

To Not Make a Big Noise: A Sermon Towards Authenticity

*(For A Congregation in Search)*

Rev. Robin Landerman Zucker

Beacon UU Congregation, October 16, 2022

We begin with a fable: “Once upon a time there was an old king in a palace. In the center of a golden table in the main hall, there shone a large and magnificent jewel. Each day of the King’s life, the diamond sparkled more resplendently. One day a thief stole the jewel and ran from the palace, hiding in the forest. As he stared with deep joy at the stone, to his amazement, an image of the King appeared in it.

I have come to thank you, said the King. You have released me from my attachment to who I am expected to be. I thought I was freed when I acquired the jewel, but then I realized I would only be released when I let go and passed it on, with a pure heart. Each day of my life, he continued, I polished that diamond, until finally this day arrived, when the jewel became so beautiful that you wanted to possess it, so I have passed it on. I am free.

The jewel you hold is Authenticity, said the King. You cannot add to its beauty by hiding it or hinting that you have it, nor by wearing it with vanity. Its beauty comes only from the consciousness and lived experience that others have of it. Honor the essence of that beauty – the diamond in the rough.”

This fable, adapted from a classic Hindu tale, captures the essential change facing the human being who is also a minister; that is, how does she (in my case) define authenticity and then embody and retain it in the practice of her vocation? For me, this question has been my companion on a 27-year journey since I embarked on my theological education at Harvard Divinity School. And it is an important question for a congregation in search, *this* congregation in search. The diamond in our fable is an apt metaphor for the conundrum. People value the diamond more when it sparkles. We prize the stone for its many facets (or so we say), yet we may reject it based on the slightest defect. The essence of its beauty – the diamond in the rough – is often forgotten or overlooked in the brilliance of the polished jewel.

In a similar way, the minister entranced by the sparkle of her own brilliance or neglectful of her inner life, runs the real risk of losing her naturalness, her authority, and her spiritual bearings and grounding by merely hinting at authenticity. By wearing it... like this impressive robe with the velvet sleeve inserts. You’re not used to seeing me in a minister’s robe. I’m proud of this Harvard robe, I earned it and received it as a gift from my home church at my ordination in 2000. The robe is a symbol of the learned ministry (what you know). The stole (which you see me wear most weeks) symbolizes the call to ministry and ordination.

I wore the robe for the first 5 years of my ministry. I believed it gave me gravitas and neutralized my femininity. It was a uniform; a costume and it is a heavy robe which can perpetuate the very artifice I'm alluding to. So, over time, I took it off – I don't need it to be taken seriously or be authentic in my role. (I take off my robe here) – ahh, that's better. As I discovered, possessing authenticity is not a quality one goes out to acquire. It derives from the opposite – letting go, just as the King in the fable is released and in effect, fulfilled, by passing on the diamond in all its complexity.

Minister, philosophers, and theologians have grappled with this vexing pursuit for centuries; that is, how to define authenticity, cultivate and retain it through spiritual formation, personal growth, education, common sense, integrity, and a careful balance between professional polish and essential human fallibility. Plato makes it sound so simple: "May the outward and the inner person be one." Sage advice, but in the light of day, more difficult than it sounds.

Many ministerial voices have shared valuable insights on this subject, and I'll share some of them with you this morning. Gary Smith, the now Emeritus minister of my home church, First Parish in Concord, MA, define authenticity this way. He asks: "How much do we have to pretend to get by?" He recalls some fellow seminarians who didn't seem to have a sense of who they were and thought that being a minister, having that role, would make up for this. He concludes: "That's pretty dangerous."

In the piece we heard earlier by the Rev. Peter Raible, he asks: "Can I be a minister and continue to be real as a person? (And by real, he doesn't mean letting it all hang out whenever it suits) He continues: "The fact that the best ministers I know find this an ongoing challenge suggests that perhaps the repeated confronting of the issue is the best way to deal with personhood. At least, we can all try, as my mother used to say, "not to make a noise like a minister."

So, what is the difference between making a big noise like a minister and being a minister? Especially, in a profession that the Rev. David Rankin describes as a "dartboard for every wish and whim and want ad for every art, craft, trait and skill." How does one remain real while fulfilling the expectation, in Rankin's words, "to research the Universe, inspire the dull, comfort the afflicted, afflict the comfortable, maintain the tradition, introduce the contemporary, reform society, raise funds, arbitrate disputes, officiate at ceremonies, socialize with ease, and stay awake and calm at every meeting?"

There is humor in there...I hope you detect it. I am not feeling cynical or being sarcastic. Rankin's lament is not a poke in the eye. It's honest. And it reminds me of words I recall from the Quaker writer Scott Crom. He suggests that to become real is to become whole, and to accomplish this, one must learn to struggle a bit, to trust and to let go. He tells us: "Here one can return to the classical answers. The way to become whole is through wholeness, to way to let go is to let go, the way to trust is to trust. The goal is the journey, and the end is the means." Buddhists call this skillful means.

These ideas cross over so many religious traditions. The Hindu sage, Keshub Chunder Sen shared that for him, being authentic requires a form of childlike naturalness and curiosity. In his book, *Zen Mind, Beginner Mind*, Master Shunryu Suzuki reminds us that “in the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert’s mind there are few.”

Yes, ministers absolutely need to be grounded in scholarship, they need to be well-trained and mentored, professional and able. Yet, to remain authentic and accessible, they also benefit from retaining some beginner mind, and acknowledging their growing edges as they evolve. The poem we heard earlier, “Saturday at the Procrastinating Minister’s House” captures the author’s striving and her speed bumps. I laughed and nodded my way through that poem.

The thing is, for many ministers, brainwashed into believing (by many voices, including search committees) that they must shimmer with expertise, the notion of “beginner mind” or acknowledging those growing edges can feel threatening and risky. Remember to ask your candidates what they are curious about, not just what they know.

The Rev. Frederick Buechner, a Presbyterian minister who is one of my favorites, understands this but calls the recognition of our need to evolve as a “magnificent defeat.” He tells us: “Vocation is not what you do. It is who you are becoming.” Gary Smith, along with my mentor, the Rev. Ken Sawyer, embodied this balance between shimmer and shadow. In one of his sermons, the Rev. Smith recalled the words of the philosopher Soren Kierkegaard, who asks: “How does one tell who has faith? We can tell because the person who has faith is the person in motion, taking risks, becoming vulnerable.” Or in May Sarton’s words: to become oneself – shaken and stirred.

Even so, ministers unravel. Buechner cautions us that Clergy of all stripes “run the risk of ceasing to be witnesses to the presence in their own lives, let alone the lives of the people they are called to minister to. Instead, they become professionals who have mastered all the techniques of institutionalized religion, yet their sermons sound as bland as they sound bloodless. The faith they proclaim appears to be unrooted and un nourished, free floating, second-hand, and passionless. They sound, in other words, detached and burned out.”

Burn out is a real thing in ministry. That’s why study leaves, sabbaticals, vacations, time for a spiritual life, and strong support and collaboration in the congregation enables a minister to be fully human and fully functional. We all need to go to the well to be replenished. The pandemic made that difficult, but I had the mesa and the sunshine, my wonderful pup, some friends, and this wonderful congregation traversing it with me.

It takes courage to be alone with yourself in the sun and in the shadow. But only in this way can a minister attend to the essential care of her soul, body, and mind, and model for her flock the questions so well put by the remarkable Sister Noel Doyle: “What grounds me? What rounds me? What astounds me? And What hounds me?” If ministers

won't do this essential soul work, how can they help but self-destruct or retreat at such an alarmingly high rate (higher than ever these days)?

Why do ministers choose to fake it or settle for unintentional phoniness? Does the answer reside in pressures within the self or from the congregation or a toxic stew of both? One of my colleagues believes it an image thing and that the parts that require meeting people's expectations can be faked. But this can't last. The minister impersonating a minister will be found out. As the esteemed UU minister Jack Mendelsohn has noted: "Nothing is more human in this world than to flee the slings and arrows of the moral condition, and ministry can easily be taken as an escape from the burden of being fully human, a kind of semi-divine charade, above the common embarrassments, fears and shames. Yet, ministers are persons with pincushion souls and elastic hearts, who know that the first time our laughter is false, or our tears are make-believe, our days in the vocation are numbered."

The dance of authenticity is especially fraught, here in the pulpit. Buechner reminds us that "if you are any good with words, if you are any good as a public speaker with the power to move people, to fascinate them, to bring them sometimes to tears, inspire them to new awarenesses, you have to be so careful not to make it just a performance, not matter how captivating." (a show with a big heavy black costume, to boot, I would add).

It is a dance...one with the congregation as partner. We've been practicing the steps together and I think we've gotten pretty good on the dance floor – a kind of lindy hop/waltz mash-up. You're good people. Stay mindful, though, that congregations cannot expect ministers to be truly authentic without an environment of mutual respect, honesty, safety, and shared commitment to congregational vitality. We are human – all of us. We make mistakes. We need to have standards and be flexible. As the Rev. Richard Gilbert captures it: "Today I am your rock of comfort in a weary land. Tomorrow, I am blown about by the sands of the desert, and I need an oasis of your strength. Today, I dazzle you with my perspicacity, tomorrow, I forget our appointment." In mutually supportive congregations, we abide.

I've taken off my robe, shaken and stirred. Yet, authenticity is an ongoing "Come as you are" journey. The Dutch, who have a knack for saying things in an unpoetic way, have the last word this morning. They tell us: "Dare to be who you are." "Come as you are" is really an invitation to take the dare. It is an admonition to act in keeping with your own being, your own nature." (Peter Fleck) It's a summons to not be ashamed of your humanity while also living up to your own intentions and calling. If you decide to accept the liberating invitation to meet yourself where you are and to evolve from there, you may find what you are striving for – authenticity - a jewel of wonder, a rock of faith, a diamond in the rough. Blessed be. Blessed we. And Amen.

© 2022 Rev. Robin Landerman Zucker. May be quoted with proper attribution to author and sources.

