

Sarah Skochko:

Thank you to Manish and to Nancy for this really incredible opportunity. It was such an honor to participate in this book, in particular, the collaborative way we all work together. And I also need to thank my thought partner in writing this essay, Teresa Youngblood, who's a religious educator in a red state, and though not ordained a true minister, a true minister and devoted servant of our faith. Without her input and editing and collaboration and ideas, I don't think this chapter would have come out the way it did. So I'm forever grateful to Teresa.

My pronouns are she and her. I am a 40-year-old white woman with glasses sitting at home. Most of my chapter talks about the parallels between my bartending career and my ministry career. I always say my first ministry was at the bar, and I loved bartending, and I love parish ministry also. I love serving people and talking to them, hearing their stories and ministering. But in the bar, the good that I could do for my customers was largely constrained by the system of working for tips. At every job I ever worked at, I was routinely exploited or abused or, at the very least, constrained to pay more attention to the people who had more money. That is if I wanted to pay my rent and live.

And in the chapter I talk about stories like a man crying at my bar because he thought he had killed his own mother because he hadn't taken her to the hospital. And on that day, I was financially secure enough that I could stand there and hold his hand while he cried. And when other customers came in and yelled, "Hey, we need some service," I said, "You need to wait." But far more often were the times that I could not carry out that kind of ministry, a heart-centered, person-focused ministry, because I had to placate the people who were paying me, either customers or managers. And it did not fill me with pride.

And I thought going to the ministry that I would have more freedom and more agency to choose a better path, a path of greater integrity. But as I talk about in the second half of my chapter, the road to the pledge drive is paved in eggshells. And ministers are too often constrained by the whims of the biggest donors in the congregation. And for especially those of us religious professionals with marginalized identities, we are the hired help. And we are regularly reminded of that, that we are paid for a service and if we do not provide it, we can be excused at any time.

So I'll read an excerpt now. "The idea that I, a bartender, had inherent value, even when I smelled like stale, cheap beer transformed my life. There might be sin, but there were no sinners. I'd always assumed that if there were surely I, of all people, would be counted among them, a sinner. But I began to suspect that the gospel I heard at our UU churches was often a partial and carefully edited gospel. It wasn't for me, not entirely. It included me, but someone else's interests were considered first. It took me years to figure it out. The gospel could be proclaimed only as long as it exonerated the wealthiest people in our pews.

We could talk about oppression as long as nobody at church was the oppressor. Our message could be radical as long as it wasn't any of us who needed to radically change. The revolution we hoped for would transform other people." And this is from the end of my chapter. "And so I too, have found myself preaching a partial gospel. Though I swore I never would. I have preached carefully hoping not to make anybody in the pews feel accused of their actual sins while wondering where will they hear about it, if not at church, and were still by bother having a church at all.

Once a wealthy congregant told me that the poor didn't feel like working and that getting evicted would teach their tenants a valuable lesson. I myself had lost housing, had sat for hours in the bleak confines of a welfare office, to petition for \$40 in food stamps, and I said nothing. It wasn't my place, but maybe it should have been, but I couldn't be both a religious leader and the hired help. Our churches are selling indulgences. It's a cycle that Unitarian Universalism has become trapped in, one of the greatest obstacles to the future and integrity of our faith.

When members contribute large pledges and expect in exchange that the minister will affirm their self-centered theology, will affirm that the voice of God sounds just like their own. Will affirm that nothing they do is wrong. It's not so different from going to the bar and expecting the staff to treat them like kings

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no matter how condescendingly they behave. It's an illusion they have paid a service worker to maintain. Theologically, the implications are grim for everyone. An oft-overlooked aspect of systems of oppression is that the people who do bad things are just as trapped as those they victimize

I'm reminded of the Taras Shevchenko poem in which the ghost of a man who has been executed returns to haunt his executioner, declaring that we are forever tied together by those heavy chains. Even God himself cannot undo the bonds that the executioner has forged between them. I want to be very clear here that for the privileged salvation is not deliverance from oppression as it was for me when I first came to church. No, salvation for the oppressor is absolution for having participated in it." And I will pause here. Thank you again.