

What I've Learned

**a reflection
by Rev. Bill Gupton**

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Heritage Universalist Unitarian Church
Cincinnati, Ohio**

It was a day I will never forget. It was a day that I had long ... imagined – the day I would become a Unitarian Universalist minister.

On this day, I would be surrounded by friends and loved ones, by young people (now grown) to whom I had given so much of my heart and soul in the preceding years as a youth worker, by the ministers and soon-to-be-colleagues who had helped guide me on my path – by family members who had, quite literally, been with me, since the beginning. And it was all going to happen in the church where I had first felt a sense of calling – in the same round, high-ceilinged, dimly-lit sanctuary where I had slept and prayed and laughed and cried.

It was Father's Day, 1996, at the UU Congregation of Atlanta.

In some ways, that day turned out just as I had imagined. In other ways, it did not. And that was the first lesson of my ministry.

A couple of weeks earlier, my mother – who was incredibly proud of her only son, and whose pride, I readily admit, I basked in – had told me, during an awkward and painful conversation while I was talking to her from a pay phone at a BP station in Columbus, Ohio – that she had just been diagnosed with a brain tumor. That her surgery had been quickly scheduled, and would come soon after my ordination – and that she didn't think she could make the trip to be there, at the moment of my achievement.

I was devastated by this news – by every part of it. My father had been gone for almost a year at that point, and I had just become a father myself.

Patrick was less than two months old. And now, my mother – who had not yet even seen her grandson – would have to miss the big event. I had always pictured her, in that sanctuary, beaming with pride and crying, as I became a minister.

But, as life would have it, when the moment arrived – she was not there.

She had, however, made me this robe – the last creation of her prolific sewing career. And my sister – who was able to be there – had contributed this handmade stole. So although she was not there – as I was ordained, I felt the loving embrace of my mother all around me – even as I do now.

There were other surprises that day – the most memorable of which for me came when, just as the ceremony was beginning, I looked up and saw my best friend from Tulsa – whom I had not seen in two years – rushing into the sanctuary. He was a bit dazed at the end of an impulsive, secretive, 10-hour drive – but still wearing the impish grin I had learned to love back in the flatlands of mid-America. And so, with his flamboyant arrival, virtually every chapter of my life was represented there – past, present, and (embodied in my baby son, future.

My memories of the ceremony itself are a blur. It all flew by so quickly. Before I knew it, the same man who had performed our wedding – Jennifer's step-father – was extending to me the right hand of fellowship, and the congregation was reading some words, and then I read some words. I gave a shaky rendition of what was, at that time, my standard benediction – and it was over.

Best-selling author Robert Fulghum (who is, himself, a Unitarian Universalist minister) reminds us that perhaps everything we really need to know, we learned in kindergarten. I am inclined to agree – but that was Fulghum's sermon, not mine. And so I am here today to reflect on what I have learned, in ten years of UU ministry, and to share some of those lessons, with you.

Let me begin by saying that I've come to know that it really does matter what you wear! I've never felt fully comfortable in the priestly vestments I have on today – but there are some churches where such attire is expected. In other congregations, my customary coat and tie would be deemed too formal. My female colleagues – for whom there's an even wider

array of possible sartorial choices – tell me they never cease to be amazed at the comments, both pro and con, some people will make on what they choose to wear when they preach.

As for me, my wife and I still get a chuckle some Sunday mornings, when I'm deciding what tie to put on, as we remember Bob Lamb's comment a couple of years back, when he stood right here and referred to me as "the clothes horse."

What do you think of the outfit today, Bob?...

I put on the robe and stole this morning, in truth, because today I wanted to be as I had been, on the day of my ordination. But of course, I am not the same man I was then – I've learned a few things since.

Among them: that it's a good idea, every now and then, to shake things up a bit, to do the unexpected. Maybe show up, every so often, in a robe.

Of course, another thing I've learned – sometimes the hard way – is that it's not a good idea not to shake things up too often. Because when it comes to their Sunday morning worship service, many folks want nothing so much as they want consistency. Truth be told, it often doesn't matter what you do, in worship, just so long as it's dependable. Reliable. People are creatures of habit, and most seem to want their church service to be something they can count on.

I experienced something similar, myself, just yesterday, in yoga class. When we began our practice without doing the traditional, chanted invocation at the start, I found myself upset. I really missed it. In my mind, the right tone had not been set; the spiritual space had not been defined.

And then I noticed the teacher, grinning at us, and saying, "Threw you for a loop, didn't I? That's yoga, too." And I got it.

The analogy to church life struck me immediately. We all appreciate the occasional shift in accustomed routine, but by golly, you'd better not make those changes permanent!

Yes, church people like their routines. Some folks like to sit in the same chair, every week. Some live for the Covenant, and it just isn't really a

worship service unless we say it. Others can't stand the fact that we use the word "God" in the Covenant. On the other hand, there are those for whom that's the best part.

This hints at something else I've learned over the years – Unitarian Universalists have really strong feelings about religious language. I guess I always knew that, but when your livelihood is based on using religious language, you'd better learn how to be judicious in your word choices. Too much God, not enough Spirit of Life – either way, you're doomed. Jesus, in moderation, but you'd better not say "Christ" (unless, of course, you've stubbed your toe!)...

Another thing I've discovered is just how hard it is to say goodbye – how hard, and how important. In the past decade, I have left two different churches – one because my term as an interim minister there had expired (a sort of enforced departure, as it were), and the other because I resigned – one of the most difficult decisions I have ever had to make, since things were really going well in the congregation at the time – but I felt called to move on, and to accept the opportunity to come here, to Heritage – and help this church move forward after the retirement of Elinor Artman.

In both cases, leaving the church was a far more emotional experience than I had expected – emotional for me, and for the congregation.

So, too, when individual church members leave. This past week, I had lunch with two of our departing parishioners – and in each case, as I said earlier when I invited them to light candles, it was a truly bittersweet meal. I – and we – will miss their special energy here at Heritage Church, which, quite literally, will never be the same, when they're gone.

This is another of the lessons I have learned – that churches, like our lives themselves, are an ever-changing kaleidoscope of people and relationships. Members join us, and members leave. Even buildings are left behind – Heritage now occupies its fifth building, operating under its third name.

It is only the ongoing institution – the idea of this church, the idea of Universalism and of religious freedom – that survives, and is passed on, to each new member, to each new generation.

Certainly, ten years ago, I had some sense of becoming part of what our hymnal calls a “living tradition” – but with each passing year, I become more and more committed to the institution of Unitarian Universalism. It is to the church as an ongoing entity that I have dedicated myself – here, and before that, in Cleveland, and in Columbus.

And it is in that process – of my evolving into a Unitarian Universalist institutionalist (now isn’t that a mouthful?) that I have come to terms with my calling. I am confident when I say to you that my working life, for as long as I have one, will be given, to the best of my ability, to the stewardship of Unitarian Universalist churches.

Let me share with you these words, from the ordination of Rev. Joe Camp – for they sum up my understanding of my call as a UU minister:

“To have a calling, in this life, may be a birthright we all share. But to be aware that one, in fact, has a calling – that is a rare blessing indeed. And to know, with assurance, the exact nature of that calling ... and further, to act upon that knowledge and pursue one’s calling – that, my friend, shivers the soul.”

My soul has shivered, on more than one occasion, in the face of this work I am blessed to do. When I see the look in lovers’ eyes as they say their vows of marriage to one another ... when I sit with a mother in a hospital waiting room as her young son undergoes surgery ... when I watch someone share, for the first time, the story of their own, personal spiritual journey ... when I feel – literally feel – the Spirit of Life that each of us possesses, flowing from one to the other, as our hands touch at the end of a Sunday service ... when I hug someone, just before their father’s funeral – when I do these things, my soul shivers, and I know what it means to have been ordained to this wonderful ministry.

I stand here today, too, as one who has learned that dreams do, sometimes, become reality. You may not be aware of it, but back in the 1980s and early ’90s, I was one of the main agitators for the support and recognition of youth ministry in Unitarian Universalism. The Baptists and the Methodists had long since learned the wisdom of hiring ministers who specialized in work with adolescents and young adults – but we were far behind. I remember attending the General Assembly in 1990, and participating in a panel

discussion in which we dreamed of the day when even small-to-mid-sized UU churches, would have youth ministers.

Well, here we are! Sometimes, dreams do become reality. Build it and they will come. Rev. Linda Eppert, our very own Youth and Young Adult minister! Imagine...

Usually in reflections such as the one I am doing today, it is customary, also, to address some of the biggest mistakes one has made in their ministry. That, for me, is easy. The biggest mistake I've made – I made right here, at Heritage Church, probably during the first few weeks I was your minister, but continuing on for practically the entire first year I was here. I came on too strong. I tried to change too many things, too fast. I didn't allow time for relationships to develop. And ministry is, first and foremost, about relationships...

Another thing I've learned is to not take the reflection too seriously. Others will do a fine job of that for me.

There was a time, early on, when I planned out each sermon, in great detail, for weeks before writing it. Then I revised it, over and over, trying to get it just right. More often than not, the result was a wooden and ineffective presentation. Now I'm lucky if I start writing it on Friday, and many weeks – as I did last night – I don't finish until well after midnight on Saturday!

The other day, Patrick glanced at the shelf full of binders in my home office that say on them, "Past Sermons," and asked me how many sermons I had written. I told him I guessed a couple hundred.

Yes, I've learned that you don't have to write a Pulitzer prize winner, or even a UUA Sermon Contest winner – every week. You don't even have to write one of those in your entire career. Mostly, you just have to be there, with people – be there, for people – and do your best. For although sometimes, as the Dear Abby letter would indicate, it seems that church members want their minister to be all things, to all people – really, all they want is for you to be yourself, and do your best.

I have come to agree with Rev. Judith Walker-Riggs, who once said in an address at General Assembly honoring those who had completed 25 years in the ministry, "I don't care if you want to concentrate on social justice, or

teaching, or counseling – if you lose sight of the glory of this universe, and the wonder of the people who surround you, you are lost. I don't care if you are an institution-builder, a prophet, or a healer – if you're not helping people find their visions, and [discover] the power and the glory and the wonder [deep inside] themselves, you have forgotten why you are here.”

May I always remember why I am here...

There's so much more that I'd like to say to you, this morning, but if there's one thing I've learned in ten years of ministry, it's that people get grumpy when the service goes on too long – especially when they can smell food waiting in the Fellowship Hall!

So let me close by simply saying how grateful I am that you have given me the chance to live out this calling, here, for a time, with you. Let it be a dance we do.

Through the good times, and the bad times too – let it be a dance.

Amen.