

“A Humble Vision”
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Unity Church–Unitarian

Worship Leader:
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First and foremost – let me say thank you. Thank you for having me back to lead worship and to preach, thank you for loving me into the ministry as your intern, thank you for sharing your ministers, Rob and Janne, with me then and now, and thank you for this opportunity to share a bit of what I have learned about leadership in my first years in the ministry.

It is fitting, really, that I was asked to offer this sermon on leadership here at Unity Church – because the truth is that you all taught me much of what I know about healthy leadership. Standing in Ruth’s office behind the sanctuary waiting to walk out and sit down in front of the congregation on my first Sunday as your intern almost five years ago I found myself shaking inside with nervousness – I couldn’t believe that I was finally here and that you would all be looking at me – when Rob leaned over and whispered into my ear – they won’t let you fail, you know.

They won’t let you fail. In that moment I knew not only of his care for me but also of yours, and in that moment I was reminded of one of the most crucial points in leadership – that you are never really in it alone. For one to be a leader there must, of course, be a community to lead – a community that owns the direction and health of its body equally or more than its leaders ever can, a community that, if it is healthy itself longs for strong leadership to help it get where it wants to go – a community that wants not only its leaders to succeed but for its mission and programs to succeed as well, regardless of who gets the credit.

There is no doubt in my mind that this church is a healthy church – a strong church with healthy leaders in its ministry, staff, and laity – a church that is growing into its mission of encouraging individuals to live lives of integrity, service, and joy. And there is no doubt in my mind that our nation and our world, our families and communities and workplaces, are all in desperate need of ever more healthy and effective leadership.

For years we as a country have valued sound bites over an open acknowledgement of the complexity of most situations, and we have preferred the easy assignment of shopping in the face of terrorism to the authentic challenge of communal sacrifice and transformation. We have watched our leaders fall – whether they be our parents or our presidents – to sexual misconduct, to overwork and exhaustion, to alcohol and drug addiction, to greed, to poor health choices, to the desire for fame and power and popularity. We have asked ourselves and each other why so few people of integrity are willing to step forward to lead us, why those we initially believe in turn false over time, why we ourselves so often side step or ignore the opportunities for leadership clearly present all around us.

We have noticed the void in leadership, and while the tide is slowly turning away from the celebration of leaders who claim absolute authority, who fail to admit their mistakes or change course when necessary, the fact of the matter is that there are still relatively few examples of healthy leadership in our society and in our homes – and the fact of the matter is that more often than not even we who hunger for healthy leadership in ourselves and others still simultaneously expect both too much and too little of our leaders, and we often fail to help our leaders manage the pressures that come with their work once they are in place.

For thousands of years, leaders have faced temptations and troubles, and many who began with great promise fell - damaging not only themselves but their communities as well as they made their decline. There are traps that come with leadership, of course, and the teacher, at the Zen Center in Rochester where I have recently begun studying meditation explains them particularly well. When you are looking for a teacher, he says, you must be especially diligent. There is no licensing board, no certification method that can absolutely assure quality and safety. We are each ultimately responsible for whom we entrust our hearts and minds to. There are, however, four clear signs of a false teacher.

The first sign of a false teacher, he taught us, is a love of power and fame. Second, beware of greed and acquisitiveness, of the teacher who lives in decadence while his followers struggle to get by. Third, beware of a teacher or a leader who engages in sexual contact of any kind with their congregants or students. While this happens quite often, it is never healthy and it is never fair. Fourth, our teacher told us, beware of active alcohol or drug addiction in your teacher – and if you observe any of these four warning signs in your teacher, run, do not walk, in the other direction. Your teacher has succumbed to the temptations of isolation and self-destruction that so often come with leadership, and they will only do you harm until they are able to get their own house in order again.

After delineating these four daunting warning signs of unhealthy leadership, the teacher leaned forward on his pillow to share with us one sure sign of healthy leadership. Is your teacher or leader an authentic person? He asked. Do they live an integrated life, doing as they say and admitting when they fall short? Answering these final questions takes time, he warned us, and the only way to answer them is to spend time with the person, to observe their interactions with you and with others, discerning for yourself whether or not they are authentic people – whether they live integrated lives – whether they hold themselves and those they come into contact with to the highest standards. After all, as political theorist, Hannah Arendt has said, “Power is actualized only when word and deed have not parted company.” (CL, 123)

Authenticity and integrity are the essence of healthy leadership, but we must not distort this truth into the belief that our leaders need to be perfect. There are no innocent fathers, no pure hearts, no clean hands. Our leaders need to be visibly human, sharing in our struggles and challenges. Barbara Brown Taylor, Episcopal priest and professor and one of the most sought after experts on preaching, explains this challenge in ministry exceptionally well. “For most of my adult life,” she wrote, “...I gave myself to the work the best way I knew how...I thought that being faithful meant always trying harder to live a holier life and calling [my congregation] to do the same. I thought that it meant knowing everything I could about scripture and theology, showing up every time the church doors were open, and never saying no to anyone in

need. I thought that it meant ignoring my own needs and those of my family until they went away altogether, leaving me free to serve God without any selfish desires to drag me down. I thought that being faithful was about becoming someone other than who I was, in other words, and it was not until this project failed that I began to wonder if my human wholeness might be more useful to God than my exhausting goodness." (LC, 218-219)

Our human wholeness — that wholeness that includes fear and doubt, failure and exhaustion, falling short and beginning again — that human wholeness is indeed more useful to God and to all of us than perfection, and thankfully, in talking with others who have traveled the road of leadership ahead of me I have learned that while it scares me more than anything else — at times my humanity, that soft underbelly of vulnerability, of imperfection — can be the greatest gifts I have to offer. My colleagues remind me that I do not have to be perfect in order to be a minister while simultaneously calling me to account, reminding me as ethicist Karen LeBacqz writes, that it is not that "the minister is permitted no faults." It is that "the minister is permitted no faults that have to do with trustworthiness." (CL, 127) This remains a high standard, as it should be, and it is a standard that I can keep only with the help of others.

Lives of service call on lives of support for sustenance, and our leaders require time away, time for collegial connections, time for their own studies and families and spiritual lives, if they are to remain healthy and effective, if they are to live into the commitments they have made to themselves and to us. This is the kind of investment in healthy leadership that you have given to Rob and Janne with their sabbatical — and it is an investment that will pay dividends not only to them but to each and every one of you and to this church community as well.

Healthy leaders remember that no success is theirs alone, that the privilege of leadership is a gift given. And leaders need not only our time and support, they need our challenge as well. They need their constituents — their congregants and students and children — to speak with them honestly and openly, to challenge their authority from time to time, to reclaim the direction of their own lives and the life of the community when the leader steers off course.

During my final year of seminary, after I had spent a year here with you on my internship, I returned to Chicago for a series of integrating classes. In one of these classes six students sat with the Rev. David Bumbaugh, professor of ministry and preaching at Meadville Lombard Theological School and a Unitarian Universalist parish minister himself for over 50 years. As we newbies to the ministry struggled to make sense of board meetings and budget negotiations, of stewardship Sundays and staff dynamics, David sat back and listened. Finally, as the year turned and each of us began to embrace the reality that we would soon be launched into the world of ministry alone, David leaned back in his chair and folded his hands over his belly. "Every Sunday after church," he told us, "for 50 years of Sundays, I went home and read the paper, and the first thing I did was pull out the classified section and pore over the want ads, looking for honest work. I knew I couldn't fool them forever," he told us. "I was far from perfect, and each week I stood up there in their pulpit and spoke honestly about what I saw in them and in the world, I shared the best of what I knew and struggled with, I put out a vision that the congregation might follow or reject, and each Sunday I came home and looked for another job."

Quiet fell on that small group of seminarians – and while our fears did not diminish, the task ahead became clear, if difficult. As leaders, we would be charged to speak the truth in love, to share our experience, our struggles, and our vision. In the course of this short conversation, we realized that our nervousness and self-doubt were not only normal – but they were in fact a part of healthy and effective leadership. While each of us would certainly need an ample amount of self-confidence and clarity to grow into our leadership abilities, we would also need equal doses of openness to ideas not our own, to failure, and to humility.

Rev. Bumbaugh's story echoes in my mind each Sunday as I step down from the pulpit, and each time I find myself paralyzed by fear of the tasks that lay ahead, I hear Janne's voice in my mind calling me forward. Several months into my time here as your intern, the occasion arose for me to officiate at my first memorial service. I was terrified, of course, wondering what in the world I could possibly offer to this shocked and grieving family. Panicked, I searched out Janne and plunked myself down in her office. She filled my head and my notebook with the right questions to ask, with a few things I might say, and then, after I poured out my fears to her, she held my hands squarely in her own and looked directly into my eyes – and she said something to me that I later heard her say to so many of you as well – You are exactly enough, she said, and you are never enough. You are exactly what this family needs in this moment, all of your life experience and your studies have prepared you for just this – and you are never enough – you cannot heal this family alone, your job is simply to make room for the holy, for the family's own strength, for the wisdom that will emerge if you just create the space for it to arrive.

In those moments, and in so many to come, Janne taught me not only about pastoral care, but about leadership as well. You are exactly enough, I hear her say in my mind, and you are never enough. It is a wonderful articulation of one of the primary tensions inherent in good leadership – the tension between humility and confidence. Between showing our soft underbelly of imperfection and leading with bold vision. Because after all, leadership calls for more than just authenticity and integrity, it calls us to lead, to guide, to risk, to move comfortably in our areas of expertise and to offer a new way. We count on our leaders to inspire us, to tell us our stories from a new perspective, to dare us to dream and to work for a better, fuller future that we cannot quite see ourselves yet.

Choosing to lead can be scary and exhausting – but it is something that we are all called to do. For leadership, as I see it, is quite simply a way of wearing our commitment to a spiritual life. It is the embodiment of our deepest beliefs and values in visible action – the public expression of our private commitments. Leadership asks us to make our values and beliefs come alive as we live into them ourselves and as we ask the same of others. Leadership demands that we make our hopes and commitments real – first by articulating them ourselves, then by daring to stretch far beyond what we thought possible, holding out a vision of transformation not only for ourselves but for our communities as well. Healthy leadership asks us to remember that we never lead alone, it welcomes challenge and open conversation, it makes room for surprise and for the holy to move among us, and it asks each of us to step up and step forward, recognizing the gifts we each bring to the table, daring to serve needs greater than our own.

Opportunities for leadership arise each and every day, and though we may reflexively step back, as Annie Dillard suggested, comforting ourselves with the notion that we've come at an

awkward time, our children busy and troubled, and we ourselves flawed – the truth of the matter is that when we face each day openly and honestly we are presented with numerous opportunities to manifest our deepest values and beliefs. There is no one but us, there never has been.

We step into leadership when we become a member of the clergy or a congregational leader. We step into leadership when we run for political office and share our vision for the community and the nation. We step into leadership when we become a parent or a caretaker and we move with kindness and compassion even when frustration threatens to take over – making real our commitment to the dignity and worth of each and every person even when it is no longer convenient or easy for us. We wear our commitment to our values, stepping into leadership as bosses and employees when we foster collaboration and creativity, when we treat one another with respect even as we disagree.

When we step into leadership, the traps and temptations and troubles loom large for us. If we are not careful, we too will succumb to the tendency toward isolation and self-destruction that affects so many. If we try to carry the load alone, we will surely fail. But if we take the words of Mary Oliver's friend Daniel seriously we will trust that if we are to succeed then God and friends will surely have a hand in it and we will, in time, learn how to embrace – how to balance and carry these new responsibilities that we would not, and cannot put down.

May we refuse to put down the mantle of leadership, the opportunities to live boldly and fully, challenging ourselves and our world to achieve a greater vision. May we move forward with humility and with confidence, trusting that we are exactly enough and that we are never enough, believing that we will not let one another fail, daring to step forward into this difficult but beautiful day.

May it be so, and Amen.