**The World Called and I Answered**

Reflections on 25 years in Ministry

Rev. Kathleen C. Rolenz Wednesday, June 20, 2018

*(singing?) Here I raise my Ebenezer, there by thy great help I’ve come.* Did you all wonder what’s an Ebenezer and why did we just sang that? The original words to the hymn “Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing” is found in I Samuel 7: 9-12. It describes a moment when the children of Israel were completely outnumbered by their enemies. Samuel prays for help and God responds in a thundering voice, which terrifies and scatters their enemies. Samuel then took a stone and set it up like a cairn and called the name of it Ebenezer, translated as Stone of Help, saying, Hitherto hath the Lord helped us.” So here we raise our Annual Ebenezer, this stone of help which we gather around each year, either literally in this room, or remotely or figuratively, as we take the time to pause and reflect – which was what this profession was supposed to grant us? Right? – the chance to pause and reflect on what this ministry has meant and what it still means.

It is indeed an honor to be standing among you and to represent the class of 1993, and it’s both humbling and daunting as I recalled previous twenty-five year sermons that stood out in blessed memory and in some cases, served as a spiritual life saver to me; I think of Patrick O’Neil’s sermon given in Long Beach California, where he took us through a poetic journey of his ministry in iambic pentameter; or Victoria Safford- with her unmistakable gift for painting images with the weaving of her words; Gail Seavy’s intersectionality, and Joel Miller’s disruptions. And last year’s sermon given by Meg Riley – even now, a year later, I can still hear the heels of her parishioner clomping down the stairs, leaving her earnest sermon in quiet protest but giving her so much more in return – not only a great story but a deep lesson in ministerial humility. And as I read over or reflected upon all of them, I put my head down my keyboard and like a weary Ecclesiastes declared, “ah, there is nothing new under the Sun,” for they have all said it more eloquently and poetically than I can.

And yet, that is the preacher’s blessing and preacher’s burden, isn’t it? To reflect on twenty-five years is a little like peering into the Grand Canyon and saying “wow, something happened here.” And so as preachers and pastors, teachers and chaplains, educators and retirees we gather to trace not only the external events that shape our ministries, but to try to recall the internal movement of the Spirit – the ways in which we have fashioned a ministry for ourselves - and the ways our ministries have shaped us. We are called once again to reflect back on those earliest days of ministry – days both tender and terrifying – and to see where the Spirit has brought us thus far. We were called, all of us, but in particular this year: Jade, Rhett, Lone, Kathleen, Cat, Mark, Phyllis, Jonalu, Mary, Melanie, Thea, Russ, Mary, Wade, Amy, Nancy, Barbara, and Dee, Alex, Sarah, Anne, Dacia, and Anne and Jean—**twenty-five** of us answered the call --all but five were women, thereby defying the comment made by Samuel Johnson: *a woman preaching is like a dog’s walking on his hind legs; it is not done well, and you are surprised to find it done at all.* Take that Samuel Johnson!!! because my classmates and I were among the generation of women who came to dominate the field of ministry, taking on pulpits small and large; and serving not just in pulpits but answering the world’s call beyond the parish walls; to hospitals and hospice, military and seminaries, social justice and please, let’s not forget about our colleagues who served in the Unitarian Universalist Association. They are not “they” but us – they are our colleagues and friends doing the often thankless work of institutional ministry.

When I asked these colleagues to reflect on their twenty-five years, more than one colleague wrote about how BGLTQI issues have impacted our ministries, from the growing horror of the AIDS crisis, to Angels in America winning the Tonys in 1993. We couldn’t imagine in 1993 that at General Assembly 2015, we would bear witness to history in the making as same-sex marriage became legal; weeping and falling into one another’s arms we raised our Ebenezer, a stone of help and a stone of hope and said “Amen, Amen.” Not a few of us remarked on how the direction of our ministries have shifted from a purely intellectual endeavor to the growing importance of having a spiritual practice.

In the early days of our ministries, spiritual direction and spiritual practice were words uttered only by those oddball Christians in New England; but soon enough many of us came to realize Harry Scofield’s wisdom: “without a spiritual practice, you will dry up and blow away.” And remember the controversy over Rev. Bill Sinkford’s famous line about needing a language of reverence? Would that this be the only thing we need argue about these days – for by and large, arguments about a language of reverence have been named by my colleague Nancy MacDonald Ladd for what they truly are – fake fights.

And some of my colleagues have found great juice and joy in their ministries for all these years, and others have struggled to locate their voice and place in the ever changing landscape that has become Unitarian Universalism. But there was a thread that ran through all of my colleagues comments, in one way or another, as we recalled our ordination or installation words ringing through us, “Among us, and wherever you may be called to serve, we would have you preach the word of truth in freedom and in love, ministering alike to our joys and sorrows, setting forth no less by your example than by your precept the principles of our free faith. Are you ready to enter upon this ministry?” The world called us back then and we answered “I am.”

Back when the earth was new and heaven was but a whisper – back when we had no idea what we were getting into, back when we had the zeal of the born-again Unitarian Universalist, back when we raised our Ebenezer in protests and rallies, meetings and quiet moments, little did we know where this ministry would take us. We were called and ordained under the shadow of the Thomas Jefferson Costume Ball planned for 1993 General Assembly in Charlotte, NC when our colleagues of color asked the simple, lighting bolt question

“And how shall we come to the ball – in rags and chains?” Now 25 years later we marvel at how much and how little has changed. Our ministries have taken us in places we wished we did not have to go -– to the broken body of a fence in Laramie Wyoming, to Oklahoma City, to Columbine, to Iraq and Afghanistan, and New York City; and names which have forever been branded on our hearts; Katrina, Sandy, Pulse nightclub, San Bernadino, Standing Rock, Parkland, Sante Fe. There are names of people whom we may not have known, but whose lives and deaths shaped us too; Freddie Gray, Sam Dubose, Philando Castile, Terence Crutcher, Alton Sterling, Jamar Clark, Jeremy McDole, William Chapman, Walter Scott, Sandra Bland, Eric Harris, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Eric Garner, In these places, we found our voices, our ministries and that yes, we could function on less sleep than we thought, and yes, our carefully crafted sermons sometimes had to be displaced to tend to the needs of the day.

Twenty five years and thousands of words later, I have to ask my colleagues, do you remember, colleagues, what it was like, those early days of your ministries? Do you remember the terror of the blank page, of the news camera, of the community panel discussion? I do, and the fright of that continues to keep me humble. I can recall more than one Saturday night facing that blank page, with a cigarette in one hand and a whiskey in another,(thankfully those days are long gone) praying the muse would visit me and write the sermon for me. I recall one particular Saturday night when I’d start calling on friends to help me figure out what to say, and calling my mentor, the Rev. Dr. Midge Skwire, at – I think it was 1 am. “Midge, I said, “It’s Saturday night and I haven’t got a sermon.” There was a brief silence; my pen poised to take dictation. “Well, then she said, you’d better get one. See you in the morning.” And that was that. And I did.

But what I remember most was not the sermons, or the interminable arguments about policy governance or the newsletter returned week after week carefully corrected by our resident English teacher; but it is the people whom we serve that make the top of the twenty-five year “best of” list for me. There was Terry, the NASA scientist who said: “I’m not really into Jesus or the Bible, but when you preach about Jesus, you come alive. I want you to come alive.” And there was Lois, the stoic American Gothic farmwoman from Iowa, who brought me a cup of coffee after coming out of surgery, because she knew of the headache I’d have otherwise; there was Anne, we called her Saint Anne behind her back, a diminutive woman in stature but her largess to the church knew no bounds; and of course, there was Betty, who no matter how bad the sermon was, she would sit in the front row and beam you into better preaching with the sheer force of her constant, broad smile; there was Bridgett, who brought her two boys to a march down the streets of Cleveland to protest the shooting of Tamir Rice. When we were told to lay down on the freezing cold streets as part of a die in, she and her boys and I formed a star with our arms and legs, and looking up at the night sky, I thought ah, heaven is more than a whisper tonight.

We all have those people in our congregations who often get overlooked when confronted by the cranky ones and yes, even the hateful ones. And sometimes, by God’s grace, the cranky ones transform before your eyes.

Such was the case with George. I must confess I’ve told this story before, but like all good stories, it bears re-telling. George was the church’s resident atheist. He reveled at being a greeter, sticking his hand out and saying “Hi, I’m George, I’m an atheist. We don’t believe in God here.” He was worried about the church calling an out Christian UU. The first couple Sundays after we were called to serve, I was preaching in my usual style and I began to hear this click (use clicker) in the background…What is that noise? I wondered. After the service, George approached me with a little piece of paper in his hand. “Were you aware that you said God, spirit or spirituality 11 times in your sermon?

Am I supposed to believe in spooks now?” Over time,; George put away the clicker, but he still felt compelled to tell me every time I strayed from what he thought was the Unitarian Universalist party line. For years, we circled each other like wary boxers, sometimes throwing sucker punches at one another, but over time, we actually grew to have great respect and affection for one another. To be honest, I had been sloppy with my use of religious language, and George’s critique helped to sharpen my theological point. Then, one day, George came up to me and said, “Kathleen, I’ve had…what would you Christians call it…an epiphany.” “Really?” I said. “Yes, he said. “ I realized that Unitarian Universalists need all of us. Me, the atheist – you, the Christian, Wayne the Buddhist and Betty, the witch.”

“How could I count my blessings when I didn’t know their names?” asks Rita Dove, but in truth, we do know their names. We know the names of those members who, for better or worse, have shaped or inspired us; infuriated or discouraged us; and we remember too the names of colleagues who have answered the phone late at night without swearing at us first; or who have driven to our ordinations and installations; who have stepped in to preach when we fell ill, blessed our own children with their hands, held us when our beloveds died; walked along side us when the Unite the Right rally came my new hometown of Charlottesville, telling truths, risking tear gas and tears at the terror that rained down on us that day.

Back when everything was still to come, luck leaked out everywhere, and my colleagues and I consider ourselves lucky to be among the class that has actually paid off our student loan debts by now (mostly); lucky to have landed in a profession that simultaneously takes so much out of us – and can give us so much. Yet standing here after 25 years of ministry, I also see a troubling trend among us. We who are so smart and savvy and often times so spiritually grounded, can also fall prey to a new form of creeping moral purity, particularly around our anti-racist and anti-oppression work. We are quick to judge one another’s wokeness; and far too often forget a simple truth: we all fall short of the glory of God; we all have a long way to go to build the Beloved community we keep preaching about. The mature practice of ministry does not encourage zealotry, no matter how righteous the cause. The mature practice of ministry does more calling in than calling out. The mature practice of ministry encourages honest face-to-face conversation. I pray that the next twenty-five years of ministry will be marked by a renewed spirit of humility; and that **our zeal for justice** **extends to** our colleagues; and that our interactions this week and beyond are characterized by a spirit of generosity and compassion.

It’s been quite a ride, these 25 years, and I’m grateful for all of you who have heard the world calling, and answered with your own unique ministry. Kathleen Ellis was one of the first colleagues in this class to respond to my query about what she would want to hear in this address, and in her letter to me she enumerated all these forms of ministry we have offered:

“Some of us served large churches or high-visibility positions at the UUA or the UUMA. We have prayed by bedsides, from the pulpit, and publicly at state and local governing bodies or public events…. We have been officiants for cultural rites of passage, though our names will be forgotten after the champagne toasts or the caskets are lowered.”

  And then, Kathleen’s letter continued with a poignant charge that has brought me to this very moment. She said : “I want to hear that our ministry has mattered.” Kathleen had her own answer to this charge, but here is mine:

Twenty-five years ago, when I gave my promise to the world, I knew then and I know now that it mattered to me, and that this promise has blessed my life.

Throughout these twenty-five years, I have known that my ministry has mattered to Terry and Lois and Anne and Betty and Bridget and George, because they have mattered to me.

Because of these twenty-five years, I have come to know that my ministry will only matter when black lives matter, and when we see the ministry we do as a blessing to the lives of all people and not only to our beloved tribe.

  I give Kathleen Ellis the benediction to this address, because I accepted her charge and I affirm the prayer she wrote in response to her own question:

“ Generations of people need us to be there for them, to represent their longing for spiritual blessings upon secular bodies.

  Most of us will be forgotten by name someday, but people will remember that we carried the flame for them of faith and hope, confession and forgiveness.

  May our lapses be forgiven; may our hearts be open; may our love be everlasting.

May it be so. Amen

Testimonial by Rita Dove

Back when the earth was new and heaven just a whisper,  
back when the names of things  
hadn't had time to stick;  
  
back when the smallest breezes  
melted summer into autumn,  
when all the poplars quivered  
sweetly in rank and file . . .  
  
the world called, and I answered.  
Each glance ignited to a gaze.  
I caught my breath and called that life,  
swooned between spoonfuls of lemon sorbet.  
  
I was pirouette and flourish,  
I was filigree and flame.  
How could I count my blessings  
when I didn't know their names?  
  
Back when everything was still to come,  
luck leaked out everywhere.  
I gave my promise to the world,  
and the world followed me here.