

AUGUST 30, 2015

## **Sunday Sermon: “The Interim Period”**

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The former District Executive of Ballou Channing District, Bill Zelanzy, once told a story about change and described his experience of being in crisis from a change in his employment when his boss, the Mayor, resigned. As the business manager, he was the temporary replacement. He pointed out that all change involves a certain amount of stress. Interim ministry is a change and many of you might not have known any other Unitarian Universalist minister than Jan or have never been through the transition between ministries. This interim period will generate stress, and it really generates stress when a third of your staff resigns. This year you will be looking for a new Director of Religious Education and Executive Manager, so all of your professional team will shortly be new.

As an interim minister I serve a slightly different function than Jan, your last settled minister. Settled ministry, why that’s probably an oxymoron since there is nothing really settled about ministry since your settled minister serves at your pleasure. For those of you new to this process, the settled minister is chosen by a search committee of your congregation and is presented to the Congregation, and after two sermons and week spent getting to know you, is voted on by your membership.

There are a few ways a settled minister leaves: retire or resign to take another position as Jan did, or a Negotiated Resignation, where there is some conflict between the minister and some of the congregation. The third way a settled minister may leave is by a vote of the congregation which usually divides the church community.

An interim minister is contracted by your Policy Board leadership, usually for one year with an option for a second as I am, but may be for additional years and usually to meet a specific need that the congregational leadership believes they need. In other words, an interim minister comes “pre-fired.”

Now ministerial leadership has been described as herding cats, or moving a wheel barrow of frogs, but I see it more as being in a field with young new-born pigs. If I make too much noise all I am going to hear is a lot of squealing and the piglets taking off in all directions. I’ll give you a moment to absorb that image. But I have been hired to make some noise so...being pre-fired comes with some advantages.

Some of that noise will be at this worship hour. I will attempt to expose you to readings and benedictions, calls to worship and meditations that represent different Unitarian and Universalist theological and ministerial positions so that when you go to choose a settled minister you have a wider view than just Jan or me. This is like a good college instructor in education who presents classes using different pedagogical models, so then student can appreciate some of these techniques. A problem here is that I have a job to do and I have a limited time to do it. There is a story and like all of my stories it is true but I won't vouch for its factuality. It goes like this:

A newly ordained UU minister had just been installed as an Interim Minister at a church in western Massachusetts when she decided to move the piano to the opposite side of the pulpit. She looked at the layout and decided that the placement was obvious for acoustic and esthetic considerations. Her year went horribly and she left to take another church after the year doing interim work. As she left the church she noticed the choir director and some choir members moving the piano back to its original position.

Eighteen years later she returned to the church and met the settled minister who had been there for fifteen years. When she went into the sanctuary she noticed the piano was back where she had placed it and asked the settled minister. He said that the piano was only really right in that location and he had noticed it the moment he had come to the church. "Well when did you move it, she asked." He said, "I moved it right away, but only one inch at a time."

Change is something that needs to be managed, because change, even the right one, causes anxiety. No one likes change. Another difference between settled ministry and Interim ministry is that Interim ministry has five basic duties. First I've got to come into your community find out about you so you can come to terms with your congregational history. This is especially vital because of the relative short time between Jan's resignation and her leaving. All history contains secrets and secrets seem to carry their own problems.

Part of your history is to look at your secrets, but part of your history tells you; the median member to have signed your book for membership did so in mid-year 2006. This means that half of you here have been members only nine years. This means that the other half of the members are not short time members though chances are those who have been here longer than nine years have been here as much as sixty-five years, I've been told. Why is this so? We really don't know. I have heard it said that the UU Faith isn't for everyone, but for people who became members they saw something in us that made them want to join, so that may be only partially correct.

Another reason I think we push people out the door is that we tend to have members who are fundamentalist in our own way. In my congregation in West Virginia I had an evangelical atheist who would figuratively meet people at the door and tell them why there is no God. I found similar feeling with Christianity. It seems we are open to all religions except Christianity. If you look at the Demographics of the area there are probably lots of disenchanting Christians and Jews out there who are looking for a home and if you want to grow you need to find ways to welcome them on their terms, not ours.

I found similar fundamental feeling in this congregation with respect to Christianity. Your use of the prayer Jesus taught says to visitors and members that we are primarily a Christian Congregation. I don't know what that means when you have a service that recognizes Yom Hashoah or Yom Kippur. It would be like lighting a Menorah for the Christmas Eve service, which one UU congregation I attended did. This is the only congregation I have ever heard that celebrates World Communion Sunday. This tradition started in the US Presbyterian Church to promote Christian unity.

That said, I have always celebrated communion in the five churches I've served but the celebration was never an entire service or for the entire church community. To be a Christian Universalist church is an identity, and that may be who you are or want to be, but it limits your growth potential from all the other possible theological positions a Unitarian Universalist may hold.

Ok, let me be blunt. Many of those potential UU's who are out there are not all Christians. They have many different beliefs and backgrounds, and they may be looking for something more spiritual or intellectual that might include something of the religious organization they left. This isn't to say that Christianity isn't a big part of who we are as UU churches and congregations, but it isn't the only part of who we are. I believe this was one of the dynamics that occurred during Jan's ministry. If you want to grow, you have to truly accept religious diversity including those looking for something spiritual, maybe former Jews or maybe rational humanists. Well, so much for my soap box this morning. Another reason you bring in someone who is new to your community like the Interim is that an outsider comes with less obstructed vision.

Once more a story: there's a Muslim tale about the Mullah Nasr al-Din taking his donkeys to the market and stopping several times because he thinks he's lost one: while he's riding the total he counts is 7, but when he gets off the donkey he's riding, he counts them and gets 8. In this way an interim sees as both an outsider and an observer, for when you are on the donkey the view is different.

The second job of Interim ministry is to examine your leadership and organizational needs and occasionally make those changes that need to be made. Big organizational changes during interim ministry can be problematic. Likewise, big building projects shouldn't occur under a settled minister either. It gets back to how much instability occurs with change. This isn't just with church, this is with all phases of our lives.

When I was flying in the Air Force, leadership recognized that changes like moves, marriages and divorces, births and deaths and other big life events affected how safely we flew. It is the same with big events in every life and it affects the relationship we have both in families and in organizations.

Anyway back to your organizational needs, like my monk with the raft story I told two weeks ago, you as a congregation have spent years building some very elaborate structures emotionally, physically and structurally that you are pulling along that might not meet your needs at present or into the future.

I am looking carefully at the relationship between paid staff and volunteers in doing the work of the church and we may come up with a different structure. Part of my job is to help you figure out what are these structures that no longer serve your needs and help you shed them. Once more creating change and therefore stress. One of these right now is the people who have not been very active in church life the last few years may be coming back. While you welcome their presence in our community, their presence will create a different dynamic which yields stress.

The third task as an interim minister is to help you figure out what resources you have available. This is like what we have to do when working as Chaplains in hospitals. Chaplains do not bring anything to patients, but help the patient see what resources they have available within themselves and their families and communities. So far I've seen lots of resources you have available within this congregation. You have some untapped assets in the greater Hartford area and the UUA and District that we will probably work to assist.

The fourth job of Interim ministry is to help develop your identity and vision. This is to answer the question "who am I and where am I going?" Let me propose the analogy that this religious organization is a car that has four seats. In each of the four seats are Vision, Relationships, Programs and Management.

In this analogy, **Vision** provides spiritual and strategic direction, **Relationships**

connect us to each other and ministry, **Programs** function to connect us to relationships through education, and fellowship, and **Management** administers the resources, programs and decision-making. Well, who's driving?

Vision was driving about some of the time as you reworked the trustee and committee system into a Board Structure that looks at strategic Vision. There is a quote from Proverbs: "Without a vision the people die." Since then, I feel Vision has relinquished the steering wheel to Programs or Management. You found that the conflict around your former minister and her management team occupied much of your time and energy, so Management and Program started to drive your car.

There is a story that may illustrate this. There was a family that gathered for Easter dinner. Tradition had the youngest newly married daughter preparing the family ham. As she was about to put the large ham in the oven to begin baking, her mother-in-law stopped her and said "You have to cut three inches off the ham before you bake it." Puzzled, the daughter asked her mother why? "Because that's the way grandmother taught us to do it." The daughter sought out the grandma and asked why did you cut off 3 inches from the ham. Her Gran said "that was the way her mother taught her and it was the way this family has always done it." So she went and asked her great grandmother in the living room where the family was gathered.

Nana, why is it necessary to cut three inches off the ham before you cook it, she asked. "Well, dear, when I was a new bride, just starting out like you, I baked my first ham for Easter dinner. The ham was 18 inches long. The largest roasting pan I had was 15 inches long, so I had to cut three inches off of the ham to make it fit the pan." Vision moved over for Management. It's time you looked for your Vision again.

My final job as your interim minister is to leave. This I have always found the hardest. Like Jan and Patty right now, I have to cut all relationship with you. This is so you will make a commitment to new leadership. But one of the reasons we have Interim ministry is to give a congregation the time to finish grieving the loss or celebrate the loss of the settled minister, so that you can move on to your next settled ministry. If you were to write a description of the minister you wanted right now, it might look like Jan to some, or it might be exactly the opposite of Jan to others.

Settled ministry has been called marriage-like. You try to pick someone who you would like to be perfect but in reality you hope they will be real, like a Swedish grandmother, and someone who has the imperfection that is our humanity. Then the congregation makes a long-term commitment to that minister and the

minister makes a long-term commitment to the congregation and the community.

A settled minister buys a home, moves their family here, and becomes immersed in the community and community projects. Interim ministers, by contrast, usually rent and don't get as involved with local social justice as they would like. For this reason, during the interim period outreach and social justice causes have to fall on the congregation.

Now if you see settled ministry as marriage-like, you can see interim ministry as a cruise. Both the Congregation and Ministry meet on a cruise ship and have a grand affair learning about each other. We will dance too late and probably eat and drink too much and generally have a great time partially because we know the ship must come into port and we will disembark and probably never see each other again. The one real danger in this allusion is to look to the captain to marry us. In other words, I can't be your settled minister no matter how much we seem to mesh.

In an ever-evolving and never-ending world. Amen.