

Getting to Know You
Rockland, 9-17-06

It's a new church year and you have a new minister at Channing church, coming in fresh and wanting to do a good job, and knowing only a few people--it's a bit like two people getting acquainted, wanting to be closer. We're realizing all the potential and possibilities that can come out of our being together. With a good synergy between church members and your new minister, who knows what might be. All I know it that I signed a contract and so did you, so we're hitched.

I don't know if you've ever had an experience of finding yourself in an unlikely situation, one you hadn't planned on. I didn't train and study for parish ministry. I trained for hospital chaplaincy. But here I am and here you are. And by some unexpected happenstance it feels really good to be your minister. You see, good honest pride is a two way street: I'm proud to be your minister, to tell others in the district that I am your minister. I get a charge out of it, in fact. And we can be proud together for the ministry we build here together.

In my first official meeting with your Prudential Committee in August, I was handed a list of the names of all your ministers. And I've been thinking a lot about my predecessors, so many fine ministers have served this congregation in the past. How am I going to fit in? How can I best guide and lead these people that I am only beginning to get to know? Several people have spoken of their great love for Rev. Lawrence Van Heerden and the ministry he provided to you when he was here from 1988-1991. That's only 3 years, yet it seems he had the magical ingredient that drew people to him. Not charisma, just goodness--and your deep trust in him to see the good in you and to help bring it out. Yesterday, I took a long moment to look at his picture in your, in 'our' meeting hall. "What was your secret?" I silently asked his photograph.

Hearing people speak so well of him, even after all these years made me feel a little down. Would I be as good at this ministry as Van? Would I be remembered as lovingly as he is? Then I kind of shook myself and changed my thinking. I *can't* be like anyone else! That's not my task in life and it's not your task in life either: to emulate another person, to try to be like them. No we are to become more authentically who we are in our hearts. So I've decided that I'm not going to be like any of your other ministers. I'm going to be me.

I thought of a way to explain this and brought along something that will symbolize how we can think of all the ministers in the past and, truth to tell, all of the ministers in the future. No one lasts forever after all. Here's what I came up with. (Take out pearls). Let's imagine each one of these pearls as signifying a minister from this church's past, a whole string of them. Now Van was maybe here and I'm maybe 8-pearls--or ministers--further down.

Pearls are an apt symbol for a minister because we think of ministers of bearers of wisdom--and pearls have always been associated with the quality of wisdom. The ancients valued wisdom highly--a rare quality in this time of shallowness and

impersonal relationships. In the Hebrew Scriptures we hear of "pearls of wisdom." Wisdom is "the pearl of great worth" and we need to attend to the 'getting of wisdom.' The idea is that once you get wisdom, you must hold onto it. But a minister dedicates her or himself to sharing whatever store of wisdom he or she has managed to accrue in their life and in their education.

But I don't think of wisdom as solely something that resides in the minister. Ministry is something congregations and minister do together. I have been listening to you people and making a study of you. This 'getting to know you' comes from you, too. I think that you have been asking yourselves: what will be the hallmarks of this new minister's work? How can we best combine her talents and potential with our talents and potential? How can we proceed with a certain wisdom? Maybe by recognizing that we each have our own store of living wisdom, often hard won, and that Wisdom is something we combine to make up a greater wisdom-like these pearls.

These pearls have worth that is the value I put on them--they are precious to me because of what they have come to symbolize to me: purity, discernment of true worth, and wisdom for starters. I believe that you people in this congregation have seen my worth and my potential. I know this -- because you have so warmly welcomed me in. And I can tell how much you value having a minister because of how well and fondly you remember your previous ministers and their individual ministries. There's a certain wisdom in the respect with which you speak of them that I really like.

Now another important feature of a string of pearls is that it's not really linear--you put it on like this and it's a circle--and circles as you know have no beginning and no ending. So think of the collective wisdom of generations of Channing Church members, passed down to this moment and into the future. But it's our watch now--we have to hold this church in trust for future generation, and in time, hand it on. You see: there is no end to the gifts bestowed by wisdom. Individual ministers leave and their individual ministry ends, but Channing Church goes on. Let the whole necklace represent a church. I think of a church as made up of its members, not the minister. You're the church, not me. I'm just one tiny bead in the circle.

One of the hallmarks of this ministry is that I want to be minister to the children as well as the grownups. I want this to be their spiritual home, too--the way it is for the here. I also want this church to be a sanctuary for the children, safe place where they can grow up, where our children feel appreciated as an important part of this community. It's important to me not to just my pay lip service to our children and to Religious Education. I feel a deep and abiding commitment to our children that goes back to my own childhood. And whether we're parents of the younger generation or not, I want us to realize that we all share responsibility for their well-being and for spiritual growth. The unfolding of their spiritual lives is equally important to me as the unfolding of the spiritual lives of the adults.

Getting to know you involves your orienting me to this congregation. It's on-the-job training. Teach me what I need to know. I sit at your feet, learning about you and what makes you tick--and what it is that I do that might be most useful to you. But you, too,

are learning about me. So I'm going to tell you some ways I understand ministry, I mean, other than my utter commitment to our children.

First of all: what you see is what you get. Like the husband in the reading I'm not afraid of making a fool of myself. It's not my favorite thing, mind you, but I have learned how to laugh at myself and at my mistakes. I think we learn by trying things and learning from them--and missteps are inevitable. You see, I want to learn to love this congregation--warts and all. And I think Van did that: saw your goodness.

Second is that I don't believe in coming in to any situation and imposing a top down approach, as in, "I'm the minister and we'll do it my way." That doesn't work in Unitarian Universalist churches. My style is collaborative: shared leadership, joint decision-making. You folks with your devotion to this church know it better than I ever will, so I defer to your superior knowledge and your hard won, I'm sure, insights. I'll ask questions and guide. I'll mentor and give pastoral care. I'll consult. Think of me as a consultant. Yes, we want to feel closely connected with each other, but your acceptance of me or any minister will come in it's own sweet time. It takes time to trust, especially because you've had a succession of ministers here at Channing. So relax and let's enjoy this getting to know you stage.

Third: I ask for us to have an agreement, actually a covenant, one with another, that if any of us have a concern about the ministry that you come directly to me. In the same way I am asking you, if you have a conflict or misunderstanding with another person, that you deal directly with that person. That way we end up handling little one-pound problems. Problems that have just cropped up are far easier to dealing with than a fifty-pound problem that mushrooms because no took it on when it was small. I'm expecting that there will be glitches--how could there not be. But I do try to operate with transparency, that is, information is shared and communicated openly.

Fourth: We decide together what programs and what direction the church takes. I don't come in with any preconceived ideas or an agenda that I figured out before I arrived. It's going to take us time to get used to each other and it's going to take time to figure out things such as, 'what programs are we going to offer this year?' What is our direction? Our priorities.

I am beginning to get a feel for Channing Church as a unique congregation. I want to see where people's real desires and hopes lie. I want new ideas and new energy to bubble up from within this congregation and then see what we can do together.

And finally my view of spiritual leadership is that the real leaders in any church are there to serve: like serving a long line of people buying items from the yard sale--or serving hotdogs and French fries to the people of Rockland out on a beautiful early fall day. In the Christian tradition, this is called servant leadership, after Jesus, the humble, impatient, and itinerant rabbi who went around preaching and teaching, but also served as a faith healer. There's a lot of healing that goes on when we serve others and one another.

The following quote is one I use all the time, so I might as well start today. It's by Sister Teresa, who served the most humble people on the planet, the homeless in the streets of Calcutta. She said, "we cannot do big things, but we can do little things with great love." What I love about Teresa is that there was no hierarchy; she did everything that she asked her nuns to do. There was no ego, no drama, just the work.

So if I describe other hallmarks of what this ministry will entail, I would say, "no hierarchy." The minister and every member of the congregation are equal in stature. Another is having a practice of humility: that we do small things with great love and take pride in every thing we do, even the smallest things like welcoming people to the church's front lawn and carrying things out to their cars.

And second is a practice of gratitude: gratitude for this amazing gift we have been given--life. This amazing gift we have--that of being together: that out of all the ministers in the UUA and out of all the congregations in the UUA, we somehow managed to find each other! That's more than serendipity, it seems like fate, like it was supposed to happen this way. You will find that I'm a pretty skeptical person when it comes to the supernatural. But even I have to ask, and will continue to ask, what does it mean that we came together at this time, at this church, with this group of people? Let us build on the wonder of our coming together as partners in a new kind of ministry, one that suits you and at the same time suits me.

Use me. Use me up. Challenge me, question me, hug me, teach me. For my part I will do my best to bring the most alive and most authentic parts of myself to life. And all the while I'll be seeking to help you bring to life the most alive and most authentic parts of you.