

What the Minister Learned Here
by Scott Gerard Prinster
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Reading “The Swan” by Mary Oliver

Did you too see it, drifting, all night, on the black river?
Did you see it in the morning, rising into the silvery air --
An armful of white blossoms,
A perfect commotion of silk and linen as it leaned
into the bondage of its wings; a snowbank, a bank of lilies,
Biting the air with its black beak?
Did you hear it, fluting and whistling
A shrill dark music -- like the rain pelting the trees -- like a waterfall
Knifing down the black ledges?
And did you see it, finally, just under the clouds --
A white cross Streaming across the sky, its feet
Like black leaves, its wings Like the stretching light of the river?
And did you feel it, in your heart, how it pertained to everything?
And have you too finally figured out what beauty is for?
And have you changed your life?

Reflections

A joke that ministers like to tell among ourselves is that the hardest sermon of our career is not the first one, which you might think, but the second one -- because we've already said everything we know in the first one, and now have to figure out what to say next week. Nearly as difficult is a minister's last sermon, when there *is* no next week, and we want to leave people with the most brilliant sermon they've ever heard. It is with gratitude and no small amount of sadness that this morning I am delivering my last sermon as your minister. The time has come for me to move forward with my continuing graduate studies, and for you to move forward as a congregation, welcoming my successor Karen Gustafson as your next minister.

It was actually as a university student that Unitarian Universalism first attracted me with its emphasis of lifelong spiritual and intellectual growth -- the idea that we aren't simply finished products when we hit adulthood, but may continue through the world with an open mind and an open heart. First Unitarian Society is a place that welcomes and encourages people who appreciate this growth, but it's easy to forget that ministers also continue to learn and grow and change. Our graduation from seminary and our accreditation as ministers isn't the end of our development; it's actually only the beginning, and our real growth happens on the job, in our relationships with communities of seekers like this one. Perhaps it should not be surprising that the same curiosity and eagerness that pulled me out of my comfortable job in physics and sent me to seminary has not entirely been put to rest -- it is pulling me out of the comfortable position I have been in here, where I am well-treated and -supported in my work, where I know a lot of good people and enjoy what I do, to go back into the uncertainty of a new field of study. This

intellectual restlessness is such a double-edged sword in ministry, in that it helps us to create interesting sermons and programming, keep ourselves stimulated and challenged, but it also threatens to transform us beyond the bounds of this position.

The lesson for me is how much more transformation is possible, even when we think that we've already come to the end. Five and a half years ago, I was considering announcing my resignation from a ministry that had not been going well, but I was at a loss as to what I would do next. I was not eager to entrust my heart to another congregation, so I began to make plans to return to physics. I spoke with the person at the Unitarian Universalist Association in charge of the New Congregation Program we had been participating in, and I told her that I was not going to ask the congregation to call me as their permanent minister; instead, I was planning on finishing up my five years there and going back into science. She pondered for a moment, and said, "You know, whom you really need to speak with is John Buehrens; he knows a lot of people, and I think he'd enjoy helping you get networked with others who have similar interests."

I already knew John from my two years of teaching in Transylvania, when he was still president of the Unitarian Universalist Association and had occasionally come to visit the Unitarian seminary there in Kolozsvár. I sent him an e-mail explaining my situation, and he sent a reply within the hour, inviting me to give him a call at the number he gave, and we'd have a nice talk about what I might do next. Well, we did have a nice talk, and he shared with me his concern that I would end up teaching physics at a small college somewhere, but no happier than I had been in that ministry. Knowing me as he did, he *did* know of a ministerial position that he thought I would be a really good match for, and thought that I should go ahead and resign early and apply for it. I hemmed and hawed, and made some excuse about how I really should finish out the five-year commitment I had made to that congregation, but John was very clever. He said, "Well, why don't we just talk about it some more next week? Let's see how you feel after you have some time to think about it." So we talked again later, and I made basically the same excuses. He ended our conversation the same way: "Let's talk some more after you've a little more time to think about it."

A few days later, a stranger called, who said, "My name is Craig McComb, and we hear that you're interested in the ministerial position at First Unitarian Society." John had just gone ahead and submitted my name anyway -- apparently, he thought he knew what was best for me. And, it turned out, he was right. Incrementally, over the five years that have followed, we have built up a relationship of trust and regard. Every time I have preached here, or taught a class, or struck up a conversation in the Loggia, or hammed it up for the children's story, I have become more at home in this place, and put down my roots among you as your minister. And I am very, very glad that John and Craig successfully tricked me into giving you that first chance to connect and win me over.

Since then, the growing trust and care between us has equipped me to do better and better work, both in this place and out in the community on your behalf. When I look back at my sermons from five years ago, I think of how far I've been able to come as a preacher, largely because I'm working in a community where I feel trusted and supported. And because Unitarian Universalism is a religion with congregational polity, my work as a parish minister has no real authority except that it represents a congregation. I implicitly represent you when I officiate at a memorial or a wedding, when I work with young adults on campus, when I speak to the press, and the meaning of my work finds its source in each of those moments that built our relationship. I have strived, not always successfully, to treat this web of relationships with all of my

consideration and respect, even when what I was doing was challenging our membership, or gently critiquing our work. My work has arisen out of this network of caring, and it has always been about this web of relationships. That is the meaning of the covenant that we identified between us, and your trust and care is a gift for which I have felt enormous gratitude.

One of the most important lessons I have been reminded of is that it's easy to see the ministers preaching or teaching during the weekend and think that the ministry is all about us, all about our work. I have always tried to explain to prospective members in our New UU classes that, like our other programming, the worship service is not a pre-packaged event that people consume as a passive audience. I'm always very aware of people's reactions during these services, and I often change course based on what I'm sensing from all of you. I was most vividly reminded of this in February, when an unusually heavy snowfall moved us to cancel Sunday's services, and I delivered them from this empty Auditorium and broadcast over the internet. To be celebrating this moment seemingly alone was a strange experience for someone so used to facing an assembly of people, and it reinforced my understanding that this moment is never about me, but it is about us, or rather what we have cultivated between us. It's easy to confuse the moon with the finger pointing at the moon, or the water with the wave that is only a momentary expression of it, but I was never the ministry on my own -- only a voice through which that ministry spoke and loved. People see us preaching to such an appreciative congregation, and there's a little celebrity power in that image, but it's not about me, or Michael, or Kelly, or Karen, who will soon be speaking to you from this place and this role. You're not a wonderful, successful congregation simply because you have good ministers; you attract good ministers because you're a wonderful, successful congregation.

This leads me to reiterate another lesson, one you'll also read in my last newsletter column, which you should be receiving any day now. If, as I say, the ministry has really been about us together as a community, I have understood my place as a lens to focus your compassion in a way that better illuminates the world, or a mirror, reflecting back to you all the kindness that you share with one another here. I have preached in congregations where the members would literally line up at the end of the service to voice their complaints or correct the preacher, and believe me, it is a very different quality of ministry to work in the midst of so much appreciation and support. As I wrote in my column, the world has no shortage of clever people -- what we need is more wise people, and the missing ingredient as far as I can tell is kindness. I believe that it's more important to be kind than it is to be clever. This is a group of very intelligent people, but I believe that the source of this congregation's success is actually in your kindness. I have felt very loved in my five years here, and I literally know of no other minister whom I consider luckier than I am.

Another thing I've come to understand, although like most of these lessons I regularly strive and fall short in it, is that tasks are not as important as people. I'm a very task-oriented person, as some of you have figured out, and this place has no shortage of them, especially as we are renovating our historic Meeting House and adding a beautiful new space. But I have tried to remember when the deadlines are looming that the real work -- *our* real work -- is about giving our hearts to others, and the tasks are always means to that end. As someone who is actually fairly shy, and is always tempted to hide himself in the tasks, I am grateful to have been surrounded by people who made giving my heart a relatively easy thing: truly the best colleagues I could ask for, a caring, hard-working staff, and committed, generous leaders. Again, this place has made it easy to look good.

And one more lesson, which I've spoken to you about before, is about loving what is only ours for the moment. All that we love is mortal and temporary -- our bodies, our family and friends, our possessions, our abilities. Is there any act more courageous than to entrust our fragile, tender hearts to loving something that will someday leave us? Of course, some choose not to give their hearts at all, but they suffer a far greater loss than those whose hearts are straining to contain love and loss at the same time, to make sense of this paradox. Members and staff have shared their moments of grief with me, brave enough to expose their hearts unguarded, and reminded me what grace and grit really look like in our darkest moments -- not like stoicism, which I believe is really romanticized cowardice, but like a tenderness that will not turn away from what is real. No words encapsulate this lesson more than the passage from Mary Oliver's poem "In Blackwater Pond" that I like to incorporate into memorial services:

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 own life depends on it;
and, when the time comes to let it go, to let it go.

The very meaning of love is made possible by the certainty of loss, and I am grateful for the lesson that letting go need not undo the beauty that has put down roots inside us.

Letting go is hard, but I know that this congregation is able to manage it gracefully, since you have gone through a fairly recent ministerial departure in my predecessor Mary Ann Macklin's leaving, and also a ministerial departure more like mine in which Max Gaebler continued to live in the area after his retirement. I am still a Unitarian Universalist minister with our professional Code of Ethics to follow, even though after this month I will no longer be *your* minister; that means that I am still bound to hold the health of the greater ministry above my own preferences, or any one individual's comfort or satisfaction. This is the hardest part -- knowing that I will be running into you constantly in this community, and relating to you in a fundamentally different way. This means that I'm not going to be forming friendships or engaging socially with members for the near future, until your leadership and I agree that my successor Karen Gustafson is getting connected in with that web of relationships here that is so central to our work. I know that this seems unnecessarily rigid and harsh to some of you, but having been on the receiving end of a predecessor's *not* doing that in his leavetaking, I know how utterly destructive this selfishness can be, and I would be heartbroken to know that I was interfering with the health of this ministry. There will be plenty of time to reconnect in the future -- for now, you have a wonderful woman who is joining you in your work together, and I hope that you will extend to her the warm welcome, gracious hospitality, and deep trust that you have shared with me. There truly is no better gift you could give me than to also offer this generously to Karen.

I hope that you will be able to join us later at the party that Kelly and her accomplices have planned, because, again, it isn't just about me, but about a successful ministry that we have created together. We have loved and challenged one another, and we continue to do so into this next chapter of our lives. My colleague Ken Phifer directed me to these words by Henri Nouwen: "Do not stop here. Continue on your own. My words were only to encourage you to find your own words, and my thoughts were only to help you discover your own thoughts." And now, as I accepted your invitation to ministry and was strengthened with its little, daily expressions, I relinquish my call to serve the First Unitarian Society of Madison as your minister.

With respect, deep gratitude and affection, I return to you the other end of the covenant that we have held between us, trusting that you will keep it safe until you share it with my successor. I leave you in faith that the beauty that called you here and opened your hearts to the work of love and justice will continue to grow and act in this place and in the larger world. For this mystery and all its healthy expressions, I can only say “thank you” and “amen”.