

***A Living Web: 20 Years in Ministry* — Sun., Oct. 23, 2005**
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Call to Worship:

This morning, I welcome you into worship with a joyous spirit. For today is the first of two Sundays at Paint Branch that celebrate something pretty important to me: the 20th anniversary of my ordination. Ordination is one of the few things in life that can only happen once. In our liberal tradition, ordination can only be done within a congregation, and with a congregation's blessing. It is not God who ordained me, though I did feel a spirit of something holy with us that night, so many years ago. Rather, it was people, who had enough trust in me to grant me the privilege of ordination, who ushered me into the ministry.

I am grateful that I am able to celebrate this important milestone with you today. For ministry is not something I can do by myself. It's a joint project that I am privileged to share not only with my husband (and co-minister) Jaco, but also with you and with those in the other congregations I have served. As we worship today, may we give thanks for all the ways we minister to each other, and celebrate the community we create anew each week.

First Reading: "The Web of Life" — by Robert T. Weston (From *Seasons of the Soul*)

There is a living web that runs through us
To all the universe
Linking us each with each and through all life
On to the distant stars.
Each knows his little corner of the world, and lives
As if this were all.

We no more see the farther reaches of the threads
Than we see of the future, yet they're there.
Touch but one thread, no matter which;
The thoughtful eye may trace to distant land
Its firm, continuing strand, yet lose its filaments as they reach out,
But find at last it coming back to the one from whom it led.

We move as in a fog, aware of self but only dimly conscious of the rest
As they are close to us in sight or feeling.
New objects loom up for a time, fade in and out;
Then, sometimes, as we look on unawares, the fog lifts
And there's the web in shimmering beauty, reaching past all horizons.
We catch our breath;
Stretch out our eager hands, and then

In comes the fog again, and we go on,
Feeling a little foolish, doubting what we had seen.

The hands were right. The web is real.
Our folly is that we so soon forget.

SERMON, Part 1: *A Living Web: 20 Years in Ministry* — Barbara W. ten Hove

It was almost exactly twenty years ago that I took one of the first of what was to become many plane trips from Seattle, Washington, to Washington, D.C. On October 1st, 1985, I began my first day in the professional ministry at the East Shore Unitarian Church in Bellevue, WA, a Seattle suburb. Four short weeks after that first day, I came home, to be ordained into the Unitarian Universalist ministry.

It is important that I highlight the word “home.” I came “home” to be ordained. Unlike many of my contemporaries, I chose to be ordained not in the church I was called to serve, but in the church that had raised me, the Unitarian Universalist Church in Reston, VA, where my father, the Rev. Dr. John Murrell Wells, still served as minister.

I became a minister when I was 25 years old. Lots of people thought I was too young to be a minister. But ministry was, literally, in my blood. It was my father’s trade, and like many sons and daughters before me, I followed in a father’s footsteps. This act, of walking on a path my father had trod before me, was to play a significant role in my first few years as a minister. And this deep connection I had to him and to our shared life’s work was a big part of why I came home to be ordained. For in a very powerful way, my family felt my father was passing on the mantle of ministry to me. While we did not know it at the time, perhaps we sensed he would not live long. And so his presence and participation in this important milestone in my life was profoundly significant.

On the day I was ordained, my father did two things. He led the part of the service called the “Charge to the Minister.” In that charge he reminded me, and all those around me, that I had always been spiritual and that, in a sense, ministry was my destiny. And then he gave me a handmade red, white and gold stole. My father made it, the first stole I ever wore. In every stitch he crocheted he wove in his love and pride for me. I cannot wear this stole without thinking of him.

And yet, on October 27, 1985, I journeyed home over 3000 miles because I had chosen to serve a church about as far away as I possibly could from my parents and family. For somehow I knew, even though it took me years to articulate it, that I couldn’t become a minister if I lived in my father’s shadow. I also knew that I needed to learn how to be a grown-up at the same time I was learning how to be a minister. And so I went to East Shore, very intentionally, as an Associate Minister. And, (how Freudian is this!) I went to work with a man exactly the same age as my father, and about as different in personality from my dad as any man could be. And this man, the Rev. Dr. C. Leon Hopper became my mentor and dear friend. I would not be here today if it weren’t for these two men. I

like to think that I was lucky enough to have two fathers, both with gifts and liabilities. I learned from the two of them how to be and how not to be a minister.

When I came to work with Leon at East Shore, I was—as a good (and frank!) friend once put it—young, cute, and full of attitude! I leapt into ministry with lots of energy and only a certain amount of good sense. Yes, I had learned a lot from growing up a preacher’s kid. Yes, theological school had prepared me well for the work. And yes, one could say that I was naturally gifted in many areas of this strange life we call the professional ministry. But I was young. I had so little experience in the ways of the world. And things were rather hard for me. I moved to Seattle with a friend from childhood who, it turned out, had pretty bad depression issues. I had just broken up with a fiancé and felt so alone that I made some pretty poor choices when it came to relationships. And living so far away from my family and friends made that first year particularly hard. I remember taking my drivers test—which in Washington State requires you to actually get behind the wheel, even if you had a license from another state. I failed the test. Twice. After the second time, I sat in my car and cried and cried. I don’t think I’ve ever felt as desolate in my life.

And yet – being a minister helped me grow up. Here I was, serving a church of 400 people, preaching once a month, running a Sunday School, working with membership and adult RE, and getting involved in the community around me. I had to learn certain coping skills and I did. But more, I learned that a minister does not become one upon ordination. I became a minister because the people in that church taught me how to be a minister. I’m not sure they’ll ever know how much their trust in and love for me made me the person I am today. I’m glad I had a chance to tell some of them this past summer when I preached at East Shore in August.

Those first few years of ministry were remarkable in so many ways. I remember vividly the first memorial service I ever did. It was late fall of that first year, and I had deliberately come to church pretty casually dressed as I needed to do some grunt work in the Religious Education building. I was taking a break when I got a call from the main office. Some folks who needed a minister for a memorial service were in the church library, looking for someone to help them. Since Leon wasn’t there, I was it.

I stopped quickly by the restroom to wash my hands and brush my hair before going to meet them. There were a bunch of folks, the mostly grown-up daughter and sons of a woman who had just died in a car accident. They had a very tenuous relationship with the congregation, but like so many in crisis, they came to a church they remembered, and asked for my help.

It was an amazing moment for me, because I realized that they looked at me not as a young woman in casual clothes, but as a minister who could help them deal with their pain. It was the first time I ever experienced something I have learned to call, “wearing the face of God for others.” Ministers are not the only people who wear the face of God for people in need. But our profession puts us in situations where our role is what matters, far more than who we are. That moment, early in ministry, taught me a significant lesson that I’ve never forgotten.

I also learned early on how difficult it was to serve a congregation full of diverse people. That first December at East Shore, a week or so after I’d preached a sermon on Advent, the board chair stopped by my office to talk about some upcoming events. Rather casually he said to me, “I don’t care what other folks are saying, I support you.” My response was, “huh?” I had no idea that people were talking about me. Turns out my Advent sermon had touched a nerve with some folks. My sermon was called, *Waiting for God to Be Born* and in it I talked about how we’re all waiting for God to be born—meaning we are all waiting for the best in our human species to emerge so we could build a better world. But I did two things that upset people.

First, I read from the Bible—horrors! Second, and perhaps more damning, I used the metaphor of pregnancy (Mary’s) to talk about the advent process of waiting. I had never been pregnant, and some folks thought I was too young and inexperienced to use this metaphor. Even though I had done my homework, and talked to a friend about her pregnancy, it was somehow taboo for me to use the metaphor in a sermon. I learned that day that freedom of the pulpit does not mean freedom from critique. I had to learn (and it was a slow process) that being defensive just makes things worse. I don’t have to agree with criticism to accept it and listen to it.

When I left that church in 1991, they gave me a beautiful silver chalice necklace. It is the only one like it in the world. It is a reminder to me always that the first church I served did so much to turn me into a minister.

The first few years of ministry always seem to be the ones we clergy types like to reflect on, for the way we do this work and live this role likely emerge in those pivotal years. I learned so much that I don’t have enough time to share it all. But, before I finish this first part of my sermon, I want to say a few words about the living web that Robert Weston wrote of in the first reading.

That poem was read at my ordination and I return to it often. For me, it describes my experience of the Holy, of what I sometimes call God.

When I became a minister 20 years ago, I saw and felt the living web only faintly. I believed that I was connected to something larger than myself, but I did not really understand what that meant. Ministry has taught me to believe in the web in all its shimmering beauty. I have seen it hold people in dark despair, and keep them from falling into an abyss. I have felt the bonds of love that tie me to the past, present and future. I have learned to trust that the hands I feel holding me, and all of us, are metaphorical, yes, but a metaphor that speaks deep truth.

I entered the ministry because I felt called to share our living faith with others. I stayed in it because I learned to love the work. Truly, ministry is what I did, and do, for love.

Second Reading: “The Only Way Out is Through” — by Kathy Fuson Hurt (fr. *Quest*)

In order to get out
I must go through.
There is no other way. No other way?
But there must be another way, an easier path, a well-lit road.
I cast about, scan the horizon No other way.
The way out is the way through.
The way through is the way hard. Beset behind and before,
a heavy hand laid upon me.
Pass one trial, meet another, leap one hurdle, run against another.
No turning back, no detours no other way. Lord, how long?
As long as it takes to get me there.
Going down to go up.
Approaching heaven via hell.
No other way.
The only way out is through.

SERMON, Part 2:

In 1988, my father died. It was a terribly hard thing for me to go through, and it changed me forever. The year after he died was very difficult for me, as I came to grips with hard truths about some of his less than ethical choices. My mother went into a deep downward spiral after he died, which took her ten years to emerge from. And, in my late twenties in a career that definitely did not make me a popular date, I wondered if I would ever find love and happiness.

So I did something that in retrospect was pretty smart. I got help from a spiritual therapist and from my colleagues and friends. I decided that I could pull myself together and live alone. I began to accept myself with all my gifts and all my flaws for the first time. I

walked through instead of around grief and trouble. And because I did I believe, I met and fell in love with Jaco.

I can't really say enough about him and his role in my life. Suffice it to say, I am one of those lucky people who found a soul-mate. Two short years after I said good-bye to my father, I married my best friend. On my hand I wear the wedding ring he gave me, always and forever committed to our shared life and love.

Because of Jaco, the trajectory of my ministry had to change. After my father died, I began to think about moving back to the East Coast to be closer to my Mom and sisters. I knew I was ready and eager to serve a church on my own, and it seemed timely to move in that direction. But when Jaco entered my life, he had just started his ministry in the Seattle area. He loved Seattle and was a great fit for his church. I remember one night over dinner, before we were even engaged, telling Jaco that I was calling off my search to find a new church. "I can't walk down two roads at the same time," I told him. And his road was the one I wanted to walk.

So I began to look around and lo and behold the web I was weaving with Jaco showed me a new direction to follow. In the Seattle region, there was talk of starting a new church and I was asked to be the one to start it.

Exactly one week before Jaco and I got married, I spoke to over 100 people at the first public meeting of a new church that would ultimately become the Woodinville UU Church. I was so fortunate that East Shore, still my church, agreed to pay my salary for a year while I got the new congregation up and running. When we had our charter Sunday in 1991, quite coincidentally on October 27 (the same date as my ordination), the Woodinville congregation chartered with the largest number (108) of any new church in the UUA up to that point. It was an exciting time and I loved the work.

A new church is unlike any other kind. We constantly had to create from scratch everything from how to advertise our presence in the community to where to store the coffee pots and name tags in a rented space. For the first time, I worked with people who were in my age cohort, as the church was filled with baby-boomers. On that first Easter Sunday, I dedicated 38 children at once—what a trip!

But the work was hard, too. Four of the first five board presidents quit the church because of burnout. We had constant money problems and few experienced church members who really knew how to "do church." As much as I loved the energy and creativity in this new place, I was also getting worn down. And then the bottom fell out. During one awful six-month period, I faced a real crisis in ministry. After three years of serving in a position

called “New Congregation Minister,” the church had to vote whether or not to call me as the “settled minister.” Most of us, including me, thought it would be a slam dunk. It wasn’t. Turns out there were a number of people who had real concerns about my staying. And from May until October that year, I had to hear every one of them.

It was a terrible yet powerfully important time in my life. I learned some hard truths about myself, including my tendency to over-control and my inclination to build up barriers around my heart when things got to be too much. I started seeing a spiritual counselor who helped me get in touch with both my anger and fear about what would happen if I lost my job.

But I also began to recognize that I had courage, and that I could walk through this process without running away. Thanks to hard spiritual work, profound support from Jaco and my colleagues, and a sense that I needed to stay if only to build into the church’s DNA that we could struggle and come out on the other side, I made it through. And my sense of ministry and calling deepened and blossomed.

One of the many gifts that congregation gave me was the most beautiful of all my stoles, which shimmers with the luster of a new penny. Starting a church is a privilege given to few. I’ve always said if I had to have but one professional achievement on my tombstone it would be this: She started a church.

The last year of so of my ministry in Woodinville was hampered by the dawning reality that my health was failing. I had always had a sensitive system and had been in and out of doctor’s offices for various kinds of pain for many years. Ten years ago this November, I was diagnosed. I had fibromyalgia, a chronic condition that causes constant pain. It is something a person manages, not something you get over. Even with good treatment, many people end up on disability. I had been a minister for ten years and my doctor was telling me I had to work less and decrease stress, a hard thing to do in this business. I did my best, but it became clearer and clearer to me that something had to change. And so the last chapter of my ministerial odyssey began.

When Jaco and I got married in 1990, we knew about married ministers who had teamed up to do ministry together. The early years of our married life were spent in separate churches, as we both learned more about our ways of doing this work. In 1993, we spent a weekend at The Center for Ministry in Oakland, CA to determine if we would likely make a good team. The folks there gave us a green light. But it wasn’t until 1998 that we made it a reality. That spring, we told our beloved congregations that we were launching a co-ministry, and we were lucky enough to spend our first year in an interim co-ministry position in Golden, CO.

Golden was truly golden for us. We couldn't have asked for a better church to teach us how to do co-ministry. For despite our long years in separate congregations, we didn't really know how to do this work together. We learned a lot there! We learned that we shouldn't preach together very often—our styles are so different we sometimes get in each other's way. We learned to tell people that talking to one of us didn't mean the other would necessarily know what was going on. We learned we could share an office (as long as Jaco sets it up!), a car, and a dog (Stella came into our family in 1997!) We learned that people seem to respond well to the sight of two ministers, as different as can be, sharing a life and a commitment to our faith. When we left there after one wonderful year, they gave us a stained glass piece, that shows a flaming chalice set against a background of Colorado mountains. It hangs in our dining room, ever a reminder of the loving risk we all took together, and how fine a service it was to them, and to us.

The year we spent in Golden was also the year that we found Paint Branch. We looked at four congregations that year, and knew very quickly that only two really interested us. One of them was a large church, a prestigious pulpit, in a big city. The other was Paint Branch. Had we been looking only to advance our career, the choice would have been obvious—choose the big church. They wanted us, and were willing to offer us a good salary to come there.

But as tempting as it was, there was something that called us to be here. Perhaps it was because the Search Committee at Paint Branch was the only one we met that had a truly diverse membership. Perhaps it was this beautiful worship space and this congregation's commitment to the arts. Perhaps it was that Paint Branch brought us closer to home. Perhaps it was the call of something even greater, I don't know. All I know is that, despite some very real concerns on both parts, we made the decision to throw our lot in with you, and you made us welcome.

We've been here over six years now, and I've learned so much from you. I've learned to have fun at church, enjoying the happy and warm spirit of this congregation that loves a good party. I've learned to articulate my faith more clearly, and in doing so have helped others do the same. I've learned to pace my life in ways that keep me healthy. I've learned to share the ministry with Jaco and with you.

Just a couple of years ago, Tish Hall and Sherry Mitchell made matching stoles for me and Jaco. They're the only ones we have that reflect our co-ministry. Whenever we wear them, we are reminded that we are all in this ministry together.

Twenty years is a long time. When I first started in ministry, I don't think I could even imagine what my world would be like today. But interestingly, I did have some sense of it *ten* years ago, when I reflected on what might lie ahead. In my journal, on the tenth anniversary of my ordination, I wrote this.

I began with a quote from Frederick Beuchner, "Faith is the assurance that the best and holiest dream is true after all." Then, in my own words I continued,

On this day of anniversary of 10 years of ordination, I celebrate a decade of believing in the "best and holiest dream." For nearly a third of my life I have given myself to that dream, having faith less in myself than in the possibility that our world will one day wake into the reality of that dream. The struggles have been enormous. The pain real and terrible. The frustration endless. Yet day after day, week after week, year after year I have continued to offer my life to my faith because I believe there is no other way I can live. Has it been worth it? Without hesitation I can say yes, yes, yes. I have a life filled to the brim with gifts. I am grateful and filled with prayer and thankfulness. May the next ten years of my life and ministry be as full of joy and sorrow, struggle and achievement, contentment and challenge. Today is, in a sense, another birthday for me. I am grateful for my birth into ministry and the privilege it has been to serve.

I couldn't have said it better myself. Amen.

Closing Words

I thank you for this chance to share some of my life's journey with you. I hope you have found yourself somewhere in it, for it is congregations that bring ministry to life. In closing, I share these words I used as a benediction on October 27, 1985, the day I was ordained:

United with those who care enough to move toward change,
Empowered by a spirit of love and peace,
May we covenant to spread community
To worlds beyond this place.

Blessings on us all. Amen.