

**TRY NOT TO LOSE TOO MANY**

Gould Discourse

May, 1997

Marcel P. Duhamel, Minister  
Unitarian Universalist Congregation  
Binghamton, New York

## Try Not To Lose Too Many

I begin by acknowledging that it is a privilege for me to be standing here before you this evening. I'm grateful to all of you for being here and I am truly honored that a panel of my colleagues would honor me by asking me to be this year's Gould Discoursant. My friend Martha Munson set such a standard last year that I have frankly been more than a little intimidated whenever I thought of preparing for tonight. I beg an indulgence of all of you. Hear my words and take from them whatever you will but do not compare them to preceding Gould discourses you have heard.

Whenever I give any thought to ministry as a calling--and I sometimes surprise myself at how often I do this--I am reminded of the probably apocryphal story of the minister being feted on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of his ordination. This kindly soul was known to his parishioners and colleagues as the quintessential minister; he had a warm never caustic sense of humor, a rich melodious voice in the pulpit, his sermons were always powerful and moving, he was gentle and wise in his pastoral encounters, his administrative skills were the envy of all and he lived gently upon the earth. Former interns always said that what they aspired to most in ministry was to be more like him.

He was asked what the secret was to his great success. He scratched his chin thoughtfully and reflectively and said that if he had been successful in ministry--and he added that that was probably difficult to measure--but if he had been successful, it was because he had never been out of touch with "being called to ministry" and the banner. "The banner?" said his inquisitor. "Could you say a bit more about that?"

"Well you see," answered our paragon, "when I began in ministry I motivated myself by visualizing a huge banner imprinted with the words 'Save the World'. After just a few months in ministry, I continued to visualize my banner, but the words had been edited to 'Save as Many as you Can.' And for the last forty nine years of my ministry my inspirational banner has read, 'Try Not to Lose too Many.' Try not to lose too many is probably good advice.

Ministry is different from any other way of life--I don't like to call it a "profession" but that may be my eccentricity. But medicine and law are probably unlike any other ways of life too. I know that education is unique too. For the first twenty years of my professional

life I was a high school teacher in a public school in Massachusetts. It was great fun, and like ministry much more often rewarding than not. Oh there were moments--but there are moments in ministry too. You needn't take my word for it. Just ask any of my colleagues. For many different reasons, I decided early in my teaching career that I would spend twenty years in public education and then do something else. As the twenty year mark began to loom on the horizon my lifemate and spouse and I had several conversations about what I might do next. Life as a professional fly fisherman appealed to me, but Carolanne showed no enthusiasm for that as a career move. I considered being a professional bicycle racer, but was deterred by the fact that I didn't have nearly as much talent as the world's elite racers and I was already past my fortieth birthday so when Carolanne said "get real" to that proposal, I had to admit that she was right.

When I said to Carolanne that I thought I might be able to become a minister she responded once again with "get real." When she realized that this time I was being serious, she backed off a bit and said, "isn't there anything else that you might be able to do?" You see my wife is the pragmatist in our family. Isn't there anything else that I might be able to do? I've thought of that question a few times in the past several years. I can't think of the question in the abstract but I do think of it in relationship to the church I am presently serving and the honest answer is a thoughtful "no". I cannot really conceive of myself doing anything else with my life than serving a Unitarian Universalist congregation. I suppose that means that I know myself to be called to ministry.

Hebrew and Christian Scriptures have quite a bit to say on the subject of "calling." Abraham had regular tête-à-têtes with the God of Genesis. Moses came face to face with a talking burning bush. Isaiah got a personal invitation. Paul was struck blind on the road to Damascus. None of this has ever happened to me. Moreover, I'm glad of it.

I do not have a direct and private line to the divine. Frankly, I don't want one. My telephone bill is already astronomical. When constructs of "either or" must be made, I am a theistic man. I do believe in God, not that God should give a tinker's hoot about that one way or another. But my God is not the God of the Hebrew or Christian Scriptures. If then, I'm not called by the God of our fathers and mothers, who's that knock knocking on my door?

Unitarian Universalism is different from all other expressions of faith. It is a communion that is unique unto itself and it is probably true that the majority of UU's do not think of themselves as being Protestants. But historically, we are undeniably deeply indebted to the Reformation and both Unitarianism and Universalism were once the radical left wing of Protestantism. That's history and that's simple fact. To deny that is to be guilty of reconstructionism. I think most UU's could affirm and embrace Martin Luther's thesis of the "priesthood of all believers" and it was our own Unitarian Universalist theologian, James Luther Adams, who wrote of the "prophethood of all believers."

And so our ministry in our faith of choice is a shared endeavor. Life itself calls us all to ministry. Some of us are fortunate enough to be able to devote our full time energies to the enterprise that is our religious movement and even make it our livelihood; others do something else most of the time but it is whatever work we do in relationship with one another that yields whatever results ripen and bear fruit in our congregations, in our Districts and in our international movement.

I shudder whenever I hear a colleague say things like: "I increased average Sunday attendance by 100%." or "I raised the average pledge by 60%." or "I built a new sanctuary." Or any other arrogant and self-aggrandizing bit of poppycock. Alone, an ordained minister is just as impotent as anyone else. I want to add that I have never heard any of the colleagues in this District say anything like this.

We are all called to ministry. I repeat the question: "called by whom or what?" Unitarian Universalists seem to have a somewhat ambivalent relationship with the divine. We all chuckle knowingly when we hear the philosopher Santayana say: "There is no God...and the virgin Mary is his mother."

Many of us are made uncomfortable by liturgy and ritual. The liturgy and well-known words of a church service can come to have deep, comforting meaning to those who participate in them. On the other hand, they can become meaningless and distorted when we lose touch with the why we perform them.

Three small children had a pet sparrow, which, alas, died. The children were very sad, and they decided to give the dead bird a

really good burial service. Their families were faithful members of the church, so the children had some idea of how to go about it.

The first step was to dig the grave in a carefully chosen spot in the yard. Then they solemnly prepared for the actual internment. One child held the sparrow over the grave, and another recited, "In the name of the Father, and the Son, and in the hole he goes."

In their innocence, the kids missed something. I remember during my last year of seminary I had the opportunity to work as chaplain of the Doolittle Home, a UU retirement home in Foxboro, Massachusetts. Isn't that a wonderful name for a retirement home? The Doolittle Home. Most of the residents were elderly Universalists and much more biblically oriented than I was. Among my duties was to conduct a brief worship service on Thursday mornings. I was shown the usual order of service. I was a bit startled to discover that every week the service included either the Lord's prayer or the 23rd Psalm. I decided that I would educate my new congregation a bit and I substituted other spoken meditations or responsive readings for the two elements that spoke little to me.

One elderly resident, in her wisdom, took it upon herself to educate me. She said: "Marcel, let me explain to you why we so much like the Lord's prayer and the 23rd psalm. Most of us have failing eyesight and when you give us the printed order of service with unfamiliar words we simply can't read them. But we all of us know the Lord's prayer and the 23rd psalm by heart so we can actively participate in the service when you include them. Kate taught me that ministry is service to people where they are. It is not the role of the minister to transform people in our own image. The Buddha teaches that we are all already perfect, just as we are. We need only awaken to that reality.

One of my own fervent beliefs about religion is this: Unless it helps us make a better world right now, we'd better look for other forces. I agree with William Penn who wrote: "True Godliness does not turn men (and women) out of the world but enables them to live better in it and excites their endeavors to mend it. Note the verb *excites*. The world is an exciting place and our religion must help us be attuned to that excitement.

Our ministry is an exercise in mutuality. The universe, Life herself, calls us to service. We do it together or we engage in futility and frustration.

One of the most appealing bits of Hebrew Scripture is found in the Book of Isaiah, chapter 6, verse 8, when the prophet's sins are purged by an angel and then the Lord is heard saying, "Whom shall I send, and who shall go for us?" and Isaiah responds, "I, here am I; send me."

If you listen to your heart song sooner or later you will hear a voice saying, "whom shall I send?" Never answer: "Here am I; send Gertrude or send Ralph."

When Life calls, answer, "here am I; send me."

And try to not lose too many.