

Passing the Baton
Unitarian Universalist Church in Cherry Hill
Sunday, April 28, 2024
Rev Eric Posa and Rev. Margret A. O’Neill

Margret: The term “passing the baton” comes from the relay races in track and field competitions: each team has a baton, and as each team member completes their section of the race they pass the baton to the next runner. As I near completion of my section of the ministry in the 68-year history of this amazing congregation, I will pass the baton of ministry to Rev. Eric Posa to carry it forward. We will not actually complete the handover until the end of July, but the process has begun and we wanted to share with you today who we are in the race, and what this transition means to us as ministers who love these courageous institutions of the Unitarian Universalist faith tradition.

Reverend Eric and I are both aware that we have an unusual profession, and we need to remember not to take ourselves too seriously, to keep perspective. This reading by Rowland Croucher, titled *The Perfect Pastor*, shines a humorous light on the expectations people have of their ministers:

The results of a computerized survey indicate the perfect minister preaches exactly fifteen minutes.

He condemns sins but never upsets anyone.

She works from 8:00 AM until midnight and is also the church janitor.

He makes \$50 a week, wears good clothes, buys good books, drives a good car, and gives \$60 weekly to the poor.

She is 28 years old and has preached 30 years.

He has a burning desire to work with teenagers and spends all of his time with senior citizens.

The perfect minister smiles all the time with a straight face because he has a sense of humor that keeps her seriously dedicated to her work.

He attends all committee and board meetings, makes 15 calls daily on shut-ins and the hospitalized, and is always in his office when needed.

If your minister does not measure up, simply send this letter to six other churches that are tired of their minister, too.

Then bundle up your minister and send him to the church on the top of the list. In one week, you will receive 1,643 ministers and one of them will be perfect.

Have faith in this procedure. One church broke the chain and got its old minister back in less than three weeks....so don’t break the chain.

Margret: With those thoughts in mind, Rev Eric and I have created a sort of dialog sermon to share with you today, so you will hear from us both, and we want you to have as much delight in hearing this as we have in creating it. We begin with the basics: I am a Unitarian Universalist minister, and a UUA Accredited Interim Minister. How about you, Eric?

Eric: I am a Unitarian Universalist minister, and a UUA Accredited Interim Minister. Wow, same! What are your other identities?

Margret: I am a cisgender woman of Northern European heritage – about three-quarters Irish, actually. I was raised in an upwardly mobile middle class environment, and with three master’s

degrees and a PhD -- I am a lifelong learner with more education than is reasonable for any normal human, At age 73, I guess I qualify as an elder, but generally do not feel that way. I was married to a man for 27 years and we have one son who lives and works in New York City. I have been divorced and living solo since 1999. I usually identify as heterosexual, although I believe in gender and relationship fluidity for myself as well as for others. Eric, what about your identities would you like to share?

Eric: I'm also white and cisgender, and as a man in my early 50s, I'm handed heaping scoops of privilege by the dominant culture. That includes straight privilege, being married to Suzi for almost 17 years now – that particular privilege is ironic, as I've been out as a monogamous bisexual man for several years now. But my upbringing was working-class, as the only child of a stay-at-home mother and truck driver father. I broke into the middle class via academia, earning Bachelor's and Master's degrees in philosophy, and working on university staff as an academic advisor, before attending seminary.

I was ordained into the UU ministry in 2005. After a few years of serving in my home state – first as a hospital chaplain, then interim minister, then a settled ministry - I began moving around the U.S. for transitional ministries: North Carolina; Pennsylvania (Harrisburg); Memphis, TN; Washington state; Colorado; Louisiana. More recently, I tried unsuccessfully to return to my home church (I'll say more later about that); since this February, I've served a VERY short-term ministry in Michigan. Where has your ministry taken you, Margret?

Margret: I was ordained as a UU minister in 2009, and my entire ministry has been serving congregations in transition, moving around the country from Missouri to Colorado to Florida to two different congregations in New York, to Arizona, and finally for the last five years, here in Cherry Hill, New Jersey. In some ways, coming to Jersey is making my way back to where I started: I was born in New York, my parents moved to Canada when I graduated from high school; I ended up in the Midwest (Michigan and Missouri) and my circuit has brought me back to the northeast after all these years. What about you, Eric, where are you from?

Eric: I was born in Ft. Worth, TX, and raised in a small, semi-rural suburb between Ft. Worth and Dallas. At 18, I went to the north end of the Dallas/Fort Worth area to college at the University of North Texas, earning Bachelor's and Master's degrees in philosophy, of all subjects. I wound up living in the north Texas area 'til year after ordination, then the next 5 years elsewhere in TX. After 11 years' travel for interim ministries in the places I already mentioned before, I felt a need to ground myself in a particular place for a longer period of time. And that's when my home church in Denton, TX came open. So I tried returning home. The congregation was great in almost every way, except finances; they had several different money issues hit in a short time, mostly unrelated to my arrival, but they could no longer afford full time ministry. But going back to Texas was a bit heartbreaking, to be honest. Texas had changed while I had lived away, gotten more like the negative stereotypes of the state that are held by many folk in more liberal parts of the country. And frankly, I had changed, enough so that my old home just didn't feel like home anymore.

But enough about that. I mentioned earlier some things about my education and work before ministry. What did yours involve, Margret?

Margret: Hmmm – my career in my early 20s started in Community Development, working in rural Missouri, and from there I moved into public health, first for a local health department in

the St Louis area, and then in a School of Public Health, teaching, advising and doing administration. From there, I went to seminary starting in 2004, and the rest is history, as they say. It was out of that background I felt my call to intentional transitional ministry, since I have always loved the work of change and transition, supporting spiritual, emotional and functional health in people, congregations and communities. I am firmly committed to social justice and to bringing more peace and wholeness to the world, and to creating good experiences for the congregation on Sunday mornings. But I will freely admit that my very favorite aspects of ministry are leadership, governance, administration and strategic processes – things like supporting the work on conflict transformation, covenant and governance here at UUCCH. What about you, Eric? What are your favorite parts of ministry?

Eric: There's a couple of aspects I love. One is offering perspectives and ideas - in sermons, adult RE, pastoral visits, etc. - that help people look at life in a new way, or connect more fully with other people, or live out their commitments in the larger world. Another - like you, Margret - is the organizational side of ministry. I love thinking through governance, policies, congregational structure for lay committees, etc. The value of clarity and intentionality with how we set up our shared work together as a congregation cannot be underestimated. And the other big one for me is being part of collective and effective work for social justice.

So it sounds like we have a lot in common there, despite all our differences. But I can't help noticing, with all our common ground, we are dressed a bit differently: I often wear a sports jacket or suit on Sundays, along with my stole, obviously. But I notice you are wearing a minister's robe.

Margret: One of the first lessons I learned as a woman going into ministry, in spite of all the progress we have made in gender equality over my lifetime, is that when a man wears the same suit or jacket week after week, the only comment people might make is something like, "Nice tie!" But for a woman, people will constantly comment on our clothing, even with things like "Didn't you wear that dress last week?" A robe just makes it easier to manage perceptions, and besides, it is a better background to show off all my fabulous stoles!

But enough about clothing: Eric, one of the things people often want to know about a UU minister is what we believe, and for me that is always a complicated question. My first answer is always to deflect the question: my ministry is not about what I believe, but about creating a place where everyone may explore and deepen their own beliefs, feeling accepted and valued for who they are in the moment. And when pressed for an answer, I define myself as a humanist mystical naturalist – my theology rests on a belief in human agency in a universal cosmic energetic web, with a strong connection to the natural world. I am completely comfortable with God-language and many rich religious traditions – centered always on Love as the divine energy that unites it all. Eric, how do you define your beliefs when people want to know?

Eric: Again, we have some similarities and some differences. Like you, I serve this pluralistic faith of Unitarian Universalism because I hope those I'm in ministry with can deepen their spiritual lives regardless of belief, and be affirmed for it. Yet one of the things that surprises people about me is that as a UU minister, a figure in religious history who has deeply inspired my own spiritual life has been Jesus. I know evangelical, so-called "Christianity" has become horribly politicized in recent years. In the process, they get many things wrong about the teachings of Jesus described in their own scriptures. One is how these teachings promote a

deeply progressive and anti-oppressive spirituality, that speaks to me as a Unitarian Universalist far more than these Christian nationalists. Plus, I have the blessing of having been raised unchurched - as much as any small-town Southerner can be unchurched. So I don't have the traumatic baggage that some current UUs carry from their harmful upbringings in conservative Christianity. That means I find personal meaning in SOME of the metaphors we've inherited from our Christian heritage, from the possibility of integrating the sacred with humanity (AKA a limited kind of "incarnation," but possible for everyone, not just Jesus), to the spiritual benefits known as "grace." But again, I have ZERO interest in imposing my preferred metaphors on other UUs. If I did, I would have changed denominations decades ago, but I love the pluralism of our faith.

But that's not the only thing that surprises people as they get to know me. I live with a few contrasts in my life that sometimes throw people off:

I have been accused by a fellow minister of combining "the patience of Job...with the conviction of Micah." I'm also:

- both a native Texan and a widely-traveled transitional minister,
- a gregarious extrovert who enjoys quiet time with my beloved, Suzi,
- a committed social justice activist as well as a cisgender white man and ...well, and a native Texan,
- an out-&-proud bisexual person who frequently geeks out over theology,
- an aging hipster who un-ironically loves country-&-western and polka music,
- a calm, pastoral preacher who dances during lively hymns,
- and I am both an intentionally covenantal Unitarian Universalist and a ruthless...
Dungeons & Dragons player.

Then again, maybe none of those are really paradoxes.
(Except the hipster polka thing. That's just weird.)

How about you, Margret, what surprises people?

Margret: I guess one thing that sometimes surprises people is that even though I seem to be a highly professionalized workaholic, my secret identity is a homebody. I always have at least one book I am reading, and I enjoy playing the flute and piano. I can lose myself for hours in a sewing or knitting project, or in gardening and yardwork – the soil is my playground, and there is always something new to learn and explore. I enjoy preserving the abundance from my garden, when I have a garden; I love to bake bread, and to create celebratory meals for and with others. I enjoy home renovation, and am pretty adept at laying ceramic tile, installing woodwork and trim, finishing wallboard, all those messy hands-on activities where you can see what you have done at the end of the day.

So, speaking of the things I love to do, as my work and my life make a big shift this summer, you might wonder, what is coming up next for me?

Many of you know that I thought my next step would be "retirement" and I have been preparing for that in the last couple of years. First, I worked on dwellings – two years ago I bought a house in Hyde Park, New York, to settle down within an accessible distance from my son in New York City. Next, I sold my condo in St Louis that had served as home base for me as I moved around the country. That was a big shift for me. I have been gradually moving into the house in Hyde Park and getting it ready to live there full time by this July. Then this spring I noticed that the UU Congregation of the Catskills, just up the Hudson River from my new home, was looking for

a half-time contract minister, so I started talking with them, and I have now signed a contract to take that position starting in August. I will still be teaching transition ministry with colleagues for the UUA and the Interim Ministry Network, and I plan to make plenty of time for all those homebody activities I mentioned earlier. How about you, Eric, what are you looking forward to in this next stage of your life?

Eric: I spoke earlier of my heartbreak returning to my home state. Before that, I had called myself not just a “native” Texan but also an “ex-pat” Texan: one who was living elsewhere, but only temporarily. Or so I thought. In the last few months since moving away again, I’ve come to realize I’m now a FORMER Texan. (You hear the difference, right?) In some ways it’s been a hard realization, but in other ways, not so hard as I might have thought. But it has pushed me to re-evaluate what I’m looking for in a new home. Recognizing that I have changed, now I seek a place to dwell that better matches the person I’ve become; a place to serve that matches the minister I now am, better than the minister I used to be.

Thanks to this great search committee, my good colleague, and these last 72 hours here, I see a lot of reasons to suspect that south Jersey, and UUCCH, might well be the places I’ve been looking for. I look forward, over these next 3 years as your contract minister, to getting to know you, to working alongside you in transforming our lives and our world, and to discerning together if we form the kind of match to carry this ministry forward together, for many years to come.

Margret: Wow. I am glad and hopeful for all the amazing things unfolding in the future. As our closing hymn, Eric and I chose a very traditional hymn of our faith tradition, reflecting the long tradition of which we, and all of you, are a part, as we move into the future in this historic and liberating faith of Unitarian Universalism. Please rise in body or spirit to join in the joyful singing, the words will be on the screen, #358 in your hymnal, Rank by Rank Again we Stand.