

A Labor of Love Part I

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Condensed Timeline

It is difficult to say exactly when my path to ministry began. In some ways, I suppose I've always been on it. Aren't we all products of our entire lives? The reality is, there is just too much to tell in a single sermon, so here's the condensed version to cover the basics:

June 1983: Hello world. I've arrived. It is nice to meet you.

January 1991: Hello Albuquerque. I've arrived. It is nice to meet you.

August 2002: Hello UNM. High school was interesting. Let's see what college holds.

May 2005: Ouch UNM. I don't really like what college holds for me. I think I'll stick to bartending.

January 2007: Getting a little tired of bartending. What else can I do? I know: I'll be a Realtor!

June 2008: Hmm, this was a bad time to become a Realtor. I think I'll try something completely different: I'll move to Colorado Springs to do countertop and bathtub resurfacing! What's that, you ask? I don't know, but I'm going to try it anyway.

September 2011: It was a good run, but resurfacing isn't my thing, and Colorado Springs isn't my place. I'm going back to school. Hello Denver!

January 2014: Bachelor's degree acquired! Hello Iliff School of Theology!

August 2016: Hello again Albuquerque! Remember me? I'm back. Hello First Unitarian, it is great to meet you.

Chapter One: Albuquerque

I just arrived from Denver. It is truly wonderful to be here. I have been so warmly welcomed in my first week, and I look forward to continuing to immerse myself in this beloved community as the year continues.

I am also excited to be back in Albuquerque. Although I was not born here, I consider this my hometown. I moved here when I was seven and grew up in this city.

After graduating from high school, I enrolled at the University of New Mexico to take advantage of the Lottery Scholarship. In the three years I spent at UNM, I learned a lot about myself, but had very little idea about what I should do with my life. After a particularly poor academic semester, I lost my scholarship and dropped out of UNM to wait tables and bartend full time. Over the next few years, I pursued a number of career opportunities that either didn't succeed or that I found unfulfilling. With each one, I recognize now that I was responding to an opportune moment, trying each career path, not as a matter of deep discernment, but out of circumstance and convenience. There is nothing wrong with seizing opportunities, but the way I was doing it lacked something important: intentionality.

Answering the Call

Parker Palmer writes: "Before you tell your life what you intend to do with it, listen for what it intends to do with you. Before you tell your life what truths

and values you have decided to live up to, let your life tell you what truths you embody, what values you represent.”

In hindsight, his words make a lot of sense. I realize now that I didn't truly begin to know myself until I started listening to what my life intends to do with me.

I don't know how long ministry was calling me before I finally decided to answer. I'm fairly certain I wasn't rejecting the call; I just didn't hear it. The call that I finally did answer came in the spring of 2011. It sounded just like my mom. In fact, it was my mom. She said, “honey, I talked to your Grandpa. He wants to cover the cost of school for you.”

Since that moment, congregational ministry has been my goal. Although that goal has remained constant, my understanding of what it means to be a minister has evolved as I have continued to grow in pursuit of becoming one.

Beloved Community

One of the greatest lessons I've learned is that the work of ministry is more than I can do alone. Fortunately, I'm not the only one who can do it. The labor of ministry is work that can be done by, for, and within the context of the beloved community. Since beginning my path to ministry, I have come to believe that a minister is really just a professional human. That is, we are paid to do many of the things that all people are expected to do just by virtue of our humanity.

We are all called to minister to one another in times of need, fluctuating in our role between giver and recipient.

We are all called to be theologians. Because our theologies shape our identities, we are all called to examine our beliefs so we can understand how they impact our actions and interactions with each other.

Because this work, this labor, is too big and too important to fall on the shoulders of any one person, ministers are called to build the beloved community, so that together we might accomplish what none of us can do alone.

Marco Polo

Another lesson I've learned is that the call to ministry is not a one-time call that I can answer and be done with; It's more like a game of Marco Polo, where I'm constantly seeking guidance and continuously adjusting my direction in response to the feedback I receive. The call and response of this game is not unlike the call to ministry, in that it requires ongoing discernment.

Marco [pause]

Marco [pause]

You've just proven me right. I believed this congregation would be willing to guide me in my formation, and I believed you would respond when I called to you for direction... and you did.

Marco [pause]

Throughout the year, I will certainly continue to ask for your help and guidance in my pursuit of ministry. Thank you for being the Polo to my

Marco. I put my trust in you, in this beloved community, and I know you won't steer me wrong.

Finding Unitarian Universalism: My Spiritual Renaissance

Remember those unfulfilling career opportunities I tried after dropping out of UNM? One of them was a family business with my dad and brother. We left Albuquerque to start a countertop and bathtub resurfacing business in Colorado Springs. Encouraged by a modestly successful first year, we chose to open a second branch in Austin, Texas and I would be the one to run it. The move to Austin proved to be more difficult for me than the one to Colorado had been. This time, I was alone. In a new city where I knew nobody, and doing a job that had me working in people's empty kitchens and bathrooms all day, I realized how much I needed community. It was my loneliness and desire for community that led me to the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Austin.

Finding Unitarian Universalism in Austin was the catalyst for my own personal spiritual renaissance. Fostered by a supportive community, I awakened a process of self-reflection and spiritual transformation that had been dormant in me for years.

I don't think I would have ever considered ministry as a vocational path if I had not discovered Unitarian Universalism. The timing of things really turned out to be amazing. Ten months into my Austin chapter, my brother left the business, which required that I return to Colorado Springs. I immediately sought out a Unitarian Universalist community that felt like a good fit, and found it just about an hour up the road in Denver, at First Universalist. Belonging to Unitarian Universalist congregations in both

Austin and Denver, I got to experience first-hand the transformative power of beloved community, and I realized that I wanted to be a part of creating that for others. If given the chance, I knew then that I would return to school, finish my bachelor's degree, and start the path towards Unitarian Universalist ministry.

That chance came just a year later, in the spring of 2011, when that very literal call to ministry arrived in the form of a phone call from my mom: "Honey, I talked to your Grandpa. He wants to cover the cost of school for you."

If I'm being completely honest, I was never really that good at resurfacing. So off to Denver I went to pursue my calling.

Tangible Skills

I sometimes lament that my time in seminary did not produce "tangible skills." I can't speak another language, or pick up a guitar and start playing. I can't dance the Argentinian tango. The skills I'm learning are harder to "display":

"Go ahead Dan, why don't you stand up and facilitate for us. Just a real quick display of group facilitation, please, if you don't mind."

OR "Watch as Dan juggles and provides pastoral care at the same time!"

Often, I don't get to see the results of my ministerial work. It is rare to get oohs and ahhs during a sermon, or to know whether something I said or did made the impact I was hoping it would. Occasionally, someone will share weeks later that a quote or thought had resonated with them, or that they

implemented some change in their life as a result of something I shared. Mostly, though, I am left wondering, and hoping.

And yet, I look at how my life has been affected by the people who minister to me; how professors have opened up whole new ways of looking at the world, and I don't remember if I said "Thank you." How mentors have encouraged and affirmed me as I develop, by practicing those intangible skills that make me feel valued and validated. That is to say, I am the result of their Labor of Love. The work, the labor, of these amazing people is helping me live into a better, more authentic version of myself. How's that for tangible? I'd say building up people and communities tops building a birdfeeder any day.

Conclusion

Now that I am answering my call and working towards my vocation, I find that my work is a labor of love. I love what I do, and I love doing it because it is the work that my authentic self is called to do. As Parker Palmer recommends, I've learned to listen to my life as it tells me what truths I embody, what values I represent. I am learning to listen to what my life intends to do with me. I can work equally hard at anything I decide to do, but only the work that answers the call of my authentic self will be a labor of love.

My work is to build beloved community, and here, in this beloved community, may we all learn to hear that voice within ourselves, so that love may be the fruit of our labor; and may it be done through the loving work of our hands and our hearts. May it be so.

A Labor of Love: Part II The Rev. Angela Herrera

One night in 2002, as I was on my way home from community college, something really unexpected happened; something that changed the whole course of my life. It was an autumn evening in Oregon. Not quite dark yet. There was no one in the car with me. I was making a left turn onto Chemawa Road, toward my house. And I heard a voice.

The voice said, “You’re going to be a minister.”

I said, “What?”

But I didn’t hear it again. I didn’t need to. I had already definitely heard it.

Let me tell you that I had never heard a voice before, and I haven’t since. It didn’t travel through my ears, but my brain registered it as coming from outside of myself.

The idea of hearing a voice didn’t square with my theology. I didn’t believe in a god that literally talks to people. In fact, if you had asked me back then, I would have said I was the kind of UU who considers themselves spiritual but not religious.

Maybe I still am whatever people usually mean by that, but I guess once you’re the minister of a church you can’t claim not to be religious.

Back then, I might have said I believed in something— a spirit of love, maybe— but not a talking, intervening kind of God. Definitely not.

And yet, in spite of my beliefs, I heard a voice.

Before that moment, it had never occurred to me to consider the ministry. I went to church, but I couldn’t imagine leading one. My small congregation included a ritual called Joys and Concerns, where people could get up and light a candle and say out loud what it was for. Even those ten seconds of public speaking would fill me with such adrenaline I missed next five minutes of the service after that, processing it.

I was thinking of going into microbiology—I enjoyed science and the detective work of studying micro-organisms. I was taking psychology, too, and also thinking about becoming a therapist with a specialty in

religion and mental health. I had seen so many family relationships strained by religious differences. I thought maybe I could help.

But I wasn't sure what I was going to do.

I worked throughout my teens and early twenties as a nursing assistant, and not a very good one. I was always getting distracted, listening to people's stories. We were supposed to arrive at 6:30am and have eight residents ready for breakfast within an hour. I never made it. I wanted to see them and hear them, not rush. And when one of the residents died, on my first day of work after training, as the nurse helped me prepare his body for his family's visit, all I wanted to do was sing as we bathed him. I wanted to sing to him, in case he was... listening.

I worked as a birth doula for a while, too, serving as a companion to women in childbirth, as their nurses or OBs came and went. My first shift after being trained in that job was also remarkable—a home birth, in which the midwife didn't arrive in time, and I caught my best friend's baby with my bare hands right there in her kitchen. A holy moment, by any measure.

I loved people. And I noticed I was drawn to stories, and to the edges of human experience.

I was also deeply involved in church. I served coffee, visited the sick, organized our part in a soup kitchen, acted in a church play, started a young adult group, and marched in rallies. One day I asked my minister whether ministers can go salsa dancing in high heels and little black dresses. He had not personally done that, he said, but he didn't see why not. In hindsight, I suppose an unconscious part of me was wondering whether I could see myself in his role.

Out of that context came the voice.

I don't tell the voice story very often and I've sure I've never mentioned it in a sermon. But you know what? I've noticed that whenever I do share it in a group of UUs, it turns out that a number of others have had a similar experience.

In fact, just last Sunday Tara McCaughin stood in this pulpit and told the story of hearing a voice that set her life on a new course.

So, it happens. There are, no doubt, many ways of explaining it, and I don't profess to know which one is the objective truth. Maybe it was God. Or maybe when such things happen it is our own inner wisdom presenting itself to us in the only way we can hear it. Maybe those two things aren't as different as we think.

Has anything like that ever happened to you? Maybe not a voice, but maybe a realization. A connection with your wisdom within, which you might not have registered before. Maybe it came as a growing discomfort. Maybe you started down a new path because of it. Maybe you continued the path you were on, but with new eyes. Maybe it hasn't happened. Maybe you don't need it to. Or maybe you are in the middle of it now, and haven't noticed yet.

For me, it led to a new path. A path in which I get to think with you each week about how to live in the world and help heal it and take care of our spirits in the process;

to officiate at your weddings and dedicate your children, and hold the space with you at memorial services when your loved ones have passed away.

It's a vocation in which I experience the honor of you confiding in me about the meaning of your life, and about fear, and death, and love. And I confide these things in you, too, through many of these Sunday sermons.

And it's one in which I do the nitty gritty work side by side with so many of you in our offices and meeting rooms so we can keep this place humming along, and I am touched by how much you care. It inspires me to be the best minister I can be, so that this place will always be here for you and for all of us, and for our children.

Of course, a day in the life of a minister involves much more than sermon preparation and pastoral care.

And I have learned a lot about that since I first arrived at this, my first pastorate.

I have learned to breathe when I open my inbox, and have a cup of tea on hand, as I triage the dozens of emails.

My days are made up of those, and of phone calls, made and returned, of staff supervision meetings, and time spent combing through financial reports.

Sometimes all this other behind the scenes work is interrupted by walk-ins in the church office—people from the wider community who are in need of a prayer or a bag of groceries, and it is wonderful to be able to say yes to those things.

We spend time supporting the volunteers who run so many valuable programs here at the church—the Sip-n-suppers, potluckers, afterschool tutors, ESL, UU Kids Camp, Earthweb... all of them.

There are community events to attend,...newsletter columns and facebook updates to write. Whew.

Sometimes we are hiring for a position, and that takes a lot of time—reviewing our compensation package and job description, getting the right people to the table to change it if needed, posting the position and reviewing applications, interviewing, orientation. You see.

At various times in the year other work needs to be done—designing our annual stewardship campaign; I've spent the last several weeks doing that— planning the congregational meeting in January, budget forecasting in the summer.

I think I could have been a great microbiologist or psychologist.

(Welcome, Dan.)

But let me tell you that I love this work. I love even the parts of it that aren't what we think of when we picture ministry, because what's true is that your vocation does not have to be what you do all the time. It's more important that your sense of vocation be part of who you are. In your heart. The way you operate in the world.

The oxford English dictionary definitions of vocation include feeling called or directed toward special work in life,

And/or, being made one with the divine, wholeness. Salvation.

There's this saying we've all heard by now: "Whatever you are, be a good one." I take that to mean not just be methodical and punctual in getting eight residents up and ready for breakfast in an hour,

It doesn't mean excelling at resurfacing countertops and bathtubs, though that is also admirable.

I take it to mean let it be good with your soul, too. Whatever you are be a good one. Do it in a way that is true to who you are. Let your life be made whole in it, and in whatever you do.

Thank you for this labor of love.

Happy Labor Day.