



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

My President, My Minister

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It will come as no news flash to many of us here that Neighborhood Church is now in search for a senior minister to fill the slot of Jim Nelson, our retiring senior minister. In the next few months our hard at work search committee will bring us the name of a candidate that they have picked to be our new minister and then they'll want *US* to decide if that is the right person for our church. It's an exciting time for some of us and also a time of anxiety. Change brings about those two emotions. I've heard and watched several ministers here in the last 45 years I've been a member. One of them, as the introduction said, I was married to. Brandy was a parish minister for over 40 years, 24 of them here at Neighborhood. I saw first-hand what a complicated sometimes frustrating and often rewarding job it is ministering to a bright, opinionated and involved church community.

Now we've had an opportunity to reflect on just what kind of minister we want next through surveys and group discussions and private conversations among members. I've done all of this and yet I'm still not sure what I want and expect from my new minister. But I have been looking at those challenges and at the attributes and skills which a minister brings to the position. Then I took a leap prompted by the hype and speculation now surrounding who might run for president of our country in a little over two years. Right now I'm a bit surer that we will get the right minister here than that we will be getting the right president in two years. But it has been helpful for me to look at how these two roles – minister and president – intersect. While they are, of course, different in many substantial ways; one is elected the, other is, we say, called. One is visible and influential on a global level the other on, at most, a community wide level. The president, unlike a minister, can make and enforce laws. But the similarities stand out as clearly as the differences of these two public people. Each must exercise the tricky balance of power, along with always staying in touch with their congregants/constituents. And each has checks and balance on that power.

That word 'power' is loaded with a variety of connotations depending on how and by whom it is used. In a book Brandy wrote over 25 years ago called *A Machiavellian View of the Ministry*, he addresses the power word. It was written as a guide to new ministers many of whom begin their careers loaded with institutional innocence. The book is designed to help them manage their positions in churches with a more realistic perspective. As I read this opening paragraph of his book where he talks about power think how much applies to both presidents and ministers. It reads:

As much as most people, and almost every minister new to her or his profession does not want to hear or believe it, the best way to understand what is happening is to look at how power is distributed and is being used. This is true in relationships between couples, within families, within a nation, internationally and in the church. Within the congregation between members and the minister there is the continuous use of influence, authority, alliances, coalitions, and decision making; in a phrase, there is the exercise of power in its various guises. Power, personal or group, scares many people. But power is best understood as simply the necessary element required to

make and effectuate individual or group decisions. Power is too often thought of as power over others, when in a church the best use of power is when it is used with others to achieve mutually desired goals.

I think our church would score pretty high on achieving mutually desired goals in cooperation with the three branches of our governance – minister, board and congregation. Maybe we should be giving our national government some lessons on that effective use of power.

I want my president and my minister to know how to be a positive role model *and* realize the heavy responsibility this carries. In my lifetime a very public figure, President Franklin Roosevelt, made a choice about what to reveal or obscure. As a young man he was felled by polio and was wheelchair bound. When he ran for Governor of New York and four times as president the public was never shown a picture of him in a wheelchair. Apparently it was felt that if we knew the degree to which he was afflicted he would appear weak and unable to govern as effectively. But what if we had known? What if we had been able to observe this remarkable man function fully politically and personally without perceived weakness? Was this a missed opportunity to be a role model or was it his perfect right to choose what we knew?

Like most children, I searched for models – people and mostly adults who could show me ways of being human and grown up. We need models first for our cognitive development and later for our moral development. But do our childhood models stand up to time? Think about those models you had as children. Do they still work for you? I remember my grandmother, a deeply religious, loving woman . . . very grandmotherly. I spent a good deal of time with her and loved the attention she gave me with her story telling. She would sit me on her lap and tell me stories with a moral.

I especially remember the one about the squirrel and the chipmunk. The squirrel would spend the summer storing up nuts and seeds for the winter and the chipmunk would frolic and play all summer and then have to beg food from the squirrel the next winter. I suppose I absorbed her point but mostly I liked the attention. And then there was this: When I asked her, as a seven year old, to write in my autograph book this is what she wrote, “You asked me to write in your book. I sincerely don’t know where to begin because there’s nothing original about me but original sin.” I was seven and thought then that it beautiful. It rhymed and she knew it by heart. Now I’m appalled that this bright and talented woman really believed this. I still loved her but I sure needed a new model.

And then when I was older I began spending a great deal of time with our new next door neighbors, the Barkers. They had three children who seemed to be encouraged to be chipmunks a nice balance to my squirrelly household message. Then one day my mother said to me, “I’m glad that you enjoy the Barkers. They are a nice family but you need to know that they are Unitarians.” Of course, I had no idea what that was, nor I suspect did my mother. And it didn’t sound good. But that model took, and later as a freshman in college I joined a small campus Unitarian fellowship. And here I am many years later still following that model.

If my president and my minister are to be good role models it is important – *necessary* – that they have a strong inner commitment to the task they are asked to fulfill. We say that our clergy are “called” to serve not hired or elected. It’s a strange term which has its antecedents in Christianity and means the clergy are called first to serve God through their commitment to their congregations. I interpret this to mean that the people who choose to enter the ministry have a strong moral compass to guide them in their tasks. I can’t imagine how either presidents or clergy can survive without that guiding compass.

All public figures wrestle with the ‘publicness’ of their roles. In many cases they have no control over when and by whom information is revealed. There was a recent article in the New York Times by Frank Bruni, written after a tell-all book called *The Hillary Papers* came out. The information in the book was supplied by her best friend to whom she had apparently confided. Bruni indicates up front that he’s not a great Hillary fan but nevertheless he writes:

What I have been feeling for and about Hillary Clinton over the last week is sadness. Does she have even a smidgen of privacy left? Can she utter a syllable or think a thought with any assurance that it won’t be exposed analyzed and ridiculed. Frenzied media feed on this, to a degree that arguably goes beyond our obligation to keep politicians honest and it’s troubling in two regards. How many gifted people who contemplate public office look at what someone like Hillary endures and step away?

And how do we, the public, judge the worth or truth of that information. Who draws the line about what is told and what is withheld? Sometimes taking control of when and by whom personal information is given is the best approach.

A personal example: 35 years ago one of our daughters, not yet 20 and unmarried, came home and told us that she was pregnant. As we absorbed and dealt with this information deeply concerned for and with her, we moved to be supportive of her as she explored the different options available to her. And then, when she chose to continue with the pregnancy, my husband, then the minister here at this church, said, “The church must know about this development in our lives.” I was stunned. “This is a private family matter.” I said. To which he replied, “I am a public person in this church community and there will be those who will be curious to see how I handle this. We are going to be first time grandparents. This will be public.” And handle it we did with the kind support of this community. It was a professional judgment call on Brandy’s part and though I was initially against such an approach, in this case I soon saw it as wise. We assumed control of how and when this family development became public. A perk for me was to experience how this community quietly supported us through a tricky time in our lives. Another perk was our first grandchild . . . our wonderful Sarah whom some of you may have heard speak at Grandpa Brandy’s memorial service four years ago.

Being married to a public person has made me curious about and aware of how other much more public people handle their . . . publicness. We mostly had a choice about how, when and how much over the years we revealed of our lives and our family. We also were part of a

basically supportive and caring community. Most public figures do not have that choice or in some cases a similarly inclined public. Most accept the risk as part of their public position and role. How many gifted people who contemplate public office or even the ministry look at what these roles require and step away? Our president and our minister must have strong egos to withstand and not fold under the inevitable challenges which will come their way.

But that ego needs to be sprinkled with a dose of humility. There's a story UU ministers like to tell about a colleague, the well-known minister of a big church who was known to be a bit full of himself. Seems he had just preached and on his way home as he continued to hold forth he said to his wife, "Do you know how few really good ministers there are in our association?" to which she apparently replied, "One less than you think dear."

Doses of humility sometimes come from unexpected sources.

We usually know what particular strengths presidents come into the office with. Some are strong on international relations, some on domestic matters. Some have had wartime experience. Ministers also have specialized strengths, sermon styles or persuasions. Experienced ministers know their own styles. There are four style categories.

There is the PROPHETIC. In our tradition this entails a call for social action. Then there is a PASTORAL ministry – Nurturing, counseling, giving examples of those who have prevailed over hardship perhaps with personal examples. PRIESTLY deals with spiritual practice, meditation or prayer. And lastly the INTELLECTUAL – Theological, concerned with ideas rather than the consequence of ideas. Me, I'd like to have them all in my minister which is probably unreasonable. Skilled ministers will have some of all but will be stronger in one of those categories.

When it comes time to decide if we want to call the minister whom the search committee has brought to us we will have a week to listen and observe. During that week our candidate will most likely be accompanied by a spouse if he/she has one. Our candidate will preach two consecutive Sundays, meet with committees, the staff, the board and so on. We will have an opportunity to ask the candidate questions. We will be listening and observing. We humans are observers. Studies show that we pick up almost as much from observing body language, smile, posture as we do from words. When our new minister arrives we will do more than listen to him or her. We will watch to see how our candidate interacts with his/her family, with us and at meetings.

I remember many years ago when Brandy and I were here and he was candidating to fill this pulpit. We were at a luncheon in the meeting room of the old church – a large gathering of women of the church called the Women's Guild. The room had a stage above the main floor and Brandy and I were instructed to sit on the stage, not all alone but almost. I asked *why* we were put there and the response was, "They'll want to look at you." I was amused and amazed. But she was right. We're going to be looking.

I am part of the “old guard” of this church . . . I see a few others sitting out there who have been around even longer than my 45 years. I’ve also voted for presidents of our country for almost 60 years. Even though we as a church and we as citizens of this country may have different hopes and dreams for our church and our country we all unite in wanting to carry on the proud traditions of both. So when it comes time to call a minister and elect a president let’s hope (or pray if you wish) that we get two people who exhibit, courage, intellect and wisdom to guide us into the next phase for our church and for our country. And I don’t think that’s too much to ask.