

Order of Service
Self-Differentiated Leadership

November 22, 2009

Call to Worship and Chalice Lighting

We gather in joyful thanksgiving,
That we have this place of light and love
Where we can laugh together,
Sing together,
Learn together,
Grow together,
And serve together.

Let us worship together once more.

Meditation and Prayer

There is a particular pain
Associated with lost job or lost income.
So many of our Fellowship family have been hit hard
By this recession,
That our hearts go out to them.
We cannot usually fix it for them,
Though in time it will get better.
But we can, as a loving community,
Hold them and be with them
During a hard time.
May we in the silence send
Warm intentions

And loving care
And faithful presence
To those in our family who are struggling
To make ends meet.
Amen.

Reading "The Bridge," by Rabbi Edwin Friedman

A man is wrestling with his own thoughts about leadership, his life and what choices he wants to make about his life.

It is a moonlit night and alone in his thoughts he starts crossing a bridge. The man sees out of the corner of his eye a stranger dressed much like himself coming towards him. He thinks the man approaching is putting his hand out to greet him. However, the stranger has the end of a rope in his hand with the other end entwined around him.

The stranger asks the man to hold the end of the rope.

Perplexed the man complies and takes the rope in his hand.

The stranger asks the man to hold on tight with two hands and then promptly jumps off the bridge toward the river far below. "Hold on" the stranger cries.

The free-falling body hurtles the distance of the rope's length, and from the bridge the man abruptly feels the pull. He holds tight despite being almost pulled over the side of the bridge.

Peering down at the stranger, the man yells, "What are you trying to do?"

"Just hold tight," says the other.

The man tries to haul the stranger in but he cannot. He can't get enough leverage. His strength is almost perfectly counterbalanced by the other man's weight.

"Why did you do this?" the man calls out.

"Remember," says the stranger, "if you let go, I will be lost."

"But I cannot pull you up," the man cries.

"I am your responsibility," says the stranger.

"Well, I did not ask for it," the man replies.

"If you let go, I am lost," repeats the stranger.

The man looks around for help, tries to invent solutions but cannot think of any that would work. He waits for someone to come and help pull the stranger up, but no one comes.

Fearing that his arms will not hold out much longer, he ties the rope tightly around his waist.

"Why did you do this?" the man asks again. "Don't you see what you have done? What possible purpose could you have had in mind?"

"Just remember," says the stranger, "my life is in your hands."

Time passes and a decision needs to be made. The man cannot hold on much longer.

A thought occurs to him. If the stranger hauls himself up and he keeps the end steady and pulls a bit, together they could get the stranger back to safety.

But the stranger isn't interested.

"You mean you won't help? But I told you I cannot pull you up myself, and I don't think I can hang on much longer either."

"You must try," the other shouts back in tears. "If you fail, I die."

The point of decision arrives. The man says to the stranger, "Listen to me. I will not accept the position of choice for your life; the position of choice for your own life, I hereby give back to you."

"What do you mean?" the other asks, afraid.

"I mean, simply, it's up to you. You decide which way this ends. I will help you if you help yourself." He unties the rope from his waist and readies his hands to pull on his end of the rope, while the stranger climbs from his end.

"You cannot mean what you say," the other shriekes. "You would not be so selfish. I am your responsibility. What could be so important that you would let someone die? Do not do this to me."

The man waits as long as he can. The stranger makes no movement to help himself.

"I am saddened by your choice," the man says, exhausted, and the rope slips away through his tired hands.

Interlude "Adagio," by Albinoni John Burkhardt & Ted Hegvik

Introduction: Firebombing of Dresden during the 2nd world war. First time the allies had bombed civilian targets, in response to Hitler's bombing in London. Huge collection of Albenoni's music in the museum was destroyed. This fragment alone was rescued from the rubble.

Sermon Self-Differentiated Leadership Rev. Bruce Davis (2292)

When I was a practicing physician I had a recurrent dream that was very like Friedman's powerful and troubling story. I'm on top of a high cliff overlooking the ocean. A grassy field stretches to the very brink of a precipitous drop to the rocks hundreds of feet below. I am well back from the edge myself, but people are walking close to the edge, perhaps to get a better view. Inevitably they slip at the edge but cling to a root or a rock outcropping and begin calling for help.

More out of necessity than choice I run to the edge and grab the hand of the closest victim. With great effort I pull him back to safety, but there are so many more. I rush to save another, but this time my grip and his fail, and he falls. Up and down the cliff more and more people are coming and slipping over the edge. I am in agony that I cannot dissuade

them from staying back away from danger. I wake up in panic and a cold sweat, relieved that my dream was only a dream.

Becoming fused to the destiny of those you are trying to help is indeed one form of leadership. It is all too common among those of us who would save the world from one brink of disaster or another. I'm not saying that I didn't do a good job for people as a family doctor and as a healthcare leader. But that quality of leadership in which we are bound to those we serve, is not good for us, and it is not good for them, either.

If we tie ourselves to those we serve, as the man did in Friedman's story, then when we can no longer help them, they will take us down with them. If we accept responsibility for their lives and their decisions, as the man did when he first took hold of the rope that the stranger held out to him and tied it around his waist, then indeed we are responsible for their outcome. If they do well we can feel pride in our success and we can expect their adulation. But if they do poorly then we feel the anguish of our failure and feel we deserve the sharp edge of their anger. Binding ourselves to the fate of another, we may lose ourselves in the bargain.

And we don't help *them*, either, if by "helping" we mean taking over their responsibility for themselves. As soon as we take hold of that end of the rope, contracting ourselves to be their savior, we enable them to relinquish their own capacity to help themselves. We actually take away from them the very power that could have helped them to save their own life.

Thinking back to the Friedman story, what if the stranger comes up to us and says, "Hold this rope."

"Why," we ask.

"Just hold it and hold it tight."

And we say, "No, I won't do that. I'll be glad to have a conversation with you, but I won't hold on to your rope." The result is a much shorter story, and potentially a much healthier outcome.

Years ago I was practicing in a south Seattle neighborhood in which high blood pressure was endemic. Seemingly every other patient would have significant blood pressure problems, and the corollary was a very high death rate from heart attack and strokes. In my early years at the clinic I had the high blood pressure patients come back weekly so that I could be sure that their pressure was coming into a safer range—that they were moving back and away from the brink of heart attack and stroke. The result, of course, was that I was overwhelmed with 35 and 40 patient visits every day. Even so, some got their heart attacks and strokes.

Out of necessity I figured out that I could save myself and my team a lot of travail by encouraging the patients to get inexpensive but good quality blood pressure cuffs of their own. Many of them started taking responsibility for their own blood pressure readings, and consequently they took more ownership of their condition by cutting out salt, exercising regularly and dealing with stress better.

But some did not. I remember a young man in his forties, who would take his medicines and watch his blood pressure religiously for six months and then let it go. He would come in a year later, hanging from that proverbial cliff by a twig, and again we'd stabilize the blood pressure for a while. This went on for several years, until one day his heart just stopped. He left a young wife and children behind with no means of support. Had I failed him, because that's what it felt like. Or had he failed himself?

By "leadership" here I'm not talking about the great commanders of nation states or the captains of transnational corporations. I'm talking about every one of us who seeks to make a positive difference in the lives of family, friends, church, community, and region. I'm talking about all of us who step forward to work on projects for the common good with teams of like-minded and like-hearted peers. I'm talking about anyone who joins hands with others in common purpose.

After thirty years of medical practice, I had figured out something about the dangers of becoming fused with those who called me into

leadership roles on their behalf. I realized that I could be much happier in the work (doctor, heal thyself!) and that I could play a facilitative role with others, empowering them to take responsibility, and giving them tools to build their own success on their own terms. Even being able to step away from the whole engaging and convoluted life of a physician was a measure of the freedom I had found in relationship to those I had endeavored with all my heart to serve. This is the meaning of self-differentiation: that I am an entity distinct and separate from those that I serve.

When I came to Evergreen, a rookie in a new field, I got some sage advice from one of Evergreen's own leaders. She told me that one of the very successful ministers in Evergreen's past had essentially done everything for them. For those wonderful years, the Fellowship was happy and active, but when the minister left, it took a long time for the congregation to step back into the roles and responsibilities that the Fellowship required of them. "Help us to lead ourselves," was what this wise leader invited me to do in my settlement with Evergreen.

Friend and colleague, Robert Fulghum, put it this way when he heard I'd been called as Evergreen's new minister five years ago. He said that most ministers, especially rookies like me, try to fill the position of ministry, often even defending their territory as *the* ministerial presence. Don't do that, Fulghum, advised. Consider it your task to make ministers of *them*.

Becoming a leader and reaching out a helping hand is one of the most central precepts of our Unitarian Universalist faith. Yet, jumping into problems with both feet, losing your self and your footing into the concerns of others, is not only foolhardy but downright pathological. If so, why do we do it?

When the proverbial cup is overflowing, it is the most natural act in the world to share from that abundance. If I feel emotionally full and grounded, then when I reach out a hand to another person I'm less likely to rob them of their own responsibility. Because I don't need to. Yet, if I

am feeling empty, perhaps bereft of love and affection in my life, then when I reach out to the other person it is often as much or more for *my* benefit as for *theirs*. Leadership may be defined as co-dependent if I as leader am depending on what I get through the dependency that others have on me.

There is a trap here. If I begin to lead others with the intention of serving my needs more than theirs, I become a toxic leader. I take the responsibility from them, guide them toward comfort, and offer them gifts with the expectation that they will like me, or love me, or worship me. Quickly I rob them of the very autonomy they need to solve their own problems. On a large scale such toxic leadership becomes demagoguery, as with a Hitler or a Mussolini. On a smaller scale toxic leadership is at the core of cults, like Jim Jones, leader of the People's Temple, whose insecurity fear of the authorities led to the mass suicide of his community.

Though we are not pathological like Hitler or Jim Jones, most of us have some of that insecurity and anxiety, and it invariably affects us in the leadership roles that we play in our life. Friedman suggests that much leadership in our time is "anxious leadership," and systems that are led by anxious leaders themselves become enormously anxious. Conflict is rampant in anxious organizations, and effectiveness is dramatically diminished. Friedman is not talking about stage fright here. Anxious leadership is based on a deep-down habit of self-disregard. The anxious leader may act like a bully, but at the base is low self-esteem. Looked at from a power perspective, the anxious leader is drawing power from those he or she leads, leaving them powerless. With little self-regard, there is likewise little regard for those he or she serves.

The antidote here is variously described as *self-differentiated or non-anxious leadership*. The fusion between the leader and those led is broken as the leader learns to differentiate himself from those led. And, working to lessen internal anxiety, the less-anxious leader dramatically reduces the fear of those being led. Qualities like affirmation and love, expressed by the leader, help the system to feel affirmation and love for itself. Even if the leader simply puts on hold his or her anxiety (maybe

taking it out on the treadmill at the gym) so that it doesn't spread widely through the system, an organization can begin to move toward healing. Which in turn can help the leader be less anxious.

If we would bring help and healing to our world, we must begin by helping and healing ourselves. The quality of results that we get "out there" in the world will depend directly on the quality of results that we get in our personal and spiritual growth "in here."

So here are some steps toward a healthier quality of leadership, at home, at work, at the Fellowship, or anywhere in your life that leadership is being expressed:

- The less anxious leader can take a step back in order to let the group define its own vision and identify its own best solutions to the problems at hand. And then the leader will help facilitate the implementation of those solutions.
- The leader who needs desperately to be understood by his or her group spreads anxiety throughout the group. The leader who puts her primary energy into understanding what others are saying powerfully lessens conflict and enhances communication. When anxiety is lower, we find our listening much improved.
- Being less anxious, the leader is less tied to his own agenda. Being self-differentiated from the group, the leader can step back and draw the group out with inquiry and curiosity.
- The leader's level of calm will set the stage for the calmness of the group.
- Whenever the leader defends herself or her position, whenever the leader gets publicly angry, whenever the leader hides from conflict, or whenever the leader over-explains why he did what he did the anxiety in the system will rise.
- When we are anxious we perceive our world inaccurately through the lens of our fear. One of the great qualities of non-anxious

leadership is focusing on actual observations. The first place to seek agreement is on what actually happened.

- Lightness of Being refers to a quality of humor and appreciation as we work with others. This does not mean that we are not seriously focused on the work. Nor does it mean that sarcasm at the expense of team members or competitors is OK. If you bring some humor into your leadership, replacing the heaviness that anxiety brings with it, those who work with you will appreciate it.
- The anxious leader is often rigid, the non-anxious leader, better able to tolerate ambiguity, can be much more flexible.
- The non-anxious leader is not threatened by the success of others and therefore looks for ways to develop effective leadership in others.
- Being less fearful, the non-anxious leader does not avoid conflicting views and stays in touch with people whose vision differs from his own.
- The self-differentiated leader lets go of the urge to make decisions and take actions designed to get people to like or admire them.

Organizations that are creative and effective these days have something unique: they have learned how to learn. They have discovered how to *adapt* to their changing world. Religious organizations above all must become learning organizations if they hope to respond to the changing needs of their congregations and their wider community. Such organizations re-define what a leader is. In an organization of learners, the leader is the learner's learner. She facilitates the learning.

This is what I aspire to. Learnership. That would make my role at Evergreen one of Learnership Development. May it be, then, that our learnership grows together, whether we are serving meals to homeless persons, coordinating a music workshop, or teaching a group of second graders. May we be known as the Fellowship of Learnership.

Amen.