



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

30 Years: My Life In Ministry

Rev. Dr. Jim Nelson, Senior Minister

January 23, 2011

301 N. Orange Grove Blvd. Pasadena, CA 91103 (626) 449-3470 information@uuneighborhood.org

It was thirty years ago, this past Wednesday, on Jan 19, 1981 that I was ordained by the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Arlington, VA to the Unitarian Universalist ministry. Thirty years. What seems most astonishing to me now is that I was once in my thirties – how memory and time do fly.

Today I would like to share that story, of how I got there and some things I have learned along the way. It is one of those odd jobs, ministry, the kind that gets you confused reactions on an airplane when someone asks you what you do.

I never intended this – this being a minister. I grew up in a very religious family; we were churchgoers, Lutherans. My Mom and my Dad were always leaders in our churches, and I was of youth groups. In high school for a while, my nickname was Rev but I never, ever thought I wanted to be a minister. I had never heard of Unitarian Universalism. I think my Dad always wished he had become one, but college was out of his family's reach and so he was a dedicated lay person – someone as valuable for a healthy congregation as a good minister! All that was before religion became a weapon as it is all too often these days.

I went to college planning to be a scientist – I wanted to study glaciers [big white things]– but I got caught by the humanities bug and especially literature. The English department at Lawrence believed in new criticism – highly technical reading of literature. I was after the meat, the blood and guts of story, the drama that makes literature so exciting, the tension and conflict of characters moving with and against each other in life. I thought I might be able to make sense of my own life by reading.

So I became a religion major – it had great fiction stories and tons of tension. It had philosophy and sociology, history, art and culture. It provided, I thought, the fullest and deepest inquiry into the human condition. It was the stories above all that grabbed me.

The stories of Moses and Abraham and David, of Jesus, of the Buddha and Krishna, of Mohammed. They are all fiction – some based in fact, none wholly true, but all attempts to understand why we love and hate and grieve and celebrate. Those studies allowed me to see the Christian faith of my upbringing as one faith among many, neither more nor less true or false, but part of that very human attempt to organize life and find meaning in what we do, the human attempt to deal with sorrow and loss, with the fact of death, with those moments of awe.

It is fascinating and fun stuff. Studying religion confronted me with the whole range of human behaviors – sane and crazy, wonderful and awful. And so much fun that I went on to graduate school and earned a PhD in religious studies from the University of Iowa. My hope was to teach religion.

By this time I had heard of Unitarian Universalism.

It was at Iowa that I met Herman Melville and I combined my love of Melville – a writer full of bones and muscle and blood – with study of the Hebrew Bible, that other compendium of wild and crazy stories. I had originally planned to do my thesis on Moby Dick but it would have made for a very long dissertation, so instead focused on Billy Budd – ninety pages was more manageable than 600+.

But teaching jobs were not to be found, and I ended up in Washington DC, working on Capital Hill for Neal Smith, congressman from Iowa. This was just when the Iran hostage crisis occurred, after the fall of the Shah of Iran and the arrival of the Ayatollah Khomeini. I became, very briefly, one of the experts in Congress about Islam, and had conversations with staff from the House and the Senate, the State Department and the CIA. I think I was one of the few people on Capital Hill who understood the distinction between Shi'a and Sunni Islam. I had had one course in graduate school on Islam – there you go.

About then, one Sunday, I visited Cedar Lane Unitarian Church in Bethesda MD with a friend, who introduced me to their minister Ken McLean who immediately recruited me to lead an adult education class which led to his urging me to apply to be the intern minister at Arlington, which I did and was hired.

So I began my career in ministry with never having been to seminary, never having been a member of a UU congregation, and not even sure if I was a Unitarian Universalist. Soon, however, I found I loved it well enough – I met wonderful people, engaged in terrific conversations and social justice activities, was challenged to think about how ideas matter in people's lives.

To become a minister, we require three things: three years of graduate study in religion, usually done in a seminary, a parish internship, and CPE, Clinical Pastoral Education. This is a clinical internship, of ten weeks minimum, to learn about ministry. It is usually done in a hospital setting. I did mine at St. Elizabeths Psychiatric Hospital in Washington DC. most famous as the home, once of Ezra Pound, and currently of John Hinckley – the would-be Reagan assassin.

I stayed there –not as a resident - for 9 units of training, 27 months. It was fascinating and I have always thought that working in a psychiatric facility was perfect training for working in a UU congregation. We used to say that the mentally ill are just like us, only more so. So, too with UUs and other people of faith; we are just like them, only more so. More so in wondering what is true or not, more so in our dedication to just living.

Then it was time to enter parish life. In 1984, right after our first girl was born, I interviewed at three congregations: Midland, TX; Coquitlam, British Columbia [Rev Hannah Petrie's husband Kit's home church]; and Costa Mesa. I went to Costa Mesa. While there, Brandy Lovely became my mentor and I dreamed that one day I might serve Neighborhood as minister.

I served Costa Mesa for nine years, went to Fairfax County, Virginia and served there for nine years, and now here I am.

What does it add up to? Along the way, I have made mistakes and had successes: I have helped people and failed to help them. I really do believe I have received more than I have given. I have been blunt and oblique, cowardly and courageous, warm and cold. I have developed a love of and understanding of poetry and jazz music. I have grown a bit old and grey; my daughters have been born and are grown. I have dedicated a bunch of kids, married young and old, straight and gay, and buried more people than I wish.

I have delivered somewhere around 700+ sermons, some of them more than once. Some good, some bad, some in-between.

Here are two things that have stood by me for a very long time: the first is a quote from Saul bellow's Dangling Man: We are all drawn towards the same craters of the spirit, to know what we are and what we are for, to know our purpose, to seek grace.

We are all drawn towards the same craters of the spirit, to know what we are and what we are for, to know our purpose, to seek grace.

The same craters of the spirit – how true that is, what is you is me is us. I am you and you are me and we are all together. There is something common about the human experience – to know who we are and what we are for, to know our purpose, to seek grace. Any better description of our task here?

The second is from Ken McLean: he said that congregations were like bowls, or chalices into which people poured their lives. Our job, as ministers and as members, is to keep that bowl, that chalice, in good enough repair so that our lives don't fall through.

This is a great lesson I learned from Ken, and from both Brandy Lovely and Lee Barker. Brandy loved congregations more than any minister I ever have known, and this one in particular, and Lee loves and understands institutions as well as any minister I have known – what we do, we ministers is to care for communities above all else. Our faith is carried by us together; Unitarian Universalism exists only in congregations; it is here where our faith takes shapes, grows and transforms. Here, together, in the local congregation, bound together in a beloved community.

This chalice was made for me by Frank Hassett. He was a member of the church in Costa Mesa. He grew up a Christian Scientist, joined the Air Force, flew in Korea, made it a career, flying the biggest planes he could, was married and had five children. Everywhere he was posted, he and Doris found or founded a UU congregation. Sometimes they were the entire RE program.

He took up art in retirement; I have several of his paintings, a sculpted bronze of Lincoln's head. He made this for me, and told me, that when I retired I should give it to some younger minister. He knew our faith was something we inherited and something we used then something we passed along. We don't own this faith, none of us own this faith. We have it on loan. We share this faith.

So what have I learned in these thirty years? I have learned that I love people, and that together we can do much, more than we can do alone. I have learned that I am more fallible than I hoped and stronger than I believed.

I have learned that it is really hard to believe, and that Hawthorne had it just right about Melville when he said that Melville could neither believe nor disbelieve, and therefore was the most religious one of all. I have learned that God appears and disappears in my life, but that there is something greater than all of us and that something greater is found in each of us.

I have learned that groups are usually, though not always, wiser than individuals. I have learned that beauty breaks in sometimes in our lives; I have learned that sitting in a room with people silently can be filled with awe. I have learned to listen for that deep voice within, the call of the spirit deep in my soul, and to treasure it when it speaks.

And I have learned that this is an honorable profession. You see, I never felt called to be a minister. You are supposed to be – in this business we are often asked about our 'call.' We are 'called' to congregations. But I never felt called to be a minister. I went into it because it was a job, and it turned out to be a job I liked well enough and was good enough at.

But I never felt called - until last winter. It happened at New Camoldi Hermitage in Big Sur. It wasn't sudden or dramatic, just a slow and quiet realization that I am in the right place for me, that I do really believe that our purpose is to treat each other well, to have the courage to stand up for justice and equity, that we are all drawn to those same craters of the spirit, to ask who we are and what we are for, to ask our purpose and to seek grace. I looked out at the ocean and felt connected to something deeper: I felt at home, at peace; I felt grace; I felt as though God's finger touched me.

I learned then that I can let go of the things from the past that held me back, and so become more free, that I can face my fears. I learned that I love this world and what is in it, that life is precious. My call came to me that I can share all of that with you.

On Dec 19, 1981 when I was ordained, Rev Kim Beach did the sermon. He shared a Hasidic tale that goes like this: when things went bad for his people, the rabbi would go to a special place in the forest and say a prayer and complete a ritual and all would be well. A generation passed, and when things were not good, the new rabbi went into the forest and said the prayer but the ritual had been forgotten, but still things went well. Another generation passed and a new rabbi would go into the forest, but the prayer was now

forgotten; still it was enough and things went well. As time went on later still, the ritual lost, the prayer forgotten, the place in the forest no longer known, the rabbi would tell the story, and it was sufficient.

In the Passover haggadah, there is a song – it means, and it will be sufficient. The word is dayenu.

I hope I have been sufficient. I still have a ways to go before the end and hope I will be sufficient. The song goes like this: da da yenu, da da yenu, da da yenu, dayenu dayenu

I love you. Thank you. You are a blessing to me. May it be sufficient.

Amen

Readings:

A Confession by Czelaw Milosz

Ministry in Oral Culture by Tex Sample