

Meadville Lombard 25 Year Address

By the Reverend Dr. Peter J. Luton

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Thank you for the honor of speaking with you as a representative of the 25 year Graduating Class of Meadville Theological School of Lombard College.

I spent much of my time at Meadville in the bathroom...both men's and women's...in the basement and the one on the third floor at the end of the hall by the door to the stacks. I worked with Mike Schlenge, the custodian,. From Mike I learned much about life, the German army and pickles. Mike's wife Lena motivated Mike in most of his efforts, and it was from her that I learned to clean bathrooms.

Cleaning bathrooms is an important skill—art really—that continues to inform and strengthen my ministry. My early training as a custodian does have a downside, however, as I am obsessive about cobwebs in the church—an obsession I learned not from Mike, but from Mason McGuinness who, after retiring from the Mainline Unitarian Church in Devon, Pennsylvania, came to Meadville both to be the Business Administrator of the School and to be a real, live model of parish ministry for the students. Mason had a thing about cobwebs and it stuck to me.

One of my most memorable experiences during the Chicago Years, as I expect my biographer to call them, was when I nearly killed Mircea Eliade. Dr. Eliade was much revered throughout the University of Chicago Divinity School and related places. And we at Meadville would rarely go three days without having to say or encounter one form or another of hierophany. By the time I arrived at Meadville, Dr. Eliade, was a very old, revered and peculiar man. Brilliant, but odd. Seeing him, was itself, something of an hierophany.

Dr. Eliade had an office at Meadville to protect him from admirers and bright sunlight. His office was on the third floor, right next to aforementioned bathroom by the door to the stacks. I would glimpse him late at night as he slipped from his office to stacks and back again. I understand that he was a big reader. He would circle round and round like that, from his office to the stacks and back again in an epic journey, heroic in its own a strange way, out and back, eternally returning.

One night, I was mopping the hall outside his office with good, clean, soapy water. Dr. Eliade opened his office door and stepped out right into the good, clean, soapy water. I was horrified because he was, after all, well beyond elderly.

“No. No, Dr. Eliade!” I said. “Let me mop this up! It will take just a moment.” “Oh,” he said, “I just have to wash my hands.” Which was true, he wasn't being polite. He showed me his wispy hands, dusty from fingering old tomes and cosmic navels. And

so he tippy-toed along the wall to the aforementioned third floor bathroom, like that French mime whose names sounds vaguely like our revered Romanian Scholar's first name.

I hurriedly mopped up the soapy slop and rinsed the floor and mopped up the rinse water, in the correct and ritually proscribed manner as I had been taught. When he emerged from the bathroom, Dr. Eliade saw that the chaos was now ordered and the flood receded. Accordingly he threw caution to the wind, and as close to strode as a man of his age could, out into the hall he shuffled. After two steps he did one of those, "Yikes!" hands in air, lurching slips. I nearly died, as he surely would have died, had he not thrown his arms heavenward and caught his balance by grasping the firmament above. Dr. Eliade, a bit wiser and chastened, continued to his office. What are we to make of that?

I have enjoyed the opportunity which this little address has given me to reminisce about my seminary education and the people who were part of it. I hadn't thought of Kiyō Hashimoto in years and thank you for reanimating her in my mind. Kiyō sat in the front office and befriended all the students. She was bright and lively and greeted everyone with genuine hospitality. She laughed easily and often, except once, when in my caretaking enthusiasm, I fixed something that wasn't broken.

I was vacuuming the Curtis Room, which at the time was lined with formal oil portraits of past Presidents of the school. A round table was at the south end of the room and students would sit around it and read church newsletters wondering how ministers could be so inept and dim-witted as their newsletters suggested. (I made a point of not sending the church newsletter to Meadville when I received my first call.) So I'm vacuuming and notice that there is a flower arrangement on the table. It was forsythia, I think. And the forsythia branches are flying out in all directions and one of them is sweeping right over the top from left to right. Well, it looked pretty unkempt to me, so I went to the basement to get a pair of garden clippers. I paused next to the Rigid Tool Calendar that Mike kept in the corner by his tool bench beneath the Rigid Tool Calendar. I paused and considered the tool of the month and then returned to the Curtis Room. I tidied up the flower arrangement and finished vacuuming.

Later in the day I mention to Kiyō that I fixed "the arrangement" which looked, I said, as if someone had just stuffed in a vase. Bright, cheerful Kiyō visibly stiffened. Turns out that she had just completed a five week class on the art of Japanese flower arranging. She said she had spent a hour before coming into work, preparing that arrangement especially to match and harmonize with the energy and spirit of the Curtis Room. Kiyō taught me that day about forgiveness.

I share those two memories of Meadville Lombard Theological School circa 1978-1982 not because after 25 years in the pulpit I have used up all my good, profound material or because I no longer care what your or anyone else thinks, but because the lessons those two incidents taught me have served me well in the Unitarian Universalist ministry. It is my life and my ministry to which they apply. I understand and accept that they may be irreverent to your life and ministry.

Still I have found that in spite of my best efforts to be a good custodian of souls, there are some people who will slip and fall and not be well served by my care and concern. And I can beat myself up over my failures or inability to be everyone's perfect minister, or I can accept my humanity and give thanks that as far as I know I haven't killed anyone, yet.

And sometimes, sorry isn't enough. But more often than not, when I've genuinely apologized for my obtuseness and for my failure to check out my assumptions and for my outright blunders that cause pain and hurt feelings, I have received forgiveness. More often than not such recovenanting between the congregation and myself has deepened and matured both our affection and our commitment to walk together as a faith community.

I don't really know how Meadville Lombard Theological School prepared me for the parish ministry. I was too busy learning to digest it all. I still don't really feel qualified or competent. Self-doubt, self-recrimination and spiritual vanity are real—who needs critics in the pews? And yet, here I am. There you are. We serve. We minister. We care about the people we serve in congregation and community. We care about the liberal religious heritage which bathes us in cleansing hope and animates our personal and common faith. Meadville Lombard worked! May it continue to work and serve for generations upon generations to come.

And so I say "Thank You" to my mentors and professors, formal and informal, at Meadville Lombard who walked with me through that formative and transformative furnace of thought. And I say "Thank You" to the dedicated faculty and staff who today offer themselves to the next generation of men and women who will serve and care for the world. And I say "thank you" to you, my colleagues, my peers, my friends. You are the pudding's proof. You are the hot air under my wings. You are the precious collies in colleagues who comfort, sustain, inspire and minister to me. Thank you.

This day, and every day, may we know peace.

Shalom. Salaam. Blessed Be and Amen. ☪