

# *Would I Do It Again?*

**Rev. David E. Bumbaugh**

**[The Unitarian Church in Summit NJ USA](#)**

**October 16, 1994**

Thirty years ago this week, the Congregation of the Unitarian Universalist Community Church in Chicago Heights, Illinois held a special Sunday evening service of worship, the purpose of which was to ordain me to the Unitarian Universalist ministry. That ceremony marked an important point in my life, but it was not the beginning of my career in ministry. In fact, by the time I came to that moment, I had already been serving as minister to Unitarian and Universalist congregations for more than seven years. However, the act of ordination did serve as a public and official confirmation of the vocation which had been mine for as long as I could remember, and the Unitarian Universalist Association would date my entrance into the ministry from that event, and so, it is an anniversary worth remembering and celebrating.

As I think back over my three decades as an ordained minister, my mind floods with a number of images and reflections. I have pursued this calling during a period of enormous change and flux, times of great hope and profound despair. The world in which I found myself thirty years ago was, though I did not know it at the time, the twilight of an era. In those years, we were living in a nation which still dared to believe that renewal and renaissance were possible. These were the years of the Great Society, when we believed that with good-will and concentrated effort, poverty and want could be eliminated in this land of plenty. These were the years when the Civil Rights Movement was at its height and many of us believed that with the right combination of political and social will, justice would triumph and the stain of racism be removed from the land. These were the years when equality for women seemed only a matter of time. What is more, these were the years when we allowed ourselves to believe that organized religion still had sufficient moral influence to lead the nation away from prejudice and inequity and injustice and toward a world of promise and hope for all.

Needless to say, my early years in the ministry were shaped by that environment. My sermons sought to define and illumine the moral and ethical and religious imperatives which undergirded the drive for a new social order. In addition to preaching, I served on boards and commissions; I marched and demonstrated for open housing, and fair employment, and public access; with others I struggled to improve the lot of migrant workers; I confronted political and community leaders; I lectured rank and file union members; and I was part of a network of clergy who helped women find access to safe abortions. I knew that I could not bring in the new social order by myself, but I was determined that it would not be delayed one moment because I had failed to do what I could do. And throughout, my congregation supported and assisted that ministry.

And when that dream died in a hail of assassins' bullets and in the rice paddy's of Vietnam, I turned my energies to the effort to end the violence and the war. I marched and demonstrated and organized protests against our involvement in Southeast Asia; I counseled young men of draft age, to help them find ways to avoid the draft; I organized in my own congregation a modest program of tax refusal to keep the opposition to the war visible and constant. At a later date, I used my Minister's Discretionary Fund to channel money from foundations to a program aimed at testing the legality of the war in the courts. I knew that I could not end the war; but I was determined that the war would not continue one day longer than necessary because I had failed to do what I could do. And throughout, my congregations understood that this was a necessary part of my ministry.

You see, from the beginning, I have believed that religion and politics, that morality and public policy, that ethics and the economic order cannot be divorced. I have believed from the beginning that the great virtue of the doctrine of separation of church and state is to be found in the freedom it gives religious institutions to stand in judgment on the social, political, economic order. For thirty years and more, I have been an unrepentant liberal, believing that the only justification for government is to ensure a more equitable distribution of the world's resources, and to protect those who are least able to protect themselves. And my ministry has always had some overt political quality to it. The truth is, I have never known a government or an administration I have liked or approved of. It has not been my job or the job of the church to become the ally of administrations or governments. It is my job and the job of the church to stand with the poor and the oppressed, the forgotten and despised, to stand in judgment upon the powers and principalities calling them to justice and equity and peace. And for thirty years and more, I have tried to do that.

But that has not been all of my ministry--perhaps not even most of it. As I look back over these three decades, what I see is a host of faces. I see the face of a young man who had been chair of the Board of Trustees and who suddenly lost his job. After a time, he found another job, in a distant city. Leaving his wife and children behind until he could find a new home for them, he drove to his new job. On the way he was killed in an automobile accident. There was nothing I could say to his wife and children that would make sense of that terrible tragedy. But I discovered that they did not look to me to make sense of it. It was enough that I was there, representing the church, standing by, supporting, acknowledging their grief and helping them give voice to their deep sorrow.

And there were so many others over the years: the young father whose brain tumor killed him before he had a chance to see his sons grow tall and strong; the young woman so caught in her own prison of private despair that she could reach out to no one and so ended her own life; the loved and admired school teacher who dared not tell anyone except me and one female colleague that he was gay, and who died of AIDS, alone except for his friend and me; the family of a young man shot down over North Vietnam; the elderly woman who had watched her husband and her son die by inches, both victims of cancer, who, when her own diagnosis of cancer came, refused all treatment and who, as she grew weaker, gathered her daughter and son-in-law and grandchildren around her

bed-side one day, and for hours talked to them, recounting the whole story of her life, then, her story ended, turned her face to the wall and died. So many faces, so much sorrow and grief, so much dignity and strength, so little fear, and all they ever asked of me was to know that they were not alone, that their tears did not go unobserved, that these deaths would not go unmarked, that these lives would be celebrated and remembered.

As I look back over thirty years and more, I see so many faces: bright, smiling faces, eager and hopeful, the faces of children. Some of them I welcomed into the world, as their parents stood before the congregation and solemnly pledged to care for their children and help them grow into the best it was in them to be, and as the congregation responded by accepting special responsibility for them. Some are the faces of those I encountered in coffee hours, as they wandered through a forest of legs. Dropping to my knee, I would greet them, and inevitably, they would smile, glad to see a face instead of just another kneecap, and for a moment we would talk and I would see in their bright, open faces all the hope and promise of the world. I remember the little boy at a Christmas party who, without any invitation, crawled into my lap and sat there, as I read a story to the assembled children. Always the children have had the ability to surprise me and delight me and to puncture my pomposity. And sometimes those little children with their prescient wisdom, would leave a lasting impression on me--as did the little girl who included these words in her recitation of the Lord's Prayer: "And lead us not into Penn Station, but deliver us from people." I learned to listen to the voices of the children, and I was constantly reminded that one of the duties of the church and its ministers is to speak for the children and for the future they represent, lest they and the future be destroyed in our grasping for the main chance, in our scrabbling for immediate gratification.

Looking back over thirty years and more, I see faces, so many faces. I see so many men and women who have stood before me over the years, promising to each other unconditional love. Often it has been young people, terrified at making such awesome promises in so public a manner, but so full of their confidence in each other that they managed to screw up their courage and promise each other "forever and forever." Sometimes it has been older people who have known great love and the pain that comes when love is taken away, in death or in other ways, but who have dared to love again, knowing the risk that love represents but knowing also that life without risk is difficult to distinguish from death.

So many of these people I never saw before they came to me to be married and many of them I never saw again. Often they came to me with fear and trepidation because other religious communities had rejected them, had refused to bless their union. Particularly, I remember the two young men who were the first to ask me to bless a same-sex relationship. We sat together and we planned a service of union. They told me that they had invited seventy-five people, family and friends to celebrate their union. I am still haunted by the look on their faces the evening of the ceremony, when they walked into the church and found only a dozen people, and neither of their families present to witness this act of commitment. They each took a deep breath, smiled at each other and at those who were assembled and we proceeded with the ceremony. I thought then, and I think

now that love is a precious enough thing in this world that it ill behooves any of us to misdoubt it or refuse to celebrate it.

As I think back over thirty years and more, I see so many faces: People of all ages and circumstances who have come to me in times of great joy and deep sorrow and profound distress. They have come, not because I am wise, or have the answers, or know how to soothe their pain, neither have they come to be judged or absolved. They have come because I represent the religious community, and they know that I will listen, that I will hear, and that I will keep their confidences. I have been the vehicle by which people have given voice to their guilt, their fear, their pain, their trauma, their fantasies, their follies. I have been the vehicle by which people have been able to give voice to their successes and their visions and their dreams. They have rarely wanted any advice or wisdom or insight from me. Rather they have wanted a place where, in confidence, they can say what they need to say, can hear how it sounds when spoken aloud, And, they have wanted someone in the world to know what they cannot or dare not tell anyone else.

As I look back over thirty years and more, I am astounded by the number of lives that have intersected mine, by the trust people have placed in me, by the willingness to share their lives, the dark and the bright and the times in between. But always, as I think of the passing years, my mind returns to this place, to the pulpit, which has always been the center of my ministry. I suspect that what brought me to this profession, and what has kept me here has been a driving need to discover, create, wrestle with issues of meaning in human existence, in my existence. One of my colleagues once described me as "a god-driven man who cannot find god." My quest has led me, over the years, on a long, strange journey--one which began Evangelicalism, evolved into a liberal Christianity, passed through ethical humanism to naturalistic mysticism and led me at last to reject the Jewish-Christian tradition which was my heritage and drives me now to seek that human experience which underlies all current religious expression, hoping that I might find a way to a faith more adequate to the times in which we find ourselves.

The file cabinets in my office are filled with sermons I have written and preached over more than thirty years. They detail my continuing journey, and represent my legacy, my effort to make sense of the world and of my role in it. Using Emerson's image, I have always believed that it is the duty of the minister to offer the congregation "his (or her) life, passed through the fire of thought." And I have tried over all these years to live up to that challenge--to be aware of what was going on in me, to be as honest with myself and others and I could be.

You see, I began my career in the ministry long before I understood what that vocation was all about. I am not sure I know yet what it is all about, but over time I have learned some very important things. The first of these is that in our tradition, where there is no creed, no liturgy, no commonly accepted scripture, no authority beyond the local congregation, a minister must cling to his or her integrity as the only basis for a religious life. When one is accountable to a congregation, the temptation to say what the congregation wants to hear, to go where the congregation wants to go, to do what the congregation wants to do is great, indeed. But once a minister begins to shape sermons so

that they will offend no one, or to devise goals that will not arouse opposition, or to urge policies that will not be challenged, the minister has prostituted the profession. The minister's duty is to speak the truth as she or he understands it, to challenge the conventional visions whenever they seem inadequate, and to offer the congregation what he or she believes it needs, even if it is not what the congregation wants. In our kind of free religion, the minister must cherish personal integrity above all other things, for without integrity the ministry becomes quicksand and there is no solid ground anywhere on which to stand.

And there is a corollary to that axiom. Ministry can only be conducted from the periphery. I have been blessed, over the years, with the opportunity to participate in a number of religious communities, but I have never really been part of any of them. To be a minister is to be in a community but not of it. That is not to say that people do not love their ministers and care about them and worry over them. Nor is it to say the ministers do not love their people and care about them and worry over them. It is simply to say that ministers come and ministers go and the community, the religious institution, the congregation abides. Always there is an essential distance between the minister and the congregation. It is that distance which makes it possible for the minister to function. It is that distance which allows people to share confidences with the minister, which provides perspective, which allows the minister to distinguish between the needs and the wants of the congregation, which enables the process by which the minister may attend to the truly important good rather than the merely critical. It is that distance which permits the peculiar stance toward events that makes it possible for life to be passed through the fire of thought.

There is a sense in which, mentally, from the very beginning, the minister must, keep his or her bags packed, a sense in which she or he must not need the congregation so desperately that the needed truth goes unspoken. And the minister must be willing to allow others to reap the harvest from the seeds he or she has sown. In this connection, I am reminded of the church where I helped plan a new building-- a building the congregation desperately needed, but which many did not want. As it turned out, I was one of the casualties of the building program. The building was built, but I have never set foot in it. I am reminded of the church where I challenged the congregation to change its name to something more inclusive and more appropriate to its mission. The suggestion was met with great resistance and deep anger and resentment. The change was not made until six years after I had left. The truth is that not everything a minister wants done should be done; and even that which should be done may require more time than is available. Fortunately, the minister is not required to be right, but the minister is required to be honest; to say what needs to be said, to be true to himself or herself and be willing to accept the consequences. There have been moments, in the past thirty years when I forgot that simple fact, and always, the result has been pain for me and for the congregations I have served.

After thirty years and more, would I do it again? Were I starting over, would I be a minister, given all I know? Truth is, I have not seen my deepest dreams come true. The church has not led our country into a new world in which poverty and racism and

injustice have been transformed. In many ways, greed has triumphed, racism has become more subtle and more difficult, and the cry for justice has been transformed into a strident demand for vengeance. In the process, the church has lost much of its moral suasion, as growing cynicism has eroded its position in society. Indeed, the outwardly successful churches often seem to be those that have embraced the narrow, vengeful, vindictive attitudes of a greedy and hate filled society. And yet, despite it all, I would do it again.

In truth, I never had any alternative. You see, I did not choose to be a minister in the first place. I grew up knowing that I would be a minister. From my earliest memories that is what I knew I was destined to be. I changed my religious affiliation several times; I went for a while without any religious affiliation; but I never doubted that I was destined for a career in the ministry. I could not be anything else without becoming someone else. All my life, something I have never been able to define has been calling me to this profession. And even on those Sunday afternoons, when, in desperation, I have searched the want ads hoping to find an honest job I might fill, I have known in the back of my mind that I could not evade the destiny which called me to this profession. After more than thirty years, I know that there is nothing else I could have done. And when it is over, and someone comes to sort through the file drawers which contain all those sermons, I hope they will recognize that here, in this "life passed through the fire of thought, is the legacy of a man" who counted himself supremely fortunate to have been able to do what, from the cradle, he was called to do.