

“All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Ministry”

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It's still a very popular book, though it seems a little dusty now:

All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten was published in 1988, and written by Robert Fulghum.

He's a white man, born in Texas in 1937...and he's a Unitarian Universalist minister, currently serving as the Minister Emeritus of the Edmonds UU congregation in the state of Washington.

The book's premise was simple: that the most important of life's lessons can be learned at an early age, as they might be taught in a supportive and inclusive kindergarten class.

It's been noted that Fulghum was writing from a highly privileged perspective...and today our understanding of racial, socio-economic and climate justice all cast new light what it is we all "really need to know"...

But today I'm noticing that the book was written by a Unitarian Universalist minister. And so, some of its basic premises may ring true for us, even as our world has changed and our perspectives are evolving.

Here's an abridged and slightly edited list of the most important lessons the author identified:

Share everything.

Play fair.

Don't hurt people.

Put things back where you found them.

CLEAN UP YOUR OWN MESS. (He capitalized that one.)

Don't take things that aren't yours.
Say you're SORRY when you HURT somebody.
Live a balanced life.
Stick together.
Be aware of wonder.
and Everything dies.

Now in my message today, I'm not attempting to improve on, nor summarize, this book.

But it occurred to me that, as that particular UU minister found guidance in the kindergarten class...I have learned important lessons in this congregation: a place that Reverend Shawn Newton-Gauthier called a "little living laboratory" of the human spirit.

It is, I believe, a place that teaches us important lessons about life, about how to get along with others, and how to make sense of this world so we can live in it with some degree of peace, courage and grace.

As I look ahead to this handful of last Sundays with you, it occurred to me that "all I really need to know I've learned in parish ministry."

Well, perhaps not everything.

Yet there have been important lessons that I've learned in these eight years with you (seven years on staff with an extra year of internship)...lessons that I've been very grateful for.

So, here goes: in no particular order, *a few things* I Really Need to Know, that I've Learned in Parish Ministry.

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Number One. Everyone has serious troubles.

I know you've heard the Buddhist wisdom story about the woman who is inconsolable in her grief, who is told to search the village for a mustard seed, which will bring her the comfort she longs for.

The challenge is that the person who gives her the mustard seed must be someone who has never suffered a terrible loss.

In her grief, she knocks on door after door, expecting to find people whose lives have been free of sorrow...and yet every single person has experienced grief in some form.

In ministry, we come to know that this is absolutely true.

We have the privilege of seeing behind the curtain of many people's lives--many of which may appear virtually trouble-free on the outside--and glimpse the burdens and struggles that are present on the inside.

If the struggles are not currently present, they were present in the past. There are griefs and struggles in every life, without exception.

I've learned so very much from witnessing the degree to which people meet these challenges with courage.

Sometimes that courage involves being vulnerable and honest with a few people in a circle of trust...and sometimes that circle includes a minister.

But even when it doesn't--even we ministers don't hear about the challenges first-hand--we know they're there, because this is one of the lessons we've learned.

Sorrows and joys are interwoven in every human life, and they form the fabric of our common humanity.

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Lesson Number Two (which is related):

Everything is impermanent.

People come and go...along with projects, programs and problems.

In the ever-changing kaleidoscope of congregational life, activities and concerns arise and fall away, some very quickly and some after a very long time.

But either way, whatever it is, "this too shall pass"...and we can learn to hold things gently as a result.

This is a lesson that's taken me some time to learn.

Looking back on some of the congregational concerns that caused me a sleepless night or two (or two hundred, it sometimes it felt like)...I see now that they were fleeting.

That isn't to say that we shouldn't take them seriously, nor put our time and love and energy into dealing with them.

But remembering the lesson that "nothing lasts" helps me put ministry...and life...into perspective...and helps me look at every issue with a little more softness and kindness.

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Lesson Number Three: There are limits to everything.

It is possible to do too much, to try too hard, to over-reach one's capacities.

As I've said before, even though our familiar hymn says, "Tell them I said 'yes' to life"...

That doesn't mean we can say 'yes' to everything!

In ministry across our movement as in other religious faiths, and indeed throughout all the helping professions, burn-out is a serious problem.

The faith-based Barna Group in the United States recently reported that since 2015 there has been a significant decline in the physical, mental and spiritual health of Protestant pastors.¹

It may be that in order to maintain our well-being in times that are deeply challenging, ministers must make difficult decisions that involve doing less than is hoped-for or expected.

Meanwhile, the health of lay leaders and all members of the congregation matters just as much.

And so, together as Canadian Unitarians and as a society we are continually called to live as sustainably as we can.

The Australian cartoonist Michael Leunig put it well when he said "nothing can be loved at speed." That is: love and care comes quietly and slowly. It is not rushed. It is fully present.

And it is our job, whether we are parish ministers or not, to create the space needed to care for the world, starting with our own circle of care.

I'm so happy to see in First Unitarian Congregation...in its leadership and all of its members...the ever-deepening ability to seek, connect and serve in creative new ways that will be sustainable and abundant for years to come.

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Lesson Number Four: There are larger forces at work.

¹ Jon Brown, "Exhausted Pastors Suffering Decline in Overall Health, Respect, Friendship: Study" Fox News, June 24, 2023 <https://www.foxnews.com/us/exhausted-pastors-suffering-decline-overall-health-respect-friendship-study>

In a congregation, no matter how much authority or influence anyone has, they are part of a much larger system which moves in its own way-- sometimes to our aggravation, and often to our delight.

And so it is with life.

There are always many aspects of congregational life that are beyond any minister's control.

That reality has, I think, helped me a little bit in coming to terms with the Larger Realities of my family, my community, my society and the world as a whole.

One of the many paradoxes of ministry is that everything we can influence is counter-balanced by everything we can't. And so, we are always called to both responsibility and humility.

I am reminded of the Larger Forces by so many things...including the wisdom teachings of so many traditions, many of which I keep handy at my desk to read several times a day.

One of my favourites is familiar to many, written by the 20th Century theologian Reinhold Niebuhr:

"God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."

That is to say, I bear responsibility...yet there are, also, other forces at work. It is up to me...yet it is not all up to me.

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Number Five.

I first learned this one from the late writer Brenda Ueland:

"Everyone is interesting and has something important to say."

In parish ministry, I've found that when you spend enough time with anyone, even someone you might not think you "like," you learn that they've had a fascinating life and that they have something to offer and teach you.

One often learns, too, that you have more in common than you might expect.

Unhurried and undivided attention...open-hearted presence to one another...can allow us to form meaningful relationships across all kinds of divides...which hopefully can extend in wider and wider circles.

When I was in my early twenties, I wrote a song for a well-known children's television program.

The song "Everybody's Different, Everyone's the Same" was rejected by the educational consultants at the time--because they thought it was simply incorrect.

They thought I'd made a mistake and should have said "everybody's different, not everyone's the same."

Recognizing, of course, that individual and cultural differences are deeply significant...and that lack of respect for those differences causes terrible harm...I also wanted to sing about the common threads of our shared humanity. A Unitarian Universalist perspective, before I even knew what that was.

I didn't realize, at the time, that what I was saying was 'radical' in any way--because the idea had been instilled in me somehow, through wisdom that had been passed down to me.

I heard it again recently, expressed in an Indigenous legend which teaches that the divine spark came down from the Creator and was instilled in everyone.

In my experience, when we are fully present to others, and for that matter when we are fully present to ourselves, we come into relationship with the shared Divinity which is an inherent part of our human nature.

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Number Six.

Nothing is everything you want it to be...and everything is enough.

The Quaker teacher Parker Palmer and others call it the "tragic gap"--the distance between what you want to see or hope to find...and what actually is. Our ability to live, to stay, to abide in that tragic gap is what allows us to grow.

Unfortunately, this is generally no fun at all.

It is certainly not the blissful, serene, all-knowingness that some of us might have hoped to find when we began any spiritual path.

No: Life is inevitably much more messy, difficult, painful, frustrating and frightening than we want it to be.

As much as we seek "answers" to these problems, we're likely to end up with more "questions"...so, we're called to sit in the unpleasant unknowing...in the hope that we may begin to experience it, instead, as Holy Mystery.

In parish ministry, everything one does falls short in some way. I think Rev. Shawn and my colleagues would agree with me.

Every sermon, song, program offering, conversation...they're all imperfect and incomplete.

Something will always go "wrong"...and somehow, everything is "all right".

Somehow, even in the unfinishedness and the imperfection of everything in congregational life, it is enough.

I am enough. You are enough.
We are enough.

It is enough.

Number Seven

It's related to every point I've made, but deserves a mention of its own:
We are continually called to live with paradox.

I don't know the answer, yet I must live into the question;

I don't understand this person, yet I must remain in relationship with them;

I am an individual yet part of an interdependent whole;

I must attend to my own needs while also attending to the needs of others.

This is the call of any kind of community, and especially one that is bound together by intention, or as we say, by covenant.

When we live and serve together in congregational life, we're presented, over and over again, with the paradoxes and challenges that baffle us...and that invite us to grow.

And Number Eight...the final number in what is, I know, an incomplete list:

You always teach what you most need to learn.

I don't remember where I first heard that, but in parish ministry I have found it to be true.

Like all ministers, I have my recurring themes and recurring sermons. Not coincidentally, they align with the lessons I've been called to learn continually throughout my life.

My hope is that what I have been trying to learn aligns at least somewhat with what some of you have been trying to learn.

The truth is, I really don't have the chops to do anything else!

And in the wide ranging curriculum offered by Unitarian Universalism, perhaps it's natural that we would circle back to home base...something I'll speak about in my final sermon on October 1st.

In any case, parish ministry...perhaps especially in Unitarian Universalism, but I'm sure in other religious traditions as well...parish ministry provides a unique opportunity to ask "What matters?" "What is important now?" "What is the meaning of this?" and "What do I need to learn?"

An opportunity to make meaning from direct life experience as much as from any set of written teachings...

Much like the young student who created her own meaning in the story Angela read earlier.

I've been so very grateful for the opportunity to explore what matters through all of my interactions with you, and through the sermons and songs I have shared.

In so many ways, this place--and by that I mean this online sanctuary, as well as Oakwood Collegiate and 175 St. Clair West, and all the many places I've met you over the years...

These sacred places have all been classrooms for me...and you have been my teachers.

Thank you...and thanks for listening.