

Lessons Learned, Wisdom Earned

A Sermon preached at the First Unitarian Church, Albuquerque, New Mexico

By Christine Robinson June 11, 2017

Last week, I got to sing with the band, doubling Chris Clawson singing the part of George Washington who is musing with his young assistant about his farewell address. It was glorious. One of the Washington's lines was the genesis for this sermon: "I want to talk about what I have learned, the hard won wisdom I have earned." It's actually a pretty ambitious goal, even for a book, much less for a sermon, so this is a very selective list. But...here goes.

I was ordained to the ministry on June 1, 1980, 37 years and 11 days ago. But in important ways, my ministry had started four years before, when I started telling the people around me that I was planning to go to seminary. I noticed right away that they started treating me differently. And from my second semester in seminary, January 1978, I was working in one of the many churches in the Boston area....Andover, Cambridge, Belmont.

Here's what I learned in Cambridge, a miserable year in which I never felt that I connected with the congregation or its leaders, never figured out what they were

doing in the historic old building on Harvard Square. Towards the end of the Spring, I asked my supervising minister when the pledge drive would be? And he said that oh, they don't do that. The Executive Committee comes up with the budget, compares it to the expected income from the endowment, and if it is not quite enough, they just pass the hat among themselves for the leftovers. Ah, I thought. That's what's wrong with this church! Too much money. Every church I'd been a part of before had been strapped for money...but they have also been alive in a way that was, at least, clearer to me. Every church I've been a part of since has been strapped for money, or as I prefer now to think of it, has a bigger vision than it can easily accomplish. It is better that way. I must add that I have heard that the Cambridge church is now alive and thriving and visionary in a way it wasn't in the 1970's, and that's great news. But now on to what I learned here, from you, during these 29 years.

And what years! It was hard work, most of it was good work, sometimes perplexing but usually in good company. There were some very hard times in which there was ill will and when I knew I was marching towards a cliff of no return, where the only options that were good were possibly good in the long term, but painful and risky in the short term. In spite of the trust issues I talked about last week, and some structural issues which we have now ironed out, I

always felt the good will of the majority, and I guess I always had it, because, here I still am, and feel fortunate to not only feel that I have been an effective leader of an institution that matters in the world, but to see the signs of that all around me. Membership growth, program depth, young ministers nurtured, talents coached, buildings built, leadership focused on mission and able to make clear decisions about appropriate directions. And while there is not enough money for us to easily accomplish our whole vision, we are better and better and funding our dreams and staying focused on what we can uniquely do. There were some pretty big tails wagging this little dog when I got here. No more.

And during the same 29 years, I had a baby, raised a child, and learned to parent a young adult...a life stage I hadn't even realize existed! I have taken on care for my parents; one of those things I knew happened but didn't contemplate it happening to me. I went through a period of ill health; 4 surgeries in 5 years and then a couple of seasons of pretty debilitating depression. Yikes, and....that, too, was a learning experience, not only about life, but about ministry. The care I got during those years, from you, as if I was a regular member of the congregation, from the UUA, which sent a consultant to work with the congregation and help for me, as well as the counseling and coaching I got to get me through taught me reams about ministry, myself, and the universe. It was one of those, put your face

in your hands and cry till your tears run out, which is the most sincere prayer there is, and more often answered than you might think.

That often frightening and very strenuous time turned out to be, well, not a blessing, but at least somewhat redeemed. You don't get to choose to go through such a trial, but since they happen, it's good to know that good can come from it. It changed me, I know, for good.

Which brings us to Memorial Services. My first congregation was a mostly young congregation. I only did four memorial services in the 8 years I was there. This congregation was more balanced. Here I have done more than 200 services, and participated in or simply attended dozens more. Ministry is a business uncomfortably close to death for many people, and lots of people have asked over the years, if it is depressing.

Some ministries are depressing. My colleagues, especially my Catholic colleagues who serve in gang-torn areas and regularly bury young people, violence victims and violence perpetrators...I would find that depressing. In this more privileged community, we don't have very much of that. Therefore I often find the process of writing a eulogy and listening to the eulogies others give to be downright inspiring, and that helps me get beyond the sadness of losing someone, often

someone that I knew. It is a rare memorial service that I don't find myself wishing that I had known the deceased even better.

I have mused some on this phenomena and it was David Brooks who put it into words. He wrote last year about the difference between the resume virtues (the ones we tell others about when we want to get something done around the church, and the ones which are most visible in our leaders, like knowledgeable, team-player, careful thinker) and the obituary virtues (the ones that are proclaimed in our obituaries, like patient, kind, and wise.)

Of course, we value patient, kind, and wise in our church leaders and program providers, but it is such an interesting observation, that the virtues that get us ahead in the world of work are not what matters to the loved ones and friends who come to our memorial service! This essay put into words something I had noticed about Memorial services, which is that we talk about people in a more holistic and deeper way, appreciating out loud virtues which we sometimes take for granted. Even when work colleagues speak at these events, they don't usually focus on technical matters or sales quotas. They focus on "obituary virtues" too...on how he treated everyone, from the Janitor to the President, to a kind word, how she was always the one to remember birthdays or tell the joke that broke the tension. How basically kind he was. And as for family and friends,

what they talk about, woven through tales of family vacations, marriages, and tragedy, often, is resilience, courage, recovery, getting over relationship issues, growth. They talk about how the second marriage benefitted so much from lessons learned in the first, and how driven executive became the mellow and grateful elder in spite of dementia issues.

I wrote about this in a Messenger column last Spring, and got more appreciative comments about that little bit of ministry than I have in a long time. I think that this observation, so well put into words by Brooks, not only reminds us of what is really important in our lives, it is, for me, a prime source of hope as I age.

Because my resume virtues are probably as developed as they are going to be as I retire, but my obituary virtues: patience, courage in the face of adversity...and what is aging but one adversity after another, after all? Kindness to those around me, acceptance of what is....I have the rest of my life to hone those. And the inspiration of so many of you and your predecessors to spur me on. No, this part of ministry is not depressing, not at all. I like it so much, in fact, that I plan to start a small business helping unchurched families plan memorial services for their loved ones.

I came here with the faith of a Transcendentalist...with Emerson and others of that ilk, I believed in a higher power.. Emerson called it the Oversoul...but not in

any personal care and concern from that entity. I had never experienced such a thing, called, in shortcut form, “God’s Love”, and so, a little like that Mandarin, I didn’t believe in it. The great blessing of being raised a Unitarian is that one is encouraged...as Emerson also said, to trust the integrity of one’s own experience. But one unexpected...really...very unexpected outcome of that time of ill health, and professional difficulty I spoke of earlier, was that I had several such experiences. They were brief but profound. And I trusted them, and my ideas about God morphed to something more personal and, perhaps more importantly to you, since you in no way have to believe what I believe, I got very interested in the tools of spirituality, especially as they come from the Buddhist and Christian traditions. Both traditions have a very long history of focus on the spiritual life, and it is not necessary to believe any particular thing to use the tools they have developed. Some of you were a part of that intense focus on spirituality and spiritual practices which was so important to me. You may not think of that as a category of wisdom, but for me, it was a critical part of the middle years of my ministry here. The reading, retreats, contact with interfaith clergy and quiet time both healed me and helped me to grow in faith.

And although by that time we had quit our periodic descent into fussing and fighting, after 9/11, we suddenly had the challenges of growth. We brought in a

second minister...that's quite an adjustment for someone who has been a solo minister for 20 years! We grew from 500 to 600 members seemingly overnight and suddenly became a large church. Large churches are different...not just bigger versions of small churches but fundamentally different. I've spent the last 17 years understanding how different they are and figuring out how to be a large church minister. Learned a lot. Learned enough that I've been asked to be the Western Region's consultant for large churches on a very part time basis next year. But it was also hard work, and ironically, it was focus on spirituality that got me through that hard work, and, I'm convinced that bringing a little more public face to our kind of diverse and open spirituality was one of the things that made us attractive and fueled that growth.

And...in the meantime, my experiences of God's love got longer and longer ago, and became a matter of memory not present reality. This is very common, but it was also very disappointing, and after some years of longing and experimenting, I found myself more attracted to the Tao Te Ching than to the Psalms.

The Eastern world view is very different from the Western, and those differences can be summed up conveniently by the symbol on our mural which is called the Yin/yang. The yin/yang is actually just the figure in the circle, divided into black and white sides ..or in our case, red and blue sides, by that wave form. Reality is

created and maintained by the mutual dance of opposites...each of which contains some of the other...some white in the black, and some black in the white.

If the west had a similar symbol it would probably be a square with a straight line dividing it into black and white, and there would not be splotches of the opposite color disturbing the pristine purity of each side. No sir-ee. And also...the square would not be evenly divided. There is a lot more emphasis on strength than on balance with...gasp...weakness... in the west. That squarish purity explains a lot about our political situation right now, doesn't it?

But I have come to deeply understand the wisdom of the East in this matter. and the Tao Te Ching, it's major scripture, has deeply informed my ministry. For instance:

Being and non-being create each other.

Difficult and easy support each other.

Long and short define each other.

High and low depend on each other.

Before and after follow each other.

Therefore the Master
acts without doing anything
and teaches without saying anything.
Things arise and she lets them come;
things disappear and she lets them go.
She has but doesn't possess,
acts but doesn't expect.
When her work is done, she forgets it.
That is why it lasts forever.¹

This study has made me patient. The part about teaching without words was hard for a preacher, of course, but I got that to work, too.

And besides studying books, I started Tai Chi and then Kung Fu, which are the only real spiritual practices of Taoism left in the world. I've studied in two schools now, learned a lot, gotten stronger and more coordinated...though If I ever got into a fight, I would still rely on my words not my body to get out of it!

¹ Mitchell, Stephen; Lao Tzu; Stephen Mitchell. Tao Te Ching (Perennial Classics) (Kindle Locations 193-199). HarperCollins e-books. Kindle Edition.

In practicing these martial arts, what I was most confronted with was the art of not being very good at something.

You know, once you master your career and don't have a three year old or a 13 year old around the house to show up your inadequacies; if you experience some success...you could retire early from life and quit being a learner, basking in your competencies. Before Tai Chi and Kung Fu, I had lost touch with an old experience of being at the back of the class, the one very slow to master spelling, whose papers were always pockmarked with erasures, who sat at the end of the row in band and orchestra, last picked for teams...all that stuff....pew...bad memories! About the time started at Tai Chi and Kung Fu, I had mastered my trade well enough to be speaking all over the nation, sought out for advice, all that sort of thing...the minister of a church which had almost doubled in size in an era in which most congregations of most faiths felt fortunate to not shrink into oblivion. That kind of success can limit one's willingness to try new things and...it was an instructive struggle, but I didn't.

And then there is the flow of the thing. This, too, is deeply embedded in Eastern World View, which at its most abstract, posits the basic unit of the world, not as a thing as we have it in the west, but as a movement, a process, a change.

In western philosophy, even in western science, the basic unit of the world is a thing...a particle, an atom, a unit. That's why our mental picture of the Ultimate in the West is God, a guy in the sky; an item. A person. Most people who believe in God believe in the guy. Most people who don't believe in God, don't believe in the guy. See how embedded we are? And we talk incessantly about him, and the point of all our western religions is to tell us more about him. Like, for instance, that he's a him. To understand the him part, return to that square, where the pure black...the masculine... is carefully divided from the pure white...the feminine... and takes at least $\frac{3}{4}$ of the space.

It's fundamentally different in the East, which values light and dark and knows that each contains the other, and posits the basic unit of the universe, not as a thing but as a movement, a flow, a change. And calls that a Mystery and spends most of its energy, not talking incessantly about that basic Mystery, but rather on Kung Fu: the mastery of this life, for the good of these people.

Well, you know, it looks like I am going to have to write a book about lessons learned and wisdom earned after all. Suffice it to say that these years have been very rich in so many ways, the difficult and the easy together. Thank you!