

On Sex, On Money, On Coffee and Looking for Ministry

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When my family and I first joined our congregation in Connecticut – All Souls in New London, I knew that there would be an invitation to join some committee or other and I vowed to accept it and any other request the congregation made of me.

Dawn Norton met me at the coffee pot just minutes after the service on that first day, and I found myself joining a newly forming RE committee. Later folks at All Souls strongly suggested that the website needed re-working, a technology committee needed forming and that I would make a good web master and committee chair.

None of those roles stuck, but they have led me to some soul searching and other roles which have.

Web site design isn't all that hard, the hard part I discovered, is ironing out the differences between all of the groups who want a say in the design, and it quickly became clear that I'm no good at the politicking required in that role. Before I had that realization, I headed for training to help with the task of rebuilding the web site.

I went to our UU district annual meeting for a class given by a UUA speaker on the subject. It was the strangest “technical” training I've ever attended. She started by asking how many of us had ever invited someone to come to church with us – did you know that UU's average 1.2 invitations EVER. Then she proceeded to talk at some length about ministry and proselytizing and the need to grow our congregations. Many participants left at the break, more left before she finished.

I stayed, not because she had my attention anymore, but because I wanted to know how this was all supposed to relate to the website – aside from the obvious as a public relations and advertising mechanism.

I never found out.

I don't clearly remember how she got back to the subject of ministry, but I remember the exact sound of her voice and every other detail of the moment she looked me in the eye and said that far more important than building a stellar web site or being a good web master, I should “find my ministry”

Those words have echoed in my thought nearly every day since.

Being the geeky sort, I started with the dictionary where I learned nothing: ministry is doing the work of government or doing the work of a minister. Delving deeper I looked through some divinity school texts on the subject and dredged more obscure word definition sources on the Internet. Over the years I've come to a sort of working definition which works for me: “to be a servant, or to be a means”

At our first RE Committee meeting, Dawn asked if I knew anyone who might be a good choice for our upcoming Our Whole Lives or OWL class – they were having trouble finding male facilitators. I made the mistake of saying that if they couldn't find anyone, I'd be willing to do it. Of course the rest of the story is obvious – I became the male facilitator for OWL.

There are two topics which are taboo in our daily conversation – taboo in fact in our private family conversations as well. Society lets us talk about them in sweeping concepts, but seldom or never in specifics or of our own personal thoughts: Money and Sex.

I'd just agreed to talk to our youth about SEX.

Training for OWL gave some deep insight into myself and a bit into other people. One of the first exercises was the obligatory self-introduction – with the addition that after telling our name and which UU church we were from, we were to share our favorite word associated with sex. I was startled to learn that some of the words I thought were the most obscene were other people's most cherished words.

During the class I found I had several hang-ups, topics or specific words I couldn't talk about without blushing or stammering – my classmates took no pity on me and called on me to discuss those topics and say those words in the most awkward times and places.

After 2 and half very full days of this, I was starting to feel natural about it. I was (again) reciting my hard-to-say word list over lunch when two ladies from another program going on over the same weekend at our training facility turned from their lunch at a nearby table and asked what class we were in that would have me have to practice such an out-of-place recitation.

They weren't horrified or even particularly embarrassed to join our table and we talked about teaching our youth about sex and sexuality as a healthy part of life. They were pleased and excited to hear what a contribution we were making to the world.

In that moment something shifted inside me – like a cold lump melting somewhere in my head.

Junior High kids already know what you're going to tell them, or they don't but don't want you to know that. There's lots of bluster and joking but after a while a few of them forget to pretend and start to show interest or at least signs of paying attention.

My first class-year was grueling, some youth seemed much too young and others much too old to be in the same class, there were many sessions where I felt the youth paid no attention, or got entirely the wrong message. Near the end of the year, one of the parents came to me and thanked me for the work we were doing – her youth was one of the most sullen and difficult to engage in the class. It turns out that that same youth was getting the family up and out the door Sunday so she could be on time to sulk in our class.

I realized that I wouldn't always be able to tell when or on whom I was having an effect.

At All Souls we gave OWL to all ages, Kindergarten and First Grade, 4th grade through 6th, 8th grade through 10th and finally to the Senior High youth. After my first year facilitating the Junior High class, I went back to training for the younger grades and in my second year facilitated for K-1.

As we were meeting with parents to discuss the class and allay fears, one mother took me aside to explain that her foster daughter would be in our class, and that she had been abused by prior caregivers and probably her own father. The foster-mother and the girl's therapists all thought that the abuse might have been sexual but that the girl had never spoken of it. Their hope was that with adults and children

talking together about sex and sexuality as a normal part of conversation, she might open up.

The child's timing was suspense-novel perfect. In the last five minutes of the last class – just before we served treats to celebrate the completion of the OWL unit – she began to relate some of the things she knew about sex and sexuality. Her foster mother had been quietly sitting in the back of the room for each session, just in case, and we were able to casually end the instruction and dole out treats in such a way that the other children weren't aware of the miracle which they had helped to bring about.

I would like to un-hear what she told us, to un-see the look in her eyes as she started to talk. I'd like to never have known what terrible things people are capable of doing to other people, to their children. However, I will cherish the notion that by breaking down the social taboo and talking openly about sex and sexuality as a healthy and normal part of life and conversation I can help a child to begin healing.

Some years after teaching that first Junior High OWL class, I ran into one of my students from that first year. She said that she was sorry that she'd been so difficult and closed during our class, and that she owed me thanks for the class, because now she was the person whom all of her classmates in high-school went to for advice, and for help getting condoms.

Echoes of “find your ministry” rolled through the back of my head and something else shifted inside of me, like a flower opening somewhere in my heart. I had found a ministry – an act by which I am a means for others to gain personal strength or healing.

As a geek, sorry, as an analytical, my method of operation is to examine what works and look for ways to do it again, so turning back on my initial experience in the OWL training, what could I learn?

Those moments of change – in my head and in my heart – I think are the key.

I don't have a story of success for you here, but I know that I have felt the glimmering of such a change in my heart, and since I still feel a related lump in my head, I still have work to do on that other taboo subject: Money.

In the last seven years, I've been through a lay-off, unemployment, the bursting housing-bubble, the short sale of my old home, bankruptcy and the attempt to modify the mortgage on my current home.

Along the way I've run in to many people who have been in one or more of the same spots.

What has continued to amaze me is that each person I've shared my woes and/or lessons with has told me that they had thought they were alone, they hadn't realized that anyone they knew had been through the same things.

I see that what there is to do is to keep sharing with people what I have been through, and what I have learned, but that isn't quite in keeping with being of service, nor being a means. Then again maybe it is.

I think I have a hangup about money (or at least talking about it) which I have to get over as I'd had with sexuality, but I can't see it. If you happen to notice it, please point it out to me.

That's two things.

The third seems almost silly after the two heavy subjects: Coffee

When my daughter was starting her Coming of Age year we weren't in a position to contribute much money (remember my list of financial woes) so I got to thinking whether I had a way to generate some donations.

I thought serving espresso drinks between and after services would be a fun way to make a few extra dollars for the Coming of Age fund, but I didn't expect it to be so much fun, nor so rewarding.

My Coffee Ministry was born – mostly I provide a service, but I say I also provide a means.

It doesn't bring in all that much money each week, but it brings it in 35 weeks or so a year for three years now. The shortest week all I had to show was the five dollars I usually start the donations off with, and the best week has been over \$60, plus on a few occasions folks running special events have asked me to make espressos for donation and those have hit over a \$100.

Money however isn't where the ministry is. There are espresso customers who come to me every week, and many who ask after me when I miss a week. I think I'm providing them some small service.

The best and unexpected part is when I get a Boston-Bounder to help out. It has been a great honor to get to know the bounders while I coach them through learning to steam the milk or brew the coffee, and through the inevitable mistakes and subsequent cleanup.

There have been one or two each year who take to it, and ask to come back week after week, and a few who notice when I haven't got a helper and sheepishly offer to take up the post. Watching them mature over the years, and thinking that in some part I've been helping them on their journey is better than any cash I take in.

Most of that doesn't look much like doing the work of a minister, but it sure feels like doing a service and providing a means for others to grow. I'd like to leave you with some pithy set of rules to live by, a plan to live your life by, but we're UU's so that won't work. Instead I'll just say: Find your ministry.