

Reflecting Light Into The Dark

(sermon by Deane Perkins, Feb. 24, 2013)

Rev. Tom Owen-Towle talks about the eight “P’s” of being a minister in his work, *Love Meets the Dragons*. The first two “P’s” which we discussed last Sunday are Pilgrim—one who is a “saunterer on a sacred journey,”-- and Philosopher—a “seeker and sharer of wisdom.” (see Table of Contents in *Love Meets the Dragons*, by Tom Owne-Towle). Today our focus is on ministers as Proclaimers, Pastors, Prophets, Priests, Politicians, and Persons.

While Tom is sharing his thoughts about his experience and what it is he does as a professional minister, I would like to reiterate that I believe we are all doing ministry, and that, in some profound way, we are all called. We might not think of our lives in this way; we might not think of ourselves as pilgrims on a sacred path, or as philosophers sharing wisdom; or even as

Pastors who help create a caring community. But I do—I see each one of us in this way; I see each one of us doing ministry.

And why is this important? Why talk about ministry, being ministers, being called? First, we will be meeting the Committee on Ministry, a new part of our congregation, during our Congregational Conversation after this morning's service. And these questions about ministry are questions this committee has discussed for over a year now. And we wish to share our pain with you! Actually, the discussions have been enlightening and invaluable.

This was also true of our Congregational Conversation last Sunday, where about twenty of us talked openly and candidly about our views of ministry, and of being pilgrims and philosophers. Apparently it inspired at least two people to go home and look up definitions. And in one case, one of our members went on facebook and asked, "What do you think of

when you think, “ministry?” Here are four responses that were received. One person said, “A service done as either vocation or avocation as part of one’s life.” Another said, “Huckster. When I hear the term ‘ministry’ in the modern context, I don’t think of traditional ministers; I see these super mega-churches, televangelists and tent revival charlatans. I don’t mean to offend.” Yet another woman who was a PK—a preacher’s kid—said, “I’m proud to say that I feel, in a small way, that I am following in my father’s footsteps by being a massage therapist. I am there for my clients physically, emotionally, spiritually and psychologically, and hope to help them in every way I can within my professional boundaries, in the same way my father has done for his congregation.” And lastly, “I grew up with ‘minister’ definitely being the head of a church. Now I like minister as a verb—‘minister to one’s needs’ on many different levels.” (Facebook responses from UUCB Friend) I found our conversation last

week to be exactly the kind of exciting ministry that we do with one another, for it helps meet our spiritual needs..

The second reason why it is important to talk about ministry is that all religious communities—and yes, we can also talk about what religious means sometime—need to have a theological context for the work it does, which is reflected in its mission statement and in its covenant. We are not a social club, we are not a self-help or recovery group, we are not a business. We are a spiritual community that “nurtures the spirit, and helps heal the world.” This is sacred work, and it behooves us to use theological terms like “ministry,” “called,” “religion,” “worship,” “holy,” “spiritual,” and to do so in ways that are defined to meet our needs and the needs of this community so that we identify with what it is we are—we are givers and lovers of life. And we celebrate this every Sunday-- we do worship.

These words, these ideas provide us, then, with a larger theological context whereby we can come to terms with our own identity as a community. And then we realize that what we have been engaged in all along is **shared** ministry. We are all ministers in that we share ministry itself. So let us keep the conversation going, and the ever-deeper search into our own soul as a spiritual community.

Let me further introduce the next six “P’s” of ministry with another story—one which bears repeating in the event that I have told this one before—from Rev. Robert Fulghum. “Near the village of Gonia on a rocky bay of the island of Crete...is an institute dedicated to human understanding and peace, and especially to rapprochement between Germans and Cretans....This site is important, because it overlooks the small airstrip where Nazi paratroopers invaded Crete and were attacked by peasants. The retribution was terrible....Against this

heavy curtain of history, in this place where the stone of hatred is hard and thick, the existence of an institute devoted to healing the wounds of war is a fragile paradox. How has it come to be here? The answer is a man. Alexander Papaderos. A doctor of philosophy, teacher, a son of this [Greek] soil. He came to believe that if the Germans and the Cretans could forgive one another and construct a creative relationship, then any people could.”

“At the last session on the last morning of a two week seminar on Greek culture [that I was taking], Papaderos rose from his chair and asked: ‘Are there any questions?’These two weeks had generated enough questions for a lifetime, but for now there was only silence. ‘No questions?’ So, I asked: ‘Dr. Papaderos, what is the meaning of life?’ Laughter followed, and people stirred to go. Papaderos held up his hand and stilled the

room, asking with his eyes if I was serious. ‘I will answer your question.’”

“Taking his wallet out of his hip pocket, he fished into a leather billfold and brought out a very small round mirror, about the size of a quarter. And he said: ‘When I was a small child, during the war...I found the broken pieces of a mirror. A German motorcycle had been wrecked in that place. I tried to find all the pieces and put them together, but it was not possible, so I kept only the largest piece. This one. And by scratching it on a stone I made it round. I began to play with it as a toy and became fascinated by the fact that I could reflect light into dark places where the sun would never shine—in deep holes and crevices and dark closets.’”

“As I became a man, I grew to understand that this was not just a child’s game, but a metaphor for what I might do with my life. I came to understand that I am not the light or the source of

light. But light—truth, understanding, knowledge—is there, and it will only shine in many dark places if I reflect it.”

“I am a fragment of a mirror whose whole design and shape I do not know. Nevertheless, with what I have I can reflect light into the dark places of this world—into the black places in the hearts of men—and change some things in some people. Perhaps others may see and do likewise. This is what I am about. This is the meaning of my life.”

“And then he took his small mirror and, holding it carefully, caught the bright rays of daylight streaming through the window and reflected them onto my face and onto my hands folded on the desk.” *(It Was On Fire When I Lay Down On It, by Robert Fulghum, pgs. 173-177)*

The third “P” of ministry is Proclaimer. How does our life and our experiences of personal transformation manifest themselves in the world? What is it that we wish to proclaim to the world, given who and what we are? We don’t like to think

of ourselves in Unitarian Universalism as evangelists, but one of the classic questions in ministry—“what is the gospel you are preaching?”—is just as much a part of our faith as any other.

I am not advocating proselytizing—that is, the pushing onto others our own agenda and belief system. But I do think that we have, in our hearts, a message that comes out of our own depth and our own experiences that we wish to proclaim. Rev. Webster Kitchell wrote: “Sometimes people ask me how I keep thinking up new ideas for sermons. I don’t. I have a few ideas that are fairly sound which I think I can vouch for, and I just keep using them again and again. (Ibid., pg. 67). We all have a few ideas that are worth proclaiming again and again. What light is it that we wish to reflect in the dark places?

We are also Pastors, the fourth “P.” What we do in life is companioning. We walk hand in hand with one another. We learn to be present to one another and in our relationships with

others. This is not easy. I do not think our culture fosters companionship, as much as it does competition and individual self-interest. But I think that when we are in touch with our hearts, this is what we yearn for—to be present, and to have others present with us. I think this is what meditation is about as well—to experience the moment, and to do so fully in all its profundity. I wonder if we are, in fact, Presence itself—a holy space and place in life itself.

As part of our Caring Circle, we are working on creating a Pastoral Care Team. The purpose of the team is simple—it is to listen and be present to people by visiting in the hospital, or at peoples' homes. We are, as a congregation, working to create an intentional caring community, because, as the German philosopher Martin Heidegger notes, we are, in our essence Care itself.

The fifth “P” is Prophet. A prophet is not a soothsayer or a fortune-teller, but rather one who exposes falsehoods and injustices for what they are and yearns for truth. While our Pastoral side as Presence and Care do the kind of work necessary within our congregation, the Prophet proclaims the vision of love and justice in the world. “There are two ways of being a prophet,” states Richard Rohr. “One is to tell the enslaved that they can be free. It is the difficult path of Moses. The second is to tell those who think they are free that they are in fact enslaved. This is the even more difficult path of Jesus.”

(Ibid., pgs. 95)

At the height of the Vietnam War, the minister of New York’s Riverside Church, William Sloane Coffin, was adamant that Henry Kissinger withdraw U.S. troops. Typical of politicians who wish to deny the feasibility of seemingly complex issues, Kissinger asked Coffin, “How would YOU get

the boys out of Vietnam?” Using the might and words of the prophet Amos in the Hebrew Scriptures, Coffin retorted, “Mr. Kissinger, our job is to proclaim that ‘justice must roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream.’ Your job is to work out the details of the irrigation system.” (Ibid., pg. 97)

Our calling to be human is a calling to be free. The Prophet in us revolts against any form of enslavement.

The sixth “P” is Priest. I have been asked by children and adults alike if I am a priest. My immediate response is usually to say “no.” But in fact, we are all priests, or priestesses in the sense that we do worship together, or have our own spiritual practices and rituals that we engage in. By the very fact that we are here, in this moment, worshiping together means that we affirm community, that we share fellowship, that we declare hope in spite of adversities and limitations, and that we continually return to the service of Life through love and

compassion. This is a priestly function and a priestly moment. This is what has been termed by Protestant reformers, the “priesthood of all believers.” (see Owen-Towle, ch. 9)

The seventh “P” is Politician. We have within us the power to be, or as Nietzsche said, “the will to power.” And power means “to be able,” to actualize what is within us. The politician both leads and follows, actualizes one’s power for good, and engages with that which is true within one’s own heart. Like shared ministry, a religious community like ours requires shared leadership where we are all co-creators and co-visionaries, and where we empower one another. (see Owen-Towle, ch. 10)

This is what we do with our children—our parenting is meant to empower our children as a result of the power within ourselves, to be who they truly are. Our faith community is no different.

The eighth and last “P” is Person. The foundation to what we do and are as pilgrims, philosophers, proclaimers, pastors,

prophets, priests, and politicians is our own authentic personhood. This means taking care of ourselves, body and soul. Thomas Edison said that “Great ideas originate in the muscles.” And the traditional Quaker greeting is, “How goes it with thy Spirit?” We need to honor, to massage, to shepherd both our body and spirit. (see Owen-Towle, ch. 11) Part of our support of one another is helping to find strategies that help us take care of our bodies, as well as our spiritual lives. And from that comes authenticity—and the vulnerability to be authentic.

Who are we as ministers? We all do the work of love. This is the essence underlying all eight “Ps,” all that we do and are. We do ministry. “In the end,” states Alan Jones, “ministry is deceptively simple. We tend not to trust the simplicity at the heart of religion, that we were made by love and for love.” (Ibid., pg.

153)

Who are we as ministers? “We are fragments of a mirror whose whole design and shape we do not know. Nevertheless, we can reflect light into the dark places of this world.” (Fulghum, pg.

176)

May it be so. Blessed Be. Amen.