"When You Can't Go Home"
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When one person tries something new, the ripples are endless. Joseph Tuckerman, studied with William Ellery Channing at Harvard. They both became Unitarian ministers at the turn of the 19th century. Rev. Tuckerman ministered to the congregation in Chelsea, preaching twice on Sundays and ministering to the people of the congregation. Chelsea is not too far outside of Boston, near the ocean. The community was filled with many sailors and their families. Rev. Tuckerman learned about their lives - sailors gone from their families for months at a time, the impact on those who stayed ashore, and the poverty they experienced. He wanted to help in any way he could and so he helped to provide food and clothing. He was with the congregation in Chelsea for 25 years before he resigned but his call to ministry was far from over. He went to Boston determined to help those who were underserved. There he met sailors, factory workers, farmers, and people who had recently immigrated to the United States. His heart encountered people who couldn’t afford enough food to eat, didn’t have fuel to cook or keep warm, and who didn’t have enough for shoes or clothes for themselves and their families.

His old roommate and friend, the Rev. William Ellery Channing had just helped to create the American Unitarian Association. Rev. Tuckerman turned to his ministerial colleagues in the Boston area for support and he became the first “minister at large” of the newly formed association with the goal to help those on the margins. It was new to have a minister who was not working in a congregational setting. Not only that, he was to be compensated for his work. He brought together formal training while keeping ties to the local congregation and the larger association.

He had spent many years studying for the ministry and he realized there was much more to learn. He became curious about what services were available through the government and what had been done through other religious organizations. He studied what worked and what didn’t and what was missing. Importantly, he went and spent time with the people themselves and asked them about their experiences and their needs. He heard their stories about a loved one who died on the job, illnesses that could not be treated because they lacked money for a doctor, people who had to leave homes because they didn’t make enough to cover the rent, children who at the age of 4 and 5 who had to work to help the family afford food to eat, elders who had no one to help care for them.

As he listened to their needs and their stories, he also encountered the messages he had learned from his privilege. The refrain went like this - don’t offer money, because it could be used to buy alcohol. Don’t offer help - people are simply lazy and we need to encourage them to work harder. He recognized this privilege and he went out among
the people to help them, providing what they said they needed. The people he helped spoke words of gratitude; they weren’t accustomed to getting what they said they needed, they would receive what others assumed they needed.

As the minister-at-large, he was not alone in this work. He brought back to his ministerial colleagues what he was learning from the people about the lived reality of what it means to be human for the people he meets. He helped to bring awareness to the privilege of class and encouraged colleagues and their congregations towards spiritual growth. Tuckerman collaborated with his ministerial colleagues serving in congregations in the area. Together, they formed the Benevolent Fraternity, a place in each neighbourhood where people could get food and clothes. Over the years, it also started to offer schools for children and summer camps. This organization lives on today under the title of the UU Urban Ministry.

Tuckerman is known as the “father” or “patron saint” of community ministry - the first in our Unitarian history to serve as a minister outside of a congregational setting. There was no expectation or ultimatum to the people he served where they had to make the Unitarian church their home, instead, he went to the places they already were to live out the call of welcome, care, and service to all. This form of ministry continues today bringing our values into faith-based and secular settings including school campuses, prisons, hospitals, long-term care and hospice, service organizations, the military, soup kitchens, street ministry, law enforcement, disaster relief, and counseling centres. For community ministry, the world is its parish home.

I have been in the military for 18 years now and I know that home can be a difficult concept to pin down. My friends in the military often have signs that read: home is where the military sends us, followed by plaques of all the places they have been posted. It can feel as though you are never there long enough to call a place home. I’ve been lucky - I haven’t had to move as much as others.

When I moved from Toronto to Borden in 2016, I remember not wanting to lose my church. I had found my home in Unitarian Universalism bringing with me experiences in other religious traditions. I made plans to keep Sundays open as often as possible and it worked, for a while. Reality soon set in because what I was asking of myself and my family wasn’t realistic: a three hour round trip, preparing and packing lunches, a wiggly toddler, committee meetings and coffee hour. Watching online only made me want to be there even more - it was grief, because I was losing my church.

Where do you go if you can’t go home?

I still needed church. I needed to gather in spiritual community, to renew my sources of strength and hope, to sing and make music. I needed the harmonies and the dissonance of life shared with others.
I did what our Canadian Unitarian and Universalist ancestors had to do. The late Rev. Phillip Hewitt tells the story of Unitarians and Universalists who emigrated to Canada from England and the United States, they often did not find a congregation in their local area. In an era where church attendance was expected, our ancestors found themselves in churches of other denominations. In many cases, they were barred from participating in congregational life and rituals; present but not included.

I attended one of the chapels on the base where our theology differed and I could still be with people and we could make music together. I stayed connected to our tradition through connections with ministerial colleagues - meetings, retreats, and services when I could. It was the book “The Call to Care” which sent my heart soaring - a collection of essays from Unitarian Universalist community ministers - people bringing our faith out into the world today. My heart could say nothing but “yes” to that call. The good news of our faith - that we are meant to be interdependent, that we are meant to support one another, that no one has it all figured out, and that all of us are worthy of love and belonging, and no one is beyond saving - is lived out every single day. No where in those pages did I read about a need to convert others to our tradition or even really introducing the idea of coming to church. Instead, I read of people following Tuckerman’s path - meeting people in the context of their daily lives, working alongside them, learning from them and being changed by them.

This is the work that we are all called to do in our daily living - it is our shared ministry.

In my work as a chaplain, there is something we call “the ministry of presence.” At the hospital, we call it “creative loitering.” This is when we make it a point to go out among the people to be present - hallways, break spaces, out in the garden. In the military, this might be participating in the morning workout with the unit, stopping by the orderly room to greet the human resource administrators, or the hangar floor where the aircraft technicians are busy at work. It is the act of making oneself available which is part of building relationships. Underneath it all, there is a message - I am here if you need me, when you need me, and when you do, you know who I am.

Kate Braestrup, author of the book “Here if You Need Me” became a minister after the death of her husband. It had not been her dream to become a minister, it was his. As she was making meaning of the deep grief and loss, she decided to explore it and in some ways, she lived it out for them both. In her work as a chaplain supporting search-and-rescue efforts, she has borne witness to tragedy and great joy. She writes this in response to someone she was supporting:

“Ah. I smiled. I'm not really here to keep you from freaking out. I'm here to be with you while you freak out, or grieve or laugh or suffer or sing. It is a ministry of presence. It is showing up with a loving heart.”
There is a gift in our very present, in that showing up with a loving heart - we might not have the means to change the situation, to dismantle complex systems of oppression with one new idea. The real gift is being present to welcome a person, exactly as they are - this is a way to bring our faith into the world. The love that we have to offer as we make space for silence, conversation, as we offer a meal or a smile, can become the seed of hope and strength for someone in their day. We all need a little help from our friends.

This ministry of presence isn’t only a gift for the person we are ministering too, but also to the one doing the ministering. In that act of extending care, sometimes to someone who on the surface seems very different from you, a relationship is forged - viewpoints can differ, life experiences are vast, and when we stay present with it all, it can be the moment that opens the door of welcome which starts with our own hearts. This is how we come to love our neighbours as ourselves.

This is what our religion hopes to do - to bring more love into the world today and everyday. Together, we make real the words of the Rev. Theodore Parker who said: “Be ours a religion which, like sunshine, goes everywhere; its temple, all space, its shrine, the good heart; its creed, all truth, its ritual, works of love, its profession of faith, divine living.”

The world is our home, as imperfect as home can be - and this is where we all minister. The work of community ministry, it is all of ours to do. May we make manifest these works of love, across all time, all space, and in each of our hearts.

May it be so. Blessed Be. Amen.