



**Fireproof: Installation Sermon in Honor of
The Reverend Dawn Cooley**

First Unitarian Church of Louisville, Kentucky

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I feel uniquely qualified to give an installation sermon to this congregation, the First Unitarian Church of Louisville, because our congregations are kissing cousins. First Unitarian Church Cincinnati, where I minister, was founded six months before your congregation, both of us in 1830. Cincinnati and Louisville were considered the western outposts most likely to successfully seed Unitarian congregations. We both sit on the banks of river cities, Louisville and Cincinnati. We have shared members, like Julie Underwood, whose niece, Anne Ulinksy sits in your choir today.

In addition, you are, like First Unitarian Cincinnati, one of the few remaining urban Unitarian Universalist congregations. The first time I walked in your building it all seemed so familiar to me; the history, the street people, the parking (not enough and not obvious), the confusing front door (that is really a side door), a beautiful, old, wooden, and mostly unused front door, the urban neighborhood, a commuter congregation, obvious additions to the building, the wood architecture, faded glory days, an old “liberal religious” outpost in what used to be the west.

For our installation sermon this evening I thought I would share with you the nuggets I have gleaned in my last thirteen years as your neighbor to the north. Thirteen years in one ministry is unusual these days. It counted as a long term ministry six years ago (much to my surprise). Though, it hardly compares to the length of time served by the clergy in the front row here, the Reverend Bob Reed, the Reverend Richard Beal, and the Reverend Elwood Sturtevant. It is not a boring, moldy ministry. First Unitarian has added two new staff members and a worship service in the last year, and we are growing. I say this not because we are perfect but because I want to assure you that we are not duds. So let’s have a conversation on fire management, marathons, secrets, odd things you learn, and flexibility.

In 1985 a fire brought down this sanctuary. My first visit to your building I was taken with how you chose to rebuild on this location, amidst the ruins of the fire. You didn’t take the insurance money and run. You didn’t disband. You didn’t join other congregations. You remained. You survived. You combined old and new, a modern glass sanctuary and wood paneled minister’s study. You added on. You improvised. You healed. You chose to live, here, on this sacred ground. Here you learned that you are fireproof.

There is an Affrilachian poet, Frank X. Walker, who describes churches as “fireproof.” He writes “but church people are like fire ants/as soon as the smoke clears they’ll be stirring up cement/testing new extinguishers/installing a smoke alarm in the pulpit.” We might not moan and wail as the congregation he describes but we are like fire ants and our “Faith won’t just go up in smoke.” So remember, you are fireproof. Disasters happen. No two ways about it. That is life and congregational living. Best not to panic, but just wade through. It is our ministry, and a sign of our ministry, how we pick up the pieces after the disaster, stir cement and install smoke alarms. In doing so, we live our values and faith and teach our members and friends how to live by them. A crisis is an opportunity to be who we are. Be who you are, and be proud, fireproof. Not disasterproof, not embarrassmentproof, not mistakeproof, but fireproof.

Here is a simple fact of ministry – our endeavor is a marathon, not a sprint. I want you to remember this. Our congregations and clergy are not measured in years, but in decades, generations, even centuries. Some of the slowest time in the world is church time. In professional organizations around the world people are meeting daily to do their business. But not here.

We like to meet monthly. Our time here is so slow. We build relationships, long term relationships, and they are deeply rewarding (even when frustrating). Always remember that ministry is a marathon. So pace yourself. You are not called to attend meetings four nights a week in the service of this congregation. Neither is your minister. Frankly, I think that three night meetings a week is too many, especially in a commuter congregation (where members commute 20 or minutes rather than just stopping by the neighborhood church that is five minutes away). This is my thirteenth year in one congregation and I do two night meetings a week.

I recommend no more than two night meetings a week for you or your minister. And for the love of God, Reverend Dawn Cooley, do not work more than 48 hours a week. Have you heard your mentor? She doesn’t always listen well. She is a high achiever. Because this is a marathon, with no more than two night meetings a week, you and your minister and ministry will run longer. Go home, all of you, love yourselves, your families, have your private lives and private time which will help you do this ministry that you create together. And you won’t get as sick and tired of one another, which will also be a bonus.

In Reverend Cooley’s fifth year, send her on a four month sabbatical. Our ministry succeeds with refreshment. If you are jealous about the sabbatical, I am sorry you don’t have one, truly. Everyone needs one. If that doesn’t help way lay your jealousy just remember Reverend Cooley will never get a holiday bonus (unless you do something unusual here that I have never heard about in any other UU congregation). So send her off with love, gratitude, joy, and welcome her back, refreshed. Better for you. Better for her.

There is an old adage from Alcoholics Anonymous that we are only as sick as our secrets. Amen to that. It applies to congregations too. So let me directly say that you have had some challenges in the last two decades. Perhaps some things you would like to keep secret, but keeping secrets will take too much energy you need for your ministry. And the secrets will keep you sick. You won’t heal.

So let me tell you that your cousin congregation in Cincinnati has also had bad decades, actually bad generations. There was the initial endowment fund we lost to questionable penny stocks over a generation ago. We lost every penny of an endowment fund (eventually restarted and now professionally maintained – lesson learned the hard way). After I arrived it took three years for

members to tell me that story, and it went a long way to explaining the mystery of the rigid endowment fund rules. People were ashamed. It was a mistake and we learned and have learnt again when we revised our endowment rules a few years ago. Mistakes happen. Problems happen. Talk about them, nicely, to the appropriate people so we can live and learn together.

Then there were the many unhappy ministries. Oh, where to begin? Let's put it this way. Since the married minister ran off with the organist prior to WWII, no minister had remained at First Unitarian Cincinnati more than eight years until I arrived. The unspoken rule was "five and out." And the departures were all so dramatic. There was the minister who drank (in the 1970's) and had to be bailed out of jail by members of the Board of Trustees. There was once an hour long meeting with the minister and Board members until one Board member finally blurted out "You're fired! That's what we have come to tell you. You're fired!" How not to handle a termination. But the writing was on the wall for that one. Sometimes even intelligent, perceptive people refuse to see the obvious, and don't know how to talk about it. Our congregations are not disasterproof. We all make mistakes.

Friends, don't keep problems secrets. Tell your minister where the landmines are located. Tell her the "embarrassing history nice people don't talk about." Talk about lurking problems, nicely, in a timely fashion to the appropriate people (which does not include parking lot gossip or late night phone trees). To be healthy, we gently tell the truth in love. Get help if you need it – a consultant, an accountant, the District Executive or other district services. Talk about problems so you can fix them together.

Rule A) congregations have problems. Rule B) the problems are not the measure of the congregation. Rule C) how you manage your problems (the fire) is the measure of a congregation. Rule D) have a sense of humor. We manage problems by talking to one another openly and by getting help. Be the fire ants. We have to tell the truth as we find it. It is as simple and hard as that.

It is also possible to learn hard life lessons in ministry. My short list includes: 1) Your children really are not your children, 2) Your children won't be like you so don't even try, 3) Everyone dies, everyone, even when it is too early, unfinished, not right, everyone dies so I and you will die too – we are but short time visitors in this world, 4) If your finances allow it, moved into a retirement home or some assisted living when you are still mildly healthy. If you fall and break your hip in your house, you will find yourself with many less options – ones that are even less appealing than moving into a retirement community, 5) Always have your papers in order (will, estate plan, life insurance, health insurance, formal guardian for your children) even if you are under thirty years old. Or someone else will need to pay for your funeral, someone you don't like will raise your children, your estate will lose more money than you can count if it needs to go through the courts.

I know this sounds like a stark list, but my take-away is that life happens, and I am so delighted to know this. Be as prepared as possible, and then let go. Really, let go. Let go (but go ahead and put your seat belt on before you begin). The holding on stuff to achieve control is one enormous illusion. Accept that it is a ride. Things will go better. This I learned standing at your graveside, sitting with you in my office while you sobbed, when your children called me on the telephone to confess something, when I followed you to court, when you lost your job, when I stood at your bedside as your heart stopped beating. This I learned through you in our ministry, and I am forever grateful. This knowledge had changed my life for the better.

There is a sticky note with a message on the bulletin board above my desk. It reads “blessed are the flexible, for they will not be bent out of shape.” I did not write this, nor do I know who did, but in ministry and life, these are words to live by. Think about how goofy ministry is. We are communities of hundreds of people, mostly unsupervised volunteers, without a creed, in an anti-authoritarian religious tradition peppered with vastly over-educated members. Oh please, be flexible and exercise humility and humor.

For the love of all you hold dear, have a sense of humor. This was taught to me by my mentor in ministry, the Reverend Gary Smith of Concord, Massachusetts. While waiting to speak in the pulpit, he used to tell his former Assistant Minister that there was toilet paper on her shoe, or that her skirt was tucked in her hose. If you left papers on the podium he was likely to tell you that they had disappeared. Humor makes the problems and mistakes easier.

We live and work in one of the most humorous professions of all time, ministry. It was the best of times (we renovated our building). It was the worst of times (*story deleted in written form to protect anonymity* – how many principles did that violate?). Have a sense of humor and for your own sake, please bend wherever possible. Be gracious with one another. Forgive one another. Offer and accept apologies between one another. Take the high ground. Assume the best until otherwise notified. And for the love of everything you treasure, keep your emails short! The road to congregational trouble is paved with long, frequent emails.

This is the best profession in the world, ministry, and clergy and congregations create it together. This ministry, whatever you create with Reverend Cooley, will be your ministry, your shared ministry. It will stretch you, challenge you, ideally make you a better person. It will be glorious. And it will be ridiculous, and silly, and disastrous and unexpected. And this mess, this glorious human mess, is why it is worthy, why it is real, why it can make a positive difference to you and this world. So go be the fire ants. This pulpit does not yet have a smoke alarm. There is work to be done. Amen.