

GIVING THE WORLD THE BEST WE HAVE
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INSTILLATION SERVICE
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“Give the world the best you have and you'll get kicked in the teeth. Give the world the best you have anyway,” writes Dr. Kent M. Keith.

Isn't that a future to look forward to?! And that's the conclusion of a whole series of paradoxes that build on each other. “Do good, and people will accuse you of ulterior motives. Do good anyway.” “What you spend years building may be destroyed overnight. Build anyway.” And then, “Give the world the best you have and you'll get kicked in the teeth. Give the world the best you have anyway.”

What an encouraging thought on which to start a new ministry, and to enter a new phase of being for the UU Congregation of Grand Traverse! I am familiar with a slightly different version of these words that were attributed to Mother Teresa. When I read them I thought, “There is the paradox of ministry. Maybe it is the paradox of congregations.”

We are called, both minister and congregation, to serve the world. We may have slightly different priorities about in what order we place our emphasis, but we are called to work together to chart our path, and walk it into the future. Let us unpack this paradox of ministry, of congregations.

The call to ministry is one of those faintly mysterious terms that is difficult for UUs with a pragmatic bent to understand. 1

The original *call* in our church culture appears in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. *God* in whatever form god is understood by the writer, calls to the faithful follower. “Do this.” or “Go There.” or “Follow Me.” And the proper answer is always, “Here I am. Send me.”

Few, if any, of my colleagues would claim such a call. And yet, for all of us, there came a time when we could no longer ignore –what?--the still, small, voice within; the need to explore and go deeper into matters of faith; or the nagging itch between the shoulder blades that can't be reached? You know, that itch that says, “You must change your life. You must find meaning in your work. You must explore how you can best serve the world.”

Often the call does not come at a convenient time. Many of us are already involved in careers that have little to do with ministry. Often such careers provide a higher income than one can expect from ministry. Let me say that I know of no UU minister who chose the path of ministry as a pathway to great wealth. If one did he or she is greatly disappointed. Thus, answering a call to ministry often requires a financial sacrifice. It may also require leaving a home, hardship for the family, and a willingness to move to a different kind of landscape and climate—like farther north than you ever expected to live.

The call to ministry will require sacrifice, but it is also a call to love. It is a call to learn to love more people, to love them despite, perhaps because of, their imperfections. Dr. Keith says, "People are illogical, unreasonable, and self-centered. Love them anyway."

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Ministry requires that both minister and congregation members grow their hearts. The minister will expand his or her heart to love all the members of the congregation, and the congregation will expand their hearts to love the minister AND all the new people who will come to check out the new guy in town.

The call to ministry is also a call to justice making. Keith says, "The good you do today will be forgotten tomorrow. Do good anyway." Not only that, but the justice making you pursue will be praised by some; but others will not see justice, they will see *meddling*. This is part of the paradox of ministry that, in my judgment, will be always with us.

However, the call to ministry is also a call to live fully in the here and now. Dawna Markova exhorts us to "not die un-lived lives." "May we choose to inhabit our days," she says. And continues, "May we choose...to loosen our hearts until they become wings, torches, promises." It is in living our lives fully that we find meaning and satisfaction. It is when we are unafraid to explore and develop all facets of our lives—body, mind, spirit and soul—that we come to complete fruition. We, who are ministers, are called to model this fullness, and to help develop it in the lives of our congregants. We must do it in the knowledge that it makes us vulnerable. And we must do it anyway. Ministry is a paradox for the minister.

I think it is also a paradox for the congregation. Let us recognize that the calling of one minister means the loss of all other possible ministers for this time. However wonderful the minister you have called, (and I think this one is especially wonderful),

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those of you who dreamed of a goddess figure may not find that dream fulfilled. Those of you who wanted to grow your Religious Education department through the minister's family must find another way to reach that worthy goal. You've got a great minister here, you are installing him to serve you for the next X number of years, and you took the leap of faith that resulted in this evening of celebration. The paradox is that you lost all the other possibilities for this time.

For you also, the call you extended to Chip to serve this congregation is a call to live fully together. Together you will learn each other's talents and foibles. Together you will craft a vision for the future that maximizes the talents and minimizes the foibles. Together you will decide how best to serve your community and the larger world. Markova says, "May each of us choose to risk our significance; to live so that which comes to us as seed goes to the next as blossom, goes on as fruit."

Grand Traverse has a rich history. You planted a small fellowship here, and grew it into a congregation of over 200 people. You are blossoming here in the beautiful tip of the Michigan mitten. Now, you must work together with your new minister to complete the cycle. What comes

next? What goals will you set? What plans will you make that will bring to fruition your living fully together knowing that the paradox means that there will be setbacks along the way?

Part of the paradox is that you are living with change. You are transitioning to new leadership. This means that some things—maybe things that seemed very comfortable to you—will change. And change is not easy. 3

I have a favorite story about change, and an audience that has not heard it before, so I will share it. My husband, John Kratochvil, had a wry sense of humor. One day, when we were struggling with a decision in our small fellowship in Jackson, Mississippi, he said: “The trouble with change is—things just aren't the same any more!” John had a way with words....

Any new leader, especially a new minister, will bring about change-- maybe not even intentionally... Just having a different person in the pulpit is a change. Having a different person interacting with you pastorally is another change. Having a different person representing Grand Traverse in the community is yet another change. Some people will be very happy about the difference, and others may not appreciate it so much.

Church growth experts tell us unanimously that any change in leadership means some people leave. However, the paradox is in operation here also—more people will come! People will come to see what a young, male UU minister has to say about the meaning of life. They will come to new programs, they will come with you, their friends, to explore a faith that celebrates reason AND is unafraid to explore matters of the spirit. They will come because they are hungry for a faith that makes sense of a world of shifting power and changing cultural values.

They will come, as they always come, in search of a faith community that helps them discover the deeper meaning of their lives. They will come, as they always come, a bit timid, unsure, maybe carrying a Bible that first time because this is what they were taught to do when they were children.

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They will come, not knowing that they are searching for theological grounding, but they will find it here.

They will stay, if they find acceptance, welcoming, and love. They will stay if you, the people of the congregation, give them a reason to grow their spiritual life in company with you and your new minister. Sadly, change means that some will be so uncomfortable that they choose to leave. However, the paradox is that change also means that more people will come. You have an opportunity to grow and develop, along with the new people who need our sustaining faith and find it within your walls.

This time of change is also a time of excitement and joy. You united to craft a beautiful ceremony this evening, enlivened with glorious music, and brightened with art. Beginnings are wonderful, for there is much that is possible. However, they also seem fraught with a *frisson* of anxiety. If all is possible, then I may not like everything that develops. There is a little trepidation present, underlying the celebration. But—you made your decision (I think a good one), you called Chip to

your ministry, and now it is time to go forward together.

Let it be with a determination to give the world the best that you have. And how might that be enacted? Only you can decide your path, but let me offer three guidelines.

The first is, give yourselves the best that you have. Give yourselves the gift of each other's presence. You will not be able to reach your potential unless you are present here and to each other.

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I ask you to not only attend the services at this congregation, but to be fully present when you are here. Let go of your worries about the state of the world, about the office spat, about the neighbor's sassy kid. Be present here and with each other. Take full advantage of your lovely surroundings. Include them in your church life. And remember to serve your own people, all of your own people, with the best that you have.

My second guideline is to give your community the best that you have. Traverse City is a lovely, growing city. You have an opportunity to be a force in shaping its future. Give it your best shot! You were active in issues around gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered rights. You may want to expand your service in that area. Perhaps you will choose to be a presence at the T.C. Cherry Festival. Whatever you choose, give this community the best you have.

And the third guideline is to give the larger world the best that you have. Part of that "best" is to continue building a healthy, viable faith community, ready to welcome all who are seeking. However, what else will you choose to do in the world? Will you focus your energies on building the spiritual health of all your members, so that they can give their best at whatever justice issue calls them? Or will you come to consensus on a specific issue that the congregation makes its own? Will you send people to India or Transylvania to help our sister congregations there? Will you send workers to help the devastated neighborhoods of New Orleans, or to the Indian reservations that need our help?

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Take this opportunity, this new beginning, to decide how you can best serve the world. Remember that Keith says "If you do good, people will accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives. Do good anyway." And, "People really need help, but may attack you if you do help them. Help people anyway."

Give the world the best you have. Work together to determine your priorities, to decide what your "best" consists of, and how to use it in your work. "You'll get kicked in the teeth," says Keith. "Give the world the best you have anyway."

Go forth and do so—together.

Shalom and Saalat.

Blessed Be and Amen.