

After Running Through the Thistles the Hard Part Begins

The 180th Berry Street Lecture

by the Rev. Dr. Mark D. Morrison-Reed

with responses by Leon Hopper and Marge (Margaret) Keip

The baptismal font was older than the building. It had accompanied the First Unitarian Society of Chicago when the congregation moved south to Hyde Park. The years had dulled the white marble. At age four I stood next to that font waiting with anticipation. Beside me was my brother. We were wearing matching plaid sports jackets. Behind us our baby sister squirmed in Dad's arms. The minister, Leslie Pennington, had white hair, wore a black robe and when he said, "Name this child," both of my parents said, "Mark Douglas Reed." The minister reached into the font. Then as he touched my forehead with a drop of water he repeated my name. I felt he was sort of like God. At age eight I started crossing Chicago's southside on Wednesday afternoons by myself in order to attend choir practice under the wild gaze of Christopher Moore. On Sundays, however, I raced down hallways, played tag, and hated graham crackers. When I was 11 years old, Jim Hobart, who was studying at Meadville Lombard Theological School, was my Sunday School teacher. He describes me as "a tall, thin 6th grader, serious, quiet but not shy, who didn't have a lot to say but did make good contributions." By age 17 I was a high school senior and President of the local LRY (Liberal Religious Youth), and at age 19 I was already back home from college. I'd flunked out, returned to Chicago, found a job, and was recruited to teach Sunday School. The kindergarten class thought I was great - particularly a bi-racial, developmentally challenged child named Dickey. He hung on me. Their appreciation and affection were triage for my broken ego, and so began the healing process. Returning to Chicago at age 25, a vagabond entering Meadville/Lombard, I discovered the congregation was excited about my decision to enter the ministry. My marriage and ordination, my mother's and sister's memorial services were all held within that living community. As the Christmas Candlelight and the Flower Communion services marked the cycle of the year, these rites of passage marked the cycle that is my life.

Nevertheless something I only barely remember left the strongest imprint. It happened slowly, growing incrementally week after week, year in and year out. Each time a teacher smiled or took me seriously, when our choir processed in scarlet robes, an emotion grew - the feeling of being at home in that place, among those people. Trust grew and with it my faith. Now my very being expects life to be this way, so much so that fifty-one years later it is difficult for me to imagine living apart from religious community.

I am at home among these people in this liberal religious movement. It is a place where I was nurtured, and because I was nurtured I grew; having grown, I could give, and having given I grew more. It is a place where struggling, I could fail; where failing, I was still loved, where loved, I could begin again. It is a place where in pain I could go; where, having gone, I was cared for; where cared for, I could heal and go on. That is why I am a

minister, to help sustain religious communities - places like the one in which I grew up, places made holy by what people experience within them - the seasons of their lives and the healing of their souls.

The power of community is enormous and I have lived my entire life in its embrace. It is why I entered the ministry. I believe the liberal church is worth devoting a life to -- my life, in fact.

My years as a congregant did not prepare me, however, for a cruel irony. Ministry, as most of you have discovered I am sure, is a source of unrequited grief. I regret having not read the fine print. If I had, perhaps I would have made another choice. But the print was very small, the phrasing paradoxical, while I was young and eager. This is what it said:

*You will love your parishioners with all your heart but never befriend them.
You will pour out your lifeblood for the community but never settle there.
You shall die to the congregation so that the ministry might live.*

Let us look at these three:

You Will Love Your Parishioners With All Your Heart But Never Befriend Them.

When Donna and I returned from a sabbatical in the Fall of 1998 calamity struck. Immersion in death changed my understanding of ministry. Four women, all in their forties, each a mother, had cancer; among them was my sister, Carole. These were strong, powerful women. Rosemarie stopped trying to end child poverty in Canada and threw herself into music and art. Suzanne, another social action friendship, stopped promoting a national dialogue on social policy, drew her friends near, focused on her teenage children's future and began talking to me about the experience of dying, the nature of God and the meaning of life. My sister, an insurance company vice president, worried about everyone else -- especially her three-year-old daughter -- and covered her despair with gallows humour. Chris, a church member and social worker, organised a memory book for her six-year-old and placed an altar by her bed. The challenge for me through all this was to be fully present -- fully in those precious moments. Open to dialogue without pushing it, often I simply sat and waited and watched the rise and fall of each breath. I gave up the urge to fix and assuage, held in abeyance the need to grieve, and stilled my thoughts and feelings so I could be fully there. Because that was all there was to do -- be there.

In a pensive moment following a bout of tears it came to me that being present is what it takes to love a congregation. We do ministry knowing that someday the relationship will end. The challenge is to be there despite this. For unless we can be fully there in authentic relationship with its members we can go through the motions of ministry but we can't really minister. We can't hold back because the power is in our relatedness to one another, and yet we must hold back or risk conflating the professional with the personal. To minister is to wrestle with this dilemma.

The relationship of minister and parishioner has the qualities of a friendship, but no matter how warm and deep, authentic and reciprocal the relationship is it is not a sustainable friendship. Why? Because it is built upon an unavoidable imbalance -- the minister is always more responsible for the relationship. When necessary we must be prepared to forsake the role of friend for that of minister, and ready to choose the well being of the community over the needs of the friend. We are not as free to share all aspects of our lives and ourselves. Nor can we make friends with whom we please, for that would create two classes of parishioners -- the chosen and the not. Finally, when our ministries come to an end so must the relationships, lest we take up space the next ministry needs if it is to take root.

You Will Pour Out Your Lifeblood For The Community But Never Settle There.

Ministry takes enormous courage or romantic obliviousness to the repercussions of giving one's soul to the church. Mary Oliver's poem "In Blackwater Woods" describes what is required: "To live in this world you must be able to do three things: to love what is mortal, to hold it against your bones knowing your own life depends on it, and, when the time comes to let it go, to let it go." [Cries of the Spirit, edited by Marilyn Sewell, Beacon Press, 1991, p 129] We love what is mortal. For each individual ministry is mortal. It has its life span -- a beginning and an end. Knowing this we still invest our essence in the community. We treat it not as a job but as our lives. Then "when the time comes to let it go" we have to let it go. This is the way it must be. Forrest Church writes: "The fact that death is inevitable gives meaning to our love, for the more we love the more we risk losing. Love's power comes, in part, from the courage required to give ourselves to that which is not ours to keep: our spouses, children, parents, dear and cherished friends, [and congregations]..." It takes courage to throw off caution and enter fully into life. The risk of loss is not just great; it is certain. Therefore, it takes courage for us to wholly engage in the life of the community knowing that what awaits us at the end of our ministry is grief. A grief made deep by comforting familiarity, conflicts weathered, and dreams once shared. You will pour out your lifeblood for the community but never settle there. 'Why not?' you ask.

You Shall Die To The Congregation So That The Ministry Might Live.

"Running Through the Thistles: terminating a ministerial relationship with a parish" is an essay written by Alban Institute consultant Roy Oswald. When in 1988 the time came for Donna and me to leave our first congregation, the First Universalist Church of Rochester, N.Y., it was recommended to us. I assume many of you have read it too. Roy recounts that when he was a young boy "growing up in rural Saskatchewan" the quickest way home from school "was over the fields." "It was shorter ... but occasionally we would come upon enormous thistle patches." ["Running Through the Thistles: terminating a ministerial relationship with a parish," Roy M. Oswald, The Alban Institute, 1978, p.2] He and his older brothers either had to walk around or find the narrowest gap and sprint across. He writes: "I can still vividly remember the experience: running full speed in bare feet across 20 feet of prickly thistles yelping in pain all the way through." At the end there were always a few thistles stuck in his feet, but the ordeal was over. This, Oswald

claims, is how many of us manage our departure from a congregation. We deal with our farewells by steeling ourselves, then plunging in. We know it is going to hurt so we rush full tilt ahead hoping to get it over with. The quickest burst of speed I've seen was a colleague who announced his resignation on the way out the door to GA, and had left both his congregation and his fiancée by the end of June.

Donna and I read Oswald and did our best to fulfill the five tasks he outlined: "Take control of the situation," "Get your affairs in order," "Let go of old grudges," "Say thank you," and "Be honest about why you are leaving." Donna and I developed an exit plan. First, we were open about why we were going to Toronto. Our sermons talked about separation and grief; we reviewed our successes and named our disappointments. We called upon several members who had become estranged. We listened a lot. We said thank you over and over. After seven months and many tears they seemed weary of leave-taking and quite ready for us to go. And when we left we left. Well, we left town at least. Leaving emotionally proved more difficult. We maintained contact with two couples. One had been our surrogate parents -- Bill and Eleanor. The other was a friend of mine I'd introduced to his future wife who was a church member. We also exchanged Christmas cards with those -- mostly senior members -- who wrote to us. That was a mistake -- a misguided courtesy. Most often it was just that, a courtesy. But then a long revealing letter would arrive, or a note from someone I knew had ceased attending, or a wistful comment about us from someone who was keeping the new minister at arm's length. In those moments I cringed, for I knew we were intruding upon our successor's ministry.

Two and half years after we left Al French, a church member we'd known well, died and Beth Banks, who followed us at First Universalist, invited me to deliver the eulogy. We both thought Donna and I had been away long enough. We were wrong. I knew it as soon as I began interacting with the older members -- I was the minister and Beth the interloper. Twelve years in ministry and I was just beginning to really understand that ministry was not about *my* relationship to the members but rather *theirs* to one another. Nor should it be the answer to *my* yearning to live in community because at the end of the day they will stay and I will leave. Only then did I begin to grasp this reality -- ultimately I must die to the congregation so that the ministry might live. When several years later our surrogate father, Bill, died we consulted Beth and decided not to attend. It meant grieving in private, a double loss -- of Bill and of community.

Truthfulness about this fate is something we need to hold up to one another at the beginning of each new ministry. Leaning over the pulpit during the installation of Marcel Duhamel at Binghamton, N.Y., my friend Andy Backus wagged his finger and said, "Marcel, you are not in charge here. This is not your church. And you are not indispensable... You can and will be replaced." [Charge to the Minister delivered by Rev. Andrew C. Backus on the occasion of the installation of the Rev. Marcel Duhamel to the ministry of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Binghamton, New York, November 19, 1989] Given the chance, when Andy was installed in Schenectady, Marcel returned the admonition. We are not indispensable, and each of us will be replaced. That is the reality,

and when we don't understand this we do irreparable harm. Did you hear what I just said? Do you understand?

In the face of the inevitable death of our own ministries we go about our business of building relationships in the context of religious community. This includes preparing for your departure from the very beginning. Mark Belletini does this by occasionally saying to his parishioners "When I am gone." The point is to keep asking yourself: 'What do I need to do today to help the next ministry succeed?' A critical moment for the next ministry comes at the end of your own, the point at which Roy Oswald encourages us to model effective closure. He writes:

"[It] involves being able to live deeply into the human side of death --; the death of relationships --; the death of roles and functions and responsibilities --; the death of that special relationship a pastor has with a parish. At times we may discover ourselves having more difficulty letting go of the role we play than the people themselves... Dying to the parish involves dying to our role with people, as well. Our failure to die to this role with congregational members gets us involved in pastoral acts with them long after we've left. Our hanging onto these roles is our bid for immortality. We allow ourselves to be indispensable with people, insuring our ability to live forever in their lives." [Ibid. p.11]

One of the hard blessings of ministry is being invited into the lives of those who are dying. Over and over again we are given the opportunity to learn how to die, and then when we leave a congregation we get to practice. And still we find it difficult to say farewell. We stay involved long after we've left. They call; if not, we do. Correspondence goes back and forth. We even vacation with ex-parishioners. The stories are legion. One new minister found he had to call the minister who had been there before his immediate predecessor to really find out what was going on in his congregation. How many of us have boxed a colleague into a no-win situation because, when faced with a call to officiate from an ex-parishioner, we said: "I'd be happy to do it if the settled minister says it's okay." Then our colleague can't really say "No" which is what we should have replied in the beginning. Or, after a very long ministry the minister emeritus and his wife stay in town and remain active in the congregation, studiously oblivious to a continuous series of problems caused by his passive presence. "Who me?" We find it difficult to let go and as a result, we unintentionally undermine the ministry.

Why do we hang-on? First, despite having made religious community the center of our lives, we live isolated lives. Second, we are confused about the power vested in the ministerial role. Third, having become attached to the congregations we serve, we seek to avoid the pain of letting go.

Let's consider these:

Ministerial Isolation

First, despite making religious community the center of our lives, ministers live in isolation. During the second week in June of last year a protracted conversation on the UU Ministers of Canada Chatline caught my attention. Its title was "isolation," its tone anguish. I lurked, but many others made testimonies. One wrote: "I did know ministry would be lonely. [But only later did] it dawned on me how much I was going to miss having a church community for myself." Another lamented: "[There is] absolutely nowhere I can go where I don't run into somebody who is seeing me through some kind of filter." And the most poignant comment of all: "I find the isolation of ministry to be excruciating." One participant, however, didn't get it. She couldn't see why one should not reach out to members of one's congregation and queried: "Why, oh why, would any of us not allow this mutual ministry?"

"Mutual ministry" is what our congregations are about. Good ministry empowers people. Ours is "the priesthood of all believers" which, as James Luther Adams writes, "implies that every member of the church has the obligation to share the work of reconciliation and healing." [James Luther Adams, *Voluntary Associations*, edited by Ron Engel, p.259] Clergy are included within its embrace.

After my sister died cards arrived and comfort was offered. Tears, of course, were shed, yet Sunday morning was not a time for the abyss, neither were meetings or classes. When I did go into the depth it was with Donna or my running partner, colleagues or a support group unrelated to the church. Intermittently, through the fog within, I noticed that the congregation's anxiety climbed in response to my emotional absence. Mutuality has a limit; sharing one's grief is good modeling, but being incapacitated goes beyond the implicit deal made between congregation and minister: We are called to serve, not to be served. No matter how caring the relationship; its essential nature can't be overcome. As Andy Backus elaborated in his charge to Marcel: "Never can this be your church. Never will these people be your family -- because you are here by dint of what you do, not who you are... Ministry, I am afraid, is often being alone among all those people." This abiding sense of isolation is not what we bargained for when we entered the ministry; it is a most bitter discovery. Rather than face the pain we linger upon the fringe of a community that can't be our own, and hold on to pastor-parishioner relationships that can't be true friendships.

Ministerial Power and Radical Laicism

Second, we are confused about the power vested in the ministerial role. Sometimes we even deny its reality. When I was a child I knew my minister, Leslie Pennington, had something to do with God. His deep resonant voice sounded the way I imagined God's did. I held him in awe. In my mind he still looms large, although I'm told he was no taller than me. I draw two points from this observation: The power of the ministry is in the eye and the expectations of the beholder. Entitlement is given to us whether we want it or not.

However, today what people see and expect has changed. I can't substantiate this but I suspect that in the 1950's ministerial authority was not challenged and distrusted the way it is today. Ministry, propelled by activism and me-ism into the cultural cauldron of the 60's and 70's with its anti-authoritarianism and, among UUs, anti-clericalism, with its t-groups, openness and emotiveness, became more relational. At its worst this gave license to an 'I'm just one of the gang so let's jump in the sack' attitude. At its best it nurtured a less pulpit-bound and more accessible ministry. There was a removal of barriers, and simultaneously a blurring of boundaries.

I can't help but wonder to what degree James Luther Adams's reclamation of "radical laicism" as a central UU value further obfuscated the distinctions. Coming out of his experience of the church in Nazi Germany, and with the American churches tacit support of racism, his insistence that prophetic power "belongs not merely to the clergy: It belongs to the congregation and the individuals in the congregation" was an important corrective. [James Luther Adams, *The Prophethood of All Believers*, edited by George K. Beach, 1986, p. 59] JLA said, "the test for clergy is of our capacity to elicit radical laicism." I have no argument with his proclamation of the "prophethood and priesthood of all believers," however, the consequence is a flattening of the congregational landscape that makes it more difficult to differentiate between laity and clergy. This religious egalitarianism invites us to underestimate the influence, responsibility and authority infused in the ministerial role. After all, if we are just peers why shouldn't we continue our relationships with parishioners beyond the end of our ministries?

The Pain of Letting Go

Finally, having become attached to the congregations we serve, we are unwilling to embrace the pain of ending the relationship. We don't want to let go because we've poured our lifeblood into the congregation, our lives and love are entwined in the fabric of the institution. We believe deeply in religious community, but the one we love most can't be ours. Overwhelmed with church work, we take little time to develop a network of friends outside the congregation - another set of relationships in which one is not "the minister." In time we even lose the skill of being 'friend' instead of 'parson.' Friendless, our sense of isolation grows. And even if we have a life external to the church we yearn to be in community with other Unitarian Universalists. We are communal creatures adrift without a community of our own. This is a harsh realization. We don't let go of our congregation because it seems there is nothing to grab hold of -- a free fall after which religious homelessness awaits.

It is a Faustian bargain we've struck. We receive all the perks of ministry -- a life full of meaning, invitations into the most intimate moments of people's lives, the righteous glow of justice work and immortality through the institution's survival. The cost? At the end you must quit the community in which you have invested your life. Quit it. Leave it. Let it go. Trust that it will survive without you and you without it. Rather than face religious homelessness, what do we do? We lurk around the edges of the community, maintain ersatz friendships, and hope to be just an ordinary member of the congregation upon retirement, except maybe to officiate now and then when asked. Rather than say, 'I

relinquish my covenant with you,' and ask that the congregation do the same, we hang on. And thus, do harm.

We find it difficult to say 'good bye' to our congregations and to our role as minister because we mistake this vocation for our essential selves. When our innate sense of our inherent worth and dignity flags, it is this role that helps bolster self-esteem. Ask yourself for a moment, 'Who am I if not a minister?' Without this identity I'd feel lost, adrift, afraid. 'What happens if I let the "ministerial" facet of my life die?' I'm not convinced I'd know how to stop. How would I act? How would I relate? Would I feel empty inside? What would it mean to stop being a minister? We must let go -- youth passes, our children leave home, relationships and dreams end, we die, yet most often until that final moment arrives we act as if ministry is synonymous with life.

I discovered a poem by Elder Olson in *Great Occasions* when I was searching for a reading as my sister was dying. I put a copy in my wallet. Later I mailed it to Suzanne as her illness progressed and later still I read it to Chris.

Nothing is lost; the universe is honest,
Time, like the sea, gives all back in the end,
But only in its own way, on its own conditions:
Empires as grains of sand, forests as coal,
Mountains as pebbles. Be still, be still, I say;
You were never the water, only a wave;
Not substance, but a form substance assumed.

[Elder Olson -- *Great Occasions*, edited by Carl Seaburg, Beacon Press, 1968, p. 388]

This image comforted me when my sister was dying. It spoke to me about the nature of life. I could see her life and my own rising, as does a wave, cresting and then subsiding once again into the sea. Now I've come to see ministry in this way. We are not the ministry of a church, but a form ministry assumes.

The image of "running through the thistles" is catchy. We can see ourselves yelping and hollering as we sprint through leave-taking -- accepting a little pain but avoiding the hard and prolonged work grief requires. Oswald coaches us through the process of leave-taking, doesn't address how to bear the heartache. Having counseled others through loss we know what this requires. The human urge is to avoid the grief, but the reality is "that the way out is the way through." The way through is the hard way of mindfully accepting the pain rather than avoiding or stoic enduring it.

The image of waves seems more apt -- waves upon the ocean. I can see us rolling along, one following the next. There have always been priests and priestesses interpreting the mysteries of life; there will always be a need for those who can illuminate the human condition. As we rise above the ocean and into consciousness of ourselves and of life, it sometimes seems as if we are alone. We have been set apart, but we are not alone; we are embodiments of the Unitarian Universalist tradition. There are moments when we know

this. It comes to us during the Service of the Living Tradition when, in the reading of the names from that past and the future, history is compressed. Yet "[y]ou were never the water, only a wave; not substance, but a form substance assumed." You were never the tradition, only a voice through which it spoke and loved.

Still I want to know how to crest and then let go of my life -- the foaming surf, of what I had been, running up the beach and then receding into the ocean, into unconsciousness, submerged once again in the Divine Mystery. The pounding surge of the ocean is so relentless we know the end to life and ministry will certainly come whether we accept it or not. If we had a way of envisioning this task of ministerial leave-taking that portrayed it as a choice, an act of volition, might it not make what is difficult easier?

I suggest the image of the Phoenix serve us as a model for leave-taking. "Legend has it that when it saw death draw near, it would make a nest of sweet-smelling wood and resins, which it would expose to the full force of the sun's rays, until it burnt itself to ashes in the flame. Another Phoenix would then rise from the marrow of its bones." [The Dictionary of Symbols, J.E. Cirlot, 1962, p.253] This approximates Oswald's five tasks of leave-taking. Upon seeing "death draw near" intentionality and mindfulness can inform us as we put all in order. There is celebration and thanksgiving in our leave-taking as we surround ourselves with "sweet smelling woods and resins." In the full sunlight of truth we explore what our years together meant. A purifying flame consumes the "old grudges" and us. How appropriate for a faith whose central symbol is the flaming chalice. Then, finally and appropriately, the next ministry rises out of "the marrow of [our] bones," for it arises from the distillation of our essence -- our deeds and dreams and love for those with whom we have striven to build the beloved community.

Where does this leave us as minister? In order to live in religious community we must die to the ministry. I say this in hope -- a hope more romantic than realistic. For I'm not sure it's possible. There is no ritual that will unordain us. I don't even know if I can stop. And I'm not sure others will let me. Still I hold this hope in my heart. Someday, when I'm done ministering -- not done being caring, human and present -- but rather done with bearing the primary responsibility for a religious community, I'll take off my stole, hang it around my colleague's neck and say, as Bob Doss did when he retired from Wilmington, "It's all yours buddy." Then I will shed my beloved, worn pulpit gown handed down to me by the daughter of the Reverend Frank Edwin Smith, and with the robe my role.

Someday I'll minister no more. Someday I'll deepen the spiritual life I never quite make enough time for now. Someday I'll say 'no' even though I've known the bride since I named her as an infant. Someday I'll sit in a memorial service and weep tears unchecked by the necessity of having to rise to deliver the eulogy. Someday, somewhere, I'll add my voice to the choir and sleep through the sermon if it bores me. Someday I'll come early to set up my Sunday School class project and smile when the rascals charge down the corridor playing tag.

Response by Leon Hopper

Mark, I commend you for drawing our attention to the painful tension and paradox deep at the heart of parish ministry: that while our lives are devoted to the creation and sustaining of religious community we can never be fully a part of it and must in time separate from it. It is not surprising that there would be angst in the letting-go / separating from / leaving behind what we have devoted a life time to fashion and create.

Mark, your evocation to ministry encouraged by sustaining experiences from your religious community echo my own. Religious community has been central to my life and being thus it should not be surprising that your essay sent my mind into high gear piercing both memory and conscience.

But, before I go further three essential acknowledgments:

- we have and do exchange Christmas cards and letters with former congregants (some on our "list" for over 45 years)
- I have conducted memorial services in each of the congregations I had served after my departure
- we do live in the community of my last ministry, attend church and participate (within limits) in church life.

However, having acknowledged what has happened in my life I quickly add my practices do not invalidate your admonition or insight that letting go of what we have sought to create and live for is painfully difficult and necessary.

I want to lift-up for attention a few issues for emphasis and response. I do so in the awareness that church and ministry are multi-layered experiences and engagements. The relationships we, and our parishioners have with us, signally and in community are much too complex to even attempt to offer a single answer or direction -- overarching principles are needed to guide us.

You write: (the ministerial) "Relationship must end...lest (we) take up space the next ministry needs." "You shall die to the congregation so that the ministry might live." Yes...but.. the relationship does not "end" even when one dies. Long after Leslie Pennington died the ministerial relationship with you continued "...he was sort of like God." The reality is that memories, experiences, words, work, values, a sense of presence do not (does not) die (noted in the closing poem) they live on and on and on -- good, bad and mundane.

Even though we have gone, let go, died to our presence, we are yet a continuing presence. I know by vivid experience that the lives of my predecessors had seeped into the very fabric of the church and the lives of the people just because they had lived and worked in the church. They were a presence without any form of contact.

The critical question to be asked with regularity is: "will our presence be helpful or disruptive in the future of this church?" You point us in this direction when he realized that "I was beginning to understand that the ministry was not about me -- Nor should it be an answer to *my* yearnings to live in community..." "What do I need to do today to ensure that the next ministry will succeed?" (The ministry is not about me, not about my needs.) Thus the need is to work to try to point beyond self to the vision of the church, the community. Each of us will be replaced. We must understand this (not just in words, thoughts in the head) but by our every action and deed and in the present.

An aspect you did not address, but is essential, is an understanding of our relationship with the settled minister in the congregation we have served. Ministry with a congregation is derived from a covenant -- congregation and minister upon installation publicly define this covenant of relationship. When we leave, retire, from a congregation that covenant/relationship is severed. It no longer exists. From that moment forward the covenant that holds me is between the new minister and me. A new relationship (I did not choose) will now hold me. When we are not clear that our relationship is with our successor and not the congregation then confusion and trauma can be a consequence.

This is the paradoxical bargain I didn't know that I took on when the call to the ministry and the creation of religious community echoed in my soul.

Two quick additional comments worthy of much longer response. First, the observation regarding the "flattening" of the congregational landscape making it difficult to differentiate between laity and clergy (I am not so certain that this is just the heritage of JLA.). Many of us, clergy and laity, are very fond of the terms like "co-ministry" and "shared ministry." If this be so, what are the particular roles and responsibilities of "the minister." So the question you ask "...if we are just peers why shouldn't we continue our relationships with parishioners beyond the end of our ministries?" is worthy of careful consideration.

Earlier in your essay you noted that minister/parishioner friendship is built upon an unavoidable imbalance. It is true, it is impossible to be "just an ordinary member of the congregation." There are many aspects to my being -- father, husband, friend, hiker, but within the walls of the church (any church) -- wherever I go -- the attributed role of minister cloaks me like an ethereal cape -- the perception is pervasive -- real and ever present. Like you, Mark I did not know the bargain I was striking when I entered the ministry, but at some point I discovered that I could not be "just another member" and continue to do/be an effective minister. Because --

An additional issue not adequately dealt with is how to be of help to a congregation and its members to deal with the grief they have when their minister retires/leaves. As noted in a recent article in the Alban Institute *Congregations* "even when the clergy 'get it,' most of our folks just do not."

Building relationships of care, creating communities capable for working for justice and equity is the imperative of ministry. Clearly and cleanly letting go when the time comes is too. Yes, it is much more difficult, and sometimes with no help or support.

Thank you Mark for your work, guidance and model.

Response by Marge (Margaret) Keip
(recreated from her notes)

Namaste, Mark. ... I was moved to tears by your words, deeply moved by the contrast between the terrible need to die to our congregations so that ministry may live and your ending image of freely adding our voices to the choir even while sometimes nodding off during the sermon in that most seductive of opportunities to rest on a Sunday morning.

Deep in my heart I truly believe -- *want* to believe -- that your concluding vision is possible. I yearn for some new old-Greek word to name such a way of being. It's so true what you describe: that ministry is the practice of authentic relationship; that our power resides in our relatedness; that ministry happens in being present to another without holding back. Such open-hearted presence offers more than some of our people have ever known in their lives of friendship and love.

It is also true that this relationship must always, for us, be unequal; that in our clergy role, we always bears a larger responsibility. We may be self-revelatory; but must never burden this with emotional demands, nor ever attach any strings of neediness.

Perhaps what you and I are stretching for is something akin to good parenting, with its great gift of loving freedom -- expressed so well in a line from a poet as "letting go of children that need to be free." (Merrit Malloy, "Epitaph") This gift, this letting go, might be our benediction. -- So that you or I may then return, rather like a fond grandparent, to celebrate the new building dedication; or safely connect as emeritus and thrill to see them bountiful and beautiful and thriving. (If we are growing out of date and grin a bit daftly, no matter.)

Fred and I continue struggling to do this well with Monterey. The effort does not cease. With every interim I leave behind someone yearning for enduring friendship that I cannot sustain.

We -- the big collective clergy WE of us -- have not yet mastered how to do this, how to navigate such leaving. And a hunk of our UUMA Guidelines have been written from all the mistakes we make.

Nor is it just us. Problems with "dearly departed" clergy are endemic across denominations, and a prime cause of congregational conflict. At the first-ever Interim Ministry Network training for UU colleagues in our accredited interim program this spring, our training team (one leader from the Disciples of Christ, the other an Evangelical Lutheran) brought us a case study from hell. And it was matched by an immediate example shared by one of our own.

From the lives of interim ministers, I know this: to the extent that you and I bungle and screw this up, we generate conflicts for someone else to solve, and create case studies for someone else's training.

But a different vision beckons. It glows in Mark's conclusion. And it shines in lines from Robert Frost's poem, "Wild Grapes" (which Fred and I read in our farewell service at Monterey and I recall now when leaving each interim) -- lines that sing of how we must to learn to let go with the hands -- but may never, ever need to learn to let go with the heart.