

Here Come the Love People
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Liz Perkins wondered if I had one. A clergy shirt. It was March 2013, nearly three years ago, and we were wrapping up the First “Pop Up InstitUute” here at the church. Dennis Brunn from UUPLAN (UU Pennsylvania Legislative Advocacy Network) had given a fantastic workshop on “Being UU in the Public Square” and we were getting acquainted and chatting in the Gallery as folks streamed out the door after a satisfying day.

Nope. No clergy shirt. Liz, who is one of our dedicated UUPLAN organizers, explained that clergy are taken more seriously by legislators when they are wearing a clerical collar. A stole won’t cut it. The shirt with the collar conveys authority. Somehow it improves the hearing of lawmakers. Liz gently plugged the purchase: “They are bombarded by well-funded evangelicals and conservatives,” she explained. “Maybe I might get one soon and we could go knock on some doors? They need to hear from liberal clergy, too.”

Great idea. Sure. I went online and saved some possibilities...but being a neophyte, I wasn’t even sure what collar type was appropriate for a Unitarian minister. I didn’t want to end up looking like the Vicar of Dibley! So, I perused my colleague’s Facebook pages and even consulted a blog called “Beauty Tips for Ministers” (I kid you not) and I figured it out.

But, I couldn’t quite close the deal with myself and wondered why. Was it my Jewish background? That didn’t seem to stop my UU colleagues, the Reverends Lavanhar, Weinstein, Lerner, and Morgenstern. Was it that I perceived my ministry as mostly one of spiritual and personal growth? Preaching and teaching and pastoral presence? I’m not going to do THAT in a collar!

Was it that it was just so “minister-y” (even a little pretentious) and that I didn’t want the shirt to be the first thing people saw when they looked at me, drawing assumptions, projecting stereotypes, and proceeding to lob probing questions about my theology and initiating arguments about God? As I’ve discovered at nearly every social event, it’s complicated enough being minister without advertising it.

Time passed and Liz inquired again, in her persuasive but non-abrasive manner, about the shirt. Did I have one? Nope, not yet. But I’m workin’ on it. “Great, because we need liberal clergy to get in there and offer our perspective.” Yes. Of course we do. I’m on it. Really. And I’m thinking, “What is wrong with me? It’s just a shirt, for Pete’s sake.” So, I order one in March 2015 after being deeply inspired by dispatches from the Justice GA the previous summer, during which an army of my colleagues marched in Arizona against border brutality in their clergy shirts and “Standing on the side of love” (SOTSOL) stoles.

I chose an oxford blue button-down style with a tab collar. Very classic. Permanent press! I’m pumped. The shirt comes, I unwrap it and go to try it on.

But, I can't. One of the sleeves is sewn shut! I laughed out loud at this cosmic joke. It was as if the Universe was taunting me, confirming my struggle and ambivalence. I sent it back and ordered the one I'm wearing today from a different vendor. "Beauty Tips for Ministers" thought a jersey pullover style would be more flattering anyway. And who am I to argue?

So, I want to thank Liz Perkins for her patience. Later this month, in my clergy garb, I will be accompanying her and several other congregants as we visit Representative Mark Mustio in his office in Moon Township to talk about the Patient Trust Act and "taking politics out of the exam room." This visit will include talking points on the danger of fracking chemicals, the need to discuss gun safety, and the limitations of medical scripts that often contain false information. I'm excited, I'm honored to go, and I look forward to learning from Liz and giving my best effort for our side.

When I told a friend about this upcoming visit, she said it was like a "coming out." I suppose in some ways this is true. More accurately, a debut of an aspect of my ministry here in Pittsburgh that has been evolving over these past 5 years as I've gotten my feet under me. I will be deliberately putting my clergy-self out there so that people DO see the collar first and perceive it as a sign that I am willing to wear my faith and my convictions on my sleeve (not in the pulpit, typically -today is special- but when I am "hot under the collar" and the symbol might matter.) Yet, more than a "coming out," it is a "walking willing" pledge (as Sister Simone Campbell, the feisty nun who riled the church hierarchy, might call it). Or, a "Standing on the side of love" vow, in our UU parlance.

Sometimes, when you make that decision to "walk willing" or "stand on the side of love" the dots get connected for you in unexpected, even life-changing ways. Recently, I had the privilege of hearing attorney Bryan Stevenson, author of Just Mercy, the UUA Common Read in 2015, give an incredibly compelling lecture at Carnegie Music Hall. (Some of you were there – I saw you.)

And, as I listened to him recount stories of racism, mercy and redemption, especially in the juvenile justice system, I had an epiphany. Stevenson discovered to his surprise that he had influence. And he knew he could not squander it. He pursued every avenue for using it and made an enormous difference in the lives of his clients. The very day we heard him speak, the Supreme Court abolished life sentences for juveniles and he helped make that happen. How could I have missed this point in my own life...that I have so much potential influence as a minister and that I had been keeping it on a hanger in the closet?

I may seem late to the party, but I didn't have a thing to wear! Seriously, though, I am making the decision now to walk willing, to walk towards trouble, wearing a visible symbol of the power given to me by my community, and I look forward to discovering how my influence might result in positive outcomes or change through UUPLAN and other efforts. And, as Garrison Keillor once quipped: "Once you've pack your bags for the Promised Land, it's hard to go back to Motel 6."

So, let's not go back. Let's walk forward, willingly. My colleagues inspire me in this journey with their own recounted experiences. The Rev. Amy Carol Webb tells this story: "When marriage equality was in the courts in South Florida," she writes, "I arrived at the courthouse steps one morning having forgotten my stole with the rainbow stripe, and so arrived with only my collared blouse under a tailored black blazer. The way the demonstration was staged, the only way I could get to the equality advocates was through the non-equality folks."

As I approached," she continues, "the non-equality folks saw me and started up greetings 'Oh, Pastor, we're so glad to see you here. Thank you, thank you for coming,' and such. Then of course they got terribly confused and startlingly quiet as I passed on through, blessed them along the way, and joined the rainbow folks across the rope line. Soon after, a lead attorney for equality who knows me spotted me and shouted through the megaphone, "Hey Rev., you here to MARRY some people?!" To which I shouted, "You bet I am!!" "UU, right?!" "Absolutely!" There was cheering. Reporters captured it -- which served both the action and our standing in the community well."

Today is "Share the Love" Sunday, an opportunity to celebrate and support the SOTSOL campaign which started back in 2004 when UUs like the good Rev. Webb agreed to walk towards trouble to demand first marriage equality, and then over time, economic justice, racial justice, immigration justice, and environmental justice. Today, we know this campaign by the gold logo and slogan you see behind me and on the T-shirts of some of our Joyful Noise singers. At the annual Pride parades, they are everywhere...a sea of gold marchers, walking willing, in love and solidarity. At General Assembly, it's practically a uniform. (UU game day clothes!)

I suppose you could even call it our brand, "Standing on the side of love." During the Pittsburgh Cluster Assembly back in November, the keynote speaker, the Rev. Vail Weller, remembered marching in Arizona, in that demonstration I mentioned earlier, with lots of folks in gold T-shirts and overhearing someone on the sidewalk remark: "Here Come the Love People." So, thank you, Vail, for my title today. The love people -- isn't it heartening to know that there are folks who think of UUs as "the love people?"

What does it take to be a "love person?" Ask yourself this question when you have time to ponder it (maybe while you're perusing what's left in the Valentine's Day card selection at CVS): What does it take to be a "love person?"

Another of my colleagues, the Rev. Jo Crawford, is among the love people. Every Friday, she dons her collar and heads to a local coffee shop. She is a veritable "Sister of St. Arbucks." Rev. Jo parks herself at a visible table and saves a seat for the brokenhearted. And, they come. But, it's not about the collar or the SOTSOL t-shirt, really (although this certainly creates a welcome mat).

Being a love person is about so many deeper things. Knowing what and who you love and why, and then turning towards them, rather than away. Learning what it means to THEM to feel securely loved and then not withholding that. It's about basic, simple kindness. It's about loving strangers just because

they need someone to love them, care about them, and not let them fall through the cracks of a hardened society. It's about loving what breaks and loving what endures. Loving the questions more than the answers. Striving to be curious, not furious, in the search for truth and meaning.

How many ways might you share the love today or tomorrow or the next day or the next? It may happen in a politician's office, or in your child's school or your parent's assisted living facility, at a Black Lives matter rally or at the bedside of someone who might otherwise die alone. You could be a love person with a grieving co-worker or with a refugee you have sheltered, a spouse in recovery, a prison pen pal, or a bullied trans teen you might be mentoring in another part of town.

And like so many other aspects of our lives, being a love person begins at home. It begins with you in your heart of hearts. And, then it expands out to include your intimates, then your friends, your community, your society, our global home.

In our political wilderness and especially, in this already troubling Presidential election cycle, our commitment to cultivating the following five habits of the heart is more crucial than ever. These habits are: 1. An understanding that we are all in this together; 2. An appreciation of the value of otherness; 3. An ability to hold tension in life-giving ways; 4. A sense of personal voice and agency; and 5. A capacity to create community.

The writer Terry Tempest Williams reminds us that "the human heart is the first home of democracy. It is where we embrace our questions. Can we be equitable? Can we be generous? Can we listen with our whole beings, not just our minds, and offer our attention rather than our opinions? And do we have enough resolve in our hearts to act courageously, relentlessly, without giving up and trust our fellow citizens to join us in our determined pursuit of a living democracy?"

The Rev. Martin Luther King echoed this call to action when he preached: "The question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists for hate or for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice or for the creation of justice?"

Personally, I don't live next to a fracking pad and I do not have a child who might play in a home with a loaded gun. But if I will not pledge to stand on the side of love for those who do or who might, I am only for myself. At the dog park or at a cocktail party, I can decide who I say I am. But in this collar, that is not an option.

On Friday, February 12th, as our own version of 'Nuns on the Bus' rolls up to Representative Mark Mustio's office in Moon Township, and our determined band of UUs walks willing towards his door, I'm hoping the receptionist spots us and announces to everyone in earshot- "Get ready, folks. Here come the love people." Blessed Be. Share the Love. Amen.

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