

A Little Farther Than the Rest

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On the Occasion of the Installation of Rev. Diane Olenick Rollert
As Minister of the Unitarian Church of Montreal / L'Église unitarienne de Montréal

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We live in an age of great hubris, in which the leaders of the world's most powerful nations—even its so-called democracies—too often govern with utter indifference to the people they lead; where the heads of gigantic corporations rule the economy with a power akin to the old divine right of kings; where the purposes and practices of the largest religious institutions are too often indistinguishable from those of business; where monolithic media destroys local culture and clutters our thoughts with mind-numbing distractions; and where celebrity has replaced character as the measure of success. The scale of the society in which we find ourselves would have been unimaginable to those pioneers who gathered to establish the first Unitarian society in this city—indeed, the first such congregation in an entire country that did not yet exist.

Despite the extent of the great changes which have occurred over the generations—indeed, perhaps because of their magnitude—we have a great deal to learn from our spiritual ancestors: from their struggles and successes, from their words and deeds, from their attitudes and accomplishments. In the face of the astonishing hubris of the world today, we are compelled to notice—and we're naturally drawn towards—the humility that characterized the people of this church from its earliest years, especially when we remember just how many captains of industry and leaders of the state it included. Whatever other accomplishments the Unitarians of this city have known in their lives, they have been drawn to this religious community in search of that “something more” for which even the most outwardly successful seem to long.

I need not remind *you* that, for many years, this church was known as the Church of the Messiah, which serves to remind *me* of the messianic pretensions to which ministers sometimes fall prey—even Unitarian Universalist ministers. (If my wife were here, she might add *especially* Unitarian Universalist ministers!) While many of my august colleagues would surely deny such pretensions, I will confess to them myself and thus vicariously bear their burden for them. What else would a messiah do? You see, in the back of my own mind I somehow recall that at least one small piece of me imagined entering the ministry to save the world. Along the way, I somehow imagined that I might even become famous. And while I never dreamed I would become wealthy through the messianic ministry that awaited me, I did hope that wealthy people would

befriend me, feed and clothe me well, and send me on nice trips abroad. However, the world has an interesting way of saving us from ourselves, sometimes, especially when we are “full of ourselves.” The powers of the universe—call it God if you will, I’ll settle for Nature—evidently had a much more humble assignment in mind for me, if my particular career trajectory is taken into account. Having come to realize what a real chore it would be to save the world, I’m more than a little grateful for the respite.

My late brother was a genealogist by profession, and he left my siblings and me with about as full an account of our pedigree as anyone from the humbler classes might reasonably expect to have. Among both my forebears and my lateral relations, there has been a healthy representation of ministers—mostly Lutheran, but also several Unitarians, some German Evangelicals and quite a few Catholic priests and nuns. If I’m allowed to count my wife’s great aunt, we also have a Buddhist Abbess from Japan in the mix. In a family that consists otherwise of farmers and carpenters, merchants and midwives, you can imagine that I have been naturally curious about the ministers. What a lesson in humility it has been to uncover as little about the ministers as I have about the farmers, to learn that whatever else may be said about their lives, they were called to faithfulness rather than fame, service rather than success, and responsibilities rather than riches.

Reflecting on the messianic ideal, from the earliest times to the present day, Rabbi Robert N. Levine felt obliged to proclaim, “there is no messiah – and you’re it!” What a relief—and what a burden! There is no one coming to save us from ourselves—no president or monarch, no new technology or technique, no spiritual guru or any other alien being. As ministers, we are not called upon to save the world and redeem its people in some grandiose fashion. Instead, we are called simply to nurture the religious community along, to witness to our faith through the integrity of our living, to acknowledge our limitations and failures, and, in so doing, inspire others to lead lives of integrity and purpose. That’s no small order, but its accomplishment is a more achievable goal for those of us with rather modest gifts. No minister—and no church—needs to take it all the way, bear the burden alone, build the New Jerusalem—we just need to nudge it along some.

Evolutionary change is more lasting than the revolutionary variety – just ask Robespierre. Yet there are tipping points in the procession of evolutionary development, when the accumulated changes lead to new forms. The slow, steady procession of challenges met, victories won, disappointments survived, insights gained, passages celebrated—each and all of these yield a harvest of incomparable value and worth for humanity.

In a 1925 sermon delivered to this congregation, the Reverend Sydney B. Snow observed that the great persons of history have succeeded in their aims because “they fit

their environment better. ... They sway the [people] of their day because they express the thoughts and aspirations of their day. They may see a little farther than the rest, – have a little clearer vision; but they never see too far from the present. They keep close to the earth.”¹

It is sometimes supposed that brilliant ministerial leadership is the only thing necessary for a church to prosper. While I would not wish to detract from the brilliance of your past ministers, nor from the true brilliance of the minister we have gathered to install, it has been my experience that great ministers and great congregations grow in relationship with one another. One does not make the other; one is not the cause and the other the effect. Rather, both contribute to the strength of the other. In fitting its environment and keeping close to earthly interests, this congregation has, in fact, nurtured many great ministers and, in turn, it has been nurtured by their ministries. John Corder and William Sullivan Barnes, Sydney Snow and Angus Cameron, Leonard Mason and Charles Eddis – these were all ministers whose influence reached far beyond the walls of their church. Frederick Griffin, Dudley Ferrell and Lawrence Clare, Ray Drennan and now Diane Rollert – all ministers of spiritual depth and ethical insight. But whatever accomplishments and virtues they have known or will know, they can never be appreciated apart from this religious community.

Reflecting on the first twenty-five years of his ministry to this very congregation, the Reverend John Corder observed, “I have no shadow of doubt that more might have been accomplished ... if all our members had been equally faithful to their privileges, and devoted to their trusts. Nor have I any shadow of doubt that more may be done still, if we are only faithful to our duty and true to our light.”²

This congregation has a long history of being good to its ministers, a tradition of respecting the office of ministry and expecting that the local occupants of that office would be individuals of integrity and substance, honour and worth. Yet, even with its high expectations of ministry, it has nevertheless demonstrated a mature patience with the normal frailties that all human beings possess, including members of the clergy. No less a minister than Corder himself, revered by colleagues and the community alike, felt moved to thank the congregation for, in his own words, “the generous consideration you have invariably given to my failings in the ministry of this place.”³ And Corder’s experience has been echoed in the pastorates of his successors, right down to the present time. Paradoxically, it is just such “generous consideration” that, by freeing ministers from the façade of perfection, allows them to grow and flourish in the pursuit of their vocation.

Looking out my window this morning, I noticed that the façade of the cathedral next to the hotel is topped with larger-than-life statues of Jesus and the twelve disciples, each of whom is depicted in a manner intended to show their unique contributions to

the early church, even as they make a singular impression of unity when viewed as a group.⁴ It reminded me of a comment by Frederick Beuchner, a Presbyterian minister and prolific author, who observed that “[t]he first ministers were the twelve disciples. There is no evidence that Jesus chose them because they were brighter or nicer than other people. In fact the New Testament record suggests that they were continually missing the point, jockeying for position, and, when the chips were down, interested in nothing so much as saving their own skins. Their sole qualification seems to have been their initial willingness to rise to their feet when Jesus said, ‘Follow me.’”⁵

The founders of this church—sensitive men and persistent women—and the successive generations who have kept it alive and vital, along with the great cloud of witnesses who have borne the free spirit in religion along through the ages, call to us to follow them. We need not parrot their every belief nor ape their every movement. But we stand with them, “in unbroken line,” much like the disciples across the mantle of the cathedral, though clearly a little closer to the ground—each of us bringing our unique gifts to the service of a common purpose, each of us grateful for those who came before and each of us determined to leave a legacy of value to the future.

In her novel *Gilead*, Marilynne Robinson tells the story of an aging Congregationalist minister—a third generation divine, each of whom was possessed of the same name—as he reminisces about the nature of his life, family history and ministry, inevitably comparing his own career to that of his father and grandfather before him. The story is presented in the form of a letter by the seventy-six year old Reverend John Ames to his young son, born late in the minister’s life, as Ames feels his strength waning and his own life slipping away. Thinking back to his childhood, John Ames recalls a time when he and his companions, “pious children from pious households in a fairly pious town,” took it upon themselves to baptize a litter of kittens. One by one, this pint-sized future minister moistened the brow of each kitten, recited the biblical formula, and presumably granted each one a proper Christian name, although several were thought to have slipped away into paganism.

Remembering his youthful ritualistic zeal, Ames writes, “I still remember how those warm little brows felt under the palm of my hand. Everyone has petted a cat, but to touch one like that, with the pure intention of blessing it, is a very different thing. It stays in the mind. For years we would wonder what, from a cosmic viewpoint, we had done to them. It still seems to me to be a real question. There is a reality in blessing, which I take baptism to be, primarily. It doesn’t enhance sacredness, but it acknowledges it, and there is a power in that. I have felt it pass through me, so to speak. ... Not that you have to be a minister to confer blessing. You are simply much more likely to find yourself in that position. It’s a thing people expect of you.”⁶

How I resonate with this vignette from the life of a fictional cleric. More than once, I have heard the Unitarian Universalist ministry described as being akin to herding cats. And, if the truth be told, many of our more conventional religious neighbours—more, in fact, than we would care to admit—view the rites of our liberal religious tradition as being about as efficacious as the baptism of cats.

The act of installing a minister is nothing more—and nothing less—than the act of blessing a ministry, in full anticipation of a new era in this congregation’s history, which will reach a little farther than the rest, building upon a foundation for ministry which was laid long ago but which stands firmly and resolutely today. And if leading Unitarian Universalists really is like herding cats, then the act of installing a Unitarian Universalist minister might well be compared to baptizing a mother cat—full immersion, no less!

You have chosen as your new minister one of the most capable and promising ministers in our fellowship: a women of deep spiritual insight, uncompromising values, and abundant gifts. She will bless you as surely as John Ames blessed the kittens—and if she serves you prophetically, sometimes with about as much discomfort to you. Those of us who come to witness the covenant you make with one another trust that this congregation will also be a blessing to this minister as you move forward together—a little farther than the rest.

In his poem *Evening*, the celebrated Icelandic Canadian freethinker Stephan G. Stephansson, who was the literary inspiration of the Unitarian movement on the Canadian prairies, wrote:

—The night of our wand’rings seems woefully long,
The wayfarers lost as of yore.
Our dawn of advancement a boastful romance,
The shadows as dense as before.
The minds of the ancients soared equally high,
Where, then, is our wonderful score?

In this—that the dawn reaches numbers increased
Through centuries slipping away.
—Not higher—nor deeper—but *farther* it seeks
like shafts of the lengthening day.⁷

Under a new minister, the Unitarian Church of Montreal must meet this challenge to “bring the dawn to numbers increased,” to reach farther than it has reached before, *and in so doing* reach both higher and deeper. You will sometimes feel that your wanderings together seem woefully long and wonder, at times, if your longings are but a boastful romance. Be aware of both the pitfalls and possibilities that lie before you,

yet allow yourselves to be emboldened by your rich heritage and believe, somewhere deep in your hearts, that the message you proclaim and the values for which you stand will be as fruitful in the future as they were in the past.

Looking back on the first quarter century of this congregation and its ministry, John Cordner professed the quiet confidence that “we have an encouraging prospect before us, if we are simply true to our organization and to our distinguishing principles” and that “if we are thus alive to the value of our faith and privileges, and true to our trust,” then our congregations “will grow in strength, and abound in promise, year by year.”⁸ This is not a grandiose vision of our inevitable triumph as religious communities, nor is it wishful or magical thinking, but rather, it is the quiet confidence of a humble but determined religious leader in the relevance and value of the liberal religious tradition for which he bore witness, and to which he dedicated his life and ministry. It stands as a challenge to us today to be faithful to this precious inheritance, to build upon the foundations left to us, to work with the quiet confidence that our daily strivings are of supreme importance because they minister to the needs of countless individuals, known and unknown, whose lives are comforted, supported and sometimes even transformed by the liberal gospel we proclaim. In short, this living tradition, which we have inherited from those faithful souls who have gone before, calls us to bear it forward, alive and strengthened, just a little farther than the rest.

The greatness, if any, to which we may be called, both as ministers and as faithful adherents, will arise from our capacity to “fit our environment better” and to “express the thoughts and aspirations of our day” while “keeping close to the earth.” For we are called to bring the eternal verities of our way in religion to bear upon the pressing issues of our age, to serve the needs of the people around us, and to simply bless the earth and its people with our love and our presence. In a word, we are called to be relevant. In this confusing and sometimes chaotic age in which we live, we need not possess the power of either prophesy or perfection, but simply “have a little clearer vision” of the world around us and a little clearer imagination for the way forward. In “keeping close to the earth” and its people, ministering to the everyday concerns of those who live and grow and die, we will bless the earth with our presence, just as surely as you can baptize a cat if the need arises. And in so doing, we will bear this Unitarian Universalist faith forward—just a little farther than the rest!



References

¹ Sydney B. Snow, "Leaders of the Spirit" (1925), in *A Century and a Half: A Collection of Sermons by Ministers of the Unitarian Church of Montreal to Celebrate its Sesquicentennial* (Unitarian Church of Montreal, May 1992), 42. Snow was the fifth settled minister of the congregation, from 1920 to 1926, and later president of Meadville Theological School in Chicago.

² John Cordner, "Twenty and Five Years" (October 1868), in *A Century and a Half*, 16. Cordner was the first settled minister of the congregation, serving from 1843 until 1879.

³ Cordner, 18.

⁴ Cathédrale Marie-Reine-du-Monde next to The Queen Elizabeth Hotel.

⁵ Frederick Beuchner, *Beyond Words*, (Harper San Francisco, 2004), 259.

⁶ Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2004), 23.

⁷ Stephan G. Stephansson, "Evening" (1899), translated by Jakobina Johnson.

⁸ Cordner, 19.