

Sermon

“Getting the Call to Ministry When Your Phone is on Mute”

By Jeff Liebmann

The daily routine of work, caring for loved ones, and maintaining a home may at times seem like driving on a highway. We enter the highway at young adulthood and pick up speed through the years until we take the exit ramp into our retirement. We may switch to different lanes along the way to provide us with some variation on our journey. But, the idea of leaving this familiar route and destination for another whose direction is unclear frightens us.

Being part of a religious community can reveal other roads to travel. Our church experiences can initiate a process of reflection about our lives. Our service to and with others can give us the conviction to consider new directions. Ultimately, our church family can help us muster the courage to take the exit ramp onto a different highway of life. For example, when I agreed to become a youth advisor, I never imagined that I might one day enroll in a seminary and seek to enter into the Unitarian Universalist ministry.

My Call to Ministry

My first call to the ministry happened in Lamoni, Iowa in the summer of 1999. It was a sunny Saturday morning and the week long Young Religious Unitarian Universalist Youth Council meeting had just ended. The members of the Council were gathered in the parking lot of Graceland College preparing to leave for our homes. Youth Council is the continental governing body of YRUU and the week had been filled with hours of hard work and late night resolution formation and election sessions. I stood next to a young woman I had known for three years and had worked with on Youth Council for both years of my term. As our departure approached, we looked at each other and – realizing that our service together on Council was ending – began to cry.

Now, generally speaking, the men in my family do not cry. But, that day, I cried. We hugged and cried some more. And then, something inside of me just . . . broke. For the first time in my life, I sobbed. Our emotional outpouring spread and others joined in. For twenty minutes, a group of us hugged and came together in a way I was at a loss to explain.

In the weeks following this emotional event, I analyzed my feelings and what had happened to me. Many clichéd metaphors flooded my mind – a door had opened; a dam had burst; a wall had crumbled. I knew that my outburst had somehow changed me. I knew that I would never be quite the same person I was before going to Iowa. And, I knew that this heralded only the beginning of my transformation.

In my time with the youth of our church, I have experienced other moments of transformation. Most, thankfully, have not been as cathartic. But, each one moved me closer to becoming someone else – to taking the pieces of that broken “whatever” on the asphalt in Iowa and building it into a new “me.” Eventually, I decided to take that exit ramp to pursue the Unitarian Universalist ministry.

Many people contributed to the ongoing process of crafting a new “me.” The most significant impact to my reconstruction came from our youth. While specific youth stand out, it is really certain general attributes shared by many of our youth that most influenced me. In my ministry with our youth, three of these attributes typical of today’s teens demand our attention and consideration. Because, we in the adult community can benefit from examining these attributes and how they reflect our own attitudes and relationship with our denomination.

Openness

Modern society provides enormous benefits to those of us with the financial resources and the historical privilege to enjoy them. But, freedom exacts a heavy price. We feel insecure about our jobs, the safety of our loved ones, our health, and our future well being. To cope with

these fears, we protect ourselves. We set aside money and buy insurance; we install locks and security systems and software; we build bigger police forces and jails; and we pass more laws defining permissible behaviors. But, most of all, we erect walls that dampen the impact of others' actions toward us and mask our innermost feelings from the observation of those around us. We adults spend a lifetime following rules, adapting to customs, and learning paradigms to navigate in our society. In effect, we mute our life phones to ring tones that are risky, or dangerous, or unknown.

Our youth, on the other hand, recognize few limits to what is possible in their lives. They challenge us, our assumptions, and our paradigms. Adolescents today embrace tools, technologies, and experiences. While most adults satisfy themselves with the default ring tones that come standard with their phones, youth seek out their own melodies for both their phones and for their lives.

Authenticity

Many of you share with me the joy (and immense frustrations!) of refinishing an older house. One of my favorite tasks is stripping off multiple layers of wall paper, paint, and other finishes to uncover an original surface. Quite often, we find that the best intentions of generations of owners never improved on the beauty of the wood grain of the first surface.

In the early 1900's, a psychologist named G. Stanley Hall wrote a book called *Adolescence*. Now, the notion of a pre-adult stage of life was not new. But, Hall crafted a new notion, defining those in their late teens as incomplete adults suffering from a psychological pathology of youth. He saw the "storm and stress" of this period of life as something best conquered under the careful guidance of adults. This work almost single-handedly defined how society would view teenage youth for the next century and even today. It laid the theoretical groundwork creating structures to control youth (like the modern high school) and to delay their entry into modern adult life. One can argue that these structures protect youth and prepare

them for maturity. On the other hand:

- X our society now judges a teen's intelligence and value by test scores, ignoring the many and varied gifts they have that cannot be measured or quantified;
- X our society provides youth few opportunities for meaningful work that compensates them fairly;
- X our society withholds many freedoms and responsibilities from youth that adults enjoy, but incarcerates youth in body and in spirit through a racist judicial system and a classist economy that fosters poverty and abuse;
- X our society floods their minds with images of unloving sex, pointless violence, and substance abuse, with few balancing images of human compassion, of the power of loving community, and of the wonder of exploring the mysteries of our existence.

In spite of all these oppressions, our youth exhibit an invigorating authenticity – an almost raw electricity. In a sea awash with commercial exploitation, fear mongering, and stereotypes, our youth stay afloat on the energy of their self identity. Teenagers rightly resist adult efforts – some well-intentioned, but some not – to cast a net over youth or to chain them to anchors. They seek to chart their own true course through the waters. They resist our attempts to paint over, or to wall paper, or to board up their authentic grain.

Joyfulness

The first time I was asked to sponsor youth at a weekend district youth conference, I was reluctant. What did I know about teenagers? I had no counseling experience. My own children were still in elementary school. That Friday night, I saw carloads of youth spill out into group hugs. This community obviously shared a history and a level of intimacy that would stretch my personal boundaries to their limit.

On Sunday morning, the conference ended with a “hugger-pillar” – when everyone joins

hands in a circle, then comes together into two parallel lines, and hugs everyone else goodbye. After my experiences during that weekend, I did not think twice about joining in.

That is the power of joy in our youth community. In 36 short hours, those youth changed me from someone reserved about physical contact and sharing into someone who thought nothing of hugging a relative stranger. Over the years, I have laughed with youth and I have cried with youth. I have witnessed amazing creativity and moments of spontaneous emotional combustion. I have met youth clinging to life on the power of the joy they shared with their peers and as a member of this faith. Youth have reminded me how to live life with unbridled passion and joy.

The Power of Love

How have the openness, authenticity, and joyfulness of youth affected my ministry? When I first joined a Unitarian Universalist fellowship, I adopted our commitment to support a free and responsible search for truth and meaning as my battle cry. As a humanist, I found comfort in a church that endorsed reason over creed; science over superstition. But, a funny thing happened in my personal search for what is true and right in life. In that parking lot in Iowa, my exposure to the openness, authenticity, and joyfulness of youth revealed feelings in myself that I could not explain; sensations that I could not quantify. Something within me awakened that was fundamental and frightening. And, like Pandora's Box, once freed from captivity, I could not force these feelings back into their old confines.

It was some time before I began to realize what this force may be. C. S. Lewis once wrote a book called *The Four Loves*, based on the four words for love in ancient Greek. Lewis distinguished love of family from love of friends from romantic love. The Greeks referred to the fourth love as agápe – the unconditional, self-sacrificing, active, volitional, thoughtful form of love that Lewis equates to Christian charity. Agápe is a "pure," ideal type of love – the love shared between souls. To many Christians, agápe is the love of God toward humanity.

Since my personal theology does not include a god, understanding agápe represents the next big step in my ongoing transformation, both as a person and as an aspiring minister. I know that agápe exists, because I experience it. I know that our youth possess it in abundance, because it manifests itself through their openness, authenticity, and joyfulness. But, I know that it often loses its potency for adults – perhaps as other forms of love take precedence. I hope that my ministry with youth will continue to help me as I merge onto this new highway of life. I also hope to return the favor by helping them to draw their own routes and to share those new maps with the adults in our community.

So, to you here today, I invite you to embrace your inner adolescent. We adults need to break out of the protective shells we so carefully craft and reinforce throughout our lives. *Embrace* your inner adolescent. Open yourself to experiences long set aside as inappropriate or risky or undoable. Embrace *your* inner adolescent. Peel away those years of meticulous effort to cover up your authentic self to others. Embrace your inner *adolescent*. Hold onto whatever in life gives you joy and prioritize everything else toward that end.

We are all ministers in this community of agápe. So, hug someone you have never hugged before. Tell them something about yourself that you have never shared. Unmute your phone, and turn up the volume on your ring tone, so you can hear life's call. And listen to the message – wherever it may lead.