

Wellsprings of the Spirit

By Rev. Stefan M. Jonasson

Charge to the Minister at the Installation of Rev. Linda Weaver Horton
as Minister of the Unitarian Fellowship of Kelowna
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On my rambling path to ministry, which had more switchbacks than a winding mountain road, I never fully appreciated the fact that this vocation would reward me with friends as well as colleagues. Yet I stand here today as much—or more—as a friend, who happens also to be a colleague, called upon to offer the “charge to the minister,” which is, at once, both humbling and challenging. Who am I to offer a charge to one who has served the liberal ministry for far longer than me? Who am I to offer a pittance of wisdom to a wise woman who has bound together her experiences and reflections, her learning and her values with the solid bands of integrity? Who am I to speak of covenant to one who has so richly honoured hers in both joy and adversity? Who am I to reflect upon the values and insights of our Unitarian Universalist faith in the face of one who has embodied them in her very life? I am a professional colleague, to be sure, but much more to the point, Linda and I have become friends in ministry. And so my words today are advice to a friend, which the rest of you—congregants and family members, colleagues and acquaintances, members of the larger community and perhaps a few here who are simply curious—are called to witness.

You have entered into a covenant with one another—as congregation and minister—to “build a welcoming community, which is appreciative of differences, compassionate of heart, and courageous in spirit.” I would remind you that this covenant is not just between you and your congregation alone, but that it is also a covenant with the living tradition of our Unitarian Universalist faith and the commanding power of life and love, which we may not name but which we can never escape. A covenant is no mere contract but rather a considered pledge of the heart to be together in community, through good times and bad, that a great purpose may be achieved—one which transcends that very community itself.

In the turbulent days of the late 1960s, when there seemed to be little ground between confrontation and refuge, Seward Hiltner wrote in his book *Ferment in the Ministry*, “the fact is that what ministers say they like to do is precisely what they do alone and by themselves without having to consult anyone but God, and that what they dislike doing is consulting and winning and relating to people in order to get something done.”

Linda, beware of those enterprises which lure you into acting alone, when you might otherwise have acted in concert with others. There are times when we must act alone or keep our own counsel—ministry can sometimes be the loneliest of vocations—but I would encourage you to never act alone when your ministry might engage others in a shared task. We dare not minister alone even for the sake of efficiency, for efficiency's rewards are short-lived and superficial. Your congregants have ministries of their own, which it is your special responsibility to nurture and encourage.

In ministering to this congregation, do not neglect to care for yourself and to be open to the ministry of others to you. Tend to your inner life, resisting the temptation to over-function, over-perform, over-compensate and over-achieve. Care for your marriage and remember which vows came first.

I would remind you that ministry offers no escape from being human. Own your frailties and shortcomings; be embarrassed when they are revealed. But do not let your human imperfections define who you are or determine the nature of your ministry. Your congregation will care more for your strengths and resilience, so focus their attention—and your own—upon these.

Your authenticity will carry you farther than your authority. Our mutual colleague John Cummins once confessed that he believed the liberal ministry could yet redeem a broken world because ministers “lead by influence and example rather than by power.” I believe it too. Use every ounce of influence you have in motivating this congregation to become what it is destined to become—badger it at times, if you must!—and offer your life as a model of the nobler world we can create for ourselves and the generations to come. But do not wed yourself to outcomes or seek to impose your solutions, even when you may be right. Recoil from the expedience of power as a means even to desirable ends, revealing the way of partnership as the best avenue to human community.

As both preachers and pastors, we would all do well to speak less and listen more. Rarely a week goes by when our congregants do not reveal to us everything we need to know to comfort them in their grief and distress, to challenge them in pursuing their gifts, to celebrate their accomplishments and laugh with them in their joy, if only we would pause to listen. Only after you have heard your congregants' fears and disappointments, yearnings and aspirations, will you be ready to preach the good news—words of hope and thanksgiving, love and celebration. And it is good news that you are called to preach.

A few weeks ago, I found my great-great-grandfather's name on the manifest of a ship that sailed from Bremen to New York in 1846. Along with his companions, he was destined for “Obercanada”—that is, Upper Canada—but the big news to me was that the ship's manifest indicated that he hailed from the village of Lingelbach in

Germany. My family has been looking in vain for this link for more than half a century. Linda, you know how I am naturally curious about such matters and I'm sure that you yourself are curious about what this minor genealogical discovery has to do with your ministry. — Everything! Absolutely everything! Lingelbach is in the land of the Brothers Grimm. It seems that for as long as memory can recall, the wells of Lingelbach suffered from two regular calamities: they were subject to recurring contamination, making the water undrinkable, while every seven years—not five and not six, but every seven—the wells ran dry, providing no water at all. There was one well in the village, though, that never became contaminated and which never ran dry: the “minister’s well” at the parish church.

Linda, I charge you to be a good steward of your own “well-being,” so that the pure water of the spirit flows freely from the wellsprings of our free and liberal faith, whenever your congregants come to you thirsting for the things of the spirit. You are not the water—nor are you the well—but you are the *keeper* of the well. Protect it from impurity and contamination; defend it against those who would bottle its waters and sell them for a profit, or who would ration its contents because their own wells have run dry; forget the fizz and the flavour, for it doesn't really need such additives. Tend to the wellspring which gives your people access to its refreshing flow, reminding them that even in times of drought, it is there for us if we would go deeper to find it. And remember always to drink from the well yourself—it is, after all, the “minister’s well.” The waters of life and love are there to quench our thirst and refresh our spirits, out of the abundance of the earth, which flows through our souls.