

Past as Prologue By Michael A. Schuler June 3, 2018

Prose and Poetry Apropos From The Rev. Martin Copenhaver, UCC minister and co-author of the book, *This Odd and Wondrous Calling*

Wisdom may be the one distinguishing quality of pastors because all people have an equal opportunity to demonstrate the same integrity and faithfulness good ministers exhibit, but the latter have been given a unique opportunity to become “wise.”

Of course, not all pastors are wise, God knows, and often the wisest people are not pastors. But the nature of the pastoral life is such that it gives a person an extraordinary shot at becoming wise.

But then I need to pause to say a word about what I mean by “wisdom.” It has been called the woolly mammoth of ideas—big, shaggy, and elusive. Philosophers, theologians, and social scientists have all found wisdom notoriously difficult to define. In part, this is because wisdom is more than a single attribute. It is more like a cluster of attributes, including a clear-eyed view of human behavior, coupled with keen understanding: a certain tolerance for ambiguity and what might be called the messiness of life; emotional resiliency; an ability to think clearly in a circumstance of conflict or stress; a tendency to approach a crisis as an intriguing puzzle to be solved; a gift for seeing how smaller facts fit within a larger picture; a mixture of empathy and detachment; a way of suspending judgment long enough to achieve greater clarity; an ability to act coupled with a willingness to embrace judicious inaction.

Again, it is not all pastors who are wise. Nevertheless, the kind of experiences one has as a pastor are just the kind of experiences that can help nurture whatever gifts for wisdom one may have.

From The Rev. Elizabeth Ngyuen, Vietnamese-American, Strategist with the UUA and graduate of the University of Wisconsin

For when you want to write the resignation letter
Want to skip town, give up on this job, this congregation,
This community, this family, this faith.
Start a new life slinging brunch. On a beach.
Definitely on a beach.
Specializing in sunny-side up eggs on buttered toast
And mango smoothies.
Never think about justice, covenant, love, heartbreak,
Just about all the yellows of sun and egg and mango.
Spirit, give us the long view.
We are only here because someone refused

To give up on this congregation, this community,
This family, this faith.
Give us perspective, humor, a break.
Give us teammates who we can tell the truth to.
Give us faith, honesty, mangoes.
May we dig down past the giving up
And find the grit to get through.

Reflections

In his last report to the Parish in May of 1987, my predecessor, Max Gaebler, provided a summation of services he had rendered to the First Unitarian Society during his distinguished 35-year pastorate. His records indicated that Max had presided at 1,112 weddings and 236 memorial services over that time. Child dedications totaled 356 and 1,789 people had been welcomed into membership. Max didn't divulge the number of sermons he had written and delivered, but I have to guess it was somewhere in the vicinity of 900.

From my own clergy logbook and a few back-of-the-envelope calculations, I figure that around 2,800 people joined the Society during my tenure and listeners were subjected to 750 of my sermons. I presided at fewer weddings than Max—540—but considerably more memorial services—347. Between us, Kelly and I have probably dedicated in the neighborhood of 450 infants and children.

These are, you may agree, some rather impressive numbers, but they don't tell the whole story. If they did, this would be my shortest sermon on record. In the May FUS Newsletter, I listed other developments related to the Society's financial growth, construction and restoration projects, increases in staffing and programs, extended outreach efforts, and governance reform. I don't intend to repeat what's already been written, but if you're interested, you can check it out on our FUS website.

What I prefer to share with you today is a bit more squishy and subjective—something that's less a historical overview than a personal testament; a summary of insights I've gained during my three decades among you. Whether they'll strike you as in any way significant remains to be seen. At the very least, you'll get a glimpse of one UU minister's inner life.

At the risk of indulging in a cliché, let me begin by acknowledging that my missteps have generally proven more instructive than the successes I've enjoyed. Fortunately, there haven't been too many pratfalls in 30 years, because if there had, my career path might have unfolded quite differently. Most men and women who

enter the ministry don't stick with it; the drop-out rate after 10 years is around 50 percent. It is the rare individual who enters the profession as young and green as I was, and keeps plugging away until social security kicks in. It's quite easy to get discouraged doing this work.

While pondering what to share with you today, I returned to a file I'd been keeping from the time I left Binghamton, New York to come to Madison. In that file was the last sermon I delivered to my former congregation—it was entitled "Parting Shots", which gives you some indication of the ambivalence I felt after seven years among them.

In that discourse I also shared some learnings from my tenure in Binghamton. I gained some important self-knowledge, I said back then, especially about my rough edges. A career in the parish ministry was, for me, something of a stretch, I confessed—a role that, from a temperamental standpoint, I wasn't all that well suited for. From time to time I'd been informed, usually second-hand, that I could be intimidating, stand-offish, and overly cerebral—lacking warmth, in other words. Since coming to Madison I've undoubtedly mellowed a bit but, as they say, the leopard doesn't change his spots. Similar comments have reached my ears here as well.

I'll allow that there's some measure of truth to them. But while these may be ineradicable flaws, I gradually figured out how to compensate for most of them, most of the time. Having colleagues like Kelly Crocker, Karen Gustafson, and Mary Ann Macklin has helped a great deal, and I have appreciated each of them for the "balance" they have brought to our clergy team. One of the secrets to a long-term ministry is, I think, the ability to recognize your own limitations and bring on board co-workers who exhibit strength in those departments. Of course, that also means that you have to share the limelight and give your colleagues encouragement, opportunities to shine, and then commendation—all of which I've tried to do.

It also helps when you don't take yourself too seriously and can make peace with your deficiencies. The admonition an enlightened Zen master once shared with his students is one I, too, have taken to heart: "You are perfect just as you are, and you could stand some improvement,".

A second insight I've gained, and one that Don Miguel Ruiz highlights in his book *The Four Agreements*, is not to take most things personally. Often as not, when someone takes you to task or declares that you have let them down, something in their own life experience or their unspoken assumptions about you is probably contributing to their displeasure. That's not to say that I, as the object of this displeasure, am always blameless. There may well be something to the complaint that deserves sober reflection. If so, I've found that nothing does more to mollify my crit-

ics than admit to having missed the mark—if, in fact, that is truly the case—and to offer a sincere *mea culpa*.

I've also learned a person can do this without losing their sense of worthiness. As Kathryn Schulz points out in her book *Being Wrong*, in our culture most of us are terrified of making mistakes. We take them too personally, presuming that if we admit to being fallible we forfeit credibility, trustworthiness, and the respect of others. However, it's been my experience that in dropping our defenses and owning our mistakes we actually *gain* respect and also develop greater sympathy for the world's other fallible beings.

And, if we honestly think we are being misjudged, rather than go into a defensive crouch we can ensure a better outcome by pausing, listening quietly, and then seeking clarity through calm questioning. Be curious, in other words, rather than argumentative. Have I always succeeded in dispelling negativity in this way? Of course not. When someone comes on to me strong, and without warning or provocation, I feel that surge of adrenalin and the old reptilian brain gets a jump on my better judgment. In such instances, the outcomes are always less than ideal.

This leads to a third insight having to do with the utility of patience. Early in my career this was hardly my strong suit, but by the time I began writing *Making the Good Life Last* I had turned the corner. What I *didn't* remember is that at the time of my departure from Binghamton, my colleague and mentor at the Ithaca UU Church had written a letter in which he offered some pointers for enjoying a long and prosperous ministry in Madison. Chief among them was patience.

You will encounter critics or adversaries in the parish, Jack warned, and:

... your best weapon for dealing with the people who want to see you gone is the knowledge that your ministry is more lasting than their dissatisfaction. I call this patience; others call it stubbornness.

Jack described a board president who had gotten under his skin, but he didn't let the conflict distract him from his core ministerial responsibilities. "This too shall pass," he reminded himself. The key to staying centered when work becomes a struggle is the exercise of patience.

And, as I quickly learned, patience is also called for when one is stepping into a parish that had been served with distinction by a minister of Max Gaebler's caliber. You have to be able to tolerate those who, even after you've served for a decade, still refer to you as FUS's "new minister." Or, there will be those who react to something you've done by saying reprovably, "Max didn't do it that way." Patience tells us not to resent such statements, not to personalize them, but rather accept them as a sign of honor for your much-esteemed predecessor. If you can stick it

out and perform well, the congregation will in all likelihood come to embrace you on your own merits.

Fourth, know how to claim your authority without throwing your weight around. A few years ago, I was asked to deliver the sermon at our annual General Assembly's Service of the Living Tradition—a big deal and a great honor. The topic I chose to speak on was clergy authority, which has been in serious decline in recent decades. The office of parish minister, which in an earlier era was a source of considerable influence, enjoys little of its former prestige. Nevertheless, within any given faith community a minister can, over time, win the confidence of the congregation and become someone whose opinions and judgment carry considerable weight.

That was certainly true for my predecessor, Max Gaebler, and I think it's been true for me—so much so that one of the comments about my ministry I've heard quite frequently is that "If Michael wants something to happen, it's going to happen," or words to that effect. Frankly, I don't think there's anything terribly wrong with that. To be called into leadership entails and requires the granting of authority. The trick in a democratically governed system such as ours is to exercise that authority in a way that complements other people's efforts and respects the influence to which *they* are entitled.

For me, it's always been important to recognize that there are natural and appropriate limits to my authority, and to use it sparingly and at times when it can produce a positive institutional outcome. I like to think of it less in terms of "authority" than as accumulated social capital that I can invest in building and expansion projects, social justice initiatives, and organizational realignment. For most purposes, however, I've tried hard not to step on the rightful prerogatives of our lay leadership, the congregation as a governing body, or co-workers who have been empowered within their own spheres of influence. That's what it means to exercise authority without becoming authoritarian.

A fifth point: Use your authority but don't over-invest in outcomes. For much of my ministerial career I had a habit of over-functioning. I always had that nagging feeling that I hadn't done enough and that there were always unmet needs that it was solely my responsibility to fulfill. I didn't need a supervisor giving me my marching orders, I was pretty much my own taskmaster. Parker Palmer calls this kind of behavior "functional atheism,"

... the belief that ultimate responsibility for everything rests with us; that if anything decent is going to happen here, we are the ones who must make it happen.

The pattern for this particular behavior was set way back when I was in undergraduate school. After a less than stellar academic performance in a freshman year in which

I spent a good deal of time on more pleasurable pursuits, I decided that a more disciplined approach to study was in order. So, as a sophomore I began taking course overloads—five courses instead of the usual four. That way there wouldn't be much time left for extraneous pursuits and pleasures. And it worked! My grades went up and stayed up right through graduate school.

And so I became a certified workaholic, always afraid that if I didn't keep my nose to the grindstone, I wouldn't measure up, wouldn't make the grade. It wasn't so much a fear of failing as of not succeeding at the highest possible level. As a parish minister I developed the false feeling that it all rested on my shoulders.

Over time, this became an unhealthy state of affairs. I was working far too many hours at the expense of my family and my own mental and emotional well-being. Tasks that I could well have delegated to other capable staff and volunteers I insisted on carrying out myself to ensure they would be "done right." During this time, FUS was thriving, but it was not a sustainable proposition. The harder I worked, the more my people-skills deteriorated. But then, in 2005, I took a much-needed sabbatical.

In good workaholic fashion, I used my four months away to crank out a draft of the manuscript that became *Making the Good Life Last*. But that wasn't the most enduring achievement. For the entire time we spend in Tucson Trina and I didn't darken the door of a UU Church. We took a complete break from institutional engagement. And, as the weeks slipped by it dawned on me that I needed to stop obsessing about outcomes, let my co-workers do their jobs, practice ministry the best way I knew how, and then let the chips fall where they may.

It was like getting a new lease on life, and these past 12 post-sabbatical years have been, without a doubt, the most fulfilling of my career. I've weathered some choppy waters and the interpersonal and institutional challenges haven't gone away. But as I practiced detachment it was easier to maintain a non-anxious presence even when things weren't going particularly well. I've come to the same place as Edward Everett Hale who famously declared: "I am only one, but I am one. I cannot do everything, but I can do something. And I will not let what I *cannot* do prevent me from doing what I can."

Sixth and finally—and related to point five: In the end, it's really not about me. The position of lead minister carries with it the occupational hazard of conflating one's own interests with that of the institution one serves. Over time, you do become closely identified with the church. When people thought of FUS during the '70s and '80s, Max Gaebler came as much to mind as Frank Lloyd Wright. Before that, the outspoken Kenneth Patton was the face of the congregation.

Whether or not Patton and Gaebler in some way sought celebrity status I really can't say, but I do know there's something very seductive about the amount of attention one commands as FUS's senior minister. It can be a real ego trip. And, it can also be problematic. Ministers who stand on pedestals can also become lightning rods. As my late colleague from Schenectady, Charles Slap observed,

People do not join UU churches because they agree with our doctrines, because we have none. And because we have no creed, no Book of Common Prayer, no papal marching orders to follow, we're left with the minister, who becomes a symbol of all that is "right" or "wrong" about the church. It can be very flattering to be the minister, but it also means our churches tend to polarize around their leadership.

Having been in this business for a long time, I fervently believe that our society needs strong, dynamic, democratically organized, multi-generational, and activist faith communities like the First Unitarian Society of Madison. I have done my best to ensure that the people of FUS felt a sense of ownership for this establishment and were given the opportunity to perform its important work.

In other words, I have sought to be a good steward of the enterprise. Not long ago one of our members expressed unhappiness with a decision I had made, reminding me that she was a member before I arrived and would

remain an active member after I left. Just so. I have never pretended to have a proprietary interest in FUS. It doesn't belong to me, and I have served at the congregation's sufferance. I have, however, done the best I could to build upon a distinguished legacy, increase FUS's human and material assets to secure its future, and make it a more effective force for good in the world.

As stewards, the organizational consultant Peter Block writes, we "serve our organizations and are accountable to them ... without taking control. ... We honor what has been given to us, use power with a sense of grace, and pursue purposes that transcend our own self-interest." That has been my intention, and I hope that it has at least in some measure been fulfilled.

One last comment. A few days ago, Trina, shared with me a recent "kindness" ranking of major American cities. Several different criteria were used to create the ranking and when the scores were tabulated, Madison led the pack—a refreshing contrast to another recent report that ranked Madtown as the nation's fourth drunkest city.

My own experience generally supports the kindness finding. Madisonians are, as a rule, pretty darned considerate, helpful, fair-minded, and appreciative. Perhaps it's just a reflection of the surrounding culture, because I have experienced this kindness here at First Unitarian Society and felt blessed by it. But I like to think there's more to it than that. This was and is a wonderful community. In any case, if I haven't said it before, I am moved to say it now: "Thank you."