

"Storm Signals"

Reverend Alison Hyder

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The Universalist Meeting House of Provincetown

Opening Words: By Walt Whitman "I Hear It Was Charged Against Me"

I hear it was charged against me that I sought to destroy institutions;
But really I am neither for nor against institutions;
(What indeed have I in common with them? - Or what with the destruction of them?)
Only I will establish in the Mannahattan, and in every city of
These States, inland and seaboard,
And in the fields and woods, and above every keel, little or large, that dents the water,
Without edifices, or rules, or trustees, or any argument,
The institution of the dear love of comrades.

PRAYER/ by Rev. Gretchen Woods

Spirit of wholeness and community
Who draws us together,
We pause in awe and wonder
At the rich variety of possibility offered us
In the diversity of creation.
May we learn to cherish the differences
As enriching the whole.
May we acknowledge our human limitations
While treasuring and encouraging our individual gifts.
May we be grateful for our particularity
And the gathering of community
And the challenge of meeting in wholeness.
We come together as seekers,
Long for fulfillment
Physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually.
We seek within and beyond in silence.
May our search be rewarded
With wider understanding
And deeper love
For all of creation.

READING: "The Importance of Ministry" by Webster Kitchell

The preacher-in-community is a good ministry - focused, traditionally educated, open to newness, wrestling with great issues of a rapidly changing culture, trying to hold fast to what is good. It is a ministry that should not last after being all things to all people. It is a ministry in which the preacher is the listener.

I have never fully understood why I am a minister. It is some combination of accident and intention. I am content not to understand it fully. When I was a young minister, I spoke from certainty. Now I speak from mystery. It is not that I feel I know less. It is that reality has expanded for me in a life of celebrating with

people, a life of keeping the Sabbath, a life of trying to maintain and deepen the institutions of freedom, a life of trying to speak honestly. I have been an imperfect agent of that which I believe is glorious.

It takes many trades and professions to get the world up in the morning, feed it, care for it, enjoy it, and put it to bed. Then do it all over again the next day and the next. One of those professions is that of a minister. It has its importance along with the rest. It is the profession that helps people celebrate the holy moment. It still honors the Sabbath. It believes in the possibilities of the unfettered human soul in a community of searchers after the good. I feel the honor and the privilege and the mystery of being a minister. I am grateful for the accident and intention that called me to such an investment of my time.

SERMON: "Storm Signals" - Rev. Alison Hyder

Last week, a number of people told me that I was courageous for delivering a sermon that outlined the ways that our government had knowingly and repeatedly jeopardized the Gulf Coast over the last 5 years, through budget cuts and administrative indifference. That was not the first time that I had criticized the values of the Bush administration or the American public that grants them power. Ministers have always been called to be that prophetic voice that predicts the consequences of human failings and sins and urges justice and compassion. Too often, these days, all we hear is James Dobbs or Pat Robertson, with their petty morality and hatred, so we forget the visionary power of Martin Luther King, Jr, or Daniel and Philip Berrigan, leaders whose faith in the redeeming nature of love bound them in fellowship with all of humanity. They used their authority to speak truth to power, and challenge the government's policies on war and racism and poverty. And while I am happy to stand with them in that tradition, I really cannot think that I was particularly brave or even visionary about it. This is Provincetown. Everyone criticizes the government. I agree it was a strong sermon, but I was simply articulating our collective outrage and disgust.

In fact, I am more nervous today. Last Sunday, I had the satisfaction of righteous indignation. But this morning, I am taking us on a journey through a dilemma that I faced recently, a more personal conundrum that seemed to exemplify one the challenges of being a minister. As many of you know, I come from a theatrical family. My parents performed in comic operas and plays and British Music Halls throughout my childhood. I have always loved the great songwriters like Jerome Kern and Cole Porter, and the Beatles, too. A few years ago, I started performing in the Broadway revues here at the Meeting House. They're part of our Great Music Series, so I'm sure that being the minister here gave me a certain clout with the producers that I was only too happy to use.

I am a rank amateur. I've done very little acting and my voice isn't trained. I just love words, and have a certain feel for these songs that I'm able to share with an audience. Performing, like preaching, helps me get in touch with my feelings and experience shared human emotions. It's stimulating. So I feel tremendously lucky that I get to go up on a stage and perform! How many people - much less ministers - get to do that?

So a few weeks ago I did a number called "She Touched Me." It's from a short-lived musical called *Drat! the Cat!* and it was sung by Elliott Gould, if you can imagine. *Drat the Cat* sunk without a trace, but Barbra Streisand was involved with Gould at the time, and was producing his musical, so she decided to salvage this song from the whole fiasco. "He Touched Me" became a sort of archetypal Streisand song - soaring and climactic. Just about everyone recognizes it. I did. But it really tells how a nerdy and naïve guy feels when a woman comes on to him for the first time. Kind of stunned and nervous and thrilled in turn. Or like a woman might feel at her first lesbian kiss. It's a cute little number. I had fun with it.

Well, one of the people who produces Showgirls was in the audience, and he invited me to perform "He Touched Me" in their show. Now, if you don't know, Showgirls is a Provincetown kind of institution. What it is, is a combination of talent show and drag venue. Professional performers will come and showcase a number from their current shows. But in between, you get anything from lip-synced Madonna or Toni Braxton imitators to comedy songs. There are always serious singers, sometimes a bluegrass combo invited off the street beside the regulars. I like to go at least a few times every summer because it's a really good way to gauge the tone of the town and get a feel for what's going on - not just in the clubs, but also with the tourists. And through it all, literally, runs Ryan Landry, the producer and host. Ryan introduces all the acts, and keeps the pace going with his irreverence and a series of bizarre outfits thrown over pretty much no clothes. Lately, Ryan has taken more pains to camouflage his penis, but he still rewards people from the audience for mooning the crowd or flashing their breasts. Showgirls

has a reputation as a ... well, you know, I don't really know what others say or think. It can be crude, and I guess people would call it vulgar or coarse. Or maybe earthy is the right word.

To me, Showgirls is gay Burlesque. Burlesque shows teased about sex between singers and comedy numbers. Ryan goes for the laugh. He makes fun of everything, and especially sex, appearing randomly on stage in ludicrous pieces of clothing, which doesn't exactly make for an erotic atmosphere. Or a refined one, either. So you can see Showgirls is not exactly a likely venue for a minister. I was surprised and honored to be asked to perform, and frankly, I thought it would be a hoot. I had a lot more thoughts, too. I don't know if I can explain them in any linear or coherent manner, because they're so intertwined. And they all went to the heart of my role as a minister, and my calling (which is a different thing) and to my own principles as a Unitarian Universalist.

Unitarian Universalists struggle with issues of sexuality like everybody else. Even folks raised UU, who may have escaped some of the moral strictures their friends suffered, still get messages about sex and their bodies and promiscuity and homosexuality from their culture. Not everyone is comfortable in their body. And I think that few people really escape judgment or guilt about sex. But UUs are at least free from religious dogma about original sin, and our principles presume that men and women (and gay and straight) are inherently worthy and good. We don't believe that the body is dirty or evil. We believe in lifespan sexual education. We want our children to accept themselves and be able to make informed and safe choices about sex and accept others' choices as well. We've been teaching sex-ed to our 13-year olds since the seventies, and last decade we wrote additional curricula for all the other age groups, including adults. We think sex is normal, natural. It is abusing or demeaning people, or hurting them in any way, that is immoral and bad. And that is hardly limited to sex. Sin is any act, anything that denigrates others or promotes violence and hatred.

So, on the one hand, while I consider Showgirls to be fun, if not plain silly, I realize that it's considered rude and indecent by most all sides of the spectrum, whether they like it or not. Performing there would be a kick. I'd have a good time. But then what? I have a responsibility toward this congregation that includes my image as a minister. You know that word would spread. What would people think - and say?

Now, some people who have been rejected by their church, or think that religion is judgmental or irrelevant or maybe boring, might be intrigued about a church whose ministers are so free and down-to-earth.

I've always felt that the role of the minister is to model an authentic, healthy humanity, flaws and foibles and all, and to celebrate our complex and contradictory characters. So many people are burdened with shame and insecurities. They can't love themselves, and consequently are blocked from the true spirit of life. They need a community where people are honored and accepted as themselves. And that's our mission. The UU Meeting House offers hospitality - and respect - to the wounded and the weary and the afraid, the odd and the empty. If nothing else, we provide room. There is always extra coffee, a place to sit and heal, and space in our choir. I've always trusted this congregation with my total, my true self. That's really quite something for a leader to be able to say, you know. It speaks volumes about your integrity and heart. I've received criticism and complaints - as I should - but never attacks.

You have given me remarkable latitude, and with that freedom comes responsibility. Just because I am able to do something does not mean that I should. A lot of people like the fact that I'm natural in the pulpit. But we have other members who would like their minister to reflect the nobility and beauty of this lovely sanctuary, to project an aura of wisdom and spiritual authority. They already want me to have more "gravitas." Some of them are unhappy that I am a regular - and known to be a regular - when Bobby Wetherbee is at the piano bar. They don't think that it's good for my image as a spiritual leader. So I know that appearing in Showgirls would really embarrass and dismay people, or lower myself in their estimation.

Should that stop me? What do I owe to you as your representative to the community? Do I have a stricter obligation than you do?

There is a difference between doing something unethical and something that's merely unseemly. If I believe that I am acting with propriety and honor (if not gravity), should I be swayed by popular opinion? What are our responsibilities to the feelings of other people, our lovers or parents or community? Should their comfort come at the expense of our fulfillment? When do we sacrifice our desires to their expectations?

These are questions we all could face, and some of us have. Small towns, like families, can get judgmental, and news travels fast. It's useless to say that it's no one's business when it's everyone's interest. So we each have to decide when and why to make a stand.

It's especially pertinent in Provincetown, because so many of the people who come here have repressed and closeted their true selves. We've had to resolve their feelings about being gay or transgender, or come to terms with alcoholism, and decide how to live. We've had to risk rejection and discrimination from the very people who should support us, at the very time we're feeling most vulnerable and raw. This has made Provincetown an accepting and diverse community. I think of that part in the *Velveteen Rabbit*, where the young stuffed bunny meets the old Rocking Horse, and asks him the secret of life. How did he become Real, and not just a toy? The Rocking Horse replies, "Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off and your eyes drop out, and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real, you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand." [*The Velveteen Rabbit* by Margery Williams] And yet, this does not always stop us from rushing to judgment when other people cross the line. I guess we all want someone to look down on. Still, I find the trend toward propriety both amusing and alarming. I mean, I think I'm conventional enough without being urged to conform to some seemingly norm. I'd like to live in a society that's more diverse and creative and bold, that honors the outsider and the offbeat and frankly, I need all the encouragement I can get to make it possible.

Now, singing a Broadway tune at Showgirls hardly ranks as radical action, even for a minister. It strikes no blow for justice or compassion, and it won't challenge a corrupt government. It doesn't even fulfill a personal need. I have plenty of other opportunities to perform before very appreciative and sympathetic audiences. So I don't want you to think for a minute that I am feeling stifled or repressed. And Showgirls will continue to succeed very well without me. Which makes the whole question moot, in one way. I don't need to perform, and the potential for damage is much more patent and serious than any possible good that could come from it, no matter how innocent my actual action is. I have to balance my own ideas of ministry with the wishes of the entire congregation. Or, as they say in Bulgaria (I believe), "If you wish to drown, do not trouble your self with shallow water."

In the last months we have seen tragic examples of failure in leadership, as leaders have neglected the needs of their citizens for their own self-interest. And while we are each responsible to each other for justice and common civility, there is no question that leaders communicated very clear messages about their values and priorities and set the cultural tone. A manager can make a workplace competitive, or sexist, or fun, depending on the behaviors she or he rewards, the rules enforced. We all know that under Reagan, for example, homophobia and racism increased, as the needs of blacks and gays were chronically ignored. There were brief hopes, after the World Trade Towers were hit, 5 years ago today, that the tragedy might unite this country in a new humility and faith, but instead, the government used fear to manipulate us, and divide us further. Now the people must lead us out of the mire.

This religious community provides excellent practice for it empowers each person to a direct and sustaining relationship with the divine. Unitarian Universalist ministers do not speak for God, but to the spark of divinity within each person. You have an obligation to express your values and needs, so that you may live out your principles. I have tried to encourage a community of generosity and forgiveness, with respect for individual boundaries and differences, because as a human, and your minister, I am trying to grow into greater courage and creativity.

As we all prepare for my sabbatical absence in February, we will be considering the implications of my pastoral roles and the ministry and vision of this church. I appreciate the thoughtfulness and commitment that each of you brings to this dialogue and to this community. May we continue to walk together in love. Thank you.

CLOSING WORDS: by Thomas Merton

...Then it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts,
the depths where neither sin nor desire can reach,
the person that each one is in God's eyes.
If only they could see themselves as they really are.
If only we could see each other that way
there would be no reason for war, for hatred, for cruelty ...
We would fall down and worship each other.