

Hold On To What Is Good

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“I’ll let you in on a secret, Sharon. You are about to take on the best job in the world.” These are words that the Reverend Dudley Rose shared with me at my ordination at the First Parish in Concord on May 9, 1997. Later, my mentor, the Reverend Gary Smith made me stand up and look at all the people who came that night to see me become a minister. He made me turn and look so that I would remember that I never minister alone. These are the things that ministers remember. Dudley and Gary knew me well, and they know this profession, which I have served for nine years.

I do have the best job in the world. It is good. I have been privileged to serve two congregations, the Northern Hills Fellowship for one year, and First Unitarian Church for eight years. At this congregation you treat me like a treasure, and I honor this trust and generosity on your part. Every major thing I have asked for, you have given to me. Every major problem I have had, you have helped me. I don’t have many colleagues who can say the same thing.

Yet, ministry plays funny tricks on clergy, and not the ones you would think. I am not in danger of having a “large head” – which some of you periodically worry about. The last thing I remind myself of before I step to the pulpit on Sunday morning is that I am here as a vessel, to serve you with the God I know. This is silently said in great humility. I do things here and in this profession that I am not sure I would be able to do in other avenues, due to my faith and work. I consider this a great privilege and responsibility that I do not fully understand, and my ignorance wedds me to a grounding humility.

But ministry does play tricks on one over time. It is easy to believe that my worthiness as a person depends on being a minister. Reverend Dorothy Nickel Friesen notes, “Pastoral identity can get all wrapped up in ‘doing’ while neglecting the ‘being.’”¹ When I spoke to the Reverend Helen Lutton Cohen, daughter of Ed and Ginny Lutton, and a graduate of our RE program, about ministry and sabbaticals she said, “As human beings ministers need to be at peace with ourselves. We don’t need to be obsessed or cling to things. We need to read whole books.”

This is all part of having the best job in the world. And to keep it deep, molded to, but not merged with my identity, and real, a sabbatical is required. As Helen also said to me, “I mean, ‘God rested.’ And he told the Hebrews to rest too. I really do believe in that concept.” Helen refers to the Book of Leviticus that says in part

The Lord said to Moses on Mount Sinai, “Say to the people of Israel, when you come into the land which I give you, the land shall keep a Sabbath to the Lord.

¹ Dorothy Nickel Friesen, “She Died Without Me: Letting Go on Sabbatical” in *Congregations: The Alban Journal*, (July/August 2000), 13.

Six years you shall sow your field, and six years you shall prune your vineyard, and gather in its fruits; but in the seventh year there shall be a Sabbath of solemn rest for the land. (Lev. 25:1-4)

I need a sabbatical. My growing awareness is that everyone else needs a sabbatical too. And to some extent, I hope that First Church experiences a sabbatical concurrent with mine. In order to be clear about my sabbatical, I need to absent myself from here, which I will be doing, as of this Wednesday, March 1, for five months. But you do not need to absent yourself. Instead, I encourage you to gather, celebrate, relax, laugh, and get to know one another again. I was delighted to hear at last night's Board meeting that Social Activities has planned monthly events through June. With the disruptions in our building the last year, we have not had as many opportunities to gather and get to know one another, to have fun and relax with one another. In addition, some of our lay leaders have been working overtime for five years now, since we began planning for a capital campaign.

In his article on the Sabbath, Reverend Steve Doughty quotes Rabbi Chester Diamond who read from a penitential Sabbath prayer that says, "Days pass, years vanish, and we walk sightless among miracles."² What are the miracles we have not had time to see or celebrate here at First Church?

Doughty is also a member of the Presbyterian Church's Work Group on Sabbath Keeping. He explains

I have had the privilege of serving on a small group that my denomination dubbed "The Work Group on Sabbath Keeping." I believe the dubbing was done with a straight face. After all, if we are going to recover the gift of Sabbath rest we had better work at it, and work at it hard! "If Protestantism ever dies," a friend of mine once mused, "the Protestant work ethic will be the last thing to go." And of course, work at it we did. What else could we think of to do? So we read. We studied alone and together. We talked. We listened. We worshipped. And somewhere along the way, we sensed that something new was being born among us, both individually and as a body. What came, and came with a strength that stunned us, was a renewed sense of how immense right now is the need for Sabbath . . . the need for Sabbath and the nature of Sabbath have been pressing in our minds and hearts.³

For five years I have been our cheerleader for work, for planning, for participation, and now I ask you to rest with one another. My sincerest wish for First Church members and friends is that everyone pledges generously and gives until it feels good (let's set ourselves up together for a great year), and then come back for the companionship, renewal, stimulation, fun, for the discovery of the miracles among us so that we walk sightless no more. Certainly there will be things to learn and do here this spring (which is necessary), but it is also time for some rest, renewal, exploration, and fun. I ask you not to go away, but bring with you, and explore a different spirit here. I

²Steve Doughty, "Some Reflections on Sabbatical" in *Congregations: The Alban Journal* (July/August 2000), 4.

³ Doughty, 4.

hope you create that here so that we can share our experiences, our miracles, when I return in August.

During my sabbatical I have been encouraged to sow, reap, and lay fallow, that is; to read, study, meet with colleagues, and travel, to create a new work or sense of direction, and to rest so that a deeper understanding of myself comes forward. I do have a plan for sowing and lying fallow, reaping will have to wait to be discovered along the way. I will be taking classes at the University of Cincinnati, one on Judaism and one on Arabic Women Novelists. I had wanted to also take a Philosophy class, but since that professor was being so difficult, I decided, why bother, I am going on sabbatical!

“Wild enthusiasm” does not fully describe my thoughts about taking classes again. I intentionally selected subjects that will be new to me. Sure I mention Judaism and the Arab world, but I don’t consider myself well versed on either topic. So now, I get to hear lectures and read whole books on new information! Wild enthusiasm abounds. Thank you for your generosity. Every day I will remember that you make this possible.

I will continue to meet monthly with my interfaith clergy group, as well as attend some Heartland Minister’s meetings, and even General Assembly in June (where our Association does its yearly business) as long as my health is good. I have missed General Assembly for two years now, and I really want to go. I miss my colleagues. I hope, in general that extra rest and time spent in physical rehabilitation will shake off my lingering back problems. I’m not certain about this, but I am optimistic. I will be swimming, taking tai chi, walking, and spending time in the weight room at the gym. And when I am tired, I will sleep. What a gift, thank you. I will think of you with great love every time I take a nap and have a good night’s rest.

I will spend more time with my family – perhaps some Sunday day trips, and special time spent with my son, who just last week, when I told him I was marrying someone, wanted to know if I would still be his Mommy. Look, putting together “my mommy is a minister” is complex for a four year old. We’ll have some time to work on it together. Our family will also be moving at the end of March to Pleasant Ridge. I look forward to having the time to move into a house and not worry when things get lost in boxes for weeks or months. I’m on sabbatical, I won’t need that folder!

The UUA Sabbatical Handbook notes “‘Who is the minister when she or he is not actively being a minister?’ is a challenging question that can lead to some of the deepest human, spiritual reflection. The process of experiencing and reflecting on this question can be both disconcerting and transforming.”⁴ This is a question I will be playing with when lying fallow. I will also wait for the unexpected to find me, a spontaneous trip, trouble with my girlfriends, I don’t know, something.

Here is the hard part of sabbatical. I will miss you. Make no mistake, I will think about all of you and I will miss you very much. This is what I do on Sunday morning. I like seeing you. I like my work. What will I do without you? (I guess...rediscover who I am) For those of you I have known for a while, I am partway through “the story of your life,” and some of you are at amazing, very moving transitional points. I will have to wait until August before I hear the rest of your story. And I will wait for that moment, and I will want to hear from you when I return. I think most of August will be spent sharing what we have learned, spending time together, and reflecting on the past five

⁴ *Handbook on Sabbatical Leave for Ministers and Congregations*, UUA, (1992) 21.

months. I look forward to this and I hope that we can have a party when I come back. It will be good to return. Know that I love you now; I love you when I am gone, and I will love you when I return. This is my promise to you.

At last Tuesday's Board meeting Dick Bozian reminded me that upon my return I will be your longest tenured minister, since, well, we weren't sure, longer than Bob Clarke in the 1980's, maybe entering into "Thayer" territory from 1900. I charge you to find that out while I am on leave so we can celebrate that too when I return.

There are some groups who will still be working hard while I am on sabbatical, and I want to thank them. First, the Board of Trustees, who has done amazing work this year, from working through the by-laws, to answering life's persistent renovation questions. I will periodically be in touch with Board President, Beth Duff. Also, my Sabbatical Committee, the Worship Committee, and the Extended Ministry Committee who will be continuing with lay visitation.

After eight years I remain happy to be your minister. It is my privilege and an honor. I remember with great gratitude all that you have given me, including this precious sabbatical. You are a generous people and you are a strong people. Someone asked me if I would worry about you while I am gone. Honestly, the answer is "No." I don't worry about the laity here in that way. We have skilled, dedicated leadership. The staff is good. Members are committed, communication is good, and our stewardship is strong. You are strong, and flexible, and ready to find the miracles that abound. It is good to love. It is good to work and to rest. It is good to discover and play, and it is good to return.

May your eyes see only beauty
Your ears be filled with sweet song
May your hands hold only gladness
Your feet be dancing on the ground
As you turn into the morning
Bathing in the dew
May your heart burst into flower
Your joy be ever true.