

## PEELS, VISIONARIES AND DANCERS

This is my single sermon squarely on the nature of Unitarian Universalist ministry, so I hope it gives you some useful context as you welcome your settled minister, David Miller. I will be speaking, on the whole, in general terms, because I don't want to constrain either you or David.

Well, for starters, some Unitarian Universalist ministers wear robes, some don't. Some pray, others meditate. Some preach sermons, others give addresses. Some do closing words, others offer benedictions. Some will preach from here and others will plant the pulpit a few feet away from the seats.

Some have partners who are active in the local congregation; others will arrive alone or have partners who are quite busy outside the parish. Some ministers love the rich traditions of Judaism and Christianity; others emphasize the heritage of skepticism, choosing a vacant altar over the idolatry and tribalism that often haunts the old symbols. Some are pagans and others are theists, and multiple hybrids thereof.

Some love the Buddha or Lao Tzu, Esther or Mohammed, and there are others who will prefer Shakespeare or Emma Goldman, Isaiah or Annie Dillard over any of the religious greats. Or others will draw equally from all sources of savvy, the universe over.

Some ministers are great listeners and so-so administrators; some are good organizers and some are good scholars, some rare ones are both. Some are terrific at small talk, others quite awkward. Some, believe it or not, are bona fide introverts given to bursts of extroversion, especially on Sunday mornings.

Whatever type of minister David Miller will be, he's charged to love you most of the time, respect and enjoy you as often as possible, but not always please you. Those congregants who aren't pleased, will make your adjustments, and, if you're devoted San Dieguitans, you'll likely settle in to a state of peaceful co-existence. Still other committed Unitarian Universalists, for one reason or another, will pull back from the new regime, or even withdraw. There's nothing sinister about *any* of these responses; they just happen.

I offer all this, so you'll realize that, although your vote was an astounding 98% (good for you!), you're not going to be forging a perfect ministerial match at San Dieguito in the seasons ahead; a solid one will suffice. So, for goodness' sake, don't aim for perfection; rather go for a sufficiently fine match, that will enable both pulpit and pew to grow in wisdom and compassion and enable San Dieguito to make sizable strides toward evolving the kind of beloved community in North County of which you can be roundly proud. I'll go out on a limb: you have the potential to become a 500 member flagship congregation.

Whatever quirks and eccentricities your first settled male minister may exude, know this my friends: ministers don't make Fellowships, neither do congregants; ministers *and* parishioners working creatively together grow healthy congregations.

Moreover, every good minister will need to become some version of a banana peel, a visionary, and a dance partner, all three. Let me explain.

First, you can expect David Miller to be an effective catalyst or banana peel. That means that good ministers will sneak up on people, trip them and knock their heads and hearts against reality—sometimes painful and sometimes comforting reality. These

collisions can happen in worship, in meetings, in a hospital or at a party, during a crisis or engaged in a shared project, or simply on the fly.

Slip–whop! And a new insight about self emerges. Slip–whop! And renewed commitment to a family or cause or an article of faith develops. Slip–whop! And the courage to face dying occurs. Not all at once, mind you, but every banana peel collision launches a powerful religious process. You see, good ministers create conditions wherein transformative collisions happen. Good ministers aren't simply friendly and nice, but will challenge your conscience and stretch your soul. So, you'll want your settled minister to be a banana peel. Don't settle for less.

In addition to being banana peels, you'll want, David Miller, as your called religious professional to be a visionary. Not just a person who can see ahead but someone who will **forge** ahead. Prophets are people who have hunches about where beauty and justice lie, and, more importantly have the courage to travel there, and even coax, sometimes goad, others to join the search.

If banana peel ministers help people confront reality, what *is*...then a visionary minister enables laity to embody hope, what might yet *become*. Such ministers will pull you out of ruts, spring you beyond mediocrity toward excellence.

A good minister will keep you on purpose, ever moving forward...reminding you that you're lovable and capable, reminding you of your innate power and worth, alerting you to the fact that *your* spirit is resilient and renewable. Because whenever your imagination or courage grow faint, you could use a spiritual nudge to launch you toward the fullness of your being. I think that's why ministers exist: to nudge, goad, and stretch their fellow pilgrims!

Unitarian Ralph Waldo Emerson once wrote:

*Faith and love are apt to be spasmodic in the best of minds. We live on the brink of mysteries and harmonies into which we never enter, and with our hands on the door-latch we die outside.*

Well, my friends, good ministers are visionaries, and as such willing to keep San Dieguito's noble and particular vision alive. Good ministers refuse to allow laity to fall into the trap of being known as the almost people. San Dieguito almost touched beauty? San Dieguito almost cared about one another? San Dieguito almost served North County? San Dieguito almost grew children of character?

Rather, at his best, David will urge fellow San Dieguitans to burst in upon those mysteries and harmonies, to take the risk, to make the move, to open the door, to create a beloved community that will dare to change, for the better, lives inside and outside this amphitheater.

The third quality is one which requires inordinate teamwork.

Perhaps the profoundest approximation of religion is symbolized by the dance. Dance as in gamboling with other creatures, ideas, Divine Mystery—dancing as well with moments of deep pain and insistent promise. Never forget that religion, before it was spoken, was danced. And our Unitarian Universalist religion is incorrigibly relational, first and last, an interdependent web that yearns to be danced up-close and personal.

For as Anne Morrow Lindbergh wrote: “we are dancers, free, barely touching as we pass, but partners in the same pattern.”

Dearly Beloved San Dieguitans, soon, in fact within a matter of months, you will launch your covenant with David Arthur Miller; you will formalize your *troth*: that old fashioned phrase of incomparable beauty and substance. You will pledge your troth

(literally a blend of truthfulness *and* trust...and yes, we humans can't do any better than that). You will pledge your troth to serve souls right here in Solana Beach and beyond—for better, for worse, for as long as your dance is mutually empowering.

Many summers ago, Carolyn and I obtained this gorgeous and evocative bronze sculpture, created by Northern California artist-friend, Robert Holmes, entitled *The Dancers*.

We fell in love with *The Dancers* because it's a striking, visual dialogue between two creations, at once both cool and precise, warm and humane, spiritual as well as sensual. In its semi-abstract form this sculpture reminds us that religious life bridges the practical and the visionary.

I display it this morning to remind fellow Unitarian Universalist partisans of some fundamental religious wisdom.

For starters, *The Dancers* reminds us not to fuss and feud, as our Fellowships are prone to do, about who's leading or following in the ministerial dance. For in healthy congregations, we're all summoned straightway into the dance, we're all spiritually equipped to master the twin arts of leadership and followership. In the final analysis, what matters is the dance, what matters is that the gambol known as shared ministry swirls on in creative circles of compassion and delight.

So I invite all of us, but especially the members and friends of this special 50-year-old outpost of liberal religion, to ponder today how you will choose to dance most joyously and justly with David Miller as your new partner in the days ahead? Your current dance is already mutually gratifying, good for you, good for me, good for us—but, I assure you, you'll need to update your choreography, lest you're lulled into one

comfortable cadence or step. Your ministerial dance must be ongoingly shaped afresh, for new occasions teach new duties as our hymn implores.

This sculpture would also remind us of the tension, the pull, the stretch necessary in any empowered ministry or imaginative dance. For as poet Marge Piercy notes: “loving leaves stretch marks.”

Note the dancers are neither clinging to one another nor bounding unfettered. They’re neither leaning upon nor propped up by the other. Rather they stand tall, separate, with clasped hands, swaying and stretched. The strength of each dancer is visibly flowing into the other.

Yes, you will be dance partners with your new colleague–dancers free, barely touching as you pass, but partners in the same pattern.

*The Dancers* further recall that partnered ministry, at its finest, rarely freezes but remains fluid...keeps gamboling. This sculpture exudes movement; so should this singular Fellowship exude movement as your dance leaps ever-forward. After all, Unitarian Universalism–both theologically and operationally–is a movement. We’re a religion in flux, perpetual motion. *Semper reformanda*, “ever reforming and being reformed” has been our central mantra since the 16<sup>th</sup> century in Transylvania. Revelation for us is never sealed. Nothing is fixed or settled; everything matters. Our dance bops on and on and on and on...

Furthermore, *The Dancers* declare that life is fun, bathed in mirth and graced with zaniness. The religious quest is not to be waged as drab toil or a bitter struggle but to be embodied as a sporting proposition, an interplay of opposites, a cosmic dance...with

everyone lured from the sidelines squarely onto the dance floor, shifting with each and every dance: be it a jitter-bug, reel, waltz, or rock-and-roll.

And with its openness between the figures, we're prompted that life's empty spaces are as shapely and crucial as our intertwining bonds. "Let there be spaces in our togetherness, and let the winds of heaven dance between us. Love one another but make not a bondage of love," offers the Lebanese poet, Kahlil Gibran. Pulpit and pew can grow close but must ever refrain from cloying or being clingy.

And there's more truth whenever congregants and clergy choose to boogie together: namely, whenever we're cut off from another's touch and grip, we'll tumble and crash to the ground; yet with the light, firm hold of fellow faithful fools we're enabled to dance adventurously and gracefully into the unknown.

Finally, *The Dancers*, with its outstretched arms, remind San Dieguito stakeholders to welcome strangers into your communal dance. Dare to move beyond cozy and clannish parties. For healthy and hospitable congregations reach out with open arms to the newcomer...that their dance might be more varied, more inclusive, more wondrous than ever before. Widening your circle dance is a particularly relevant stretch for such a tight-knit band as yours. Yes, for your parish dance to flourish long and lovingly into seasons beyond counting, you must always welcome one more frolicker, and then another, then another.

And so, when the dancing days of any ministerial match come to a close, yours included, we Unitarian Universalists can gladly surrender our dance into the arms of new partners...confident that we will continue to be held in the embrace of the Eternal One.

But I'm not quite done, after sharing three images of shared ministry: banana peel, visionary, and dancers. Allow me some final words about what your professional minister, David Miller, might need from you. After 42 years, you can well imagine that I've mustered some working hunches.

Your new minister will need you to help him face things when you see fear or regret in his eyes. And I charge you San Dieguitans to care enough to confront David whenever he has unnerved or ignored you.

And when he fouls things up, which ministers are wont to do sometimes, maybe even smudges the institution of San Dieguito you cherish in common, your called companion will need your understanding and forgiveness.

Ministers need congregants to love and enjoy us, whenever that's possible, but through thick and thin, at all times, we ministers need you to respect us. And, well, if respect isn't possible, then don't fake it...simply wait for the moment when respect might be reborn.

And, friends, in an oft-dreary, lonely world David Miller will need the release of your wit and the restorative energy of your embrace. Deliver them both in ample measure. Don't be shy with your humor or touch.

And in an oft-ugly world, David will need you to help him relocate some beauty and goodness, even show him some new beauty and goodness he seemingly hasn't yet been ready for.

And, yes, you will need to oppose your newly settled minister whenever he appears to be wrong. You must dare to confront David when you have to say something important that you think he may not be hearing. And it goes both ways, doesn't it? Both

pulpit and pew need forbearance when things are fouled up and appreciation when things are going swimmingly.

And always, take the chance to ask of David the following: “my friend, tell me more, tell me more of what’s on your mind or in your heart.” For, in a truly shared ministry, all San Dieguitans are members, one of another, yoked in a common enterprise, trying your darnedest to grow a beloved community which includes yet always transcends everyone, pulpit and pew alike.

And so, my friends, I hope I’ve convinced you that members and friends of San Dieguito equally share a high and holy vocation. It’s high not because it’s remote or distant. It’s not high because you’re going to place your new minister on a pedestal. No, it’s a high calling because it’s holy, it’s high because shared ministry poses a rare opportunity to lift people to wondrous heights of being. Ministry’s a high calling, because it can put us humans in direct communion with all that’s meaningful and worthwhile.

Well, that’s plenty for today, for soon, you’ll be enjoying the grand opportunity of welcoming a banana peel, a visionary, a dance partner...to join you in the highest of human partnerships...the sacred trust we call shared ministry.

And know this: some of us clergy, either of blessed memory or still on the sidelines, folks like John Shannon, Ron Knapp, Ken Brown, Anne Hines, Enid Virago, Kathy Hurt, Frank Willey, Jim Grant, and Tom Owen-Towle will be cheering you on, giving you all the spiritual support possible, that together you and your newly settled minister, David Arthur Miller, might dance into seasons of wonder and wisdom, compassion and creativity...seasons beyond counting.

Tom Owen-Towle  
May 17, 2009