

In between-ness

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The future of the church is almost totally dependent on these two factors: great congregations (whether large or small) and effective, dedicated ministers. The strange feature of their relationship is that they create one another. (Jack Mendelsohn)

One of the seeming ironies of the profession of ordained ministry is that many, if not most ministers, are introverts. It might seem odd at first that such a public profession would attract people with strong needs for privacy to maintain their sanity, yet, without private time, without alone time of the spirit, what could a minister possibly offer to another human being, let alone a congregation? Without a deep life of the spirit a minister could be a circus director—we call our minister too often to fulfill that function—and yet such a minister would be “*unfamiliar with, and even somewhat afraid of the deep and significant movement of the spirit.*” It would be a minister who would fail “*in [the] most basic task; to offer men and women creative ways to communicate with the source of human life.*” Henri Nouwen said that in his book *The Wounded Healer*.

Most ministers enjoy alone time, canoeing, hiking or retreating to rustic cabin. I own such a cabin in Northern New Brunswick. Part of the magic of this cabin is that it is totally inaccessible by road. The only way to get there is by canoe. It is my wilderness retreat, my oasis and some days my touchstone when the world becomes a little too insane. My neighbour and friend at the cabin on the Tobique River is Bill Miller. Bill is an accomplished storyteller and a fine photographer, who has been making his living over the past 30 years creating beautiful and durable hand-made 20-26 foot wooden canoes. One day Bill and I were working on restoring a commonly-owned 90 year-old log cabin. To be honest we are still working on it. The job involved getting about 2000 pounds of building materials across that river to the cabin. Wilderness retreats have their challenges. We made a make-shift raft out of one of Bill’s boats and one of mine and then piled on the lumber and a bunch of friends. Would it float?

When everything was as ready as we thought possible, we pushed off from the shore and out into the middle of the river. After a few nerve-wracking seconds, when we began to feel assured that the thing would indeed float, we relaxed a bit. It was then that we experienced one of those magical moments that graces our lives from time to time—perhaps more often than we think if we would pay more attention—there, out in the middle of that beautiful river, between the two shores, exhausted; there, between the two shores of our lives with nothing really to do but to relax and to let the current carry us; there it happened. Bill took a long, deep and rather noisy breath, followed by a much longer, deeper and noisier sigh. He then shouted to us and to the universe with a broad, infectious smile, “Ah, life, life don’t get much better than this!”

“Life don’t get much better than this!” Look around you this morning. Look deeply within. Take stock of your life, where you are and how it has all developed to date. Did you ever imagine that you would be who you are today, doing what you are doing? Few of us do. Did you ever imagine that life would unfold as it is unfolding? Take a moment to look deeply within. Can you at this time, at this very instant of your life exclaim with a long, deep and satisfying sigh, “Life, life don’t get much better than this!”?

Too often are we not so focused upon what is wrong with this very moment that we fail to appreciate its blessings? I passed a Baptist Church a week ago—on my way to my cabin actually—and the sign-board read “Too Blessed to be Depressed.” What an attitude! How often do you with a deep and satisfying sigh exclaim “Life don’t get much better than this!”

What is life after all, but this instant, followed by this instant and followed by this instant? What is life but that brief—oh so brief—interlude, that in between-ness, between the two shores of being born and having to die? As Richard Gilbert has said in our reading there is no possibility of escaping *In-between-ness*. It is the existential reality of our lives.

“We live / On a remote island outpost in fathomless space, / Between stars and moons and planets and voids, / Surrounded by meteors, comets, rays and nothingness / In which there is no right or left, up or down— / Only between-ness ... Hoping along the way / To see something of beauty, / To touch hands with those we love, / To give more than we get, / To make some sense of it all. / We live in between.”

Life can only be satisfying and worth the living if we drink in “The Now” fully and completely. For all of our life is lived in this in-between. As the Buddhists say, “If you are not here now you won’t be there then.” If you are not fully and completely and intensely present here and now in this present moment then you will not be there then.

So, you may ask what has all of this to do with you, The First Unitarian Church of Hamilton and the resignation of your minister? I believe that what is true for individuals is also true for congregations. You as a congregation find yourself acutely aware of the in between-ness of your life together. The question is what are you going to do with it?

Allison Barrett, your previous settled minister of 12 years, has resigned. She will no longer be your minister. The relationship has changed. I know that many of you have a lot of feelings about that. Some of you may be angry or hurt or sad or mad about being where you are. Some of you may be expectant or doubtful while others of you are simply dubious of the whole process, wishing that this in-between time would come to an end, as quickly as possible. You might not be happy with how you have arrived at today or be clear what happened to get you here or you maybe O.K. with the present, believing that now is the right time for a change. You might be eager to move on into a yet-to-be imagined future or you might want to turn the clock backward. More than likely most of you are experiencing a complex mixture of many of the above emotions and more.

Of one thing I am certain this morning that no matter how much you may wish to turn the clock backward and to wish this present moment away, you cannot. Our reading said it so eloquently. (#670 *The Way*, Edwin Muir)

“Back, I must travel back! None goes there. Then I’ll make here my place—The road runs on ... the road leaps on ... the way leads on ... that journey’s done ... The way leads on.”

You must find the courage and the wisdom to embrace fully this present, unsettled, in-between moment of your congregational life. This present moment is the one you have been given and there will be no other NOW. Give yourself some time—lots of time—to talk out what has happened here. Give yourselves time to listen and to honour each others’ emotions. Talk about the good times, the mistakes made and the lessons learned. Dream lots about how all of this will make Hamilton a better community. It is often through pain that both ministers and people are offered the possibility growing.

Maybe I am getting ahead of myself and should explain a little about me and why I am here telling you these things. You might be saying to yourself, “Who is this guy anyway? He says he is a Canadian UU minister representing the American Unitarian Universalist Association. Are we not an independent Canadian congregation? What right does he have to come here and to tell us anything about who we are or how we will choose our next minister? We don’t have bishops or head-offices which come and tell us how to operate.” That is the Unitarian spirit. If you were thinking this, or something like this, you are both right and wrong.

It is easy to say whom I am not and what I am not going to do for you. I am neither going to be your next settled minister, nor will I choose one for you. I couldn’t handle either the praise or the blame. You remember in the film *Fiddler on the Roof* there was a matchmaker. “Matchmaker, matchmaker make me a match, find me a find, catch me a catch...” Well, I am not actually the matchmaker either. In fact you are. Most particularly your future Search Committee will be your matchmaker. I am more like a coach to the matchmaker, as your future Search Committee—when you are ready—goes about scouring the continent for a suitable match for you. My job is to help your board and later your duly elected Search Committee become familiar with the ministerial search process so that you will have the best chance of conducting a continental-wide search; so that you will be successful in finding your next ordained settled minister.

The term “settled minister” is a misnomer, is it not? If I have learned anything over my 30 years of ordained ministry I have learned that all ministries are interim, some lasting two years, some 12. The average is about eight years so Allison’s 12 years was longer than most. The only permanent ministry is that of the congregation, which is itself in constant evolution.

Rev. Phillip Hewett, minister-emeritus in Vancouver, would often arrive in a new ministerial setting wearing a backpack and carrying a walking stick. He is an avid hiker. Theatrically he would remove his backpack and lay it down beside the pulpit. As he set aside his walking stick he would say, “**WHEN** I pick these things up again...” He said “When” and not “if.”

All ministers are temporarily on the scene. Individual members of any congregation are likewise impermanent. All move on. It is the nature of life. Again the Buddhists have it right in saying that that there is nothing constant in the universe except change, so we had better get used to it.

For ministers and for congregations our desire to have things stay the same, to keep things settled, is perhaps our undoing. It was Ralph Waldo Emerson, a Unitarian minister himself, who once said these familiar words, “People wish to be settled; only as far as they are unsettled, is there any hope for them.” So it is with us all. Only when we are enough unsettled is there hope for us. The shared ministry of member and ordained minister must never seek too much settlement. If we wish to be religious communities that matter in our world, we must find the courage always to be moving, adapting, growing and changing. Without such dynamic movement there is no life or hope in us. Without such change we are of no use in our deeply troubled world.

This unsettled time, this in-between time in your congregation can be productive and transformative if you dare to take up the challenge and find the courage to grasp it fully, to grow and to be changed by it. Obviously, Hamilton is a strong and vital congregation which over the years has made and is making a significant contribution to this city, our Central Region and to our national Unitarian movement. Your president was once a UUA trustee and one of your members is now acting director of the CUC. You have ministers and candidates for the ministry among you. Yet every congregation, this one included, has both strengths and weaknesses, places where it excels and places where it is stuck. This religious community, like all others, has its traditions, some of which are helpful, others which are not.

This in-between time is a perfect time to take the time to look deeply into the mirror and to have the courage to name and to change what is NOT working for you; what is not helping you to grow or to become that vital, challenging religious presence. This in-between time is a perfect time to have what I love to call “Amicable collision” with one another. The phrase comes from Lord Shaftesbury in the 18th century. This is the time to honestly debate and evaluate what went right and what went wrong during Allison’s 12-plus years among you. From what I have read you have already begun some of that work. You must learn to say thanks for what you have had with Allison as your minister, to resolve the deep feelings about her ministry, let her go on her life’s journey and then to embrace a new future without her.

In that mirror, if you have the courage to look, you will find not only the congregation that you are and the one that you are not—it is sometimes a painful self-examination. In that mirror you will also see the congregation that you might become together with a new settled and unsettling minister. In this time of introspection maybe you will find a new compass reading and then set out in a new direction for your life together. Don’t wish it away.

Yesterday your board and I were exploring the details of the search system so that you as a congregation can make the most of a continental search for your next minister. After the service I will be available to listen to your questions and attempt to answer them. Let me take a moment and briefly outline a couple of aspects of the search process.

For the process to work, seven people from among you will be asked by the whole congregation to form the Ministerial Search Committee. Think carefully before you indicate an interest. It is exciting work, yes. It is also difficult work and time-consuming work. I have left a copy of the characteristics of a good Search Committee member with your board.

“Someone known and respected ... strongly committed to the congregation as a whole ... committed Unitarian Universalist pluralism ... works for consensus ... has the time to be thoroughly and continually involved ... someone who constantly remembers the wishes of the congregation ... someone with a history of Unitarian Universalist involvement ... someone who can respect confidentiality ... someone capable of both self-assertion and compromise ... someone not prone to extreme reactions to ministers ... (i.e., not the one who was either the biggest fan or the biggest critic of the last minister) someone who follows through on commitments ... someone who is inspired and can inspire others ...”
A tall order for sure...

If you become a member of the future Search Committee it will be the most important task that you will ever be asked to do for this community. The very future of this congregation, its health and future direction, depends on you making a careful and wise decision. The search process will help you think deeply about what it is that you believe and what your congregation is about. It will help you to think spiritually and philosophically about the congregation.

Those who are not on the search committee have work to do also so that the Search Committee can do its work. It will need to know this congregation inside and out as never before. It will need to know not only the mainstream but also the smaller currents of water. It will need to know intimately the diversity which exists here; diversity of theology, philosophy, politics, social standing, education and social levels. This small 7-person committee, if it is to find the right minister, will need to know you intimately, your hopes and dreams and fears and potential. To do this the Search Committee will need to hear from you. When they ask for your opinion, take the time to give wise and well thought-out answers. If you do not tell them who you are and what you dream of for this place then they cannot represent your point of view.

You, the congregation, may be asked to vote on a compensation packet for your next minister. Included in that letter of agreement will be the dollars and cents that you will offer to this minister. Although ministers must learn that their value is not in money, ministers do need money to live. I said this yesterday to the board and I will say it again. Generous congregations find that they have more ministers to choose from. Make sure that the compensation packet that you offer is generous of spirit.

I have gone on long enough. I want to end where I began. As I have said, this is a congregation with strong lay leadership both locally and nationally. Choosing wisely your next settled minister is only one of the ingredients for a strong and vibrant congregation. Each one of you is a co-minister here. Jack Mendelsohn said it best:

“The future of the church is almost totally dependent on these two factors: great congregations (whether large or small) and effective, dedicated ministers. The strange feature of their relationship is that they create one another.”

When you are ready to begin again your search for your next settled minister, realize that you will shape your next minister as she or he will shape you in ways that you cannot even begin to imagine today. Enjoy this in between time. Bonne chance!

Rev. Ray Drennan is a Canadian UU minister and family therapist. For over 30 years he has worked throughout the globe and within several religious communities as an ordained minister. Ray is a certified leader for Healthy Congregation Workshops. He completed a ten-year ministry at the Unitarian Church of Montreal in 2005. He and his partner Ann and their two youngest children own and manage an inn/spiritual retreat centre in Bouctouche, NB. Since 2006 he has served as the Ministerial Settlement Representative for Eastern Canada.