

# Birmingham Lecture

## Nurturing Our faith

### Joys, Sorrows, Fun, and Frustrations

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When the call came last August, I could not believe what I was hearing. Would I be one of sixteen ministers speaking to 500 colleagues next March? The Convocation Planning Committee thought it would be interesting for me to share a very personal, 25-minute presentation about, "What nurtures my faith?" In a panic, I called my friend and teammate Richard Gilbert and asked: "How can I be interesting for 25 minutes? Who will care what nourishes my faith?" His reply was something like, "Well, they probably won't care, but you have to do it anyway." Thinking, "What did I expect from him?" I called another dear colleague, Martha Munson, and repeated my dismay, saying, "I can't imagine why they called me." Martha replied quietly, "I can't imagine." So, with encouragement like that I said, "Yes."

These past months I have been writing down the experiences I have had among Unitarian Universalists of all ages. Indeed, it has been 35 years of "joys, sorrows, fun and frustrations," and sometimes an incident would be a mixture of two or three of these ingredients.

There was the time in the Schenectady church when we were having a terrible morning with a very active seven-year-old boy in the church school. Classes were held in a three-story house across the street from the church. The teachers were desperate, so I took Alan with me and asked him to help me to deliver the snacks and juice. We put crackers on a tray, I took the juice, and we headed up to the third floor. On the landing of the second floor, Alan tripped and the crackers flew. We picked them up, took them down to the kitchen, threw them away, refilled the tray, and made it to the third floor when Alan spilled them again. We repeated our task for the third time and at the bottom of the first floor steps, as I was about to tell him that I would have to carry everything, Alan said with all the confidence in the world, "You know, this time I think I should carry the juice!"

Now, this is why I love working with our Unitarian Universalist children – they are most often eager to try again, having been around adults who have faith in them and who are glad to be around them. Really, I salute the parenting I have witnessed in our churches. This past fall in Rochester, we had three memorial services for three long-time pillars of the church. The adult children of these three individuals all described remarkable, child-centered, households in which they grew up. It absolutely nurtures my faith to be among such families as they interact with one another, remembering their home and church childhoods.

I think the seeds of my intergenerational ministry were planted when I had the privilege, as a child, of spending my summers with three and four generations of people gathered either on Cape Cod with my father's family or in North Hero, Vermont, with my mother's. There were family dinners, daily swimming and sailing activities, and I loved every minute. I didn't know it then, but I am an off-the-chart "E" on the Myers Briggs personality indicator, which means that I am, and always have been, energized by being around people and fascinated with relationships. It is the relationships in congregations that have so fed my ministry. It is extremely important to me that our congregants are careful with one another. I have served, and I'm sure some of you are presently serving, congregations in which there an air of tension and

rudeness exists, places where individuality is taken to an extreme and the good of the community is forgotten. As you all know, being careful with one another means feeling safe and nurtured. When this happens we are enabled to use our energy to create positive, growing experiences with each other. This also helps us sustain the drive to work to make this a better world for all.

I suppose if I name the area of my work that is definitely full of joy, sorrow, fun, and frustration, but also nourishing, it is our church school. The parents who teach in our church schools are usually as dedicated as any people with whom I have worked, and they are a favorite source of the many "fun" stories I tell.

Last year, in the 5-year-old class, it came to the time when we teach our introductory sex education—the youngest "Our Whole Lives" or "OWL" class. This is usually about how special and wonderful our bodies are, plus a simple version of the sperm and egg story. But, it couldn't be this simple last year because we had children in the class who had come into the world in each of the ways known to human kind. The teachers had to explain artificial insemination, adoption, and intercourse. They spent a great deal of nervous time getting their lessons ready. After they finished the multiple descriptions of conception and parenting, the teachers told the children that they must remember one thing: "We're all alike in that we all began as babies." Relieved that the session was over, they were amazed to hear: "Oh no," said one precocious five-year-old, "We didn't all begin as babies, we all began as monkeys."

As many of you know, I love to overhear and pass on these stories. I have dozens of "OWL" stories, having worked with human sexuality education since 1969, when we developed "About Your Sexuality." I am sure that our "OWL" classes are one of our best gifts to our children and youth. For instance, two Sundays ago I was walking through our lobby after church when I noticed a gang of teens sitting around after youth group. I went up to them and said to one of the boys that I had heard had been in the Emergency Ward, "What happened?" "Oh, I'm OK now, but you know how sometimes your testicles don't come down just right? Well, one of mine got twisted and did it ever hurt." His friends of both sexes were quietly sympathetic, and all I could think was that "OWL" really works. These young people had just finished their twelve-week senior high session and could talk with each other about testicles as if they were discussing broken thumbs. Another piece of evidence that "OWL" works is that our youth come back from college to report that they have become their dormitory sex educators, that most other college freshman are not being careful or respectful concerning their sexuality, and that they are making disastrous decisions about this most important and sacred part of their lives.

Another favorite story also involves our curriculum for our five year olds. A family arrived at a Chicago area church where I was working during the 1980s with a concern: the grandparents felt they were joining a cult. I gave the parents a lot of reading material about Unitarian Universalism and, finally, they reported that the grandparents were beginning to relax about their choice of a church. Well, there is a lesson in that curriculum about the birth experience. The children are asked to bring in a sheet and, while they lie in the fetal position under the sheet, a teacher reads about how it feels to be in the womb of their birth mother. By coincidence, of course, the family's five-year-old daughter had just received her postcard asking her to bring her sheet on Sunday. On Saturday evening, the grandparents came to dinner. They asked their granddaughter how she liked her new church school and what she would be doing the next day. "Oh, Grandpa," she said, "Tomorrow, we're going to be born again!"

Another area of fun—and frustration—is working in a collegial relationship with Dick Gilbert. It is nourishing to have his faith in my work and to return my respect for his. One of my favorite times occurs when Dick and I escort our bi-annual class of twenty, or so, ninth and tenth graders to Boston. The trip two years ago was especially interesting and produced more great stories. When we visited the three Boston churches, I took seven teens to King's Chapel, signed us in, and went down the aisle following the usher, when one of the students called out that they were going to sign the visitors book individually. I was seated in the first box pew under the pulpit. After quite a while, the kids joined me. They were giggling, which was the norm, so I thought nothing of it. When the time for announcements came, the

interim minister said that this, indeed, was a most unusual Sunday morning because there were visitors attending the service from all over the world—people from Japan, New Zealand, Brazil. . . . I noticed that my group of teens was slowly disappearing into the pews. Then, I "got it" and whispered that they were all going to be asked to stand to introduce themselves in their native tongues. They lucked out and weren't invited to stand, and I secretly felt so pleased and amused that they could enjoy some harmless fun, even in one of our more formal churches. This is a gift we Unitarian Universalists have, well, most of the time – humor.

Dick and I do a lot of teasing of one another and the kids pick it up, especially on our trips and tease us right back. One morning, we were having breakfast when I heard the girls talking about thongs. I exclaimed, "Oh, I love thongs!" They whirled around and said in unison: "You do?" I realized my mistake – "For my feet, I mean!" "Sure," they replied. Weeks later, as we planned our Sunday morning worship service about what we had learned on our trip, I was explaining that the girls had to wear long skirts, as they would be sitting on the stage. "That's not fair," one said, "We have to wear long skirts and there you'll be, wearing your thongs."

I can't say that I am nurtured by the sorrows we experience together. . . the deaths, the cancer, the divorces, the misuse of drugs, the wars, the loss of jobs, the moving away. . . . But my faith is definitely enriched by being with people during their life altering events. Not all of these experiences end well, regardless of what we ministers try, and I have had experiences like these. I was in Chicago when a prominent brain surgeon—a member of the church—attempted to murder his wife and two children. She and I worked for weeks to be sure he would not be released from a mental hospital and try to come for them again. But power is powerful, and he was released with no publicity whatever. She fled with the two little ones, never to be heard from again. She had told me that she would not even be able to return to her parents' home because he would look for her there. I have her menorah, which she left for me at the church before she disappeared. I think of Sue every year, at of Hanukkah. In Rochester, we were conducting a memorial service for an older woman, Kay, who had died after a brief illness and whose husband, Bill, was suffering from Alzheimer's. As we were gathering the family together to walk into the sanctuary, Bill kept saying, "You can't start the service, Kay (his deceased wife) isn't here yet." His adult children were extremely upset and we finally had to tell Bill that we had to start without Kay. It was one of those moments when our hearts were broken and there was nothing to do but feel the sorrow.

And we suffered the tragedy of tragedies this past summer when a twelve year old, visiting Switzerland with her father, mother and ten-year-old brother, slipped off a climbing trail and fell to her death. We had two memorial services, the additional one being for her church school friends, with whom she had been involved for her entire twelve years, and who were still away for summer vacation when the accident happened. In January, her parents and brother came to a grief group I lead where we often have people report what have been the most helpful or the most troubling words people have said to them in their time of crisis. The mother, through tears, told us of her horror as a fundamentalist neighbor, while handing her a casserole, declared: "Well, finally God has brought you to your knees." I'm not sure we realize how troubling our faith can be to others. We have even had an entire neighborhood isolate one of our families, instructing their children not to go near those Unitarian Universalist children.

Yet, as I experience us, we Unitarian Universalists are an amazing group of people, and there is no better way to witness this than by serving on the Ministerial Fellowship Committee. It is such an honor to sit on interview panels for four to five days a year with thirteen other devoted ministers and lay leaders. And it is such an honor to hear from all of you who are looking forward to coming into our ministry. It is very hard work, very time consuming, and a great way to grow dear friendships. I find service to our Association to be very nurturing to my faith – I can't imagine life without my colleagues, even though some of them let you down upon occasion – like when they retire and leave you to pick up the pieces.

Every one of us has some great rites of passage stories. I have two which were not as much fun at the time

they were happening as they are now, in retrospect. I was using a wedding ceremony written by the very poetic Richard Gilbert (I wanted to say the very 'wordy', but I was just hard on him in the last segment...). Anyway, it was a hot day in the University of Rochester's chapel, and my entire head was filling up from allergies. The bride and groom were Catholic and Jewish, respectively, and they were fairly tense, as were their parents. I reached the point in the ceremony where it was written: "Marriage is more a process than an entity, more a living organism than an institution." I was stuffed up and I was having trouble speaking clearly. I blurted out: ...More a living orgasm, than an institution. The bride looked puzzled, the groom started to smile, and I had to give him one of those withering mother-looks. The parents kind of cocked their heads as if to say, "Well, what do you expect from a Unitarian female minister?"

The second story is about our time of joys and sorrows in our Sunday services. Dick and I both leave the pulpit and walk to the stand on which are eight candles. Dick stands by the candles and I am at the microphone, the position for "The Hook." It is my duty – assigned by the Worship Committee – to reach over to anyone lighting a candle and gently tap them if they have lost their sense of time and/or purpose. We have several curmudgeons, of course, and for at least a year, one of them had been busy hating joys and sorrows. Each Sunday on the back of the order of service he would write about this, demanding that the worship committee discontinue this silly ritual. Then one Sunday, there he was lighting a candle. With great difficulty, we did not glance at one another, we stayed 'cool' or non-anxious, if you prefer. The next morning the staff handed us his order of service and on it was scribbled: "My flame was not as big as the others."

A therapist has told me that it sounded to her as if our ministry was kind of crazy. Dick and I do agree with something we first heard from David Weisbard: "When I get well, I'm going to leave the ministry." We have been known to mouth to each other from either end of the board meeting table: "Watch out, here comes an AFGE (Another F----- Growth Experience)."

But, let me tell you how this all started for me. I did not receive a "call," the way some of you have. In 1964, I was pregnant with my third child in four years and had had a Labor Day picnic the day before I went into labor. At our picnic was a woman whose parents had helped to start the then Plandome Congregation – Shelter Rock, now.

My four year old was beginning to ask all those theological questions four year olds do and this woman insisted I was a Unitarian and didn't know it. Have you heard that before? So, when my husband drove me to the hospital early the next morning, instead of putting down Episcopalian, as I usually did, I marked Unitarian on the religious preference line and forgot all about it. The next morning, to my horror, a man with a large bunch of flowers arrived, introduced himself as the Unitarian Universalist minister in town, and said he was delighted to be able to bring me last Sunday's chancel flowers. He went on to wonder how he had missed me in church and if we were relatively new in the area? I mumbled something about too many babies to attend church, thanked him profusely for the flowers, and quietly died of embarrassment. Well, any of you who know anyone who has been raised as a proper WASP will know that I had to go to church at least just once. It was what a well brought up young woman had to do. So, later that fall, I went to the First Parish in Fitchburg, Massachusetts, and the rest is history.

We ministers are being helpful to our parishioners in ways we can never imagine. One of our special programs is to provide condoms in our bathrooms at the church. On Sunday mornings, one of my jobs is to run around with condoms, which I have packaged with instructions as to how and why they are to be used. We know these are helpful for obvious health reasons, and also because they are a source of great pride for our teenagers when they bring their friends to church. What we didn't anticipate was how the condoms would be helpful to a young woman, Katherine, and her husband, Peter, whose Mormon relatives are constantly harassing them about Unitarian Universalism not being a real religion. The relatives insist that Katherine and Peter have to stop attending services at our congregation so that the

entire family will be able to be together in Mormon heaven. One particularly stressful family gathering was heating up when the Mormon contingent started in on Unitarian Universalist ministers. Someone shouted, "Why what do they know how to do, anyway?" Katherine told us later that she suddenly knew how to stop the harassment. She replied: "Why, what they know how to do is to deliver condoms to our church bathrooms!" Delightful silence followed this claim to fame and the subject has yet to come up again many months later.

Our interns always say: "They never tell us in Divinity School what really goes on in churches." These stories are a lot of what really goes on and they are what nurture my faith: the humor, the enjoyment of one another, the enjoyment of our foibles as human beings, the shared sorrow, and being included in people's lives in a way possible only in ministry. And finally the joy of being in community, a joy felt by all ages as they gather.

I want to close with two more stories from Rochester. Each year, we have an animal blessing service on Memorial Day weekend. A visitor arrived on one of those few times when it was raining and all the children, adults and their cats, dogs, spiders, hamsters, guinea pigs, chickens, bunnies, gold fish, and rats were standing in the lobby waiting to process into the sanctuary. On the back of her order of service, she wrote and we later read. "Thank you, this is a lovely building and you seem like such nice people, but, even though I had heard that you were unusual, I had no idea!"

Finally I want to share a story about the frustration often felt while trying to get things done through our system of democratic committees. Most of last winter, there were spotlights on our new sign, which had taken years and much money to create, and we were very proud. But there was no lettering on the sign because the letters had arrived damaged and we had ordered replacement letters. At night, as you approached the building on Winton Road all you would see was a blank sign with brightly lit by spotlights. During the winter New Member Orientation, a young man asked if he could see me after the session. Then he whispered that he thought he was beginning to understand us a little. He said he had been puzzling about our theology, about why a church would shine a spotlight on a blank sign? Before I had a chance to explain, he declared that he had figured it out – "We only asked questions, there were no answers." Amen and blessed be!

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