

UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST MINISTERS ASSOCIATION
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Fifty Is Nifty, So Thanks Be For These

by Richard S. Gilbert

The first fifty are the hardest; all the rest is commentary. I think my 50-year colleagues would agree. There was little quality control fellowshipping ministers in 1961. Caught on the cusp of consolidation, we freshly minted graduates could seek timely fellowship in our respective faiths or wait to become the first Unitarian Universalist-fellowshipped clergy. I chose the former; my MFC equivalent was a friendly conversation in the rear pews of our Binghamton church between sessions of the New York State Convention of Universalists. The three committee members had known me from knee-high to a grasshopper; we had a brief chat; they were satisfied, and that was that. I hesitate to confess this to those running the MFC gauntlet today.

Despite lack of quality control, we were a good group: Rex Styzens, Chuck Gaines, Ron Marcy, Ron Knapp, Bob Thayer, Kim Beach, Farley Wheelwright, Ron Cook, Berkley Moore, Robert Fulghum, Bob Ross, Richard Kellaway and Hunter Leggitt. I have their responses to my inquiry for updates if you are interested.

Rex Styzens lives in retirement in Long Beach, California, and reminds us that Unitarian Universalism “is all about possibility.”

Farley Wheelwright, 95 and blind living in Mexico, is active in the San Mugeuel de Allende UU Fellowship where he occasionally preaches. He remarked on sermons he wrote when sighted: “I was amazed to find how good these sermons were, and only wish I could replicate them.”

Kim Beach, whose years of ministry speak for themselves, as does his monumental work in making James Luther Adams accessible to more people, is still very active and is here. His one sentence sermon: “All things must be transformed on their way to fulfillment, even ourselves.”

Chuck Gaines, long time minister at Framingham and resourceful UUA staff member, sent me a thoughtful sermon reflecting on 50 years of ministry, concluding, “I carry these memories between my hands as carefully as if it were a bowl filled to the brim with fresh milk. And it will be an adequate sign – it will be enough for me.”

Richard Kellaway continues active as a ministerial consultant and globetrotter – he led a stimulating tour of South India before last year’s IARF Congress, which I enjoyed. His short sermon is “Be grateful; be glad!” which he can deliver to you directly since he is here.

Others in our group are Ron Cook who taught ministry at Starr King, Ron Knapp, who had ministries in the great Midwest, Hunter Leggitt, who I think wrote words that move me, “We are all more human than otherwise.” Ron Marcy, minister and district consultant in Metro New York, and a classmate of mine at St. Lawrence Theological School; Berkley Moore, Bob Ross, Rob Thayer and another one of our colleagues who is here – and who made ours the most published ministerial cohort in UU history – Robert Fulghum.

Thanks be for these good and faithful colleagues and those no longer among us.

Reflecting on the nifty fifty, I recall the words of E. B. White: “It’s hard to know when to respond to the seductiveness of the world and when to respond to its challenges. If the world were merely seductive, that would be easy. If it were merely challenging, that would be no problem. But I arise in the morning torn between the desire to improve the world and a desire to enjoy the world. This makes it hard to plan the day.”

Or to plan a life. To enjoy the world or to improve the world – or perhaps both – even at the same time. On the one hand, I think retirees need a mission in life beyond collecting Social Security and playing with grandchildren, as necessary as is the first, and as satisfying as is the second. I think of the Gray Panther founder Maggie Kuhn who said, “To rest is to rust.” There is that Puritan streak in me – you know – the Puritan who worries that someone, somewhere is having a good time.

On the other hand, it is also time to enjoy the world just a bit more, and so from time to time I practice the “shirk ethic,” counterpoint to the “work ethic” at which we are so proficient.

O God of Work and Leisure
 Teach me to shirk on occasion,
 Not only that I may work more effectively
 But also that I may enjoy life more abundantly.
 Enable me to understand that the earth
 Magically continues spinning on its axis
 Even when I am not tending thy vineyards.
 Permit me to breathe more easily
 Knowing the destiny of the race
 Rests not on my shoulders alone.
 Deliver me from false prophets who urge me
 To “repent and shirk no more.”

I pray for thy grace on me,
Thy faithful shirker.

Theologian Frederick Buechner I think has ministry about right: “The vocation for you is the one in which your deep gladness and the world’s deep need meet – something that not only makes you happy but that the world needs to have done.”ⁱ

Some of my most powerful spiritual experiences have come when I try to be one of those “drum majors for justice,” as Martin Luther King, Jr., would say. I learned about pastoral care and justice when I attended the 1963 March on Washington and heard King for the first time. Upon my return to First Unitarian Church of Cleveland, I told the congregation “why we marched” and was astounded when a church pillar who had warned against my participation was first to thank me for what I had done and said.

In 1965 my path once again crossed that of Dr. King – in Selma – at the memorial service for James Reeb. Unable to get into the Browns Chapel sanctuary, I stood in an ante-room where he literally brushed my arm on his way to the pulpit. That experience propelled me from my doctoral studies back into parish ministry, where the action was.

I was right. The First Unitarian Church of Ithaca and Cornell University provided a nexus for further deep experiencing. I came to befriend Dan Berrigan and worked with him through the deaths of King and Robert Kennedy, and those tumultuous years of the 60’s.

I will never forget the Cornell graduation of 1970 when the President, a member of my congregation, invited me to deliver the invocation and benediction. It was just days after Kent State and the ritual was interrupted by protesting seniors who stormed the platform. I knew them through the peace movement, but also knew the university mace-bearer, another congregant, who defended the stage with that sturdy weapon, while I tried to be peacemaker. It is a scene etched forever in my memory. I fancied myself an establishment radical – dealing with members of the establishment who sat in my congregation – bringing to them what I thought was a prophetic perspective.

That became more evident as I chaired an economic justice task force at the request of UUA President Paul Carnes. We developed a rather radical statement on the U.S. economy, and I was called on the carpet before the UUA Board to justify it. That experience left me with the question “can a prophet chair the board?” – translated: can a movement which has benefited from our economic system bring to it a prophetic critique? I explored that in my book, *How Much Do We Deserve?* I am still critiquing and still wondering. And I am still waiting for the prophetic imperative to alert and enliven our movement to the troubling times in which we live, reminding all who will hear that peace and justice work is not an extra-curricular activity.

Thanks be for experiences like these – and a movement that enabled me to be what Bill Moyers calls “a public nuisance” – and still keep my job.

These fifty nifty have also brought me some powerful personal experiences. Like the time in Cleveland, my first church, when, with no clinical pastoral education or internship, I made my first bereavement call. Red-head, brush cut, all of twenty-four, what did I know about death? Not very much, but I concluded the mere fact of my presence represented not just a rookie preacher, but a whole religious community. The ministry is not all about me – or you – but about a community we are privileged to lead and represent.

Pastoral care at time of death and memorial services that follow always conveyed a feeling that I was really doing ministry. I sat at the bedside of a World War II conscientious objector with his wife in home hospice as he was dying by refusing nourishment. Or the time I was with my colleague Helena Chapin as she died. It was enough to be there. As was often the case, I was more ministered unto than I ministered.

More recently in Rochester, I was catapulted from retirement to do a memorial service for a former parishioner who had been strangled by her husband. I knew and loved both; they were choir members, musicians who had sung at our younger son’s wedding. We had recently been in their home and detected nothing of what was to come. I led her memorial and have been visiting him in jail and prison. Another challenge for which there is little seminary training – nothing to do but be there.

Thanks be for the hard times when we are reminded what it is to be a minister.

Those moments have been more than balanced by the joyous times of ministry: child dedications when crying – or laughing – babies steal the show – even the Christmas candlelight service when my year-old first-born sent the congregation into waves of laughter by giving a Bronx cheer as Angus Hector MacLean named him.

And, oh, yes, the weddings – trying to be the only cool head in the room, whispering to bride and groom about the importance of breathing. There were unforgettable trips to Boston with Rochester’s coming of age group, trying to excite them about Waldo’s boulder in Concord’s Sleepy Hollow Cemetery; force marching them around Thoreau’s Walden Pond; pointing out the UU statuery at the State House while they seem more interested in the Boston Garden ducklings, hoping some spiritual osmosis occurred. And the privilege of preaching – having the more or less undivided attention of a congregation for an hour – or in my case likely more – while I indulged in what I call “spiritual streaking.”

Which brings me to spirituality – that squishy word so often pronounced and so little understood – at least by me. I grew up in a Universalist Church as a theistic Christian. My first sermon was preached at 14: “Are you a true Christian or a Christian only in name?” Returning to the church of my childhood last year I reprised that question with a slightly

different sermon. But thanks be for those good people who indulged a youthful sermon and welcomed me back into the same pulpit, though it had moved from Universalist to United Church of Christ.

From my rather pious Universalist Christianity I became a seminary atheist – or perhaps agnostic. My theology has gradually evolved into a mystical religious humanism.

I have come to reject a competitive spirituality which tries to persuade others of its depth. I approach theology and spiritual experience not from an apologetic perspective – trying to demonstrate the absolute necessity of my views as central to the very survival of our movement. Rather, I take a confessional approach – confessing why I do what I do and let my life speak, as Emerson said, “so loudly that you cannot hear what I say.”

Rather than decry the theological diversity among us, as if there were one true liberal religious way, I rejoice in a rich variety in which it is possible to learn something. I once did a sermon series on UU theological perspectives – in the first half of the sermon making as good a case as I could for each, and in the second half critiquing what I had just said. It was an exercise in appreciative inquiry for me – and I like to think – the congregation.

My *Building Your Own Theology* was intended as a group process enriching to all who were open enough not only to expose their deepest values, meanings and convictions, but also to receive with gratitude those of their fellow pilgrims. I will never forget the night in Ithaca when we listened to one of the finest UU’s I’ve ever known, a country doctor who shared his spiritual autobiography with us one night, and died suddenly the very next day.

Thanks be for all those who build community by building their own theology.

Retirement is a mixed blessing. It is a full-time job, with no coffee breaks, no days off, no vacations, no sabbaticals and no pay checks. It is not for the faint of heart.

I probably have too many irons in the chalice, if you know what I mean. By grace I have been granted good health, a faithful companion of 50 years, two fine sons, a charming daughter-in-law and three beautiful grandchildren. I still love to preach and teach, and dread the time when there will no longer be invitations to do so. Then my Universalist theology kicks in. “What Are We Worth When Motionless?” So often we are defined by what we do. What happens when we can no longer “do,” when we must be content just to be? I conclude being there is the end game in ministry and in life.

And so, thanks be for these:

For colleagues who know we are all just “temps,” ultimately “interim” ministers, always with a beginning – and an ending;

For activists who are faithful to the dream of Beloved Community though it seems a receding possibility;

For congregations who suffered sermons too long and too intellectual and who taught me the wisdom of feeling and story;

For friends who didn't quite know how to be friends with their minister, but who figured it out;

For a rich history, about which we are still too ignorant, but which sustains us even to this day and beyond;

For a future that beckons, even if forebodingly.

For fifty nifty years and the privilege in being a minister in them.

I conclude with an excerpt from Robert Frost's *Masque of Reason* in which God and Job converse about their initial encounter. God thanks Job for his performance; Job counters:

“All very splendid. I am flattered proud
To have been in on anything with You.
'Twas a great demonstration if You say so.
Though incidentally I sometimes wonder
Why it had to be at my expense.”

God responds:

“It had to be at somebody's expense.
Society can never think things out:
It has to see them acted out by actors,
Devoted actors at a sacrifice –
The ablest actors I can lay my hands on.”

And after all, we are just actors in this great cosmic drama. And so, after the first fifty, the nifty fifty, I have just three words of advice for all who are actors – and that is all of us. My advice? Break a leg.

Retirement reminds us we're all temps, we ministers. And in a larger sense all of us are temps; we are all interims, always with a beginning and an ending.

Having already retired – more or less – from ministry, I thought we ought to make this a “teachable moment” for us all. I thought we might enjoy the wisdom of 11-year-old Sandra Cisneros. As she celebrated her eleventh birthday, she wrote with insight far beyond her years: “What they don't understand about birthdays and what they never tell you is that when you're eleven, you're also ten, and nine, and eight, and seven and six, and five, and four, and three, and two, and one. And when you wake up on your eleventh birthday you expect to feel eleven, but you don't. You open your eyes and everything's just like yesterday, only it's today. And you don't feel eleven at all. You feel like you're still ten. And you are – underneath the year that makes you eleven . . . because the way you grow old

is kind of like an onion or like the rings inside a tree trunk or like my little wood dolls that fit one inside the other, each year inside the next one. That's how being eleven years old is."

We might then apply this to reaching retirement – something like this: “What they don't understand about retirement and what they never tell you is that when you're sixty-five, you're also sixty-four, and sixty-three, and sixty-two, and sixty-one and sixty – and this is going to take too long! And when you wake up on your first day of retirement, you expect to feel retired, but you don't. You open your eyes and everything's just like yesterday, only it's today. And you don't feel retired at all. You feel like you're still working. And you are – underneath the year that makes you retired . . . because the way you retire is kind of like starting a new career with no coffee breaks, no days off, no vacations, no sabbaticals and no salary. It is a full time job – you give all your time and energy to it. That's how being retired is.”

Poet Mary Oliver writes about letting go in one of her poems: “To live in this world you must be able to do three things: to love what is mortal; to hold it against your bones knowing your life depends on it; and when the time comes to let it go, to let it go.” Now is the time for letting go. For saying good-bye.

There is a time to celebrate the past, and a time to envision the future.
The time for celebrating the past is here, but briefly,
For now the future beckons and we must be on our way.

This is a sermon about ministry – Unitarian Universalist ministry. Ministers have been called the “canaries in the coal mines of life.” They are supposed to be out there on the frontiers of human living, probing the edges of human experience, scouting out the troubles that lie ahead. That is dangerous work, for unlike the canaries, whose death is a signal of trouble, we are supposed to come back alive from the coal mines Sunday after Sunday, as well as during the intervals between, give warning of the danger and encourage the adventure ahead. We might call them dispatches from the coal mines of life. It is an arduous and formidable task.

There is, admittedly, plenty to do when things seem to be falling apart in our communal life. We have two, if not three, tragic wars, a struggling economy with an angry electorate egged on by a persistent Tea Party and then we have a very cautious president. The rich get richer and the poor poorer in the American class war that dare not speak its name. We have abused Mother Earth – global climate change, among other issues are the feedback – or should we say blowback?

Our excruciatingly difficult brand of religion has a hard time competing with those who either claim to know all the answers or ignore the questions because the Lord may come in his glory any day now. The world is full of nay sayers and prophets of doom and gloom. In such a time there need to be people who are not faint of heart, who have some

sense of where we are going and why, people who are deftly able to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable – and survive to talk about it.

The immensity of the task reminds me of the two monks sitting with their begging bowls before the mouth of a great cave in the mountains. Says one: “I came here to ponder the futility of it all, but I can see it’s hopeless.” In the face of a world desperately in need of repair, the temptations to cynicism are many. The world has infinite need. The task is to discern a need you and others with you in this congregation can meet – with gladness.

How about that other part of that description of vocation – your deep gladness – even in the face of “the world’s deep need?”

There is a creation myth involving Prometheus, who brought life as well as fire to the earth. After he had fashioned a variety of animals from clay and given them life, he turned his attention to the human animal.

However, in molding the other creatures, he had used up the available supply of water, and there was nothing to bind the clay together. The clay crumbled in his hands. This bad omen prompted some of the gods to urge him to cease and desist, but Prometheus was persistent. He looked to the heavens for rain, he searched the Garden of Creation for a fresh spring, but there were no clouds, the land was parched.

At last, frustrated at his failure, he flung himself to the ground and wept. It was then he saw that his tears had moistened the clay and held it together. Quickly, he completed his work of creation, fashioning the human animal, into which he blew the breath of life. Human nature was thus imbued with sadness as well as joy. There is sadness when one contemplates the world’s deep need, but also deep gladness to think we may in some small way meet that need.

Poet W. H. Auden penned a poem on the eve of World War II, when the hopes of the decade had become shambles under the heel of Hitler’s boot. Auden’s optimistic humanism of the 1930’s was beginning to yield to a more somber Christian realism. The poem, “September 1, 1939,” concludes with a ringing affirmation:

“Defenseless under the night
 Our world in stupor lies;
 Yet, dotted everywhere,
 Ironic points of light
 Flash out wherever the Just
 Exchange their messages.
 May I, composed like them
 Of Eros and of dust
 Beleaguered by the same

Negation and despair,
Show an affirming flame.”

Happily we have examples of that affirmation of gladness. I think of the late Hubert Humphrey, Senator and Vice-President, who was called a “happy warrior” after the image created in a poem by Stephen Vincent Benet. My own favorite example is the late James Luther Adams, Unitarian Universalist preacher, pedagogue and prophet. In a *festschrift* given him by Harvard Divinity School his benign visage was pictured on the cover – over the caption, “the smiling prophet.”

Emma Goldman once said, “I don’t want to be part of any revolution in which there is no dancing!”

Most of us in ministry try to show that affirming flame. All of us I think have done so at one time or another, and considering the odds, that is not bad.

One observer lamented, “Years ago I discovered the meaning of life but forgot to write it down.” Well, the task of ministry is to occasionally write it down – Sundays would be a good day to do so. Those are the days when we struggle – we, meaning occupants of both pulpit and pew – with the world’s deep need and how we muster the courage to bring to it our deep gladness.

Ministry really is more than we ought to expect of one person – even a Unitarian Universalist minister. However, there is a glimmer of light here in this crisis. There are two Chinese ideograms that help. The first indicates crisis and is composed of two symbols, one for danger, the other for opportunity. A second ideogram shows two people talking together – that signifies truth. We meet the danger and the opportunity – not alone – but in a company of fellow pilgrims.

When ministers are charged with responsibility for the spiritual nurture of the congregation, congregations should be charged as well, to mutual ministry. Today I am eloquent in the pulpit and brilliant in the church school, and you are spiritually intoxicated with my wisdom; next week I stumble and bumble through my uncertainty and need your forgiveness. Today I am a great rock of comfort in a weary land; tomorrow I am blown about as the sands of the desert and I need the oasis of your strength. Today I dazzle you with my perspicacity; tomorrow I forget our appointment. So it goes.

Poet Maya Angelou wrote: “Many things continue to amaze me, even well into the sixth decade of my life. I’m startled or taken aback when people tell me they are Christians. My first response is the question, ‘Already?’ It seems to me a lifelong endeavor to try to live the life of a Christian. I believe that is also true for the Buddhist, for the Muslim, for the Jainist, for the Jew and for the Taoist who try to live their beliefs. The idyllic condition

cannot be arrived at and held on to eternally. It is in the search itself that one finds the ecstasy.”

“In the search itself one finds the ecstasy.” So Buechner had it about right: “The vocation for us is the one in which your deep gladness and the world’s deep need meet – something that not only makes you happy but that the world needs to have done.”ⁱⁱ

Our ministerial association has been wrestling with the theological question, “Whose are we?” And so in the holy quiet of this hour – as we celebrate ministry – we ask: whose are we? It is a question asked of all who choose ministry. Do we belong to anybody or anything? Are we accountable to someone or something?

Accountable for what? Our work? Our deeds? Our very being?
 Does it deal with our identity? Our mission?
 We open a Pandora’s Box of possibilities and problems.
 Called by whom? For what? Call of conscience? Call of spirit?
 Where did it come from, this call?
 This is no geographical question, but a spiritual one.
 It is the intersection of inside and outside.
 Where our gladness of calling meets the needs of the world.
 What is being faithful to our call asking of us now?
 We are called by a particular congregation;
 Called by a singular religious movement;
 Called by a voice greater than just our own;
 Called by a history of service to humanity;
 Called to help create, with a congregation, a Beloved Community
 Of memory and hope;
 Of faith and love;
 Of peace and justice
 Not only within this family of faith but in the wider world.
 We are called to create a spiritual center with a civic circumference.
 Whose are we? It is not a question of possession,
 But of commitment to that which is greater than we –
 Greater than any minister, greater than any congregation.
 Whose are we? We belong to that Great Life Process
 In which we live and move and have our being.
 We belong to that great procession of men and women who have gone before,
 Nurturing the spirit, serving the world.
 May we be worthy.

Good luck. God’s speed. Amen.

References

The Poetry Of Robert Frost, ed. by Edward Connery Lathem. Copyright 1945, 1969, 1973.

“It's hard to know when to respond to the seductiveness of the world and when to respond to its challenges. If the world were merely seductive, that would be easy. If it were merely challenging, that would be no problem. But I arise in the morning torn between the desire to improve the world and a desire to enjoy the world. This makes it hard to plan the day.” - E.B. White (Quoted by Israel Shenker, “E. B. White: Notes and Comment by Author,” *NYTimes*, July 11, 1969.)

“The vocation for you is the one in which your deep gladness and the world’s deep need meet – something that not only makes you happy but that the world needs to have done.” Frederick Buechner *Religion and Ethics News Weekly*. May 5, 2006.

Ingmar Bergman on the process of aging: “Old age is like climbing a mountain. You climb from ledge to ledge. The higher you get, the more tired and breathless you become, but your view becomes much more extensive.”

READING: FREDERICK BUECHNER ON MINISTRY

Writer and theologian Frederick Buechner responds to a question during a PBS interview: You wrote a famous line about one's own deep gladness and the world's deep need. What is your advice to a young person trying to find out what to do in life, trying to figure out a vocation?

Buechner: “I never got my own quotation quite straight. There was a little piece I once read on vocation or all these "voices" -- "vocare," to call, "vocation," calling you to be this or to be that. Which one do you answer? I said the vocation for you is the one in which your deep gladness and the world's deep need meet. When you are doing what you are happiest doing, it must also be something that not only makes you happy but that the world needs to have done. In other words, if what makes you happy is going out and living it up and spending all your money on wine, women, and song, the world doesn't need that. But on the other hand, if you give your life to good works -- you go and work in a leper colony and it doesn't make you happy -- the chances are you're not doing it very well. Those for whom you were doing it will recognize that this is not an act of love. It's a good work and they are the object of it. Just the other day somebody my age in some sort of a crisis said, ‘I don't feel I'm being what I ought to be.’ And I said, ‘What makes you happiest? That's the clue.’ I struck him dumb. He said, ‘I never thought that. What makes me happy?’ I think he was thinking, what makes me useful? What makes me religious? No, no, no. What makes you, in the deepest sense of the word, happy? That's what you should be doing, if the other part is also met -- if it is something the world needs.”

In *A Room Called Remember: Uncollected Pieces*, Buechner wrote: "The time is ripe for looking back over the day, the week, the year, and trying to figure out where we have come from and where we are going to, for sifting through the things we have done and the things we have left undone for a clue to who we are and who, for better or worse, we are becoming. But again and again we avoid the long thoughts We cling to the present out of wariness of the past. And why not, after all? We get confused. We need such escape as we can find. But there is a deeper need yet, I think, and that is the need-not all the time, surely, but from time to time-to enter that still room within us all where the past lives on as a part of the present, where the dead are alive again, where we are most alive ourselves to turnings and to where our journeys have brought us. The name of the room is Remember - the room where with patience, with charity, with quietness of heart, we remember consciously to remember the lives we have lived."

- Frederick Buechner (*A Room Called Remember: Uncollected Pieces*)

ⁱ *Religion and Ethics News Weekly*. May 5, 2006.

ⁱⁱ *Religion and Ethics News Weekly*. May 5, 2006.