

"Other Pulpits, Other Ministries"

by Rev. Mark Belletini

I first attended one of these services twenty-two years ago. That may or may not seem like a long time to you, but to me it feels like a couple of heartbeats. And look at all that has happened in the span of those heartbeats!

Take our professional ministry, for example. A quarter century ago there was only a handful of ordained women serving among us; today over fifty percent of the ministers serving us are women. And twenty-two years ago, a gay man like me was often seen as some sort of radical pioneer in our ministry. Now I'm just an ordinary preacher and pastor like everyone else.

Our worship life has changed a lot, too, in the span of those heartbeats. You see a lot more clergy robes now than you used to, and a few more candles. And, as some of you may know, back in the seventies only few of our congregations began their regular services by kindling a chalice. Now, it's the single most common ritual you will find in any of our congregations, whether in Canada, the United States, Mexico, or Europe.

We've also had to match our religious education materials to our turn-of-the-century world. We are saying goodbye to our much-praised former curriculum on sexuality, and embracing a new and equally frank curriculum called *Our Whole Lives*. Taking a broader approach, the new material will help, not just our youth, but all of us, grapple soundly with both the timeless issues and newer realities like AIDS.

And finally, this Service of the Living Tradition itself has seen a few changes in twenty-two years.

For example, in 1977 we did not need to spruce up a Plenary Hall to worship together; we were so compact back then that all of us fit easily into Cornell University chapel.

And, there were no smatterings of applause as the young ministers like Jane Rzepka, Diane Miller, Frederica Lepore and Wayne Arnason were called up to receive their Certificates of Preliminary Fellowship. Service decorum was different in those days. And the robes you did see back then were mostly unadorned black.

Yet, despite this list of changes, the present service still beautifully echoes the very first one I attended. Then as now, we sang, "Rank by Rank Again We Stand," thrilling to the sheer power in our gathered voices.

And we rose then, just as we will rise later in the Service, to honor our dead. In 1977 I didn't know a single name on that list, but as the years have gone by, I've come to count more and more colleagues as indispensable friends. Thus, today, as you might imagine, the Roll Call has become the very center of the Service for me.

But I know for many that the sermon is important too. I know I always look forward to it. That particular June in 1977 in Ithaca, the Reverend Joyce Smith improvised her two-part sermon on the mighty sixth chapter of Isaiah. One of her most moving lines offered the startling image of "a red rose" she had "crushed" in her hand.

I can't do justice to that image here. But I do remember that later Leon Hopper and I agreed that something both luminous and heartrending had crossed the threshold of our hearts at the very moment when Joyce reached out and closed her hand over that imagined rose.

And now, somehow, here I am, standing in the pulpit Joyce blessed. I am preaching. And though this service obviously differs from the format I usually use on Sunday, I have to admit that the sermon itself feels pretty much like any of the other nine hundred sermons I've preached during my ministry.

Aye, and there's the rub. For despite the major changes I've seen these last two decades, in ministry, in worship and in curriculum, the real difference for me personally between 1977 and 1999 is this: back then, I used to sit in front of the pulpit. These days, I usually find myself standing in them.

This does not mean, however, that I've had to live without benefit of very fine sermons these last two decades.

For there are, after all, other pulpits, and other ministries.

I first opened to this revelation during my brief ministry in San Francisco.

Let me tell you about Norma's pulpit and sermon, for example. I was a newly ordained, twenty-eight-year-old minister; she was a laywoman in her fifties confined to the cancer ward in a local hospital. I went to visit her. Not long after I walked into the dimly lit room, she sensed my great discomfort and nervousness. So she preached to me this remarkable sermon: "Mark, I think it must be difficult for a young man like you to know what to say to a person my age who is dying. Maybe you are feeling helpless. Maybe you are telling yourself there is nothing you can do. But there is something you can do. I would like you to ask me some questions. Here they are...."

Norma recited a list of three questions. I asked her the questions, and then we discussed them at some length. When I left her room I wept for the gift she gave me that day. I assure you that a hospital bed can make a very fine pulpit indeed.

I also remember a sermon Priscilla preached to me once. Early one Sunday morning, she stopped me in the hall, speaking urgently with an indeterminate Slavic accent. Since I was just about to enter my office to finish my own sermon on the Czech roots of our faith, I was none too happy that she cornered me so well. Knowing my sermon topic, she told me she wanted to show me her beautiful antique book on Jan Hus, the greatest of Czech reformers. Then, setting the book aside, she started to pour out the story of her life.

She described the day the Nazis came to town. "There are the Jews!" the townsfolk said, pointing to her house; and so the Nazis shot her parents before her eyes. She elaborated the terrors of surviving in a concentration camp so long. She spoke of her losses, and her life-distorting grief and rage.

But most of all, I remember her remarkable testimony about the Hussite freedom-symbol which we now call "the flaming chalice." You must know that the Czech version of our symbol has a motto underneath it, "Pravda vitezi," which translates, "Truth overcomes," or "Truth prevails." Every single morning in that terrible camp, Priscilla told me, she traced a picture of a flaming chalice in the sand with her finger. Then she wrote the motto underneath it. "It gave me the strength to live each day," she said to me. "Whenever I drew the chalice in the dirt I knew in my heart that the assertions of Nazism would one day be overcome by the greater Truth that no human being may claim power over any other human being."

Priscilla's hallway sermon completely transformed my view of our worship. For me, the kindled chalice is no sweet little ritual, but a perfect invitation to live out my life in daily response to our demanding and powerful heritage. I will never be able to thank Priscilla enough for the sermon she gave me as a gift that day.

But most of all, I remember Margaret's great sermon.

Margaret was nothing less than a Unitarian Universalist powerhouse. She served our movement well: as Moderator of the Board of the San Francisco church, as a leader in the Pacific Central District, as a board member of Starr King School for the Ministry, and finally, as the Vice-Moderator of the Board of our Unitarian Universalist Association. She even shared Denny Davidoff's privilege once, chairing this Assembly when it met in Minneapolis.

Margaret's personal life, however, was as tough as her church life was glorious. She knew the worst loss a parent can know. Her first born, a terrific expressionist painter, was killed in a car accident. Her second child took her own life. Her third child, a personable young man with the looks of movie star, was arrested and tried for several terrible murders, luridly detailed in the press. Found guilty, he was incarcerated at Atascadero prison. Their fourth child grew up painfully in a decimated family, understandably broken by grief, rage, and horror.

By the time I met her, Margaret had become something of what you might call "a character." I used to say that she had lost so much in her life she didn't seem to care if she lost much else. She would often scare people with her blunt or reckless comments. Though she rarely attended Sunday services any more, her word of approval or disapproval behind the scenes still counted plenty. At first I have to admit that Margaret scared me too. But I finally grew to respect and even love Margaret very much.

On Memorial Day in 1979, Margaret called me up and said, "Can I take you for lunch at the Altamira today?" I sensed some urgency in her voice, so I went with her.

Just after we crossed the Golden Gate Bridge, Margaret suddenly said, "Turn off here." I did. We snaked up a winding road draping the edge of a green hill, until we arrived at a well-hidden cemetery. Then Margaret said softly, "Stop here." Without waiting for me, she climbed out of my VW Bug and clambered up the grassy slope. There, two gravestones glowed within a burst of orange California poppies. Cut into those stones, and spotlighted by the noon sun: her children's names.

With a single movement she dropped to the grass, lay prone, and began to sob with all her might. I climbed up the hill and stood next to her, but did nothing else.

After what seemed like hours to me, but which was only about 15 minutes, Margaret slowly got up, then pierced me with her wet and red eyes. "You did very well, young man, refusing to console me. You know you can't really do that, and to your credit you did not try. But I thought it might be important for you know that this is what happens after your parishioners leave the church the lovely funerals you do ... and that this can go on for a long line. Time doesn't heal as fast as they say it does." Then she started down the hill, saying, "Thank you for being kind enough to stand by me in silent witness. Now let's go to lunch."

Well, we indeed lunched at the Altamira. We talked and even laughed. But I confess I don't remember what we said or what we ate. I was still anchored back in her tears.

I knew then that those tears were points made in a truly great sermon I also knew that, contrary to her assessment, my silence back there at the cemetery revealed no great pastoral wisdom on my part, a but only simple garden-variety stupefaction. And yes, I also concluded that her sermon was probably not over yet.

Sure enough, three months later, Margaret called me up and asked, "You free for lunch today?" Of course I was. This time we crossed the Bay Bridge to the East Bay, past looming Mount Diablo. Margaret did not discuss her lunch plans for us. She just chatted about this and that, saying from time to time with a wave of her hand "Keep going, keep going."

Suddenly we caught sight of the John Muir House, a National Landmark I had passed any number of times without stopping. I vaguely remembered that the renowned naturalist, who was a friend of our own Ralph Waldo Emerson, had lived in the Bay Area much of his long life.

"Ever stop to visit John Muir's house?" Margaret asked.

"No," I said, "strangely, in all these years in California I never have."

"Well, let's go then," she said, way too cheerfully.

As we walked toward the entrance, I swear Margaret's face grew younger before my eyes. Her eyes brightened, her gait grew sure, the lines in her face vanished. She paid the

admission, and we entered. Then she grabbed my hand, practically dragging me like I was her kid brother, and said with intemperate glee, "Let me show you my room!"

She pointed to a small bed set in a bright yellow closed-in porch and said, "This was my bed. See, here's where I carved my initials when I was a little girl." She looked up at my stunned eyes and explained, "My father was John Muir's ranch foreman, young man. I grew up here. This is my home."

I have to admit this took me by complete surprise.

After a while, we went out to the gardens. There, a surprisingly tall Mission fig tree loomed over all the orange poppies, over all the vines, mint, and rosemary spreading to the powder-blue hills. Margaret suddenly bolted from me, and literally skipped to the base of that tree. There, to my complete befuddlement, she hoisted herself into the lowest branches in that tree and straddled them, rocking back and forth like a little kid.

When I caught up to her, she stared off at the glowing hills, and spoke wistfully, "This where I used to sit and daydream when I was a ten-year-old girl, Mark. I used to look out over the gardens to the mountains over there, wondering what my future live would be like. I used to come here in the afternoon on days just like this, when the sun turns everything to gold, and the whole world is wide and alive. Here in this tree I tried to picture what my husband would look like. I tried to guess what names I would give my children. As you well know, Mark, my life did not turn out like I imagined back then. But I want you to know that there is deep thanksgiving in my heart as well as all the ache. There is blessing as well as curse. It's all mixed up together, the great loss and the great love, the misery and the joy. The world is tough, Mark," she concluded, "and I certainly don't think that there is some dotting God anywhere looking out for me, but nevertheless you know this world of ours, it's wonderful."

She paused, then added quietly, "I owed you this, young man. Thanks for coming here with me, and helping me remember how full of wonder it all is."

I thought then that she was ending her sermon by echoing the Dao De Jing's great line, "And if pressed further to describe the Way It Is, I might stammer, "It's wonderful!" It seemed like an excellent conclusion to me.

But I was wrong. The sermon was not over yet.

Once a woman came to my office, saying she wanted to talk with me about her "problems with God and religion." She was feeling angry, she said, about all the ancient scripture her childhood church forced her to memorize. She told me that Psalm 139 especially infuriated her.

"Where can I go to escape you?
Shall I climb into the sky? You are there before me.

Shall I burrow into the earth which will one day claim me?
No, you are already there."

"What terrible intimacy!" she said of the psalm. "God has never been there for me like that. "

"Does intimacy really seem terrible to you?" I asked.

With that, she suddenly stopped talking about religion and told me instead how lonely she felt most of the time. "I don't deserve this terrible loneliness," she said to me. "Where is love in my life? Where can I find it?"

But as she started to speak more directly about her life, she realized that her anger with "God" was not the real issue.

It suddenly dawned on her that the reason she was feeling upset was not so much theological or philosophical as personal. She was deeply frustrated with her present life and wanted to place the blame elsewhere. "I'm sorry, Mark" she said to me, "I guess I'm not really here to talk with you about God and religion like I first said. I seem to be talking about my life." "There's no reason to be sorry," I said. "I usually think that a whole lot of what we call theology is often a kind of autobiography, a disguised way of talking about our own deepest life, our fears, our sadness, and even our burdensome joys. This is a most religious conversation as far as I am concerned. Especially since you told me that you don't see your loneliness as a permanent or desirable state. Your lack of satisfaction with your present life can be a very real way of saying 'Alleluia!' as far as I am concerned."

A few months later this woman told me that she had stopped fighting with her childhood God. She no longer expected intimacy ... divine or human ... to arrive as a reward or a right, or, something to be taken away as punishment. She no longer claimed "to believe" or "to not believe," or even to be some sort of agnostic. She dropped the futile calculations of "I deserve love" or "No one should ever be lonely." She just tried to pay close attention to what was really going on in her heart, in her mind, and in her life, minute by minute, hour by hour, day by day. She let great religious riddles remain riddles. She let religious mysteries remain mysteries. She stopped blaming God for everything. And a few years later, her heart opened to a remarkable relationship that brought her some very real happiness.

Margaret had a similar theology, I think. Originally, in her fig tree, she thought that "Life" owed her something, some ideal family situation with love and perpetual coziness. But then she lost just about everything like a modern day Job. So she stopped imagining that Someone Somewhere owed her anything, or would one day deal out fate with more fairness. And, like the woman who came to talk with me about religion, Margaret mostly gave up words like "belief," and "deserve," and got on with living what I would call a deeply religious life, with plenty of Alleluias despite it all. Indeed, she used these very Alleluias to conclude her sermon to me.

You see, Margaret used to order whole cases of California poppy seeds from the catalogues. Then she used to pile them into her car on weekends and scatter the seeds along the sides of every California road. On the way to visit her son in prison, she scattered seeds. On the way to visit the grave of her children, she scattered seeds. On the way to visit her childhood home, she scattered seeds. On the way to a meeting at church, she scattered seeds.

Why? Because though I think Margaret knew in her bones Mary Oliver's unvarnished truth, "Of course, loss is the great lesson," she also saw in the light of poppies precisely what the poet saw in them: "an invitation to happiness, a kind of holiness palpable and redemptive."

Realizing this, Margaret chose to up the ante on happiness and holiness. She chose to scatter the bright orange light of poppies in every nook and cranny of her beloved state, a pure unstinted redemption, fields of Alleluias despite it all.

I want to use those poppies, those insistent Alleluias, to close my own sermon this morning.

You see, I started out by noting all the changes in the last 22 years. But now I find myself wondering at century's end what changes we will see in the next twenty-two to twenty-five years. A quarter century from now, will we still be going around and around about which theology is better ... a biblical psalm or a secular world scourge of God? Will we still be debating the meanings of spirituality and skepticism as if it's really not our own lives we are talking about? What would happen if we took Margaret's sermon to heart instead? What would happen if we told our own stories to each other instead of snapping, "How can you still believe that?" to each other?

What would happen, I wonder, if together ... no matter our "belief or unbelief" ... we knelt on the common ground we all share – the very sifted "ashes to ashes, and dust to dust" of Waldo Emerson, Theodore Parker, Mary Wollstonecraft, Arius and Origen of Alexandria, Pellagius of Ireland, Hosea and Adin Ballou, Susan B. Anthony, Sophia Fahs, John Dietrich, Julia Ward Howe, Abigail Adams, David Ferenc, Fausto Sozzini, John Niemojewski, Norbert Capek, the Iowa Sisterhood, Beatrix Potter, Olympia Brown, the Channings, Maria Mitchell, The Free Spirit gatherings, the radical and Spiritual Anabaptists, Theophilus Lindsey, Ken Patton, John Scott Erigena, Clarence Skinner, Joseph Priestley, Joseph Tuckerman, Whitney Young, James Reeb, Mark DeWolfe, and yes, Isaiah, Jesus, Siddhartha Gotama, Mirabai, and Rumi? What if we then dug trenches in that common ground wide enough to receive our own scattered seeds?

And what if, while we knelt there cultivating our common ground, we told each other our stories truthfully? What if we could disclose to each other something of our love, our loneliness, our fear, and our losses? What if we then sowed into that cultivated earth the very seeds of hope we store in our own lives? What if we watered those seeds with the rain of our real tears, warmed them with the sun of our real laughter? What Alleluias might rise up under our feet then? What revelations might cover the earth like Margaret's

poppies to restore its stolen beauty? What if we claimed our own personal stories as part of a larger Story, the unfinished Story of our Living Tradition? What if we made our own place in our mighty heritage, testifying with our lives that despite the losses and setbacks, life is a wonderful gift worthy of our fullest participation? What might happen then?

I'm glad Margaret chose to end her sermon with poppies. And, you know, even though Margaret has died, I'm not sure her sermon is really over. Neither, for that matter is Joyce's sermon, or Norma's, or Priscilla's.

I, for one, am grateful our Living Tradition has always insisted, that "Revelation is not sealed." And if we remain open to those revelations, those Alleluias, those blossoms risen from seeds we have sown, is it possible we might each experience something "redemptive and palpable," as the poet suggests?

If we do, I for one really don't care what any of us call it, holiness or God, or human relationships, or emptiness, or Spirit or even as the Dao De Jing puts it, the "Way it Is." But I do care enough to agree and exclaim with the poet that we are each and all:

"Washed and washed in the river of earthly delight, and what are you going to do, what can you do about it in the deep, blue night?"