

Give 'Em The Old Razzle Dazzle

The Rev. Gary E. Smith

A Sermon for the Service of Living Tradition

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At the risk of blasphemy, I will say that this little acre of property upon which we meet this morning was made sacred for me nearly half a century ago. I grew up two hundred miles north of here, in central Maine, and through the miracle of a transistor radio, and an earphone, and the cover of darkness sometime after lights out, the old Boston Garden came alive, the "Gah-den", a magnificent structure that stood just south of here on Causeway Street until its demolition some years ago. In the nights of my boyhood, Johnny Most introduced me to Bill Russell and Bob Cousy and the parquet floor of the Boston Celtics. On other nights, I listened to the Bruins games and the Chief, Johnny Bucyk, as he slid up and down the ice, crashing into the boards, bloody for fighting for the puck. "The Bruins goal is to your right on the radio," this voice would tell me, and it was as if I was there, as if I was here.

Later, the names were Larry Bird and Kevin McHale, Bobby Orr, Phil Esposito, and Ray Bourque, all names that hung from the rafters of the Garden, that hang now from the rafters here at the Fleet Center, memories for New Englanders, all of them, a place of heroes and champions, boyhood idols. I became Cousy in my driveway, shooting foul shot after foul shot, with the NBA final on the line, depending on first this shot and then that. This acre of land was the big city, it was the place of the Ringling Brothers, Barnum and Bailey Circus; it was the place of the Ice Follies; it was not Maine, it was a world beyond, it was me and my mother and father, me and my two older brothers. If I say this is sacred ground to me, you will understand my sentimentality.

And who would have imagined I would return today in a black clergy robe, here in the midst of my colleagues whom I love so much, here on a floor of memories, here among thousands of Unitarian Universalists, sojourners with me in my adopted faith, as we pause in the business of our General Assembly to take notice, to remember, to recognize, and to give thanks. These words are addressed to my colleagues in ministry, those entering into this amazing profession, those who have earned something called retirement, those of blessed memory, these are words for you, and for all my colleagues spread throughout the hall, with my own staggering and humble realization that a few other people will be eavesdropping.

From the moment I was invited to preach here this morning and learning the setting in which I would speak, I have known what I want to do next. What will happen now is meant to be high symbolism. It is meant to be a moment of tribute to you, my colleagues past, present and future. We are committed to a profession in which we serve in so many invisible ways, in our communities as chaplains and social workers, in our work with children, in our parish ministry with congregations across this land, in our day-to-day struggles to try to get ministry right, say this word and not that word, make peace here,

hold our peace, put the pieces back together, please some of the people some of the time, say the word "God" enough but not too much, laugh at the jokes about ministers working only on Sundays, shop at supermarkets out of town so your parishioners won't discover you buy really big bags of chips, and, in this past year, struggling with an economy that has squeezed the living day light out of the institutional budgets that support our ministries, and of an insane world in which we've had to scream, "Hey! I'm a patriot, too!!"

O Karma, Dharma, pudding and pie,
gimme a break before I die:
grant me wisdom, will, & wit,
purity, probity, pluck & grit.
Trustworthy, loyal, helpful, kind,
gimme great abs & a steel-trap mind,
and forgive, Ye Gods, some humble advice -
these little blessings would suffice
to beget an earthly paradise:
make the bad people good -
and the good people nice;
and before our world goes over the brink,
teach the believers how to think.

And so, my colleagues, here on the floor and in the seats all around, even in the cheap seats up high, on behalf of the heroic work you do, and of the champions you are, along with the names of Orr and Esposito, Bucyk and Bourque, Russell and Cousy, Bird and McHale, we now raise to the rafters your name, your uniform, your number, this, a symbol of your ministry, and we thank you.

[Pulpit robe raised. Audience reaction follows.]

And now back to reality and some straight talk. Whatever glory there is, we know this, is fleeting, pun intended. Here is what I know about my own ministry: there are Sundays when I walk into the pulpit in Concord and I look out at the congregation, and I think to myself, "What am I doing here? If these people, whom I know and I love so much, only knew how inadequate I feel, how inadequate I AM, would everything come tumbling down?" "Give 'em the old razzle dazzle," I can hear Billy Flynn sing in the musical Chicago, and there are days it could be me singing. "Give 'em the old double whammy. Daze and dizzy 'em, show 'em the first rate sorcerer you are. Long as you can keep 'em way off balance, how can they spot you got no talents? Razzle dazzle 'em. Razzle dazzle 'em."

And then Jack Mendelsohn's words come back. "Ministers," he wrote, "sit with the happy and the sad in a chaotic pattern of laugh, cry, laugh, cry - and know deep down that the first time their laughter is false or their tears are make-believe, their days as real ministers are over." We will leave the Fleet Center in a bit, and tomorrow or the next day we will go back to our ministries, in parishes, in offices, in hospitals, in classrooms, on the street, at a bed side, in a clinic, on a campus, in the pulpit, at a conference center, in a meeting

room, in a meeting room, in a meeting room. And most of us have never and will never be the big heroes, the big champions; we will never receive \$90 million for a Nike minister's shoe contract. We know, deep down, that all our words, all our music, all our prayers, all our advice and encouragement, our laughter and tears, they're ephemeral; they pass almost as soon as they're spoken and sung.

But what remains? This is what I have come to know. This is what a celebration of the living tradition of ministry points toward. This is what ultimately matters in our struggle not just to be a minister, but also to DO ministry. How will we guide and inspire and comfort and forgive and challenge and love one another and those we are called to serve? It probably will not happen in any of the big moments, like standing in the middle of the Fleet Center in Boston, Massachusetts, on a late June morning and receiving the recognition of our colleagues and of our lay partners in this faith. This is what I have come to know: that any measure of our success in ministry has come or will come not by raising our eyes to the rafters of champions, but by lowering them into the eyes of those we serve. The measure of this our ministry will not be in any great lightening bolts or in our saying something so brilliant that we will be hoisted onto shoulders and carried around the room [although, come to think of it, that might be nice].

- The measure of our ministry will perhaps be when we dedicate a child and give it a kiss, and, for the look on that baby's face in that moment, and for the look on your face, for that matter, and for the whole scene, in the light of a Sunday morning, you will find yourself in the presence of something holy.
- The measure of our ministry will perhaps be when we are able to come running in the middle of everything to hold someone's hand when their loved one is dying, and we take hands around the bed and find somewhere within us the words of a prayer that we will never remember and we will never forget.
- The measure of our ministry will perhaps be when at the end of one more wonderful Coming of Age ceremony and all those fifteen-year-olds stand before us, their faces aglow, the words of Gibran echoing around them - "They are the sons and daughters of life's longing for itself. They come through you but not from you." - we know that place from which our call came to be a Minister of Religious Education.
- The measure of our ministry will perhaps be when we say one word at the beginning of a sermon and another word at the end, and back there in that pew, though that person may have gone somewhere else again between the two words, they draw some connection between the two, and they know their life will change from the moment they step outside these doors, and it has been because we found the right two words, and it has been because they came here that day ready to listen.
- The measure of our ministry will perhaps be when, in the words of Daniel Berrigan, we see one homeless man, "and the look on his face when bread finally arrives... For that look on his face," Berrigan says, "and for your hands meeting his across [that] piece of bread, you might be willing to lose a lot..."
- The measure of our ministry will perhaps be when we have found we have opened a way to the divine for our youngest children, when you have told a story about

sharing and generosity and an open heart, and an e-mail comes that evening from a mother who tells you that her young son has that afternoon proudly shared a loaf of home-baked bread with guests, the boy referencing your story as he slices that bread, and it is bread that the mother had rather thought was set aside for her own family later.

"It comes and goes quickly," writes the poet James Autry, "so you have to pay attention, a change in the eyes when you ask about the family, a pain flickering behind [the words that are said...] In every [place], you [can] hear the threads of love and joy and fear and guilt, the cries for celebration and reassurance, and somehow you know that connecting those threads is what you are supposed to do and business takes care of itself."

We are about connecting threads, you and I, we ministers are about the ordinary and everyday, we are about the unspoken and silent things. If we are lucky, if we are aware, if we allow ourselves to be taken by the lapels and shaken into recognition, we can pause in the middle of the everyday and count out all these small blessings of ministry, take them for the bread and water and sustenance they are, and feed on them, and wake up tomorrow and do the same all over again. This Service of Living Tradition is one grand parade of ministry, from those here this morning with the flicker of a call within them, the "what if?" that pounds in their hearts, and then here come the aspirants and the candidates and the newly ordained and those who literally paraded today, those first fellowshipped as ministers and those with tenure, and all our colleagues who surround us, doing ministry, faithfully, persistently, doggedly serving "the coalition of the willing."

What a parade, and now here come those completing full-time service, thanks be to you, our mentors, our inspiration, our models, and now, in just a moment, we will hear the names of those who have passed into blessed and beloved memory, the remembered and the forgotten, the famous and the little recognized. Ministry is our calling, it is our life work, it is our procession, it is our living tradition. And out there, beyond time present, beyond all the pageantry, the trumpet fanfares, and the drum rolls, there will always be the simple and ordinary moments that will transform and transcend and make holy, ministry now and again and again and again. I thank you all for this faith and for this profession we share.

The Rev. Gary E. Smith has been the Senior Minister at the First Parish in Concord, Massachusetts. Born and raised in Maine, Rev. Smith graduated from the University of Maine and the Divinity School at Vanderbilt University. Now thirty-one years in the ministry, he served churches in Middletown, Connecticut, and Bangor, Maine, before working on the UUA staff for three years. Rev. Smith also served as President of the UU Ministers Association from 1998 to 2001.