

The Road Ahead, The Road Behind

preached by the Rev. Colin Bossen at the Unitarian Universalist Society of Cleveland, August 12, 2012

And so with the advent of this morning's sermon this congregation has reached the end of what may become known as the Colin Bossen years. Shortly after my sermon ends we will share a ritual of release and dissolve our bond as minister and congregation. The minister's office is almost packed, my files are in order and our business together is as finished as it is going to be. Soon after the service and coffee hour come to an end I will close the door on the office that has been mine for the last five years for a final time. Sometime next week Doug Wadkins, your new interim minister, will help start you on the next leg of your shared journey. And sometime next week my family and I will arrive at our new apartment in Boston, ready to begin our lives in New England.

A minister's final sermon to a congregation is often a bit like a eulogy. It tries to sum up the totality of the preacher's ministry with that congregation. This morning's sermon has a tinge of the eulogy feel to it. As I preach today I intend to reflect back on the course of my time with you, upon what I learned here and what we have accomplished together.

But this sermon is also forward looking. As the old Monty Python sketch would have it, "I am not dead." Neither are you. So rather than just sum up our ministry together I am going to point out some of the landmarks you might encounter on the next part of your congregational journey. And I will do the same for myself and suggest where I may be headed over the next years of my career.

Writing this sermon I have felt a bit like Robert Frost at the beginning of his famous poem "The Road Not Taken":

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair...

We are at the metaphoric fork in the road. I find myself gazing down my own path. I also find myself peering down yours. Before we gaze on the paths ahead any longer, and take our separate steps, let us look back at the common trail behind us.

I arrived at the Society in September 2007 as a not quite newly minted minister. Though this congregation was my first settlement it was not my first ministry. That distinction belongs to the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Pottstown, where I served for a year as interim minister.

When my family and I came to Cleveland I was, as a few of you felt necessary to repeatedly remind me, young for the ministry. But even at just past thirty I brought to the congregation close to twenty years experience with the larger denomination. I had almost as much experience with social justice movements. I had written a religious education curriculum and published several articles. All

of this had meant that when I was in search I was lucky enough to have several different congregations extend to me the offer to candidate.

I choose the Society despite the fact that it was the smallest of the congregations to offer me a pulpit. I choose the Society because I believe in the congregation's potential to grow into a vibrant urban church. My principle interest in the parish ministry has been in urban ministry. I believe that cities are places of cultural creativity and social possibility. Urban churches can bring this creativity and sense of possibility within them. When they do so something powerful happens, glimpses of what Martin Luther King, Jr. called the beloved community emerge. Rob Hardies, the senior minister of All Souls, Unitarian in Washington, DC offers one of my favorite visions for the urban church. He say of his congregation that it is "a place that shelters the dream of the human family reconciled and whole, and helps make that dream come true."

During my candidating week I preached a sermon laying out some of this vision. I lifted up the work of two early 20th century ministers, the Unitarian John Haynes Holmes and the Universalist Clarence Skinner, as a potential model for us. Holmes and Skinner started something called the community church movement. Historian Dan McKanan has described the community church movement as an effort "to expand the 'social' dimension of religious life. They believed that churches should attend not only to individual souls, but to society as a whole... They thought churches shouldn't just provide charity to people in need, but should create cooperative social structures that would make charity unnecessary."

With this vision the membership of Holmes and Skinner's congregations in Boston and New York each reached several thousand. The two men and their congregations played important roles in the development of American radical politics and our liberal faith. Holmes's congregation in New York was one of the major organizing centers of the early ACLU and NAACP. Skinner's congregation formed the backbone of the Sacco and Vanzetti defense committee, a legal aid organization for two Italian anarchists executed by the State of Massachusetts for murders they did not commit.

The vision that brought me to the Society was not to build a congregation of many thousand. It was to help the congregation develop a stronger voice for justice and increase its impact on the surrounding community. I hoped that the Society would extend its reach beyond Coventry, Cleveland Heights and into all of Greater Cleveland.

I thought, and still think, that you have the ingredients to do so. But my hope was not always shared by all of the members of the congregation. Some members seemed content with the status quo and even resentful of the kinds of organizational changes necessary to realize such a vision. In truth, the vision was more mine than the congregation's. And that provided me with an important lesson. In order for a congregation to accomplish something its vision and ministry must be shared between the minister and the majority of the membership. As William Sloan Coffin preached in one of his sermons, "...it is not the preacher's job to tell you what to do, but only to remind you who you are..." I am afraid that on occasions I fell a little too much into telling you what to do and failed to uplift who you are.

Maybe that could not have been helped. I was brought to the Society, and came to it, to grow it. I was the Society's first full-time minister in thirty-five years. You needed someone to hold up a

larger vision for you. The Society had been shattered during the ministry of Farley Wheelwright, the full-time minister before me, when the it moved to Cleveland Heights.

Many of you know that story, a few of you lived it, so I will just present the barest of outlines here. The Society was founded, as I mentioned last week, to be "a Unitarian Church that will attract persons of various cultural, economic, and racial backgrounds" when a slim majority of the members of First Church decided to move that congregation from urban Cleveland to suburban Shaker Heights. For close to twenty years the Society made a good go of it, grew to 450 members, increased in racial diversity and had a significant impact on the wider community. By the late sixties things began to change and relations between the Society and the Hough neighborhood where it was then based deteriorated.

This was during the era of the Black Power movement and then minister Farley Wheelwright hatched a plan that he hoped would save the Society. The congregation would seed an African American Unitarian Universalist church and give control of the Society's building to that congregation. The two congregations would share the building but the actually assets would be controlled by the African American congregation. By a slim margin members of the Society voted to support this plan. They gave the African American congregation control of the Society's historic building with its beautiful Tiffany windows along with half of its endowment.

A lot of people left the Society as a result. More left when it became apparent that the building sharing arrangements were not going to work out and congregation moved to Cleveland Heights. Within short order the congregation went from 450 to 200 members. Over the next three decades it shrank further, bottoming out at less than sixty during the last year of Peggy Clason's ministry.

The Society's dream deferred, to invoke Langston Hughes, festered. The congregation's reputation among other Unitarian Universalist soured. The situation was such that when I attended my first ministerial gathering after arriving here two separate colleagues asked me whatever possessed me to take the congregation's pulpit. When I replied that I thought the congregation had potential I was met with rather dubious silence.

I am a little proud to report that my colleagues assessment was wrong and that those of you who called me to grow the congregation were right. The Society did have potential and because we worked hard over the last five years we were able to change its reputation. The extent to which we have was brought home to me last summer when we hired Rina Shere, our current Director of Religious Education. When he hired our previous DRE we had only handful of applicants. Only one of them came from another Unitarian Universalist congregation and that person had no religious education experience. In contrast, when Rina applied for the position we received close to twenty applications. The majority of applicants came from other Unitarian Universalist congregations, most of them had religious education experience.

I do not want to take too much credit for the growth that the congregation has experienced in the last several years. The credit for that growth belongs as much to the members of the congregation as it does to me. I think that what allowed the congregation to grow was your joint decision to move to full-time ministry and the positive and hopeful energy that accompanied that decision. The particular full-time minister that you called mattered less than the decision you made to take the leap of faith and call one.

Perception, I have learned, is often reality. How people perceive the congregation to be doing is frequently a product of how they themselves are doing. My friend MK writes about this problem as it relates to labor organizing in a piece called "How's the Campaign Doing?"

I believe the less active I am in the union, the less active I perceive the [union] to be. The more I wade into factional... battles, the more I imagine the [union] plunging to death under factional wars. If I feel demoralized... I will characterize the state of the [union] as grim... Some confuse personal burnout with lack of organizational progress. So stay in touch with someone who is excited, someone who's on a peak while you're in a valley.

One of my roles has been to try and hold up a larger vision of hope and help you feel good about where the congregation is going. This has lead some of you to accuse me of being too hopeful about the Society's future. There might be truth to that but if perception informs reality then nurturing hope is an important ingredient for creating a better future. It is better to be haunted by beautiful dreams of the possible than bogged down in the mires of despair. And besides, there is a difference between hope and optimism. As Cornell West reminds us,

Optimism tends to be based on the notion that there's enough evidence out there to believe things are gonna be better... whereas hope looks at the evidence and says, "It doesn't look good at all... Gonna go beyond the evidence to create new possibilities based on visions that become contagious to allow people to engage in heroic actions... no guarantee whatsoever."

Hope is about change. Change is something people are often uncomfortable with. I have wondered sometimes if the people who have accused me of being too hopeful were really just saying that they did not want to see the congregation change. Loss of what has been always accompanies change. For longtime members growth and a full-time minister both brought change.

Shortly before I began your previous interim minister Kathleen Rolenz encouraged you to embrace this dynamic preaching, "Fan the flames of hope. Embrace change. Let [your] light shine." And my hope for the congregation has not been entirely unwarranted. Sunday morning attendance is now, at the end of my ministry, roughly double what it was at the end of Peggy Clason's ministry. There are about sixty of you here this morning, seven years ago average attendance was just under thirty. Membership is up about fifty percent too. The year Peggy retired the Society reported 59 members to the UUA. This year we reported 89. Pledging has also increased substantively during my tenure.

This is not to say that our shared road has always been easy. In order to grow the Society has had to undergo what is called a size transition and change its culture from that of what sociologists of religion call a family sized congregation to a pastoral sized one. In a family size congregation a handful of longtime members, the congregation's matriarchs and patriarchs, make most of the decisions. Such a congregation is like a family where the parents decide what is going to happen and everyone else is along for the ride.

Church consultant Alice Mann writes, "When [organizations] change significantly in size, they must also change in form." That change in form can be painful and lead to conflict. Five years into my ministry the Society has moved from family size to pastoral size. In a pastoral size congregation, elected congregational leaders, in consultation with the minister and other staff, make most of the day-to-day decisions. This can be frustrating for the matriarchs and patriarchs who are used to having control and a hand in deciding everything. But for the rest of the congregation it is empowering.

It also allows the congregation to do more. The wider distribution of decision making means that there are more opportunities for leadership development and, consequently, more leaders in the congregation. In addition to having a larger membership than it did five years ago the Society also has a more active membership. Committees function in a more efficient matter and the Society has a greater ability to have an impact on the wider community.

Together we have been able to harness that energy to do some good in the world. We started a community garden, held an annual service commemorating the Iraqi and U.S. war dead, brought well known speakers like Amy Goodman to Cleveland, stood up for just immigration reform and BGLT rights... All of this activity raised the profile of the congregation. Multiple articles about our work together appeared in both the Cleveland and denominational press.

Your task over the next years will be to continue to build upon this energy. The Society has been stuck at a plateau point for membership and attendance of the past few years. The eighteen members and friends who have died during my tenure has been one reason for this. Another has been the dismal, but improving, economic situation in Cleveland. In several instances active members of the congregation have had to move elsewhere, despite their wishes to stay, to find employment.

These two realities are not, however, I think the main reasons for the congregation's plateau. That honor goes to two separate issues that you will need to resolve. The first issue has to do with the Society's building. In the last year I have become convinced that the Society cannot support a membership of larger than a hundred, or maybe a hundred and twenty, in its current building. There is some simple math behind this. The Society has forty parking spaces, forty five if you count the five in front of the building. According church consultant Kennon Callahan congregations should expect their attendance to correlate to the number of parking spaces available. He argues that with current American driving patterns you should expect 1.5 people per parking space. Well, if you multiple 1.5 times 45 you get 67, which very close to what the Society's average attendance, during the regular program year, has been stuck at.

Another issue with the building is its proximity to First Church. On Berkshire Rd., the site of my former house in Cleveland Heights, more people were members there than here. When asked I was told that the major reason for this was First Church's religious education program. If the Society were to move to someplace more towards the center of the city or closer to the lakefront, someplace further from First Church, this problem would become less significant.

There are other issues with the building that could be touched upon but I believe that these are the two most problematic. How you choose to resolve them will probably be your most important decision in the coming years.

Besides the building, the other issue that I think is holding you back has to do with the congregation's finances. There continues to be concern in some quarters that the Society is spending down its investment portfolio. A few members of the congregation even seem to believe that the Society should return to part-time ministry or tell the next settled minister that he or she should only expect to stay with the congregation for a few years before the money runs out. These impulses are destructive. They sap vital energy from growing the congregation. Such concerns contain the possibility of becoming self-fulfilling. It is like I said, earlier, perception is reality. A perception that congregation is unsustainable can lead to that perception becoming reality.

It is possible that a few of you are upset with me for raising these issues in my final sermon. If so, I understand. But please know that in this, and in everything else I have done, I have never wanted to wound you. It is just that I always felt that my duty, even in the closing, has been to the larger vision. And carrying that larger vision, which I have done inartfully at times, is central to my own call to the ministry. It is what led to come to the Unitarian Universalist Society of Cleveland and it is what is leading me away.

In the past few minutes we have glimpsed a little of where your future path may take you. Mine is taking me towards what I hope will be greater service to that larger vision. My goal in pursuing a PhD at Harvard is leverage the skills that I learned here, through my previous organizing work, and will learn there into becoming a public intellectual. I believe that our world needs more strong voices that are liberally religious and politically radical. And I think that my future path, if I tread it carefully, contains that possibility.

Many of you have asked me what, in particular, I plan to do after I complete my doctorate. The short answer is, I do not know precisely. There are many ways that to be a public intellectual. I could work as an academic, serve as a senior minister of a large church, work for a think tank or write for a magazine like the "New Yorker." All of these things are possible with a doctorate from Harvard. Which I choose will depend on what opportunities I have to serve the larger vision when I graduate.

No matter what I will not be leaving the Unitarian Universalist ministry. If anything I plan to be more, not less, active in denominational life over the next decades. And no matter what I will long remain grateful for our time together. During my time with you I matured as a preacher, honed my pastoral care skills and learned about the sometimes challenging process of growing a congregation. Exactly how I learned these things is another sermon for a different time and different place. For it is now that our paths truly do part. As a brace I offer words from Walt Whitman:

Onward! To that which is endless,
as it was beginningless,
to undergo much, tramps of days, rests of nights,
To see nothing anywhere but what you may reach it and pass it.
To look up or down no road but it stretches and waits for you--
To know the universe itself as a road--
as many roads--
as roads for traveling souls.

May the road ahead for each of us be good. I love you. I am going to miss, greatly.

Amen and Blessed Be.