

"JUST HANG OUT AND BE RELIGIOUS"
MINISTER AS PERSON
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A funny thing happened on the way to the title of this year's Gould Discourse. Somewhere between my computer and the St. Lawrence Lines computer there developed a virus that changed my original title "Just Hang Out and Be Religious" to "Just Hand Out and Be Religious."

The change intrigued me. Are discourses simply hand-outs from preachers who know to parishioners who do not? Are ministers the chief agents of charity, standing on the street corners of life handing out spiritual dole? Or should I just hand out the text of this lecture for you to read later so we can all go out and party now? After being seriously tempted, I have resorted to my original title: "Just Hang Out and Be Religious: Minister as Person."

My title comes from last June's Unitarian Universalist General Assembly in Milwaukee. There was spirited discussion of new definitions for our denominational leadership. It was suggested we really need two leaders - a chief executive officer for administration and a spiritual leader - a kind of high priest to the denomination. At one point someone asked the provocative question: "What would such a spiritual leader do?" A youth delegate rose to the occasion and said: "Just hang out and be religious."

Beneath the humor is something far more profound. What is the task of the minister - what is he or she to do or be? I can do no better than repeat the words of the youth delegate: "Just hang out and be religious." Hence, my subtitle, "Minister as Person." When all is said and done, when all the sermons have been preached, when all the seminars have been taught, when all the rites of passage have been administered, when all the social witness is but a memory, it remains true, as Emerson said: "What you are thunders so loudly, I cannot hear what you say."¹

We ministers are in trouble already. After all, most of us are just ordinary, garden variety human beings, not necessarily better or worse than anyone else. There may be a few demi-gods in our ministry, but I have not met them. If you have, let every Search Committee in the District know immediately. On second thought, don't. Getting a call is hard enough for mortal ministers as it is.

As you may have noticed, ministers walk with feet of clay across the clean carpets of our congregations, leaving their footprints behind. What is an acceptable size for clay feet? How much frailty can we accept? Clearly, we have not yet answered that question.

History is instructive here. Flawed prophets are the rule, not the exception. Moses was a murderer; David was an adulterer; Jesus lost his cool and tipped over tables in the temple.

¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson,

The Donatist controversy in the 4th century of the Common Era raised the question as to whether sacraments given by priests who had sinned were valid. Bishop Donatus said no; priests must be exemplary in their conduct for the sacraments to be effectual. The Synod at Arles in 314 CE disagreed - the validity of baptism and ordination was not dependent on the moral merit of the administrator. There must have been a collective sigh of relief.

There have been more than a few notorious Popes down through the ages - more trouble in the holy orders. But Roman Catholics had no monopoly on imperfect saints. Martin Luther had a pornographic bent. John Calvin was something of a tyrant.

Even our secular heroes and heroines walked under a tarnished halo. Thomas Jefferson fathered children by one of his slaves. Emma Goldman had a series of sexual relationships that would make modern-day feminists blanch. Franklin Delano Roosevelt had a longtime liaison with a woman who was with him the day he died. John F. Kennedy wandered from his conjugal bed.

The famed 19th century preacher Henry Ward Beecher was involved in a sexual scandal. More recently, several contemporary Elmer Ganttrys of TV evangelist fame have fallen from grace on some moral peccadillo or another, ranging from sexual dalliance to fleecing the flock, while at play in the fields of the Lord.

In the last two years even the redoubtable Martin Luther King, Jr. has been subjected to character critique. Ironically, one of his central messages was that black people should be judged not by color of skin but by content of character. Now King has been apotheosized into a demigod. He looms larger than life over us. It is a mark of maturity that we can subject him to criticism.

His strategies for non-violent change in several campaigns that backfired have come under criticism. King himself was a sober, self-critical man. In a 1964 interview in, of all places, Playboy Magazine, he recounts "The Mistakes I Made."² But these were errors of judgment, not flaws of character. Recent allegations have focused not on political mistakes, but on ethical behavior.

Ralph Abernathy, King's lieutenant in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, in his book *And the Walls Came Tumbling Down*, described King's last night in the company of three women, whom Abernathy implied had sexual relations with King. Abernathy's allegation, King's reputation as a "lady's man," the revelations of FBI tapes - all suggest King may have been no "paragon of domestic virtue."³ One can pass off Abernathy's account as the product of bitter resentment at not having been accepted as

² Martin Luther King, Jr., "The Mistakes I Made," *Playboy Magazine*, 1964.

³ Peter Marin, "On the Humanity of Saints," *The Nation*, December 25, 1989, 784.

King's natural successor in the civil rights movement. We may take Abernathy at his word, that he wrote to remind us Martin was a man. Or we can simply leave him alone and move on to more important matters.

As if this were not enough to disabuse us of the vision of a superhuman King, last year another question was raised about his basic integrity. While doing research in connection with the King Papers Project, Stanford University professor Clayborne Carson, an admirer, discovered King had committed plagiarism in his doctoral dissertation and other writings from 1948-1955. He had copied long sections from another dissertation without attribution. As Carson put it: "Martin Luther King Jr. was a great man, but a careless scholar."⁴

While we can rationalize away his alleged promiscuity by the pressure he was under, and while we may explain his plagiarism by reminding ourselves he was a busy pastor as well as national leader, this hardly justifies his behavior intellectually or morally. We are forced to admit flaws in this prophet of the human spirit.

Nonetheless, David Rankin puts it well:

"I met him in 1962 - in Mount Vernon, Iowa.

He was not a good planner: two hours late for the appointment and unaware of the location.

He was not a commanding presence: short in stature and ungainly in movement.

He was not a handsome figure: slightly overweight and clothes too small for the body.

He was not a congenial person: impatient in conversation and never fully present.

He was not a great speaker: words lost in the nose and ill-timed gestures.

He was not a creative individual: ideas borrowed from others and frequent repetition.

He was not a happy character: wide mournful eyes and lips not made for smiling.

But if God appeared anywhere in the 20th century - it was in the form of Martin Luther King, Jr."⁵

It has been suggested that history's major figures "go through a cycle: first, they are eulogized as demigods, then some historical iconoclast ridicules their importance and exposes their human failings, and finally a more balanced historical view raises them up again to their true stature."⁶

What are we to do with this information, with this painful case study of King? We are not prophets of his stature, of course. Still, do we allow our ministers to be imperfect even as we are imperfect? Are we disillusioned to the point of despair because we find they walk beneath a halo both tilted and tarnished, even as do those they presume to edify in the spiritual and ethical life?

⁴ Clayborne Carson,

⁵ David O. Rankin, *Portraits from the Cross* (Boston: UUA, 19).

⁶ Louis R. Harlan, quoted in "Mythmaking Has Stunted the Progress of King's Movement," *Washington Post National Weekly Edition*, September 24-30, 1990, 36.

In his essay "On the Humanity of Saints" Peter Marin asks: "Would we denounce the theory of gravity or evolution if we discovered that Newton or Darwin were libertines? The power of moral truths inheres in "them" or, at the very least, in the complex relationship between truth and those who seek it, or think they've found it."⁷

He goes on to chide liberals for their vain dream to be better than others, a desperate need to be superior or more pure than our adversaries, a preoccupation with a "moral hygiene" and a "need for a feeling of virtue."⁸

Marin contends the correctness of one's moral or political position (and might we add, religious?) is no guarantee of personal moral rectitude. He concludes: "Why should that disturb us? I don't know. Indeed, the commingling of good and evil is, in some ways, the most miraculous thing about human nature."⁹ And I've little doubt that (King) would think that losing a hero or a perfect martyr is a small price to pay for regaining the privilege of living with truth and human complexity."¹⁰

We are all more human than otherwise. Each of us is a bundle of contradictions, inconsistencies, and dubious ethical behaviors. Alexander Solszynitzen reminds us that "The line of good and evil runs not between the good and the evil, but through the heart of each person."¹¹

Learning that our folk-heroes share finitude with us can but encourage us to meet the ambiguities of existence with the same soul-searching, the same commitment to life as did they. Martin Luther King is all the more powerful as a "flawed prophet," because we know he was human, like us, that some approximation of what he was, we can be.

As church historian Martin Marty writes: "Had there been tape recorders through the ages, there might have been no saints on the calendar. Now, let us move on."¹² Indeed, we need to move on.

We need to remind ourselves and teach our children that role models are not perfect human beings. We need to remind ourselves that character grows out of the warp and woof of real life - fought out in the trenches of human experience. We should not be deceived by those who would replace character with personality, courage with celebrity, substance with style.

Before we do move on, however, we need to remember that, in the words of the Zen parable: "If you meet the Buddha on the road kill him (or her)." This is a Buddhist way of saying it is fruitless to expect someone else to provide meaning and direction for our

⁷ Ibid., Peter Marin, 784.

⁸ Ibid., Marin, 785.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 786.

¹¹ Source unknown.

¹² Martin Marty, "Martin Luther King's Inner Spiritual Church," *The Christian Century*, January 21, 1987, 43.

existence. It is dangerous to place our faith in others to formulate values by which to live. It is irresponsible to expect some guru of the spirit to absolve us of the responsibility of making hard decisions.

In our movement this plays out in a peculiarly ecclesiastical "cult of personality." Unitarian Universalists, being blessed with an absence of creed, dogma, rigid church hierarchies, as well as with an abysmal ignorance of and indifference to their religious tradition, are especially prone to this disease. Too often the church develops its character based on the personality of its minister - who may be a fine preacher, community activist, expert counselor or whatever.

We ministers, never immune to ego-tripping, are secretly pleased when someone says "this is Jane Roe or John Doe's church," when the Jane Roe or John Doe is us. It means we have placed our personal stamp on a religious community, and to an extent, that is natural and normal. But it can also become a perilous journey of pride, fraught with institutional danger. When Jane Roe or John Doe is finally found out to be flawed (as everyone eventually is), there is disillusion. It also means that when Jane Roe or John Doe leaves, the successor may find a church that has no religious identity beyond being the personal extension of the predecessor's personality.

The moral of this little story is that while ministers in our movement inevitably will make a powerful imprint on local congregations, the congregation needs to institutionalize their joint inspirations and develop a character that is enriched by, but not dependent on, any single minister.

We need to remember another thing. Every minister ministers with the proverbial tarnished halo that is rakishly atilt. That should come as no surprise to either ministers or congregations. The Reverend Venerable is also The Irreverent Vulnerable. Ernst Becker helps us at this point with these words:

"Love draws one out, breaks down barriers, places the human relationship on more mutual terms; in a word, takes it somewhat 'out of the control of the armored person.' It takes strength to love, simply because it takes strength to stand exposed without armor, open to the needs of others."¹³

It is good to be reminded that, as Ralph Waldo Emerson, another of our flawed prophets, put it: "Everything God made has a crack in it."¹⁴

That is why when I "charged" our congregation recently on the installation of a new Minister of Religious Education, I asked what it meant to "charge" a congregation? The answer to my query was not immediately apparent when I consulted the Random House Dictionary of the English Language, 1967 edition:

¹³ Ernst Becker, *Angel in Armor*.

¹⁴ Source unknown.

"To fill or furnish a thing with the quantity, as of powder or fuel, that it is fitted to receive;

- to charge a musket;
- rocketry - grains of a solid propellant usually including an inhibitor;
- to supply with a quantity of electricity;
- to suffuse, as with emotion: the air was charged with excitement;
- to load or burden the mind or heart: her mind was charged with weighty matters;
- to instruct authoritatively, as a judge does a jury;"

At last I came to definition # 30: ecclesiastical - aha! "a congregation committed to the spiritual care of a pastor."

I found this definition most provocative: a congregation committed to the spiritual care of a pastor. But what does this mean? Who is caring for whom? Clearly, the verb is ambiguous. Most often it is assumed the minister's task is that of spiritually caring for the flock - the metaphor of minister as shepherd.

But may not the opposite also be true? Is it not possible that a congregation should be charged with the spiritual care of their minister? Is it not possible that the minister, despite the tender ministrations of the Independent Study Program, the meticulous scrutiny of the Fellowship Committee, and the authoritative call from on high, may need some spiritual nurture of his or her own? And who to provide such care, if not the congregation? After all, it has been said that "saints are simply sinners, revised and edited."

When ministers are charged with responsibility for the spiritual nurture of the congregation, congregations should be charged as well, to the mutual ministry. Today I am eloquent in the pulpit and brilliant in the church school, and you are spiritually intoxicated with my wisdom; next week I stumble and bumble through my uncertainty and need your forgiveness. Today I am a great rock of comfort in a weary land; tomorrow I am blown about as the sands of the desert and I need the oasis of your strength. Today I dazzle you with my perspicacity; tomorrow I forget our appointment.

Blessed are they who minister and blessed are they who are ministered unto. Blessed be the task of the minister. Blessed be the task of the congregation - for ultimately they are one and the same.

Our relationship in religious community as clergy and laity is the antithesis of that described by Southern Baptist leader W.A. Criswell: "A laity-led, layman-led, deacon-led church will be a weak church anywhere on God's earth. The pastor is the ruler of the church. There is no other thing than that in the Bible."¹⁵

But ministers cannot quite escape the weight of the burdens of ministry. Fair or not, healthy or not, we expect ministers to be human beings without peer. In an age which

¹⁵ W.A. Criswell, quoted in *The Christian Century*, April 9, 1986, 347.

celebrates specialized techniques, the minister presumably is one who demonstrates that "Life is just a chance to grow a soul."¹⁶

In researching this lecture I came upon my own statement on the liberal ministry as required for fellowshiping. It was written in 1961 when your speaker's hair was rather red and bristled in a near-military brush cut. I was inspired by an experience as a college sophomore occupying the pulpit of the Canton Universalist Church with a congregation of professors and their kin. I told Ruth MacLean, the very wise wife of Dean Angus MacLean, that I was terrified of preaching to so academic a crowd. She assured me they were all very human and I could speak from my experience without fear. And I did. And they listened. And here I am. This is an unexpurgated excerpt from my 30-year-old essay on the ministry:

"The liberal minister is both priest and prophet, but primarily he (sic) is person. He leads in the celebration of the value experiences of life. He is the compassionate center of a redemptive community. He is the prophet who drops a plumb line over his community and nation and judges them by his own highest standards. But mainly he is a person who leads his church and community in an untiring quest for the good life."

There, minus the sexism and presumption, is my theme - just hang out and be religious. By "hanging out" I emphatically do not mean "hanging out" at the mall. I do mean what I think Woody Allen meant when he said: "Eighty per-cent of life is showing up." The essential task of ministry is to be there in love and justice.

We ministers must have a center; we cannot be all periphery. We probably save more souls by working first on our own. We are undoubtedly more persuasive when, instead of saying "thou shalt" or "thou shalt not," we say "behold."

Kurt Vonnegut says ministers are the "canaries in the coal mines of life."¹⁷ We are supposed to be out there on the frontiers of human living, probing the edges of human experience, scouting out the troubles that lie ahead. That is dangerous work, for unlike the canaries, whose death is a signal of trouble, we are supposed to come back alive from the coal mines Sunday after Sunday and give warning of the danger and encouragement for the adventure ahead.

Our task has not much changed over the years. Chaucer put it this way in *The Canterbury Tales*: "O yes, the love of Christ he taught, but first he followed it himself."¹⁸ Emerson said in the *Divinity School Address*: "the capital secret of the minister's profession is to convert life into truth."¹⁹

¹⁶ A. Powell Davies, source unknown.

¹⁷ Source unknown.

¹⁸ Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*,

¹⁹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Divinity School Address," *Three Prophets of Religious Liberalism*, edited by Conrad Wright.

The 19th century French writer Henri F. Amiel wrote that: "Every life is a profession of faith, and exercises an inevitable and silent propaganda. As far as lies in its power, it tends to transform the universe and humanity into its own image. Every (one's) conduct is an unspoken sermon that is forever preaching to others."²⁰

In his "Masque of Reason" Robert Frost writes of an encounter between Job and God centuries after their confrontation in the Hebrew scriptures. Job is still uncertain why he was chosen to be made the model of a righteous man who had to endure suffering not of his deserving. Job says to God: "'Twas a great demonstration if You say so though I sometimes wonder why it had to be at my expense." God replies: "It had to be at somebody's expense. Society can never think things out: It has to see them acted out by actors, devoted actors at a sacrifice - the ablest actors I can lay my hands on."²¹

Thus we are bound to incessantly practice what Mark Twain called "the annoyance of a good example."²²

I thus conclude the central task of ministry is to "just hang out and be religious." Ministry is the one profession in which one is paid for the simple task of being human. That is hellishly hard work. We who choose so hazardous and presumptuous a calling do so at our peril, but it is a peril, which after thirty years, still seems to me well worth pursuing.

²⁰ Henri F. Amiel, *Amiel's Journal*, (1852), 24.

²¹ Robert Frost, "Masque of Reason," *Complete Poems of Robert Frost*. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), p. 596.

²² Source unknown.