

## What Do You Do?

(sermon by Deane Perkins, with lots of help from Robert Fulghum and Tom Owen-Towle)

Have you ever been tempted to say something pretty outrageous when someone on a plane, or at a party, or at some other social event asks you what is it that you do?

One time, Unitarian Universalist minister Robert Fulghum—yes, I will use another of his stories today and perhaps even next week--was sitting next to a Sikh on a plane as he was flying to Thailand, and informed the distinguished-looking man that he, Robert Fulghum, was a neurosurgeon. The Sikh looked at him with delight and exclaimed, “How wonderful, so am I!” (*It Was On Fire When I Lay Down*

by Robert Fulghum, pg. 65)

Another time Robert Fulghum, wanting to have some peace and quiet to read a book, told the woman next to him on the plane that he was a janitor. The woman was

absolutely intrigued. She, in fact, wrote a housewives' column for a newspaper, and so she gave housekeeping tips to Rev. Fulghum during the entire trip. He learned a great deal about how to get spots out of rugs. That Sunday at the church where he was a guest speaker, he saw her again—she was a member of the church and was sitting in the third row. Apparently she knew all along who he was, but for a few hours on a plane, she allowed him to be a janitor. (Ibid., pgs. 64-65)

Having learned his lesson, Fulghum decided, at his next flight to play a game, and the man sitting next to him was all for it. He recounted these stories and suggested to his flight mate that they both make up a profession. So the man decided to be a spy, and Fulghum decided to become a nun. They had a great time together, making up all sorts of stuff. But apparently it befuddled the couple who were

sitting in the row behind them. As the couple passed Fulghum in the airport concourse, the man said, “Have a great day, Sister.” (Ibid., pgs. 65-66)

And yet another time Fulghum put “Prince” down as his occupation, since his wife had called him a prince that day. The clerk who was helping him with the bank document was not amused when he saw “Prince” under “Occupation.” They had a discussion, and Fulghum pondered, “What is at the heart of this matter of identity? Is my occupation what I get paid money for, or is it something larger and wider and richer—more a matter of what I am or how I think about myself? Making a living and having a life are not the same thing....A job title doesn’t even come close to answering the question, “What do you do?”” (Ibid., pgs.

66-67)

Our occupation, if we have one, is a far cry from the plethora of things we do. We eat and sleep and sit and wait in lines and drive and fly and talk a lot more than whatever it is we do at work. At seventy-five years of age, most of us will have slept for twenty-five of those years, one-third of our entire life. We'll have spent tens of thousands of hours eating. I can only imagine how many hours we have spent talking. (see Fulghum., pgs. 68-69)

Some of us may be unemployed. Some of us have experienced being fired, being let go--whatever euphemism our employer employed. Some of us may be housewives or housedads. Some of us are retired. The whole question of "What do you do?" is, at the very least, awkward. But it might also be painful. And at a social event, it might be a status thing—whose profession is most respected and how

much money do you make? As though either has any real or ultimate meaning.

Having said all this, however, I would like to tell you about my profession. In the desire for full disclosure, I think it's time you know what I do. In a cartoon that I sent as part of my packet to the Search Committee, it shows Dennis the Menace going up to his minister excitedly at the end of the Sunday service saying, "I'm going to be what you are when I grow up." The minister naturally asks Dennis, "why?" And Dennis replies, "Because you only have to work one hour a week!"

Let me assure you that even if we ministers work for one hour a week only, it is a complicated, profound, and exciting profession. So today I will discuss the first two "P's" of my profession, and next Sunday I will discuss the other six "P's"—that is, ministers are Pilgrims,

Philosophers, Proclaimers, Pastors, Prophets, Priests, Politicians, and finally, Persons. I am indebted to Unitarian Universalist minister Rev. Tom Owen-Towle for these categories and for discussing systematically ministry in his book, *Love Meets the Dragons*.

But let me be more candid. I wish to talk about the profession of ministry, about the eight “P’s,” because I believe that it describes what we *all* do as part of our church community. We all do ministry. Perhaps unique among professions, what it is I do professionally is what we all do as members and friends of this congregation. What do you do? Among many things, you and I do ministry.

Although we can certainly talk about it during the congregational conversation following today’s service, I am not here to respond to the query: “well, if we all do ministry, why do we need a minister?” While it is a valid

theological question—one that Quakers certainly raise--I am more concerned this morning with what we do here in this beloved community, and what ministry means to us.

About a year ago I preached a sermon on ministry, quoting from Rev. Forrest Church that “the one thing that can’t be taken from us, even by death, is the love we give away before we go.” (*Love and Death* by Forrest Church, pg. x) This is, for me, the call of ministry, for ministry “is the love we give away before we go.” Some of us may not like the word “ministry,” but it serves well the idea that our work is to deepen our spirits, our souls, our lives—and to support others in the same journey—so that love manifests itself freely and openly. As some Native American tribes are wont to say, “May we walk in Beauty.”

So it seems to me that the question “what do you do?” is, in fact, a deeper question as to who we are; it is a

question of identity; it is being **aware** of who we are and of working in the world to foster and manifest what it is we are. Whatever word we wish to use—and I personally like the word “ministry” because of the theological understanding underlying ministry as service and stewardship—it is something, I believe, that we have in common as human beings.

Rev. Owen-Towle’s first category of minister and ministry is: “Pilgrim.” “Come, come, whoever you are, wanderer, worshiper, lover of leaving. Ours is no caravan of despair. Come, yet again, come.” (Rumi) We are all pilgrims, wanderers, searchers. This is one of the aspects about Unitarian Universalism for which I am so grateful—we don’t say “this is what you have to believe in order to be who you are.” We say, “You are, and we are, and I am, and we journey together to discover what all this means.”

This is why ours is a “chosen faith,” where faith itself is a process of encountering, a journey of being and of becoming. Now I happen to think that this journey, this process of becoming is a holy journey. I think that our persistent and deep need—not just desire, but need—towards self-actualization is itself sacred. And the pilgrim is passionate, because the pilgrim is in the world, simultaneously living with pain and with a buoyant, ebullient heart. (see *Love Meets the Dragons* by Tom Owen-Towle, chapt. 4)

Sheldon Kopp states that, “Search we must. Each one of us must set out to cross the bridge....You can stay at home, safe in the familiar illusion of certainty....[But] everything good is costly, and the development of the personality is one of the most costly of all things. It will cost you your innocence, your illusions, your certainty.”

(Ibid., pg. 39)

And thus we begin, over and over again we begin as Pilgrims. This is who we are; this is what we do.

In her work, *The Hero Within*, Carol Pearson talks about six archetypes, six aspects of our inner self, one of which is the Wanderer. The Wanderer may or may not **intentionally** take on a personal search, or think of him or herself as a pilgrim on a road fraught with challenges, trials, life-changing decisions, and adventures of all kinds. But journey we must, for at the end we leave as much love as possible behind. For the journey as pilgrims is learning to love ever more deeply ourselves and others.

The second “P” of ministry is Philosopher. We are all philosophers, and I don’t mean by that that we necessarily intellectualize the meaning of life by espousing some grand theological or philosophical scheme. “There are few human beings,” writes L.H. Myers, “who, when they think

of themselves in relation to the universe, are without a sense of curiosity, of wonder, and even of awe; and insofar as this leads them into speculation, they become philosophers.” (Ibid., pg. 55)

We are Wonderers, we are Ponderers--this is part of who we are when we contemplate life. In 1972, Abraham Heschel—a Jewish philosopher and theologian (and a mandatory read at seminary in Old Testament class)—had a heart attack from which he almost died. When he became conscious, he did not feel anger or despair in relation to his God, but gratitude for his life and his existence. Yet he was ready to let go, to depart. And he reflected on his experience in one of his works when he wrote: “Take me, O Lord, I have seen so many miracles in my lifetime. I did not ask for *success*; I asked for *wonder*. And you gave it to me.” (Ibid., pg. 56)

Our calling as ministers of life itself—of who we are and what we do—is a calling to depth, a calling to profundity. One of my favorite rituals at church is doing child dedications and namings. You may hear me kid around that it is because I get to hold the baby. But the real reason is because I am in total awe and wonder at birth itself, of new life, of the incarnation of the Spirit of Life. As Sophia Fahs says, “For every night a child is born, is a holy night.”

In wonder and awe, we as Philosophers experience something which I consider to be sacred. Something touches us at the depth and center of our longing when we open ourselves up and become vulnerable to life. Is this not why we are here together on a Sunday morning, to experience the beauty—in wonder and awe—of each other, of the music, of the singing, of the words, of the silence?

And we do so in the midst of a community that declares that every day is Valentine's Day, that responds to the question: "What do you do?" with the cry, "We Are Lovers!" For "the one thing that can't be taken from us, even by death, is the love we give away before we go."

May it be so. Amen.

