

UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST MINISTERS ASSOCIATION

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Fifty Years in This Ministry

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My first General Assembly as an ordained minister was in a brand new denomination. The merger of the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church of America was accomplished in 1961, and there was quite a bit of excitement at this new beginning.

Our class began in ministry against the backdrop of the height of the Civil Rights movement, the Viet Nam War and the efforts to end the War, and the Women's Movement. We were involved in some ways in all three. We went from the high of the March on Washington to the lows of the assassinations of two Kennedys and a King; from the crisis of Selma and the killing of James Reeb to the show of determination which was the March on Montgomery. We went from the War on Poverty to the Poor People's March, and we heard Lyndon Johnson celebrate the Voting Rights Act, saying, "We Shall Overcome"!

My intention is to speak of my ministry in very personal terms in the hope that some strands of my experience will resonate with what others of this time have known. My background was Methodist. I was a high school teacher in Los Angeles when I married Harriet Johnston, a Unitarian Director of Religious Education. We started going to the Unitarian Community Church of Santa Monica. The decision to apply to Divinity School came suddenly, and soon I was at Harvard. James Luther Adams held up a conception of the prophetic ministry which was an ideal I tried for many years to fulfill or to free myself from, because I could never live up to it. Ralph Helverson was one of my first mentors and friends, as a parish minister. His short essays in the Cambridge Newsletter, together with the writings of Robert Terry Weston in the meditation manual *Seasons of the Soul*, became the beginning canon of scripture for my ministry. I think Ralph Helverson's short piece that begins "Deep in ourselves resides the religious impulse" is the best lyrical description of what we are about that I know, and I have brought some copies of it to share.

Facing the Fellowship Committee was not so bad, but I was worried about the psychological tests that were required. I was sure they would discover that I

was a homosexual. And that, in 1960, would have ruled me out as a candidate for this ministry. I did not know that Dr. Evelyn Hooker had already established that the experts on reading Rorschach tests were unable to determine which subjects were homosexual. The denomination and I - and the experts! - had a lot to learn. I was safe, sort of, and ready to find a church. I was like an illegal immigrant; I wasn't supposed to be there; I just slipped in.

What I have today is gratitude; gratitude for those beginning mentors and colleagues; gratitude for the people of the churches I served, who helped me to learn and grow, who shared their lives with me, and who made it possible for us to build community together. And there is deep gratitude to this denomination, which grew and changed as I did, and which gave me opportunities for service in a larger context that I will always cherish.

I have found Unitarian Universalists honest and responsive in their support of ministry. Four years ago I missed two steps and fell on a pavement on my face. At the hospital the MRI showed that I had fractured the two top vertebrae closest to the brain and broken my nose. I was lucky not to be a paraplegic.

After three days in the hospital I received a call from a member of the church. "Ken, we'd like to come and see you." "Well, I'd love to see you, but I warn you, I'm not a pretty picture." "But Ken, you never were!" Honest and responsive.

It seems to me that I was particularly fortunate in the churches which called me: in Roslindale and West Roxbury, we were able to reunite what had been Theodore Parker's church and give it his name. In Knoxville, following Dick Henry and Bob West, we started the first chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union in Tennessee and worked successfully to free five young black men who were serving a terribly excessive sentence in the State Prison. The Tennessee Valley Church was a trailblazer in Knoxville for many decades, and two years ago when a deranged man came into the church on a Sunday morning to kill as many liberals as he could, the response of the whole community revealed the respect that had been earned by that church.

It was a privilege to serve Cedar Lane Church in Bethesda for twenty years, one of our great churches. Anything seemed possible in that beautiful and dynamic church, with its devoted membership and staff, but I was not a particularly good administrator. So I took a course in church administration one summer; I clearly needed it. All I learned was: "never put a piece of paper in a temporary place." Lots of luck!

At Cedar Lane I was encouraged to be involved in the denomination and that enriched my ministry and my life. I was always proud of Cedar Lane's contributions to leadership in religious education through Mildred Lester, Betty Anastos, Ellen Johnson Fay, Bobby Nelson, and now Susan Archer. They were among the ones who transformed a part-time job into a respected profession in this denomination.

Being at Cedar Lane, close to the National Institutes of Health gave me the opportunity to serve for many years on the committees which approved proposals for research on human subjects in mental health and cancer. I am grateful for the ministry of Roger Fritts at Cedar Lane, who has always encouraged me, as Minister Emeritus, to feel that I am still a part of that vibrant community.

In Rancho Mirage we shared the excitement and hard work of getting our first church built. I will never forget the thrill of walking down that aisle with our church president on Easter Sunday in 2005 for our first service in our own home.

Our church in North Hatley, Quebec, provided me a pulpit for many summers and is still significant in my life, and I had the opportunity to serve for six months in Juneau, Alaska. Each setting cast new light on the meaning of ministry for me.

When we were first married Harriet had said that there were "two things: I don't do shirts and I do go to the General Assembly." And we went together year after year, until 1993, when she lay dying in a Seattle hospital while the General Assembly was going on in North Carolina. My first gratitude must go to her, for she made me a Unitarian and made my ministry possible. I was half-way through divinity school when she told me she had always planned to marry a minister.

A year after her death, I went to work for John Buehrens as his Special Assistant for International Relations. It was fulfilling to work at making friends for the UUA around the world. Planning the organizing meeting for the International Council of Unitarians and Universalists and working with the International Association for Religious Freedom expanded my world. Perhaps the greatest learning experience for me was going to India five times with Kathy Sreedhar as staff liaison to the Holdeen India Program, which may be the best single thing that we are doing, as well as the best-kept secret. I learned something of how it is possible to work with the poorest of the poor, the most oppressed untouchables, the low castes of a rigid system, to find and support the leaders who will help them to change their lives. We can all be proud to be part of the denomination that has made possible Kathy's amazing work. I am grateful to John

Buehrens and Kay Montgomery, who made that five years at the UUA possible for me.

It was while I was working at the UUA and traveling to England regularly that I came to the point of telling my family and my former churches that I had fallen in love with a man, and he loved me. My letter to the congregation of Cedar Lane brought forth about seventy letters and e-mails and phone messages, every one of them supportive and affectionate. We have been together for almost fourteen years now, Terry and I, commuting between Palm Springs and London, England. We have come a long way since I was back taking the psychological tests for the Fellowship Committee. I can be a Unitarian Universalist minister and be who I am. While many other religious groups are still struggling with what to do with the homosexuals in their midst and their ministries, this denomination has educated its children and its adults on the relation of human sexuality to human dignity and that makes a difference in my life today. I think that says something about the leadership we have known in our Presidents and Moderators and Board members and religious educators who have created and supported that learning. And now we have a new leader in Peter Morales ably pointing to new challenges to our basic value of human dignity.

When I think of what has changed in our ministry, the most obvious is the entry of women. When I started, Judy Hoehler and Greta Worstel (Crosby), were the only two I knew. Greta has put it in these words: “the growing acceptance of diversity of people and thought.” She says, “I have lived most intimately women’s entry into recognized ministry. When I was ordained in 1960, there were only a handful of us. Now look at us! I celebrate the progress made and still in the making toward parity in participation and leadership beyond old categories relating to sexuality, race, origin, and divine imagery.” She also pointed out that over and over, we have found ways, especially after controversy, to include, instead of exclude. I think that the inclusion of increasing numbers of women in our profession has shown in our ministerial gatherings: much more support and interest in each others’ lives; much less competition.

There are two final parts of this ministry for which I am grateful: the first is the chance to be in on the start of some great ministries: Robbie, and Bruce, Clare, and Kendyl and Barbara, and Sydney, and Alida, and Mark, and Linda, and Dan, and Beth and Marlin. They represent to me hope for our future.

And the other thing is the combination which always defined this ministry for me: the great freedom to shape this vocation in response to the needs I saw: to be able to be involved in visiting prisons, and a work release program, and

ministerial finances and medical research; and balancing that freedom, having the discipline of the pulpit, the struggle to know what needed to be said, and the attempt to say it in that moment when each of us is so alone on Sunday morning.

That combination of freedom and discipline has been my ministry and that has been my life. Lucky man!