

*Community Ministry: This is the address I delivered for the celebration of my 50th anniversary of ordination. Parts of it will be incorporated into a larger video presentation given at the General Assembly and on Sept. 29, 2023, for a wider audience that can access it on the web.*

Thank you for the chance to describe my community ministry at the Northeast Counseling Center of the Foundation for Religion and Mental Health and the First Unitarian Society of Westchester. My path from Nebraska farm boy, Baptist Conscientious Objector, and '60's rebel to UU ministry and pastoral psychotherapy illustrates the complicated path of many community ministers.

After graduating from Goddard College, I pursued a master's in social change at the Martin Luther King, Jr. School for Social Change at Crozer Seminary. Crozer failed financially and I luckily received a three-year fellowship to study for the UU parish ministry. Just as I was ordained, the economy dived and I found two part-time ministries while I took advanced training in pastoral care. I then committed to the intensity, fulfillment, and challenge of pastoral psychotherapy—for 50 years.

As I moved from community organizing into ministry, I focused the Gandhian practice of nonviolence into psychotherapy. (Nonviolence is the practice of searching for Truth with an attitude of Love. Nonviolent, or Compassionate, Communication consists of responsive listening, reflection, and clarification.) When the free and responsible search for truth and meaning is energized by empathy between therapist and client, a co-operative relationship blooms.

My pastoral psychotherapy builds on an intimately interactive relationship. I listen closely to feelings expressed by people who suffer with profound anguish, depression, trauma, or confusion. I listen to their stories and focus on: Is their voice low or excited, are they inhibited or expressive, are they hurt or resentful? Who are they beneath their sobbing, bravado, or rage? I listen, in order to understand this unique person; they speak in order to know themselves more fully through my reflection. This may sound grim and often therapy *is* heavily freighted with thwarted desire or undeserved punishment, but often the absurdities of life also bubble up into laughter. Our therapeutic relationship cradles clients' tender inner wounds as people grow into their best selves. Then they can celebrate their achievements and comfort with intimate relationships.

I am privileged to know people so well that--as if we are on a path through deep forest--I can follow their internal journey of discovery and decision. When we metaphorically take this dimly-lit walk and they stumble on a certain rock, or intend to turn right--but turn left--I ask them how that feels, what it means, and do they want change. They said they would never go out with an inconsiderate person like the last one—or their father--and then they do. Or they are late for a job interview—again. I wonder with them: Do they find that inconsiderate person or self-destructive interviewing behavior so familiar that they see no option? Are they so self-critical they feel no right to something better? A pastoral therapist companions clients' journey of discovery, resonating empathically with their search for fulfillment. I empathically share part of the misery or hope in each client while retaining objectivity. I mirror their feelings and thoughts until I can interpret how someone contributes to their own distress. Or I can observe how

their environment is harming them. We discuss how to uncover truths that have previously been too confusing or painful to know consciously.

The Foundation for Religion and Mental Health offers services on a sliding scale, sponsored by local congregations, with offices in local congregations. In three ways, my interfaith religious agency meets needs beyond that of generic psychotherapy.

First, everyone wants to lessen painful symptoms and most also improve their relationship to profound values. Many people who have hit bottom on their previous lifestyle and are exploring a new congregation or meditation center or 12-step program—such as Alcoholics Anonymous—want to feel their spiritual hunger is understood. Almost always, I am the first Unitarian Universalist they have met, and my cross-cultural and cross-theological training enables me to comprehend a variety of spiritual journeys. Despite shame and guilt, they want to share their struggles, confident that I accept them, know their fear, and see a way forward. Those terrified by trauma want to move past feeling like they live at a distance to life, where little touches them, and feel a heartfelt meaning.

Second, for those who were religiously traumatized, it is a safe space to vent their fears and rage. Clergy and members of childhood birth-right religions can be deeply disenchanted with their faith and need freedom to follow their own search for meaning while trusting that I know their tradition. I help them feel safe and own what was good in their heritage while accepting that their spiritual search may take them in a very new direction.

Third, for twenty years, I conducted a free clergy support group for priests, ministers, and rabbis to help each other in what is sometimes a lonely, anxious

profession. The dynamics of congregations are pretty similar across many faith groups despite dissimilar rituals and concepts. Burned out, lonely, or anxious clergy look for someone who empathically accepts them as a leader who must preach when they feel exhausted, counsel a congregant when they are distracted, and resolve bitter congregational conflicts. Someone who listens and reflects with them on their despair but also appreciates their strengths. This clergy community is deeply, supportively reassuring.

I have attended the First Unitarian Society of Westchester for 50 years as both member and community minister. Fellow congregants have long provided money to support low fee psychotherapy clients, legitimacy for my services, and board trustees during the ten years I was president of my agency. As a highly participatory congregation, the atmosphere of mutual and reciprocal concern has energized my ministry.

Two years ago, when no half-time ministry candidates were available for my congregation, I re-entered parish ministry at The First Unitarian Society of Westchester and decreased my therapy hours. Two weeks later, Hurricane Ida destroyed our building. Memories of mud in the lobby and the stench of mold in the sanctuary still distress me. We became a nomadic tribe. People have rallied beautifully and—hopefully--I have for them. This crisis has called on all the skills previously developed in my career. It has been extremely difficult to find new sacred space—a building we could make into home. So, all you loving, committed UU's, send money to the First Unitarian Society of Westchester!

I repeatedly preach on how empathy transmutes fear and anger into compassion. Empathy is about nonjudgmental identification *with* and

understanding *of* another's feelings and thoughts without losing a sense of our own selves. Nobody is completely immune to mis-hearing or mis-understanding, but repeated reflection and clarification usually gets people closer to clarity. Understanding stimulates compassionate action that reassures the frightened, feeds the hungry, and houses those without.

Finally, the empathy shown in my community reinforces me. When we light candles of joy and concern, share reactions after each sermon, or attend men's and women's groups, I see how we want to know and give to each other. From the front, I see joy, sadness, and anxiety sweep across each person's face as someone shares with us. I can hear the empathic chuckles and gasps as they hear reports of a new grandchild or a dying friend. We are enriched in the telling, hearing, and responding.

I witness to my clients about the value of community, but without my good UU example I would be an idealistic windbag. I know what I'm talking about when I recommend that my clients join a value-rich community in which they feel accepted for themselves and inspired to action for others. My clients can feel my feeling with my people. Barry Lopez ended an article on recovering from abuse with this:

"We need others to bring us back into the comity of life . . .to appreciate someone's embrace not as forgiveness or as an amicable judgment but as an acknowledgement that, from time to time, private life becomes brutally hard for every one of us, and that without one another, without some sort of community, the nightmare is prone to lurk, waiting for an opening." (p.48, Harper's, Jan. 2013)

My community ministry called me to heal the nightmares of depression and anxiety with love and reason. Thank you for the opportunity to describe how empathy is the heart of compassion, and compassion is the engine of healing for individuals and our communities. Community ministry is about healing community *in* the community. It is ministry with innovative methods in changing institutions, to meet new challenges. Thank you, my community ministry colleagues, for doing your many different kinds of ministry. We are introducing Unitarian Universalism's values into diverse places and groups, ministering from the heart, to others' hearts, where they live.