

Unitarian Universalist Ministry: Where The Sidewalk Begins

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Each Sunday at my home church, The First Parish in Concord, MA, the minister leads the congregation in a spoken benediction. These eight lines, adapted from Paul's letter to Thessalonians, serve a weekly inspiration to us as Unitarian Universalists (UUs) to make the phrases we recite in church *autobiographical* in the actions of our daily lives.

One of the most innovative and intentional approaches to "walking the talk" of our benediction occurred on the first day of school some years ago, when one parishioner decided to inscribe these eight lines onto the pavement outside of the home she shared with her then-11-year-old son. She chalked out one line per concrete square so that he would literally have to walk over the words on his way to the bus stop.

"Go Out Into the World in Peace," read the first square. "Have Courage," read the second. "Hold Onto What Is Good," read the third, and so on down the sidewalk: "Return to No Person Evil for Evil," "Strengthen The Fainthearted," "Support The Weak," "Help The Suffering," "Honor All Beings."

The stirring message of this benediction and the striking image of it chalked underfoot are powerful articulations of my own pledge to walk (stride, stumble, and at times, even skip!) down life's uneven pavement alongside those I am fortunate enough to serve. This eloquent yet simple, benediction is truly a "charge" to my ministry, one which exacts an oath to use my gifts with enthusiasm and dignity, and in the words of Desmond Tutu, "to actively engage others in a quest for a life more loving, more kind, more free and more lovely, more committed and joyful, more sane and more just." I invite you to accompany me down this vividly inscribed sidewalk for a closer look.

"Go Out Into the World in Peace," reads the first concrete square. In ministry, "going out into the world" at all is a critical step, and the sheer willingness to answer one's call into this rewarding and rigorous vocation is, in itself, an act of faith. To "go out into the world in peace" as a minister requires a firm grounding in one's mission and theology, a zeal for our evolving liberal tradition, and a commitment to serve without hubris or abuse of power as a leader, a role model, and a peacemaker, locally and globally. It means perceiving the world and its people as sacred and treating them accordingly. It means being a trailblazer when necessary, but more often acting as a companion who shines a flashlight on the path so that others can find their way (and not trip so much in the process). It means meeting people where they are, in this wonderful, wounded world, and walking with them a few steps further. *I am called to walk this ministry of leadership and peacemaking.*

"Have Courage," reads the second concrete square. In 1961, the Rev. Dana McLean Greeley, the first President of the newly-formed UUA, dreamed of a church that brings not only "comfort and courage" to its people, but also "discomfort and challenge." I agree. In all of this, the minister has an opportunity to act as a catalyst and a midwife, an endeavor that requires a mature self-awareness and an embodied confidence. It asks ministers to be daring, authentic, and even tenacious when

necessary, in the pulpit, at the bedside, on the State House steps, and in dialogue with the congregation, as we speak the truth, as we interpret it, in love and goodwill. *I am called to walk this ministry of courage and compassionate truth telling.*

“Hold Onto What Is Good,” reads the third concrete square. Sometimes, we focus on scarcity rather than abundance, misery rather than joy. Nothing seems ‘good’ or “good enough.” One of the greatest gifts a minister can give to those she serves is the encouragement to cultivate what is decent, simple, and nurturing in life, such as the sustaining bonds of family, friendship, and community. We can blunt the impact of our disposable, overly-wired, jaded culture of isolation by helping others to sustain what is “good” (even when that is perceived as “corny”), and by affirming the blessings that continue to bless us, even as we struggle through the ebb and flow of shadow into light and back again. We can create and support “safe congregations” in which folks are free to rejoice openly and feel their feelings deeply. And, most of all, holding onto what is good means holding onto faith and engendering it in others - faith in ourselves, in one another, and in the sacred as we each understand it; a faith that we are not alone and that humans are essentially “good.” *I am called to walk this ministry of grounded optimism and faith.*

“Return to No Person Evil for Evil,” reads the next square. As ministers, we are called to prevent injury, to care for ourselves and others, to practice both confession and forgiveness, and to model right relationship. The Rev. Ken Sawyer, one of my mentors, touched on these notions in a sermon he preached about congregational life at The First Parish in Wayland, MA. The same words could easily be applied to the role of clergy and to appropriate UU Minister’s Association collegiality. “We are a place that cares about your spirit and the welfare of the world, not profit or position,” he preached. “We are not out to best one another, but to be of mutual aid and care. No doubt the world should be like that everywhere, but it isn’t and it isn’t going to be soon. But in religious community, we have the chance to model what that better, kinder, more compassionate and less self-centered world would be like.” *I am called to walk this ministry of right relation and community building.*

“Strengthen the Fainthearted,” reads square number five. We are all broken, vulnerable, and faint-hearted at times, yet we remain blessed and loveable. Strengthening the fainthearted asks us to be patient and flexible with ourselves and with others. It means that when the basement is flooded, the Canvass falls short, or the “Baby Jesus” spits up during the pageant, we’ll do what we can to bolster faint hearts and salve bruised egos. It means that in my own ministry, I will model a full spectrum humanness by not hiding my own growing edges or mistakes. Together, we will “fail better” (in words of Samuel Beckett). I may stumble at times and get chalk smudges on my Sunday best, yet I’ll proceed in the manner of the great Rabbi Hillel, “I get up. I walk. I fall down. Meanwhile, I keep dancing.” *I am called to walk this ministry of vulnerability and resilience.*

“Support the Weak,” the next square tells us. In his essay, “Engagement with the World,” the Rev. Bill Schulz writes that, “the Unitarian Universalism I honor takes it on faith that we can affect the tenor of the day.” I agree with our former UUA President that UUs (ministers and laity) should “support the weak” by animating Skinner’s beloved community paradigm in an effort to establish and sustain a more

just society. As clergy, we must be pro-active in asking our congregation's to be allies and advocates as we "tie our sensibilities to our neighbor's nerve endings," engaging our whole selves (and our power and privilege) within an intersectional commitment to compassion's agenda. The late Rev. Victor Carpenter preached, "We are called to do justly, to love mercy, and to work humbly for the empowerment of all. Let's get moving." *I am called to walk this ministry of pro-active justice making.*

"Help The Suffering," reads the next square. More than anything, a minister is called to serve as an oasis in the wilderness, to be present and intentional, for those in need. The Jewish wisdom text, the Talmud, tells us: "God wants heart." Surely, "heart" is what most people want from us, too. A mentor often spoke these wise words: "All there is to do really is to show up and let your heart break." And how the heart does break in the midst of loneliness, fear, suffering, and grief. The heart breaks and out can pour the manna of comfort. There is a "balm in Gilead," as the hymn promises, and it is us, and for some, it is the Spirit of Life made human in us. May we not underestimate the power of our silent witness. Through the years, when a congregant has apologized for "bothering me" with a problem or woe, I've responded: "*Bother me! Please, bother me! You are why I am here. You are why I am a minister.*" *I am called to walk this ministry of open-heartedness and soul companionship.*

"Honor All Beings," read the final concrete square. As ministers, we can model and encourage respect for the interdependent web both within the UUA and in the world at large. Honoring all beings means not only promoting ecological ethics and animal rights, but also respecting theological differences in our pews and ideological differences at coffee hour. It means not expecting everyone to "speak an orthodox language of the movement" in order to be loved. As religious leaders, we can affirm respectful interdependence (thou-ness) by collaborating in creating a matrix rather than a hierarchy within our communities. This, in turn, compels real connection to radiate through each and every being, as if we were, indeed, the sparkling jewels at each knot in Indra's famed net. *I am called to walk this ministry of respect and thou-ness.*

At this juncture, as I glance down at my chalk-scuffed boots and reflect back on the stretch of inscribed pavement behind me, I feel reasonably sure-footed as I step forward into the next leg of my ministerial journey. I proceed with faith that I carry my heart, energy, human foibles, talents, learning, and good humor in my well-worn satchel of joy and hope. To be sure, I will continue to walk and fall down and trip on a curb or two, but I'll keep on dancing. Will you join me? Together, we'll walk worthy of the ministry we share. *I am called to walk this hope. I am called to walk with you. Blessed be.*

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