

“THE JOURNEY OF MINISTRY”
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Lakehead Unitarian Fellowship
August 1, 2010

I have struggled mightily with what to say to you today. The easy route would have been to re-work a sermon I'd written for another time and place. In fact that I have not been present to LUF for the past three years, and even then was here for a brief time in this congregation's fifty year history. But nonetheless, I now find myself in the position of being one of the few ministers who has something of an inside view of LUF. Lately, it has been only through short conversations and your newsletters that I have glimpsed a picture of your recent life together. But then, there's the fact that I love you, that I care about your future, and I think that you have so much to offer to this community and to Canadian Unitarianism. And, Ken's Morrioso's recent passing also influenced what I might say. With all of that in mind, I made the decision to do the vulnerable thing...to go out on a limb, and to speak to you frankly.

First, here are some images to set a tone...

Imagine this. You're calmly sitting at a stoplight when someone behind you begins honking angrily and swerves around you with one fist gesturing wildly. As the car passes, you see a face distorted with anger, a face of someone you don't know, and the car speeds out of sight. You have no idea what you have done to make them so angry. You check. The light is still red. You sit there feeling like you were just unwittingly sucked into someone else's drama.

Or imagine this: You are a swimmy creature. You come from a long succession of swimmy creatures and have known nothing else. One day, for what seems like no apparent reason, you feel a funny tingling down your back that makes you wiggle and lurch. The feeling grows and you begin to feel oddly stretched. Something flappy and long emerges from your back...something you later identify as a leg. What the heck just happened? Years in the future, you look back upon your life as a reptile and see this for what it really was...a quantum leap in evolution. But at the time, it was strangely unnerving and just plain weird.

Or this: You make a decision to do something that's not your usual schtick. Maybe it's stupidly dangerous, like deciding at midlife to attempt to become a luge champion. Maybe it requires a huge commitment of practice time, like learning to play the accordion. Maybe it's simply a lark...something that makes you feel like you're someone you always wanted to be. When it's been done, you sit back and shake your head. What just happened here? Where did that come from?

These random scenarios are meant to evoke a particular feeling...the feeling after something has happened that you can't quite understand. What I want to say is that in the moment of aftermath, after what seems like an accident, a near miss, or a freakish occurrence, you have the opportunity to take stock and learn. I believe that at this moment LUF is at just such a crossroads, just such a place of discernment.

As David said earlier, I served here as your consulting minister from 2005-2007. During that time, we (you and I) focused on visioning. You created a 'Way Forward Task Force' who carefully and intentionally laid out recommendations for LUF's future. Those recommendations were endorsed by the LUF Board and this congregation. Based on those recommendations, you entered into a full-time interim ministry with Rev. Rick Koyle, during the 2007-2008 church year. For whatever reason, probably for a combination of reasons, that ministry was less than successful, and now LUF, from what I can surmise, finds itself in a windless place...without a unified sense of direction...a perfect moment for discernment.

Here's the thing. Looking at your history, I suspect that the culture of LUF, one in which you each participate, generally works in opposition to any efforts to move forward. That said, exactly how that happens is difficult to pin down. Herein lies your work...to understand your culture and to work to change it where it needs changing.

I would venture to say that if the ministry of this congregation were healthy... vibrant... welcoming... focused... then this congregation would grow and prosper... this congregation could locate and buy a new building, and professional ministry might finally find a foothold here, if indeed that's what you want. Let me talk about ministry for just a moment. Before I came to Thunder Bay, this congregation had several experiences with professional ministry. The history on your webpage tells the story better than I could, but you've had a minister on loan, an intern minister, a couple of ministers serving part time, several consulting ministers, an extension minister, and most recently an interim minister. None of these lasted for more than two years. You have no history of sustained, intentional professional ministry.

But the issue here is not about ministers per se, but rather about the ministry of this congregation. Ministry is your work. The UUA's Commission on Appraisal report done nearly 20 years ago entitled "Our Professional Ministry" began by stating that ministry is the work of a religious community as it seeks through faith to transform its members' lives and the world around it. Ministry is your work as you seeks to transform your lives and the world around you. If there is professional ministry, it is the congregation that creates the minister, because a minister cannot exist apart from the people he or she serves. More than other

profession, ministry involves partnership. Partnerships imply mutual responsibilities.¹ And so, I'm here today to talk with you about your responsibilities.

Ministry is service...service to one another...service to relationships...service to the healing of the world...service to a vision. It should be clear to you from your history, that any professional minister, regardless of length of stay, is ultimately a sojourner here. So LUF's ministry is yours to do. And, to do ministry requires vision, commitment, struggle, doggedness, thick skin, humility, support from and to each other...in other words, it is not easy. It is a monumental task. If LUF is to take on this task, if LUF is to have a serious, authentic, viable ministry within and without these walls, then these are my challenges for you.

First, do you have a vision? I mean a communal vision, one that you share. What and who is it that you want to be? Do you want to grow? Do you want to have a vital presence in Thunder Bay? Do you really want this congregation to live and live more abundantly? Have you thoughtfully together set upon a path with a destination in mind? If not, then this is your very first project.

Perhaps more importantly, do you know how to buy into that vision? Are each of you willing to put that vision before your individual interests? In other words, are you, each of you, willing to support the work that moves toward that vision...even if you didn't vote for it? Even if it's not your pet project? It's great to have differing opinions, to express them, to get into conversation about them, but then as a community, you need to work together. A religious community is diverse, but ultimately it can't be partisan. This is not a political organization.

So, I challenge you to come together to do some communal reflection and honest soul searching. You need to know one another. You need to be willing to look at your individual contributions, positive and negative, to what has transpired here over your history. You need to together embark on a ministry of love and forgiveness and inclusion.

Second, are you willing to do the work, make the changes, and challenge yourselves in ways that this vision requires of you? A vision will require financial commitment, personal changes of heart and mind, and challenges of moral will. You will need to hold yourselves...your decisions, your actions, your words...up against your vision at every turn...every day...in every meeting...in every service. If you don't do this, then you are certain to more often sabotage or impede that vision. You all know that if you want something to be different, you have to change your patterns and your behaviour. Doing it the same way, will not get different results. So, this will require that you let go of "the way it's been done" in the past.

¹ http://www.uua.org/documents/coa/92_ourprofessionalministry.pdf

I have had the impression that this congregation is quick to blame the individuals who have provided professional ministry here, and not so quick or willing to look at its own culture and patterns. Certainly I had shortcomings in my ministry here, and I have to take responsibility for them. For example, in retrospect, I feel that I pushed too hard for 'progress' and in so doing denied you some important 'process'. I think that I made ministry too easy for you, by not requiring a lot of you. I'm truly sorry for that and for how these things might have contributed to the place you find yourselves in today. And, while I cannot, and would never, speak to the competency or abilities of the colleagues who preceded and succeeded me here, I'm sure that each of those ministers made mistakes. But so have you. And so, I challenge to look at yourselves hard and honestly. Get into real relationship with one another. Ask difficult questions. Don't shy away from thorny topics or conversations. Create a vision together and then keep that vision before you, so that that you might hold one another accountable to it. This will include naming inappropriate behaviour and being willing to correct wrong turns.

Ministry takes preparation. Ministers (with a capital M) spend years preparing to take on this sacred role. It is no different for you. Ministry (your ministry) is a constant journey...a path...a process...moving you toward who and what you are becoming. You have made mistakes. You will make more mistakes...that is a given. But there is no shame, no blame, in mistakes... that is, if you're willing to learn from them...to grow...to change...to move on.

Leonard Cohen, in the song, "Anthem" ...sometimes called "The Bells" ...wrote:

Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in.

I interpret this to mean that we need to see our mistakes...we need to confront our imperfections, our cracks... in order to learn, and in order for the light to get in.

But don't forget Cohen's first line...Ring the bells that still can ring. Keeping your vision in the forefront also requires that you hold up, notice and honour those things that are moving you forward. Pay attention to what you have accomplished. You have incredible resources and opportunities here. Rev. Ray Drennan shared with me a paragraph from his first MSR report for you. He writes: "The city has ... a few new initiatives (regional health hospital and medical faculty) that will bring in fresh vigour. I sensed there was in general a lack of appreciation (at LUF) for the positive, and exciting ways the potential of their city's present and future may be 'storied'. This may be a part of the usual blindness of not seeing the beauty in your own back yard." He then quotes David Thompson, of the NorthWest Company as saying, "Thunder Bay for outsiders is the place of dreams and myths, the place of courage and transition."

Ring the bells that still can ring. Write new, life-giving stories. Be a place of dreams and courage. You have so much to offer. There is no other place in Thunder Bay for those who are looking for the space to question and to grow spiritually with the accompaniment of a community. There is no other place in Thunder Bay that can so well offer the assurance that we are not alone, and that we each have worth. There is no other place in Thunder Bay that is committed to beloved community... with all of its messy diversity. Be grateful for all that you have to offer, and for all that grows within you, and that gratitude will lead you on your journey.

Remember how I began this morning, by suggesting that LUF sits in the throes of an aftermath...at a crossroads? As I look back at my ministry here, and as I ponder your foray into interim ministry with Rev. Rick Koyle, and as I remember the incredible work you did in hosting the 2009 ACM, that is the question that most comes to mind. What was all that about? To hold up any one of those huge pieces of your recent history in light of the larger picture of who you are and where you find yourselves today, is to be required to ask that question...what was that about? I daresay that this is the critical work on your plate...to look at these experiences and to honestly ask the question...what was that about? Interim ministry is meant to be a mirror that you can hold up to see yourselves. So, what can you learn from that difficult year? What did you do right, and where did you make mistakes? And, as you delve into the meaning and lessons learned from your recent history, you must also ask, Now What? What shall we do next? What are we to do with this? What does this learning and experience require of us? That's the follow up to the visioning piece. Based on who you want to be, what should you do now?

In this moment of aftermath, are you feeling like you just got away with your life...or are you feeling like you're on an evolutionary path that is heading exactly somewhere you wanted to go? You can choose how to react and what direction to take at this crossroads. This is a time of gathering together and building something out of love. And I believe that you have the capability and the resources to do this, and to do this well. All that has happened is preparation for what is to come.

Ministry is the work of a community, and if this congregation is to have a viable ministry, with or without professional leadership, with or without a different building, then, in my humble opinion, you have to get a lot better at being a community. Work together. Do the hard work of relationship. Love one another. Ring the bells that still can ring. Be your ministry.

I close with a another writing by Gordon McKeeman.

Ministry is: speaking and living the highest we know
and living with the knowledge that it is never as deep, or as wide or as high as we wish.

Whenever there is a meeting that summons us to our better selves, whenever
our lostness is found, our fragments are united or our wounds begin healing,
Our spines stiffen and our muscles grow strong for the task.
There is ministry.

May your ministry be visionary and bold and united.
Amen.