

“A Letter From Your Minister”

A Sermon Preached to the UU Congregation of the South Jersey Shore

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Reading: (from Stories of the Heart, Stories of the Spirit)

Mulla Nasrudin was sitting in a tea shop when a friend came excitedly to speak with him. “I’m about to get married, Mulla,” his friend stated, “and I’m very excited. Mulla, have you ever thought about marriage yourself?”

Nasrudin replied, “I did think of getting married. In my youth, in fact, I very much wanted to do so. I waited to find for myself the perfect wife. I traveled, looking for her, first to Damascus. There I met a woman who was gracious, kind, and deeply spiritual, but she had no worldly knowledge. I traveled further and went to Isphahan. There I met a woman who was both spiritual and worldly, beautiful in many ways, but we did not communicate well. Finally I went to Cairo, and there after much searching I found her. She was spiritually deep, graceful, and beautiful in every respect, at home in the world and in the realms beyond the world. I felt I had found the perfect wife.”

His friend questioned further: “But you did not marry her, Mulla?”

“No, alas,” said Nasrudin. “She was, unfortunately, waiting for the perfect husband.”

Sermon:

Dear Ones,

I write today in an attempt to express to you both the joys and the challenges in serving as your minister. (Of course, we all know that I am not, in fact, your minister. I am another congregations' minister, and that frees me to speak with greater clarity and honesty, to say things to you that your own minister might not feel free to express. But I write to you “as if,”

as if I wrote to my own people, so that you might feel the personal dimension of my words.)

Let us begin with my salutation. I call you “dear ones,” because you are, indeed, dear to me. The relationship between a minister and members of a congregation is a precious one, and it is an honor and a joy. It is also, however, a bit complicated.

On one hand, I am a member of this community just as you are, and we work and play together to create our religious life. We serve together on committees, we eat together at potluck dinners, we march together at rallies. We laugh and argue and compromise as we do the work of this congregation, and I am one of you.

And, at the same time, I am never quite one of you, and I have learned over the years that this is hard for laypeople to understand, so I want to try to articulate it clearly and carefully. As your minister, I am always, always, in the role of the minister. I represent something bigger than my individual self. Because I am in that role, you invite me to share some of the most powerful and intimate moments in your lives. I perform ceremonies to seal your loving commitment as couples. I dedicate your children. I sit with you in the hospital, or with your family as they wait for you to come out of surgery. I walk with you in times of crisis and times of joy. I hold your hands as you die, and I help the ones who love you to remember and honor your life when that life is over.

I am one of you, and at the same time, I'm always aware of the role that I play in this community. And because of that, I need you to understand that I will not have “friendships” within the congregation in the way that some of you might expect or wish. It's not that I won't enjoy social events with you – I will. But my primary sources of intimacy, the places where I can totally let my hair down – metaphorically speaking, obviously – will have to be outside this congregation. If you all become my best buddies, I won't be capable of fulfilling my role.

Along the same lines, because all of that is so, I can't come to a congregational event without being the minister. Which means that when I am with you, I am always working. You don't like to hear that, I don't think. And I don't blame you. I can see why it would feel a bit insulting, even. But it's a fact. If you invite me to a dinner party, or a pool party, or to play a

round of golf, I'm still your minister. The fact that I am working doesn't mean that I find your company to be a chore! I can still relax and have a good time, and I appreciate being included in your lives. But I'm still the minister, never completely off duty. I need you to respect that, and understand that I also need a life outside of the congregation, where I am not on duty.

The story of Mulla Nasrudin always makes me laugh. It also makes me think about ministers and congregations. We know, of course, that there are no perfect life partners. Perhaps a rare few of you have had that "soul mate" experience, but most partnerships involve patience and compromise as well as love and celebration. I didn't look for the perfect partner, and it's a good thing, because I couldn't be a perfect partner. But my husband and I agree that we pretty consistently feel that we'd rather be married to each other than not. That's success, as far as I'm concerned. In life relationships, we look for a good match, not a perfect person.

It's the same with ministry, of course. There are wonderful ministers and wonderful congregations who just don't fit well with each other. The best minister for one congregation might not suit another at all. And no matter how idyllic things seem at the start, the honeymoon will wear off and daily life will have its challenges.

Let me say, very clearly, that there are no perfect ministers out there. None. Including me. But that's OK. Because there aren't any perfect congregations, either. Including you. It's a matter of finding a good match.

Ministry is a very complicated job, with many different facets. We're sometimes called the last of the generalists. We have to be good at so many different things. And we have to be doing so many of them simultaneously.

How many of you have ever waited tables? I often compare ministry to waitressing. Which is risky, because I was a terrible waitress. There was just too much going on at once, too many things to juggle.

At least as a waitress, though, I was good at all the individual tasks. I could greet people, I

could take orders, I could deliver salads, I could serve drinks. I just couldn't keep track of all of it at once, and eventually, when things got too busy, I'd find myself hiding in the walk-in refrigerator, crying into the cheesecake. I didn't last long.

So I've learned that I need good administrative support, to help keep me organized and grounded. I didn't have that as a waitress, but I'm learning how to use it well as a minister. You need to provide that for me if I'm going to be effective – and if you value the gifts I bring enough to compensate for the areas where I need some help.

Because unlike waitressing, in ministry, none of us is good at all of the different tasks and roles. I have certain gifts in ministry, and then I have my – well, let's call them growing edges rather than weaknesses. I try to fulfill all the roles of ministry, but I do some of them better than others. You need to understand that if you want a great preacher, you might not also get a great administrator. If you want a community activist, well, you might have accept a lower level of pastoral care. I need you to be honest with me about your priorities for your minister. Otherwise, how do I know whether or not I can serve you well? If we're not honest with each other, there's bound to be disappointment ahead.

And of course the issue is magnified by the fact that I am only part time. In a twenty-hour week, I can go to an evening meeting, keep an afternoon of office hours, maybe pay a pastoral call, and prepare and preach a sermon. Then I'm about out of time. So the issue of priorities becomes even more important. If we have different assumptions about how I should be spending my time, we'll wind up in conflict. We need to talk about that, and review it regularly.

Sometimes I may need to claim something as a priority even when you would not have chosen it as the best use of my time. One day a month, for example, I need to go to a chapter meeting of the UU Ministers' Association. It's a professional obligation to show up and be with my colleagues. It's also a personal necessity. I can't do my work well in isolation. We ministers support each other, teach each other, and hold each other accountable. It will benefit you in the long run.

All of this points to the importance of our being able to communicate. And when I say communicate, I mean directly, with each other. Talking *about* me, to other people, does not count. I need you to talk *to* me. If I've offended you, talk to me. I can't try to make things right if I don't know they're wrong.

And If I've delighted you, talk to me. Ministers get accustomed to hearing from people only when we've disappointed them. Years ago, I received a note in the mail from a member of the congregation, and my first reaction, before opening the envelop, was "Oh no, what did I do to offend Jack?" I was afraid to open it. Turned out he had taken the time to write and thank me for Sunday's sermon, which he had found helpful. This was at over fifteen years ago. I still have the note.

If you need me for something, tell me. I remember in my first ministry encountering a really interesting dynamic. No one would tell me anything, but they expected me to know. So I would hear about someone's hospitalization days after they had come home, and then I would hear the murmurs about how I didn't even go visit that person in the hospital. Talk to me. Keep me in the loop. How else can I be there for you?

One more thing about the importance of talking to me. I said it doesn't count if you talk about me to someone else. It also doesn't count if you talk to me about what someone else said. As much as I love communication, it doesn't help me to hear "someone said," or "people think." I can't respond to anonymous feedback. Please, encourage that person to come directly to me.

Now, let me say just a few words about sermons. First of all, they're a lot of work. Most of us put in at least ten hours of preparation in order to craft a really good sermon. The best preachers and best sermons often take longer. Our congregations expect both intellectual integrity and spiritual depth, and want sermons to be both personal and universal. You want to be nurtured, inspired, and challenged.

And no matter what topic I choose, someone out there is bound to know more about it than I do. Which means each sermon requires rigorous reading and research, as well as

introspection and meditation.

Writing sermons is one of the most painful pieces of ministry for many of us, a spiritual discipline that requires us to dig very deep. Some of my colleagues use the metaphor of giving birth to describe the process. And preaching those sermons leaves us vulnerable, because we're not just giving you an academic paper, we're giving you – in our best sermons – our soul and our guts. Wasn't it Emerson who said that preaching was life passed through the fire of thought? Passing through that fire is no small thing.

Because of all that, I ask you to be gentle with me. Understand why I am reluctant to have a dialogue following the sermon. In part because I'm trying to craft an experience for worship, which requires maintaining some control, and in part because I may not be ready to be critiqued. In my last congregation, I preached a sermon when I returned from my sabbatical. I had spend the sabbatical exploring my relationship to Jesus – not something this humanist-raised UU ever expected to be doing. But the gospel stories had begun to speak to my heart, and I had to understand what was going on.

It was one of the hardest sermons I've ever written. And before I began preaching, I said to the congregation, "I know I sometimes give you a chance to respond following a sermon that might evoke strong reactions. I'm not going to do that today. You need to understand that I have spent the last week in labor to birth this sermon, and I'm not ready to hear you tell me I had an ugly baby. Give me a call on Wednesday; I should be able to hear your feedback by then."

Finally I want to say a few words about leadership. We ministers walk a fine line. Our congregations are full of strong lay leaders who sometimes wonder just what they need a minister for at all. Some of you expect strong leadership, others expect the minister to preach, counsel and stay out of the way. I tend to prefer a balance somewhere in the middle. Sometimes you know best. But sometimes I may realize that although you say you want a fence, I believe you need a bridge. (reference to children's story.)

When I was doing my internship, we had a woman come to the congregation who was really

struggling with religion. She had come from a more hierarchical tradition, and she wasn't finding enough clarity, enough to hold onto, in Unitarian Universalism. She came to talk with me, and it became clear that she wanted answers from me that I couldn't give.

Finally she was able to articulate her need. "I just want you to walk in front of me with a lantern," she said. And after a moment's thought I replied, "I can't walk in front of you with a lantern, but I can walk beside you with a flashlight."

That was not enough for her, and eventually she left the church.

Leadership does not mean domination. I don't assume that I should be leading the way, carrying the only lantern. But if you don't at least respect the fact that I've got flashlight, why would you want a minister at all?

You know, people sometimes assume that if you've been called to the ministry, you must somehow be special, a better person, less flawed than the average Joe. Don't believe it. My colleague Barbara Merritt wrote a wonderful piece about ministry as a spiritual discipline, and suggested that it's just the opposite, that God calls those that he feels the need to keep a closer eye on, so that ministry becomes a sort of remedial program for some of us. We are as imperfect as anyone else, with lives full of complications and challenges and frustrations.

But we give ourselves heart and soul to the work of this religious movement, and we take joy in sharing both the joy and the challenges with you.