

Birmingham Lecture

Living Our Mission

If Life Is A Gift...

the Reverend Clark Olsen
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This opportunity to speak to you is a gift to me. Thank you for listening.

I have had an extraordinary life. Not extraordinary compared with any of yours or anyone else's. Just extraordinary compared with what I ever imagined it could be.

For you to fully understand that, I have to tell you about some facts which have been with me for fifty-six years. When I was twelve years old I fell ill with rheumatic fever. The disease seriously scarred two of my heart valves. It was a scary time for my parents. I didn't know the full extent of my impairment. I wasn't unhappy. I was simply in bed, always horizontal, knowing that my heart was beating unusually hard and fast. That pounding heart beat was uncomfortable. I couldn't escape it. I could feel it all over my body.

After six months in bed, always lying down, I was another six months before I could go back to school.

I knew that something awesome had happened to my body, and that it had implications for the rest of my life. At the age of sixteen I had another bout with rheumatic fever -- this time keeping me out of school for the last half-year of high school.

Many years later I learned that when I was seventeen years old my parents had been told I would not live to be 21 years old. Though no one said such words to me in my earlier years, my parents' body language and tone of voice conveyed more than words. Though I never made specific predictions to myself, I always understood that life for me was precarious, and the odds were stacked against a long life.

There were many times of unease, but also more moments of gratitude. My heartbeat -- so present -- was a constant message that I am alive, that being alive is different from nonexistence, that life is precious, that life is a gift.

Those twelve months mostly by myself in the 8th-9th grade, and those six months in the 12th grade -- I remember them as positive times. Not painful or lonely. I can remember trusting conversations in visits from friends. I remember the steadfast caring from my parents and siblings. I remember discovering the smell of spring when my bedroom windows were first opened after the longer winter. I remember, on the radio, the humor of Art Linkletter's "Kids Say The Darndest Things." I was glad to be alive. I felt the gift of life, the gift of possibility. It's just that I had few grandiose expectations. I knew the possibilities were more limited now. I had a "bad heart."

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I went on to college. Led a quiet but active life. Majored in political science, took only one course in religion because I knew I might go into the ministry and I wanted undergraduate exposure to other subjects. I came to love music: dormitory guitars, a very exciting visit by Pete Seeger, singing the Bach b

minor Mass, listening to symphonic and chamber music. I wasn't a musician, but I loved it all. And somehow my eyes were awakened as never before -- to the huge copper beech trees on campus, to art works, to architecture. I sensed beauty as never before.

And there was suddenly Adventure in my life. An opportunity came up at Oberlin to do something I would never have dreamed of doing. Some students started a movement to send a student representative on a summer visit to the Soviet Union. On not much more than a whim, I decided to apply. By a happy turn of events, I was chosen to go, receiving student-donated funds to help pay expenses. This was in 1954 -- just 15 months after Joseph Stalin's death. I can remember lying on my hotel bed in Moscow, looking out the window at the red stars atop the Kremlin towers, thinking "My god, how did I get here!!?? After the worst days of the Cold War and Stalin's terror, I had quite an adventure. I took 300 photos. Before and after the trip I read the New York Times daily -- so now I was an "expert" on the Soviet Union. Well, virtually nobody else had been there! I paid my way through my last year of Oberlin showing my slides and giving talks on Russia to school assemblies, Kiwanis club meetings, etc. It put me in the public-speaking business. Looking back, that trip was an extraordinary gift to me.

Upon graduation from Oberlin I received a Rockefeller Brothers Theological Fellowship. To get it one had to be "uncertain" of ministry as a career. I was amply qualified. Though my father was a minister, I cringed at the common "goody-goody" image of ministry. I was admitted to Harvard but soon I felt my spirit confined by Biblical and theological studies, and repelled by the arrogance I felt in the "neo-orthodoxy" then prevalent at HDS. Had it not been for the breadth and depth of Paul Tillich and Jim Adams, I might well have left HDS. To keep my spirit open I took some courses in Harvard Yard -- in art, literature and history -- rather than at the Divinity School. To do so was risky: I was spending precious time beyond the boundaries of HDS's notorious "general exams" given in six defined fields at the end of your time at the school.

After two years at Harvard, I was still uncertain about the ministry. I decided to spread my last year at HDS over two years, and simultaneously become minister in the Westboro MA church, founded in 1723. I was 24 years old. After graduation, I stayed three more years full-time, experiencing the gift of knowing people's lives, the solidity of generations in a small town, the importance of simply caring for a building and the church's volunteer organization, tending to community and history and covenant and possibility. To this day, I feel deeply about those people and what they meant to this so-young, so-inexperienced minister. I learned that the stereotype images of Minister also freed people to share their lives, just because you are their minister. I learned that the role of "minister" need not be a confining box.

While in Westboro I became profoundly dissatisfied with the traditional "central pulpit" role of the minister in a UU church. Partly what triggered my dissatisfaction was the sense that the Sunday service was centered too much on the sermon: a hymn-sandwich with main ingredient labeled by the sermon topic -- If it was a lousy service, it was "turkey on wry." I was dissatisfied with lay participation as always auxiliary to the minister's; at the conclusion of the service standing at the front door as people said "Nice sermon" -- or said little, triggering doubts in my own mind about the value of my words. For me, the traditional format -- not just the hymn sandwich, but also expectations about lay and ministerial behavior -- reinforced confining cultural assumptions about sources of spiritual growth, and limited possibilities of religious expression.

The dissatisfactions led me to Laile Bartlett's book Bright Galaxy -- about the experience and promise of the then-flourishing "fellowship" movement in the denomination. After five years in Westboro I was ready for a change. And change came through an offer to become minister of the Berkeley Fellowship of Unitarians. It was a group that had begun in a revolt against the perceived dominating nature of the then minister of the Berkeley Church. The group's numbers grew. In 1962 they decided to hire a "Minister-Coordinator" who would speak once a month on Sunday mornings. The other Sundays were done mostly by Fellowship members, occasionally by outsiders. My work would include supporting that lay involvement.

I was intrigued. Why couldn't we ministers, with our training and experience, help others to speak on Sundays? Why couldn't we help enable others to create Sunday services that might take different form than the typical "hymn sandwich"?

I liked the idea. But I received warnings. My father warned: "They'll eat you alive." A well-known colleague accused me of betraying the profession of ministry when I accepted the expectation that I would speak but once a month. For me, it seemed an interesting and promising challenge. And, despite the Fellowship's anti-ministerial origins and tensions, I flourished there.

In 1968 I moved to Morristown NJ as minister of a 200-member Fellowship that owned a wonderful building and, more importantly was wondrously open to a partnership between lay participation and a minister who was willing to think and act beyond traditional boundaries -- lay or ministerial -- in roles, responsibilities and programs.

I had a wonderful time there. One especially memorable project (relevant to us here) was taking a Morristown group to present a worship service the first UUMA Convo -- in 1975 in the Poconos. The service was entitled WALDEN and consisted solely of Thoreau's words -- some of them set to Schubert's music. The service had originated with my dear friend Darrell Eubank, a UU lay person from Detroit. Here this week in Birmingham, it's clear that Thoreau and WALDEN continue to inspire us.

After ten years in Morristown I decided I should move to a new congregation. In the middle of my search, a Morristown acquaintance asked if I had any spare time to work for him on a large corporate consulting contract he had with Johnson & Johnson Co. I confided to him that I expected to be moving soon to a new church. The next day he offered me a full-time job with his consulting group -- at no reduction in pay.

Should I take the job? My earlier years -- during my struggle whether to become a minister -- had brought forth a promise to myself to remain open to a non-ministerial job opportunity should it come my way. In '78 I was happy, feeling success as a minister, not looking for a change in profession. But suddenly -- the opportunity. I said YES -- with all the confidence of a weakling 13 year-old boy freshman entering a jock-spirited high school!!

At 45 years of age, and after twenty years of apparent success in the role of minister, I feared I might now -- in the corporate world - meander off into professional oblivion.

As a consultant partner, new to the world of business, I at least found the wisdom to listen as much as possible and to speak as little as possible. I had to learn fast, before my ignorance was revealed!

Within three years, at first with the help of scripted seminar materials and always with good role models, I was teaching interpersonal and management skills, and developing modest culture change strategies at CITIBANK, British Airways, Pitney Bowes, etc. I had a wonderful time experiencing my soul, my strengths and my "underdeveloped" strengths in this new domain.

It wasn't better or worse than the parish ministry. It was just different. After my anxious first year or so, I found my courage when I realized that I was no smarter and no dumber than my clients with their MBA's. I simply wore a different pair of lenses, which allowed me, from my ministerial experience, to see clearly in the workplace things their MBA lenses could not bring into focus.

For eight years I did corporate consulting. Then, in 1986, I joined the UUA staff in Boston -- combining my parish and my business experience in the new position of Vice President of Program and Planning. I sat on the Executive Staff representing the Departments of Ministry, RE and Social Responsibility, as well as the function of planning. I rejoiced in the opportunity to experience my self in a very new, but rooted domain.

After two years I left the relative emotional security of the UUA, pleased with the congregational

Long-Range Planning process I initiated, hopeful that some of my ideas for denomination-wide (not just 25 Beacon St. staff) involvement in planning would eventually bear fruit, and confident in my departing recommendation that my UUA position should be eliminated because the three department heads I represented should sit directly on the Executive Staff -- a recommendation embraced by John Buehrens when he took office as UUA President. Happily, also, my ideas about widespread involvement in planning have emerged in the work of the UUA's Fulfilling The Promise Committee -- to which I was later appointed.

So, in 1988, I returned to corporate consulting work, this time with a company that specialized in using "experiential learning" -- ropes courses and rafting, for example -- as efficient, energizing ways for people to discover their own power and the power of teams, what they wanted out of life and work, and the value of community. Ten years of that, then I retired in '98. But I still do that work a few days most every month. About one week ago I facilitated a two-day retreat for ten managers of a ball-bearing plant in North Carolina. The managers were learning how they needed to behave so that their plant could change from a "command-and-control" to a team culture.

A few other things in my life that are important to me, but not directly related to profession:

Way back in 1959, on my second visit to the Soviet Union (a month after graduation from Harvard), I met a Russian woman in the Moscow hotel where I stayed. Seven months later I returned to Moscow -- where Luda and I were married within a month. Now that was a leap of faith! -- moving far beyond the boundaries of routine expectations for love and life-partnership. Luda arrived in this country just after Francis Gary Powers was shot down in his U-2 spy plane, so newspapers across the country carried the story of this successful leap over the Iron Curtain. We had our Andy Warhol 15 minutes of fame, and then settled into life together in the Westboro church parsonage.

Interestingly, within two weeks of Luda's arrival, a CIA agent phoned asking to interview her in our home. Full of anxiety (consider her background!), tensions eased considerably when we learned the CIA agent also directed the choir in a nearby Unitarian Church!! Oh, how we do put people in boxes!

Luda and I had a daughter, Marika -- who years later, fluent in Russian, was a key off-camera producer of CNN's coverage of the fall of Gorbachev in Moscow; and Marika produced the "Murder In Selma" CNN documentary about the attack on James Reeb (and Orloff Miller and me) in 1965.

Luda and I were married for fourteen wonderful and painful years. We are still good friends. I have now been married to Anna, love of my life, for 25 years -- going strong. And we are parents to 14-year old Todd -- whom we adopted when he was six weeks old. I am grateful for the gift of loving and being loved by family, and the special joy of moving beyond assumed family age-boundaries of embrace.

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What is all this about? My title is: "**If life is a gift...**"

All this time -- so far forty-seven years beyond the doctors' predictions of a twenty-one year lifespan -- my heart beats so I can always feel it. I never escape its message about the fact that I live, and that the gift of life is precious.

But my theme goes further. It's implied in what I've been describing of my life. It's about "**boxes.**"

By "boxes" I refer to the subtle learnings from our culture or our mentors that limit our imagining about how to use our talents, our gifts. During my almost 69 years -- I more clearly know now -- I realized I could move out of boxes, or didn't even consider the possibility of a box.

- Rheumatic fever removing me for awhile from the box of school;

- Physical limits removing me from the box of some expected collegiate activities;
- Not allowing myself to be confined to Divinity School courses while at Harvard;
- My "out of the box" trips to Russia and my marriage there;
- My move from central pulpit, minister-dominated congregations, clearly beyond 1950's-1960's assumptions about ministerial boundaries working with lay-led Sunday services and lay-empowered church boards;
- Venturing -- so uncertainly -- out of my known realm of ministry into a corporate environment in which to foster people-empowerment and culture change.

When I facilitate corporate learning, I often use a particularly relevant conceptual model. It's called moving through stages from "Unconscious Incompetence to Conscious Competence." I realized recently that I could apply that model to the metaphor of the assumed boundaries of "boxes" that we inhabit -- that confine our souls, our spirits.

First, "**Unconscious Incompetent**". I can't imagine any of you being one, but maybe you've got one in your congregation. By my definition, the Unconscious Incompetent has no awareness of any box, no understanding of limits provided by any culture, family or workplace assumptions. And no idea that you could do anything but what your limited background tells you to do. I suppose this person leads the ultimate "unexamined life" -- or, in Thoreau's terms, never even considers standing on "the deck." They're always "down below."

A **Conscious Incompetent** would be a person who feels there's a box and has no idea what to do. I've met a lot of these. Their response to most any problem is predictable. It is not, "Let me think, what could I do?" It's a life-long theme of bumping into boundaries and whining "Ain't it awful!" That's the Conscious Incompetent.

If I'm an **Unconscious Competent** I know and do some things beyond boundaries. I know such is possible, but always there's an unexpressed, unexamined assumption that there are boxes which should prevent us from exercising our gifts. I passively acquiesce to those boundaries. In a decidedly mixed metaphor, "I allow the boxes to should on me!"

The **Conscious Competent** is aware that the gift of life is a gift of extraordinary possibilities; that boxes are, for the most part, figments of one's imagination. This person finds inner strengths in herself and others, new connections between past experience and future endeavors. Playful and purpose-filled imagination. The wonder of it all!

I look back on my life, and I look forward. I feel I have learned to live mostly as a conscious competent. As it turned out, when I left parish ministry I did not "meander off into professional oblivion." Finally, at this time in my life I realize there aren't many boundaries. I have played with my gifts, and delighted in finding purpose in my play.

Now don't take me for a fool. I am aware life is not totally absent of boxes. I have one that's vital to me. Ten years ago, when surgeons opened my heart to install mechanical valves, their incisions disrupted my heart's electrical system, which triggers the heart's contractions. My vital box is about two inches square and 1/4 inch thick. It's metal and has a battery inside. It's called a pacemaker. Every seven years or so, I have to replace the box, which gives me a fresh battery.

But, hey, I can live with that box. With it, the beat goes on.

But on the whole, I would tell you this: Life is a gift. And it doesn't come in a box.

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