

## **“The Power of the Rev”**

One of the occupational hazards of ministry is being accosted by anonymous strangers who either want you to be their confidante or want to challenge your knowledge of Bible verses. I’ve never been particularly good at Bible verses and have always been a rather private person—something that tends to be true of many Unitarian Universalist clergy—and this is one of the reasons why so few of our ministers wear clerical collars and why so many avoid conversations with their seat mates on airplanes, for fear of being “outed” as a man- or woman-of-the-cloth.

Occasionally, however, our secret identity leaks. This happened to Steve Edington, a friend of mine who happens to be the minister of one of our congregations in Nashua, New Hampshire, when he was on a plane trip to the West Coast. He was in the Los Angeles airport, standing in line to check through airport security. There were dozens of people waiting in queue, and thousands milling about the terminal, all trying to look inconspicuous and not to resemble potential hijackers. Steve had finally reached the front of the line and handed the guard manning the x-ray machine his ticket and personal ID, which identified him as “Rev. Steve Edington.” The security man looked at his papers, comparing the ticket against the driver’s license, and then asked suspiciously, “Is your first name Rev?” Puzzled for just a moment, Steve explained that “Rev” was a title rather than his first name and that it stood for “Reverend.” Now it was the guard’s turn to be caught off balance. “You’re a Reverend?” he asked, as though not quite believing what he’d heard. Hearing Steve affirm that he was indeed an ordained religious leader, the guard hesitated slightly and then asked him to please step out of line and follow him to the room where people were usually taken to be interrogated or strip-searched.

Steve at this point was completely non-plussed. Had ministers joined imams and ayatollahs on the FBI’s watch list? When the two of them reached the private conference area, the guard again confirmed that Steve was a minister and then told him the following story.

“It was two weeks ago,” he began. “I was lying on the couch, just listening to music, when the strangest thing happened. First it was like my feet just disappeared. And then my legs started to dissolve, nothing there. And then my arms and the rest of my trunk seemed like they simply turned to air, and then all of me went. It was as though my whole body vanished. Poof. I was there one minute and gone the next. And when I returned to the room, I decided to give up smoking and stop drinking and what do you think of that?”

Now occurrences like this never happen to me. In New England, we seldom have out-of-body experiences, and when we do, we’re encouraged not to talk about it. It’s a forbidden subject, like body odor or the meaning of life. But this was California, so my friend Steve may have been somewhat prepared for this confession because without missing a beat, he answered the man. “It sounds like you’ve had a visit from the spirit,” Steve said in his best pastoral manner. “That’s right! That’s exactly right! I’ve had a visit from the spirit!” the man exclaimed. “And that visit has made you do some hard thinking about your life,” Steve went on, encouraged by this success. “You’re right

again,” the man affirmed more soberly, “I have done some hard thinking about my life.” “And I think there’s probably a message for you there,” Steve concluded with a final touch of non-directional counseling. “You never spoke more truly,” the man agreed, “There’s definitely a message for me there!” The two of them left their impromptu confessional and resumed their places in the airport ticket line. But for a brief interlude, each had experienced what I call the power of the Rev.

Never underestimate that power. Don’t belittle it. Some days, I almost lose sight of the power of the Rev, then walk around a corner and run smack into it again, the curious privilege that goes with the job description, not only of being offered access to the most intimate, unnerving details of other people’s lives, but of occasionally being given the ability to utter words that make all the difference to another human individual. I had an experience like that myself a few years back when I visited the Fletcher Allen to find out if any of you were having your adenoids out or tummies tucked that day. No one from our congregation was on the list, but the hospital’s print out did show a Unitarian from out of state on the fourth floor where intensive care is located, so I decided I’d better go have a visit.

The husband and two daughters were in the waiting area, and from them I learned the story. The woman had been on a bicycle trip with her partner of forty years, enjoying the back roads of Vermont. They were a vigorous, active older couple, but she’d taken a fall and hit her head. The family had met with the doctors and were just about to remove her from life support. The machines were the only thing keeping her going at that point, and without any reasonable prospect of recovery, it wasn’t what she’d have wanted. I talked with them for perhaps half an hour, then asked if any of them would like to go into the woman’s room to have a brief prayer before the doctor’s terminated her care.

Now there was a time when offering a prayer in such a situation would have been foreign to me. For one thing, I wouldn’t have known quite what to say. It might have felt awkward or unnatural. But after twenty-five years in ministry, I’ve finally realized that it’s not really important what I feel. As Meg Barnhouse says, “It doesn’t really matter at that moment when my birthday is, or that purple is my favorite color. What matters is the function I perform when I stand in the broad stream of history and symbol, faith and mythology, and let something larger than myself work through me.” The oldest daughter and her father had already said their goodbyes, as it turned out. But the youngest wanted another moment to be with her mother so we went together into the cubicle with the respirators pumping and monitors blinking their benedictions, where I invoked all the love that had attended her mother through her long years of marriage and rearing a family to be with her as she left this world. Then together we walked back to the waiting room, where I said goodbye to the others, and that was the end of that.

I didn’t see that family again. I’d supposed they’d gone back to whatever state they lived in to do their mourning and really I’d forgotten the incident almost entirely until a year later when the minister from the church they attended introduced himself at a General Assembly. “You took care of some of my people a while back,” he reminded me, “and that must have been some prayer you prayed.” “Why is that?” I wondered non-comprehendingly. “Because the woman got better!” he told me. The medical team

had turned off life support a few minutes after I left the hospital, but instead of dying, the woman pulled out of her coma and bounced back to health and was riding bicycles again. I certainly don't think anything I said effected a miraculous cure. But *something* confounded all the doctors' expectations. And if my years of ministry have taught me anything, they've taught me that there is more to the world than science can explain. And they've taught me never to discount the power of the Rev.

It's not any power that resides in me. Ministry isn't a matter of oratory or listening skills or techniques that can be learned or acquired. Rather, ministry is a power bestowed by others. I was ordained in 1982 on April Fools Day, a date I chose because I knew that I wasn't remotely qualified this job. But fortunately others believed in me more than I believed in myself. It was really the first little church I served in Andover, Massachusetts, before I'd even graduated from divinity school, that entrusted me with the role of spiritual leader. When I left, they gave me the black robe that's my badge of office. But even more than that, they gave a twenty-seven year old who was still pretty wet behind the ears the good-humored confidence to trust him with the job of blessing their babies and dancing at their weddings and preaching at their funerals. And if I'm still at it a quarter century later, its all thanks to people like you, the members of this congregation, who are willing to overlook my bad hair days and work with me despite my rather flagrant shortcomings. You're the ones who make ministry happen.

Clergy don't have much real power, of course. Just the power of influence and persuasion and example. But sometimes I think that's the only power that ever really changes things in this world. Indeed, when the power of the Rev is really revved up, some ministers have even been known to walk on water.

I'm thinking now of the joke that's even older than I am about the three clergymen who go fishing together. The priest steps out over the side of the boat and walks across the surface of the river over to the shore nearby; the rabbi steps out of the boat and does the same. The Unitarian minister looks at his two friends in disbelief, steps out of the boat and gets wet up to his armpits, at which point the priest says to the rabbi, "Do you think we should tell him where the stepping stones are?" Ministers walk on water only if you tell them where the stepping stones are, as well as any stumbling blocks they might encounter.

When you go to the hospital to have your tummy tucked, for instance, you need to call me or Roddy and let us know when your operation is scheduled, because neither of us has psychic powers. We don't know you need a visit unless you tell us. That's a stepping stone. And when people who are chronic complainers and nitpickers begin to complain about the way your minister dresses or the kind of car he drives, you need to insure that the nattering nabobs of negativism (and every congregation has them) aren't allowed to set the agenda. That's removing a stumbling block to successful ministry.

You can also invite me out. Ask me to tea or coffee. Let's have lunch or pick up the phone and have me drop by the house. I'd like to get to know almost all of you better than I do, but recognize that you've got me outnumbered.

But the most important thing you can do to insure that your Rev is the kind who walks on water is to come to worship each week with a listening heart. Suspend your disbelief, withhold your skepticism, bracket your finely honed critical and analytical abilities for one brief hour every Sunday and nurse the possibility that your pastor might actually have something worthwhile to say. Don't scrutinize the sermon title ahead of time to see if you like the topic. Come expectant. Instead of listening to find fault, listen for whatever words you need for the good of your soul and the healing of your pain. You just might be surprised.

A story about Fred Rogers comes to mind in this regard. Mr. Rogers was of course an ordained minister himself as well as a famous TV personality. He was the chaplain not only to a generation of pre-schoolers but to many of their parents as well. When my wife was at home with two youngsters, completely overwhelmed with feedings and diapers and never-ending loads of laundry, Mr. Rogers was the one person in her day that she could count on who liked her just the way she was. And it's spooky now that he's died and gone into re-runs. Not long ago, I happened to tune into his show one morning and there he was, telling the kids, "You know, it's awfully good just to be alive!"

Mr. Rogers said that he attended church one morning when a guest preacher happened to be in the pulpit. He must not have been a very inspiring speaker, because Fred sat through the entire twenty minutes finding flaws in the man's diction, how he dropped his voice at the end of sentences, examining the whole performance against the standard of homiletical excellence he'd been trained to expect in seminary. When the sermon was finally over, Fred says he was feeling relieved and disgusted and turned to comment to the fellow worshiper who was sitting next to him and saw that the man had tears streaming down his face. "That man," he said, indicating the preacher, "said exactly what I needed to hear." It was a learning moment. Mr. Rogers said he realized in that instant that this is how God comes to us, not in our judgment, but in our need.

Whether it's me or Roddy or a guest speaker next Sunday morning, your preacher might be trying to say exactly the words you need to hear. He just might be playing the role of the One Who Brings Nourishment From An Unseen Source, but to make it so, you also need to play your roles as the Hungry Ones who want to be fed. Check your finicky tastes and finely trained palates at the door; bring instead your appetite for mystery, your thirst for meaning, your yearning for passion and compassion, and you might discover right here in Burlington the wonder-working power of the Rev. Why, this very morning you could very well receive a visit from the Spirit; you might be provoked to do some hard thinking about your life, and there might very well be a message for you there!