work together and play together as a *congregation*,
we are inviting something greater than companionship into this place.
We are inviting that which we see as sacred.
We are inviting a vocation, a vocation to create a place where,
as Fredrick Buechner has expressed,
“...your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”

— *Frederick Buechner, Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*

What does something greater than companionship mean?
It means that, to some extent,
you bring to these encounters and relationships
something more than your own needs and deep gladness.
Oh, they’re there alright, but you are aware of them,
aware that they fuel the connections you make
aware that you may need to be forgiven for them,
and aware that you bring so much more and make room for so much more
when you make room for the spirit.

How do we make more room for the spirit?
We make room for the spirit when, as we are opening the door to welcome it in,
we let something out.

When I finally opened the door to my calling for ministry,
there were definitely some things I had to shoo out of my spiritual house
and I’m fairly certain some of you have those things residing in yours.
Because embodying God is embodying love, all our ministry requires
communication and trust.
Anything we have in our spiritual houses that interferes with that
has to be gradually and repeatedly shown the door. It can take a while, I can tell you.
What did I have to shove out the door? Well, let’s start with some messages we learn from the cradle:

- I shouldn’t have to ask.
- If I have to ask for help or attention, then my responder doesn’t really care.
- I should do it all myself if it’s going to be done right.
- I have to get it right the first time or it means I wasn’t meant to do it in the first place.
- If people don’t like my ideas, they don’t like me.

To minister requires that we are vulnerable; that we share our hurt
and that we open ourselves to healing.
We have to ask, to acknowledge that we have needs.
We are human and imperfect.
Whatever divine Love resides in us is what fuels us to make progress toward wholeness and goodness.
It does not congratulate us for being there already.
We are together to be transformed more than we are to be transforming.
We must, somewhere in our lives, create a place for trust that will allow us to be transformed.
When we open our doors to that, we open our doors to the spirit.

Above all, no one of us, not me, not you, can do this alone.
Shared ministry is what church life is all about.
When it is not there, it is not church.

And when this demand for communication, for trust, for transformation makes us open our doors to the wider world; when we stride down our front steps and encounter the world, show up for the world – we know that we are not there to fix lives or make miracles but to let goodness happen. So that we are not alone.

I tell you today, you embody God whether you know it or not. You embody Love whether you know it or not. So make room, dear friends, make room.

“Then light your candles to the living. Say your prayers for the living. Leave the stones where they are, but take your heart with you. Your heart is not a stone. True love demands that, like a bride with her bouquet, you toss your fragile glass heart into the waiting crowd of living hands and trust that they will catch it.”

— Kate Braestrup, *Here If You Need Me: A True Story*