

Meadville Lombard Theological School
October 11, 2006

WOULD I DO IT AGAIN?

On Palm Sunday, in 1957, I stepped into the pulpit of the First Universalist Church of Blanchester, Ohio, to deliver my first sermon. It was the beginning of my career as a minister and I have earned my living in the trade ever since.

As I think back over the decades I am astounded and stunned. Though I did not know it at the time, the world in which I found myself a half-century ago was the twilight of an age. In those years, we were living in a nation that still dared to believe that renewal and renaissance were possible. These were the years when the Civil Rights Movement was at its height and many of us believed that with the right combination of political and social will, justice would triumph and the stain of racism be removed from the land. The early years of my ministry were conducted in the era of the Great Society, when we believed that with goodwill and concentrated effort, poverty and want could be eliminated in this land of plenty. These were the years when equality for women seemed only a matter of time. These were the years when we allowed ourselves to believe that organized religion still had sufficient moral influence to lead the nation away from prejudice and inequity and injustice and toward a world of promise and hope for all.

My early years in ministry were shaped by that environment. My sermons sought to define and illumine the moral and ethical and religious imperatives that under girded the drive for a new social order. In addition to preaching, I served on boards and commissions; I marched and demonstrated for open housing, and fair employment, and public access; with others I struggled to improve the lot of migrant workers; I confronted political and community leaders; I lectured rank and file union members; and I was part of a network of clergy who helped women find access to safe illegal abortions. I knew that I could not bring in the new social order by myself, but I was determined that it would not be delayed one moment because I had failed to do what I could do. And throughout, my congregation supported and encouraged and assisted that ministry.

And when that dream died in a hail of assassins' bullets and in the rice paddies of Vietnam, I turned my energies to the effort to end the violence and the war. I marched and demonstrated and organized protests against our involvement in Southeast Asia; I counseled young men of draft age, to help them find ways to avoid the draft; I organized in my own congregation a modest program of tax refusal to keep

the opposition to the war visible and constant. At a later date, I used my Minister's Discretionary Fund to launder money, to channel grants from foundations to a program aimed at testing the legality of the war in the courts. I knew that I could not end the war by myself; but I was determined that the war would not continue one day longer than necessary because I had failed to do what I could do. And throughout, my congregations understood that this was a necessary part of ministry.

You see, from the beginning, I have believed that religion and politics, that morality and public policy, that ethics and the economic order cannot be divorced. The great virtue of the doctrine of separation of church and state is to be found in the freedom it gives religious institutions to stand in judgment on the prevailing social, political, economic order. For half a century and more, I have been an unrepentant liberal, believing that the only justification for government is to ensure a more equitable distribution of the world's resources, and to protect those least able to protect themselves.

My ministry has always had some overt political quality to it. The truth is, I have never known a government or an administration I have liked or approved of. It has not been my job or the job of the church to become the ally of administrations or governments. It is my job and the job of the church to stand with the poor and the oppressed, the forgotten and despised, to stand in judgment upon the powers and principalities calling them to justice and equity and peace.

But that has not been all of my ministry--perhaps not even most of it. As I look back over the decades, what I see is a host of faces. I see the face of a young man who had been chair of the Board of Trustees and who suddenly lost his job. After a time, he found another job, in a distant city. Leaving his wife and children behind until he could find a new home for them, he drove to his new job. On the way he was killed in an automobile accident. There was nothing I could say to his wife and children that would make sense of that terrible tragedy. But I discovered that they did not look to me to make sense of it. It was enough that I was there, representing their church, standing by, supporting, acknowledging their grief and helping them give voice to their deep sorrow.

And there were so many others over the years: the young father whose brain tumor killed him before he had a chance to see his sons grow tall and strong; the loved and admired school teacher who dared not tell anyone except one female colleague and his minister that he was gay, and who died of aids, alone except for his friend and me; the family of the young man shot down over North Vietnam; the elderly woman who had watched her husband and her son die by inches, both victims of cancer, who, when her own diagnosis of cancer came, refused all treatment and who, as she grew weaker, gathered her daughter and son-in-law and grandchildren around her bedside one day, and for hours talked to them, recounting the whole story of her life, then, her story

ended, turned her face to the wall and died. So many faces, so much sorrow and grief, so much dignity and strength, so little fear, and all they ever asked of me was to know that they were not alone, that their tears did not go unobserved, that these deaths would not go unmarked, that these lives would be celebrated and remembered.

As I look back over the years, I see so many faces: bright, smiling faces, eager and hopeful, the faces of children. Some of them I welcomed into the world, as their parents stood before the congregation and solemnly pledged to care for their children and help them grow into the best it was in them to be. Some are the faces of those I encountered in coffee hours, as they wandered through a forest of legs. Dropping to one knee, I would greet them, and inevitably, they would smile, glad to see a face instead of just another kneecap, and for a moment we would talk and I would see in their bright, open faces all the hope and promise of the world. I remember the little boy at a Christmas party who, without any invitation, crawled into my lap and sat there, as I read a story to the assembled children. Always the children have had the ability to surprise me and delight me and to puncture my pomposity.

And sometimes those little children with their prescient wisdom, would leave a lasting impression on me--as did the little girl from Blanchester who included these words in her recitation of the Lord's Prayer: "And lead us not into Penn Station, but deliver us from people." I learned to listen to the voices of the children, and I was constantly reminded that one of the duties of the church and its ministers is to speak for the children and for the future they represent, lest they and the future be destroyed in our grasping for the main chance, in our scrabbling for immediate gratification.

Looking back over long years, I see faces, so many faces. I see so many men and women who have stood before me over the years, promising to each other unconditional love. Often it has been young people, terrified at making such awesome promises in so public a manner, but so full of their confidence in each other that they managed to screw up their courage and promise each other "forever and forever." Sometimes it has been older people who have known great love and the pain that comes when love is taken away, but who have dared to love again, knowing the risk that love represents but knowing also that life without risk is difficult to distinguish from death.

So many of these people I never saw before they came to be married and many of them I never saw again. Often they came to me with fear and trepidation because other religious communities had rejected them, had refused to bless their union. Particularly, I remember the two young men who were the first to ask me to bless a same-sex relationship. We sat together and we planned a service of union. They told me that they had invited seventy-five people, family and friends to celebrate their union. I am still haunted by the look on their faces the evening of the ceremony, when they walked into the church and fewer than a dozen people, and neither of their

families present to witness this act of commitment. They each took a deep breath, smiled at each other and at those who were assembled and we proceeded with the ceremony. I thought then, and I think now that love is a precious enough thing in this world that it ill behooves any of us to misdoubt it or refuse to celebrate it.

As I think back over those long years, I see so many faces: People of all ages and circumstances who have come to me in times of great joy and deep sorrow and profound distress. They have come, not because I am wise, or have the answers, or know how to soothe their pain, neither have they come to be judged or absolved. They came because I represented the religious community, and they knew that I would listen, that I would hear, and that I would keep their confidences. I have been the vehicle by which people have given voice to their guilt, their fear, their pain, their trauma, their fantasies, their follies. I have been the vehicle by which people have given voice to their successes and their visions and their dreams. They have rarely wanted any advice or wisdom or insight from me. Rather they have wanted a place where, in confidence, they could say what they needed to say, could hear how it sounds when spoken aloud. Often, they have wanted someone in the world to know what they could not or dared not tell anyone else.

As I look back over the years, I am astounded by the number of lives that have intersected mine; by the trust people have placed in me; and by their willingness to share their lives--the dark and the bright and the times in between. But always, as I think of the passing years, my mind returns to this place, to the pulpit, which has always been the center of my ministry. I suspect that what brought me to this profession, and what kept there has been a driving need to discover, create, wrestle with issues of meaning in human existence, in my existence. Early in my career, one of my colleagues described me as "a god-driven man who cannot find god." His judgment was right then, and it is still right.

My quest has led me, over the years, on a long, strange journey--one that began in Evangelicalism, evolved into a liberal Christianity, passed through ethical humanism to naturalistic mysticism and led me at last to reject the Christian tradition and the other religions of the Book, and drives me now to seek that human experience that underlies all current religious expression, as a basis for a faith more adequate to the times in which we find ourselves.

In our apartment are file-boxes filled with sermons I have written and preached over nearly fifty years. They detail my continuing journey, and represent my legacy, my effort to make sense of the world and of my role in it. Using Emerson's image, I have always believed that it is the duty of the minister to offer the congregation "his (or her) life, passed through the fire of thought." And I have tried over all these years to live up to that challenge--to be aware of what was going on in me, to be as honest with myself and others and I could be.

You see, I began my career in the ministry, before I entered seminary, and long before I understood what that vocation was all about. I am not sure I know yet what it is all about, but over time I have learned some very important things. The first of these is that in our tradition, where there is no creed, no liturgy, no commonly accepted scripture, no authority beyond the local congregation, a minister must cling to his or her integrity as the only basis for a religious life. When one is accountable to a congregation, the temptation to say what the congregation wants to hear, to go where the congregation wants to go, to do what the congregation wants to do is great, indeed. But once a minister begins to shape sermons so that they will offend no one, or to devise goals that will not arouse opposition, or to urge policies that will not be challenged, the minister has prostituted the profession. The minister's duty is to speak the truth as she or he understands it, to challenge conventional visions whenever they seem inadequate, and to offer the congregation what he or she believes it needs, even if it is not what the congregation wants. In our kind of free religion, the minister must cherish personal integrity above all other things, for without integrity the ministry becomes quicksand and there is no solid ground anywhere on which to stand.

And there is a corollary to that axiom. Ministry can only be conducted from the periphery. I have been blessed, over the years, with the opportunity to participate in a number of religious communities, but I have never really been part of any of them. To be a minister is to be in a community but not of it. That is not to say that people do not love their ministers and care about them and worry over them. Nor is it to say the ministers do not love their people and care about them and worry over them. It is simply to say that always there is an essential distance between the minister and the congregation.

It is that distance that makes it possible for the minister to function. It is that distance that allows people to share confidences with the minister, that provides perspective, that allows the minister to distinguish between the needs and the wants of the congregation, that enables the process by which the minister may attend to the truly important rather than the merely critical. It is that distance that permits the peculiar stance toward events that makes it possible for life to be passed through the fire of thought.

There is a sense in which, mentally, from the very beginning, the minister must keep his or her bags packed, a sense in which she or he must not need the congregation so desperately that the needed truth goes unspoken. And the minister must be willing to allow others to reap the harvest from the seeds he or she has sown.

The truth is that not everything a minister wants done should be done; and even that which should be done may require more time than is available. Fortunately, the minister is not required to be right, but the minister is required to be honest; to say

what needs to be said, to be true to himself or herself and be willing to accept the consequences. There have been moments, over the years when I forgot that simple fact, and always, the result has been pain for me and for the congregations I have served.

After all these years, would I do it again? Were I starting over, would I be a minister, given all I know? Truth is, I have not seen my deepest dreams come true. The church has not led our country into a new world in which poverty and racism and injustice have been transformed. In many ways, greed has triumphed, racism has become more subtle and more difficult, and the cry for justice has been transformed into a strident demand for vengeance. In the process, the church has lost much of its moral suasion, as growing cynicism has eroded its position in society. Indeed, the outwardly successful churches often seem to be those that have embraced the narrow, vengeful, vindictive attitudes of a greedy and hate filled society. And yet, despite it all, I would do it again.

In truth, I never had any alternative. You see, I did not choose to be a minister in the first place. I grew up knowing that I would be a minister. From my earliest memories that is what I knew I was destined to be. I changed my religious affiliation several times; I went for a while without any religious affiliation; but I never doubted that I was destined for a career in the ministry. I could not be anything else without becoming someone else. All my life, something I have never been able to define has been calling me to this profession. And even on those Sunday afternoons, when, in desperation, I searched the want ads hoping to find an honest job I might fill, I knew in the back of my mind that I could not evade the destiny which called me to the ministry. Now, half a century on, I know that there is nothing else I could have done. And when it is over, and someone comes to sort through the file boxes which contain all those sermons, I hope they will recognize that here, in this "life passed through the fire of thought," is the legacy of a man who counted himself supremely fortunate to have been able to do what, from the cradle, he was called to do.

--Rev. David E. Bumbaugh
Professor of Ministry