Keepin’ It Real

by Rev. Diane Dowgiert, September 29, 2019

True story. It was late on the Sunday evening of my installation as minister of the UU Church of Tucson when I hailed a cab at the airport. The rental cars had all been returned. My friends and family who had come for the event were all at their appointed departure gates for flights back home. Tired to the bone – a good and happy tired – but tired non-the-less, I said a silent prayer as I gave the cab driver my home address. “Please don’t be one of those chatty cab drivers.”

A vocational hazard of ordained ministry is, well, honesty, so when the cab driver asked what brought me to Tucson, I had no choice but to tell the truth. “Work,” I said, this time praying, “Please don’t ask me what my job is.”Which of course, he did, asking politely and innocently, “What kind of work do you do?” “I’m a minister,” I say. And he says, “Suweeet! How easy is that?” I swear to you. That’s what he said. “Well, yes, my job is sweet. I love what I do. But I wouldn’t exactly call it easy.” And he said, “Well, at least you only have to work for an hour a week.”

To which I replied, “I know that’s how it looks from the outside, but if I’m not diligent about keeping my schedule, it’s not uncommon for me to put 50 or 60 hours a week – or more -- into my job.”

“Really,” he said, with a curious and somewhat suspicious tone. “What do you do for all that time?”

“Well, let’s take that one hour per week, Sunday worship. It will probably surprise you to know that one hour takes about 20 hours of preparation.”

He thought about that for a minute and then said, “You mean you don’t just open the Bible, read something, and talk about it?”

“Well, no,” I said, deciding not to even try to explain Unitarian Universalism and our many sources of truth and wisdom. “A well-crafted sermon takes at least eight hours to write.”

“Okay, that’s eight hours, not twenty,” he challenged. “What do you do with the rest of the time?”

“Well, there’s the study and research I do even before I start writing. Then there’s finding the readings and choosing the hymns, working with lay people who will participate in the service, coordinating with the accompanist and the choir director, getting the written order of service to the office so it can be printed, arriving early to do a sound check to make sure the microphones are working properly . . . ”

“Okay, that’s twenty hours. But you said 50 or 60.” This time the disbelief in his voice was obvious.

“Then, of course, there are weddings and funerals.”

“Oh, yeah, I forgot about that. I bet they take more time than I think, right?”

“Probably. Then there’s all the pastoral care.”

“What’s that?”

“Well, for example, I visit people in the hospital. I wish I could do more, but it could be a full-time job in itself in my congregation. So I focus on people who are seriously ill, or in hospice care. For everybody else, I try to make sure they are getting attention from the church – cards, visits, maybe meals if they need them. We have a caring committee that does those things.”

“Wow. I had no idea.”

“Then there’s all the meetings.” I was on a roll now.

“Meetings? What kind of meetings?”

“Well, there’s staff meetings, and the Board of Trustees, and more committees than you can imagine.”

“Oh.” he said, and suddenly became very quiet.

I thought maybe it wasn’t a good idea to tell him about writing newsletter columns and answering email and attending inter-faith events and doing denominational work and worrying about broken air conditioners and unbalanced budgets, since he didn’t ask.

“So, how do you like living in Tucson? Does the heat bother you?” asked the cab driver

“No, I can take the heat.”

Experts in happiness tell us that unmet expectations are a cause of unhappiness. It’s like when you take the first bite of what you think is a chocolate chip cookie only to discover that it’s oatmeal raisin. In other words, paying attention to our expectations, especially those that are unconsciously held, can affect our satisfaction or dissatisfaction with life. There is a condition known as *Paris Syndrome,* which is exhibited by some individuals when visiting or going on vacation to [Paris](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paris), as a result of extreme shock at discovering that Paris is different from their expectations. The syndrome is characterized by a number of psychiatric symptoms such as acute delusional states, hallucinations, anxiety, and even feelings of persecution.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Turns out that keeping it real is important to our mental health.

A while back, author Tim Wu wrote an opinion piece for the New York Times titled, In Pursuit of Mediocrity. He argues that the pursuit of excellence has infiltrated and corrupted the world of leisure. He says, “If you’re a jogger, it is no longer enough to cruise around the block; you’re training for the next marathon. If you’re a painter, you are no longer passing a pleasant afternoon, just you, your watercolors and your water lilies; you are trying to land a gallery show or at least garner a respectable social media following. When your identity is linked to your hobby — you’re a yogi, a surfer, a rock climber — you’d better be good at it, or else who are you?”[[2]](#endnote-2)

Turns out that keeping it real is important to our spiritual health.

This thing we do together, call it church, call it religious community or beloved community, call it a society of mutual concern – this thing we do together calls us to remember who we are and what we are made for. We are persons of worth, not because of what we can achieve or accumulate, persons made for love, made for relationship. Our religious faith of Unitarian Universalism places before us high aspirations for who we might become as individuals and as a community if we live into these high aspirations.

Experts in church growth tell us that 40 to 60 percent of factors affecting numerical growth are beyond our control. They name five factors that influence church growth that are within our control, factors that are interdependent and inter-related:

* Positive identity
* Harmonious relationships
* Minister’s ability to generate enthusiasm
* Involvement in social service and social justice
* Programs that nourish and enrich

This thing we do, this thing called church, is amazing when you think of it. A group of people coming together in voluntary association to make all of this happen. We all have a role. The role I am privileged to fill is that of minister.

In the not-so-distant past, a person in my position would have been referred to not as minister or Reverend, but Parson – like in the lyrics of the song *Winter Wonderland.* “In the meadow we will build a snowman and pretend that he is Parson Brown.” The word *parson* comes from the Old English, meaning, *person.* It could be said, then, that the person who occupies the parsonage is a person for a living – the parsonage being the traditional dwelling of a congregation’s pastor or minister.

I think we all carry in our minds an image of the ideal minister, shaped in part by our childhood experiences with ministers, in part by what is portrayed in the media. The sex abuse scandal in the Catholic church left an indelible stain on that image for many. Then there is the image of the televangelists – Billy Graham, Jim and Tammy Faye Baker of days past and Rick Warren and Joel Osteen of today – eloquent preachers with scandalous and outrageously wealthy lifestyles. Then there are all the varieties of clergy that make their way into television and movies. I think my ideal image of a minister is a mash-up of Pastor Guinn, my childhood pastor, Father Mulcahey from M.A.S.H. and the Vicar of Dibley – impossible to live up to, but there you have it.

A minister, ordained and called to serve with you and among you, is a person who fills an office and a role, one with divine purposes. Ministers come equipped with skills and with knowledge, but when you think about it, a minister’s only tool is their self – their whole and holy self – body, mind, spirit, soul, and relationship – a person for a living. As this congregation seeks to call a new minister to serve with you, hopefully beginning in August of next year, each one of you probably has an image in your head of who that minister might be. I guarantee that the minister you call will not fit that ideal image. You can be assured, however, that the person you call will bring you the best of who they are so that together, you may nurture human wholeness in all its dimensions.

Paying attention to our expectations can be a spiritual practice. For me, a spiritual practice is anything that increases self-awareness and understanding. Keeping expectations real is key to happiness and satisfaction within congregational life. Amidst the busyness of all it takes to keep a church community vital and alive, let us remember to make room for the larger purpose of our gathering which is to remember who are and what we are made for. Let us remember that we are all here to minister to each other.

Turns out that cab driver had it half right. This thing we do together, this ministry we do together isn’t easy but it is sweet. Let us endeavor to keep that sweet spirit alive.

1. wikipedia [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. New York Times, September 29, 2018 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)