

**“I’m Glad You Asked That Question…”**  
**Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship**  
**June 8, 2008**  
**Bruce A. Bode**

**Lighting of Chalice** (spoken in unison)

We are travelers. We meet for a moment in this sacred place to love, to share, to serve. Let us use compassion, curiosity, reverence, and respect while seeking our truths. In this way we will support a just and joyful community, and this moment shall endure.

**Opening Words**

Holy and beautiful is the custom by which we gather on this concluding Sunday of the church year.

Here we come to give our thanks, to face our ideals, to remember our loved ones, to seek that which is permanent, and to serve integrity, beauty, and the qualities of life that make it rich and whole.

Through this hour breathes the worship of all ages, the cathedral music of all history, and blessed are the ears that hear that eternal sound.

**A Litany of Recognition and Appreciation**

As this is the last Sunday of our regular church year before we move into our summer schedule, we wish to recognize and thank the many persons who have contributed in various ways to our Fellowship during this past church year.

Thus, we have prepared “A Litany of Recognition and Appreciation,” which, as you see, is comprehensive – even exhaustive – in its approach, intentionally so. It’s intended to wear you down so that by the end of this litany you may get a feel for the amount of labor and love it takes to create, maintain, and enliven this Fellowship.

Thus, when your position is named, please stand and then be seated again after the congregation recognizes you with their response. For some persons this may mean standing on more than one occasion, but I ask that you please do so. Or, if some of you get body-and-mind weary, at least raise your hand.

Please join me now in our annual end-of-the-year Litany of Recognition and Appreciation, a kind of QUUF All Saints' Day celebration:

INTRODUCTION: On this concluding Sunday of the church year, we recognize and appreciate those who have contributed to the well-being of our religious community this past year.

MINISTER: Choir Director, Keyboardists, Music Program Committee Members, Choir Members, and all persons who have provided Special Music this past church year or who have helped with the music program, please stand as you are able:

ALL: For the music you play for us, the songs you sing to us, and the joy you bring us, we express our thanks and praise.

MINISTER: Religious Education Director, Religious Education Assistant, Youth Advisors, Teachers and Classroom Assistants, OWL Facilitators, Child-Care Providers, Religious Education Committee Members, Coming of Age Mentors, Fellowship Family Camp Organizers, and all who have worked with our children and young people in this past year, please stand as you are able:

ALL: For the time, skill, love, and care with which you bless our children and young people, we express our thanks and praise.

MINISTER: Office Administrator, Office Volunteers, Newsletter Editor, Newsletter Proofreaders, Newsletter Assembly Team, Webmaster, and Technology Committee Members, please stand as you are able:

ALL: For making our office a friendly and helpful place, for maintaining its computers, phones, and copiers, and for keeping us informed about the activities and programs of our Fellowship, we express our thanks and praise.

MINISTER: Membership Committee Members, Ushers, Greeters, Coffee & Tea Makers, Hospitality Committee Members, and Sound Technicians, please stand as you are able:

ALL: For welcoming new persons into our Fellowship, for preparing our sanctuary for services and welcoming us to these services, and for your

hospitality and good cheer before and following the services, we express our thanks and praise.

MINISTER: Cares & Concerns Committee Members, and all who have provided rides, meals, conversation, and visitation with fellow members and friends in times of physical, emotional, and spiritual need, please stand as you are able:

ALL: For extending your hearts and hands in creating the beloved community, we express our thanks and praise.

MINISTER: Governing Board Officers, Governing Board Members, Nominating Committee Members, Committee on Ministry Members, Long-Range Planning Committee Members, and Program Council Attendees, please stand as you are able:

ALL: For the many hours you dedicate to the organizational complexities of our Fellowship, and for your skill, wisdom and devotion in attending to the overall health of our congregation, we express our thanks and praise.

MINISTER: Finance Committee Members, Special Funds Committee Members, Fundraising Oversight Committee Members, Stewardship Committee Members, Personnel Committee Members, Designated Offering Committee Members, Board Treasurer, Assistant to the Treasurer, and Building Fund Treasurer, please stand as you are able:

ALL: For the love you show to this congregation through your care of our finances, and for your dedication and vision in preparing for future possibilities, we express our thanks and praise.

MINISTER: Sunday Service Committee Members, Summer Speakers, and all who have presented in our worship services this past year, please stand as you are able:

ALL: For your efforts to make our Sunday gatherings times of spiritual refreshment and community celebration, and for your courage in sharing what is in your heart, of your soul, and on your mind, we express our thanks and praise.

MINISTER: Custodians, Members of the Building and Grounds Committee, the Aesthetics Committee, Lawn Mowers, Weed Warriors, Banner Makers, Banner Hangers, Flower Arrangers, Flower Providers, Art Displayers, and all who have assisted with the upkeep and enhancement of our buildings and grounds this past year, please stand as you are able:

ALL: For your practical skill, physical labor, and artistic interest, and for your desire to make our fellowship home both functional and pleasing to the eye, we express our thanks and praise.

MINISTER: Adult Learning Program Committee Members, Covenant Group Facilitators, A-HA! Group Organizers, Women's and Men's Retreat Organizers, Friendship Dinner Organizers and Providers, Librarian, and all who have facilitated and taught classes, led field trips, or been involved in providing adult programming for our congregation and the larger community, please stand as you are able:

ALL: For your willingness to share your skill and interest, and for your efforts to expand the mind, deepen the heart, and delight the senses, we express our thanks and praise.

MINISTER: Building Design & Construction Committee Members, Building Steering Committee Members, and Building Project Task Force Members, please stand as you are able:

ALL: For your time and thought in planning for our future, and for your efforts to consider the good of the whole congregation and to involve them in this process, we express our thanks and praise.

MINISTER: Social Action and Education Committee Members, and all who have been involved in programs of congregational outreach to the larger community, such as Church Hosting for the Homeless, Habitat for Humanity, the WAVE Food Drive, the Port Townsend-Bay St. Louis Sister City Project, please stand as you are able:

ALL: For your vision and will in connecting our congregation to our larger community and world, and for your belief that religion relates to justice and that faith fuses with action, we express our thanks and praise.

MINISTER: Denominational Connections Committee, Washington UU Voices for Justice, and all persons who attended last year's General Assembly in Portland or the Annual District Meeting in Tacoma, please stand as you are able:

ALL: For your vision of the larger liberal religious community, and for your recognition that we benefit from the resources of others in our struggle for justice and in the strengthening of our own Fellowship, we express our thanks and praise.

MINISTER: Green Sanctuary Committee Members, and all persons who have been part of the twelve special projects of the Green Sanctuary Committee this year, please stand as you are able:

ALL: For your care for and love of our Earth, and for your dedicated and creative efforts to help us all to honor it, heal it, and preserve it by living sustainably upon it, we express our thanks and praise.

MINISTER: Children and Youth of this Fellowship, all those from infancy through high school age, please stand as you are able, and remain standing:

ALL: For your willingness to listen and inquire, to take in and reach out, and for the energy and enthusiasm you bring us, we express our thanks and praise.

MINISTER: Members and Friends of this congregation, and all present at this service, please stand as you are able:

ALL: For the faith, hope, love, and joy that comes from being together, singing together, learning together, planning together, wondering together, celebrating together, working together, visioning together, and serving together, we express our thanks and praise.

Please remain standing as we sing the verses of Hymn #1010, "We Give Thanks," following which we will make our Arch of Blessing sending the children on their way.

## Introduction to Reading

My reading this morning is for the onset of summer, an invitation to “blessed idleness.” It’s a poem written by Marcia Lewton, a pillar of this congregation. And though the poem is set in autumn, it applies equally to the lazy, hazy days of summer – should summer ever arrive. It’s titled, “Window with a Red Leaf,” and is based, Marcia told me, on a dream that she had that was so startling and vivid that she felt compelled to write a poem related to it.

### Window with a Red Leaf

On a day well past the halfway point of life  
I climb the stairs to watch it rain  
through wavy glass at the top of the house.  
The window is so high I cannot reach  
the clasp to swing it open. Sitting dry, I watch  
the clouds puff by, feeling with my eye the gusts  
that make the most of every drop of small  
rain hurtling through the autumn sky.  
Another nonproductive way to pass  
an afternoon that won’t contribute  
to my résumé or reputation, like  
mindful breathing in a steady line  
in and out for some unmeasured length of time.  
Or peeling an apple in one long  
strip of red and yellow without a break,  
or piling beach rocks in a cairn the tide will take.  
But I am drawn to these pursuits by forces  
much too muscular to cross, and thus  
I let myself be beckoned up  
like a sky-pulled oak to the stormy  
theater of blue and gray and white clouds,  
to see the roused wet western wind strike  
tears upon the single attic eye  
in the forehead of my house.  
I’ve been brought to watch a red leaf  
smack against the glass and stick,  
to smell the curl of wood smoke  
trickling like memory of old fire

through a long crack in the window frame.  
“Needs caulk,” I hear my father say.  
I make another useless mental note,  
and take another breath of fragrant smoke.

## **“I’M GLAD YOU ASKED THAT QUESTION...”**

### **Introduction**

Like the last two years, for this concluding Sunday of the regular church year I’ve invited you to send me any questions you may have of me.

Again, this year I have received an interesting variety of questions. I thank those who took the time to formulate them and send them to me. For those who did send me questions and may be awaiting responses, please understand that my responses are aimed at the question and not at the questioner; they are meant for a general audience, not a specific one. So, let’s begin with this question:

QUESTION: “Bruce, how do you accommodate or balance everyone's (in our congregation) belief in God or non-belief in God, and everything outside and in between, with your own, which is obviously (to me) more Christian in orientation?”

RESPONSE: This question goes to the heart of the approach of religious liberalism, of which Unitarian Universalist congregations are examples, namely, that ours is an approach in religion based not on “right belief” or a common creed but rather on a covenant of “right relations” and a way of being with each other in community.

As has been said, “We need not believe alike to love alike.” Or, again, “If we agree in love, there is no disagreement that can do us any injury, but if we do not [agree in love], no other agreement can do us any good.” (Hosea Ballou, 1771-1852, Universalist minister)

Further, the non-creedal approach in our religious communities is meant to foster both spiritual and intellectual growth in individuals by being part of a community in which individual opinions are encouraged and in which “revelation is not sealed.” It is this kind of exchange of opinion and openness to further inquiry that I value and which draws me to such

communities.

As to my own use of the word and concept “God” and how I accommodate or balance it with other ideas and beliefs in this congregation, I must say that it certainly isn’t obvious to me that I have a more Christian concept of God than most other members of this congregation.

Typically, I don’t give any thought at all to whether my use of the word “God” or concept of God is “Christian” or not. Indeed, I hardly know what it would mean to speak of *a* Christian concept of God, as if there were a single concept. Certainly, the “God” of persons in the Christian tradition that I have studied like Paul Tillich, Matthew Fox, Albert Schweitzer, Meister Eckhart, or Hildegard von Bingen is not the same “God” as, for example, that of orthodox Catholics, fundamentalist Baptists, or Utah Mormons.

And if I were to give some thought as to which religion my concept of God does come closest to, it would not be the Christian religion, but rather that of philosophical Taoism, Zen Buddhism, or the unformulated religions of Albert Einstein and some of our modern, mystical physicists. Thus, with respect to the concept of “God,” I’m currently attracted by the Buddhist notions of “Suchness” or “Emptiness.”

For me, the little word “God” is the word that more than any other points *beyond* all concepts and beliefs. It’s the finger pointing at the moon, a moon that is *necessarily* well-shrouded by clouds. As it is said, “The tongue cannot soil it.” Or, again, “The tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao.”

So, to me, “God” points to that which is prior to all concepts; it points to the ground and possibility of our very capacity to conceptualize and formulate beliefs. Simultaneously, it points to the reality that relativizes all our mental beliefs and cognitive concepts; it lays waste all literalisms. Or to be cute, my concept of God makes atheistic any and all “God” concepts.

Another little related point to this question: I feel fairly comfortable with a variety of different concepts (or non-concepts) of God, such as you might find in this congregation. That’s because in my lifetime I’ve been through a number of them: from the personalistic, literalistic God of early childhood and youth, through a spirited evangelical and even Pentecostal God in late college, through an agnostic and atheistic understanding of God in late

seminary, and for the last thirty years or so, as indicated above, an exploration of “God,” primarily through poets, depth psychologists, physicists, and meditators as the deep mystery of Being itself (Paul Tillich’s equivalent of “God”), a reflection on what to me is the continually amazing fact that “there is something rather than nothing.”

And still another point here: when it comes to concepts of God, I work with what can be called a “principle of complementarity.” This is a principle in which one sees the different beliefs and concepts as complementing and completing each other, not as contradictory or oppositional to each other.

Thus, I start with the assumption that all concepts of God touch in one way or the other on the reality that can be called “God,” but that none of these concepts is the final or the best for all situations or persons ... and that things start to go south when one insists that there is one final or best concept.

Thus, for both myself and others I ask: What concept of God is most useful, most helpful, carries most energy in this particular circumstance, this particular situation, or at this age or stage of life? (Speaking about God to a child, for example, is much different than to an adult.)

And yet one more thing here: As a minister whose job, it has been said, is to “comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable,” if a person is completely comfortable and settled in belief or non-belief with respect to a given concept of God, I might push a bit to enlarge and enrich that understanding.

So, for example, if a person says flatly that he or she is an atheist, along with my colleague Forrest Church, I might say, “Tell me a little about the God you don’t believe in, because I probably don’t believe in that God either.”

And if, on the other hand, when persons insist that “God” has been ultimately revealed in a given book, or defined in a particular creed, or appeared personally and definitively to them, without discrediting the truth revealed in that position, I would seek to acquaint them with other traditions, revelations, and concepts, so that “God” might be glimpsed in both more Unitarian and Universalist ways – that is, one light seen in a kaleidoscope of color, one sound blown through many instruments.

QUESTION: A second question – and not all the questions will receive this lengthy or detailed an answer – concerns how to conduct ourselves in our Sunday services:

“Hi Bruce, I saw in the newsletter you are taking questions for the last summer service. OK, I have been really wanting to know the answer to this deep question: Why can’t UU members CLAP/cheer for great music? Some of the performances are so great that spontaneous applause (which I consider to be quite joyful and appropriate) is hard to hold back. I don’t know if the “silent, finger shaking only” thing is a rule or what?

RESPONSE: Ah, the question of applause in Unitarian Universalist services of worship....

In the summer of 2003, when I was an interim minister at the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Houston, Flossie and I accompanied their choir to visit their sister Unitarian congregation in Arkos, Romania. At the end of the Sunday service there (in which the women sat on one side of the sanctuary, the men on the other, with the pulpit high above in the middle), when the choir finished singing its last anthem, titled “We Are One,” the congregation was so moved they broke out with clapping – at first tentative but then swelling to loud and long. It was the first time, I was later told, that this had ever happened – at least in the lifetime of its members, and perhaps in several centuries. It was like a pent-up dam that had been broken open.

There are some who would argue that this is as often as clapping should take place in Unitarian worship services – that is, every other century or so, and only upon an occasion when the congregation as a whole is so filled to overflowing that the very walls of the sanctuary would split asunder if the felt energy did not find a release mechanism.

So what are the primary arguments against clapping in services of worship?

First, worship is a sacred, solemn, and serious thing. It’s not something casual, it’s not a performance, and it’s not entertainment. Thus, applause as applause, that is, as a measure of how well a piece of music has been rendered, or how well a reading or sermon has been delivered, has no place in such services.

Secondly, in services of worship, one is invited to step away from the

business and busyness of the everyday world, to leave behind for a time the horizontal secularity of our pedestrian lives and to enter the verticality of sacred space – that is, to enter a place, a sanctuary, that has been specifically designed as a bounded and contained space, a holy place, for a time of centering, interior refreshment, and meditative silence. It’s hard enough to find and hold that vertical center without being pulled off of it or out of it by clapping every now and again.

And then a third and final argument I’ll mention against clapping in a service of worship is that once it starts, where does it end? And, believe me, I’ve been in churches where it seems there is clapping after every blessed event, and sometimes at what seems to me to be the most inappropriate times ... say, after a lovely, tender, quiet piece of music when I have wanted nothing more than to let the sound linger and linger. To be abruptly pulled out of that space by clapping can be off-putting in the extreme.

Typically, it only takes one person to start such applause. Others then feel they must follow, even if they would prefer not to – a kind of “obligatory clap.” And I’ve noticed it’s often the same person who starts it – don’t worry, I don’t have anyone here in mind. But sometimes on these occasions when I have been pulled out of a lovely interior reverie, I would like to have my pistol shot perfectly timed with the offending party’s loud clap to muffle the sound and obscure the evidence of murder, not exactly the sentiment one is looking for in a service of worship.

So, it’s true, the question of whether to clap or not to clap has sometimes led to heated controversy and conflict in Unitarian congregations.

Now some of the arguments for clapping might be quickly summarized this way:

“Come on, lighten up, loosen up, and get a life. Religion is not just about interiority or meditative silence, and not only about the mind. It’s about the whole person.

“And a sanctuary is not a funeral parlor; it should invite human warmth and friendliness, community and fellowship.

“And our services should also be services where there is light and joy and laughter and love ... times of felt fellowship with a generous flow of feeling and emotion ... times that demonstrate a community in which the body is not split-off from the spirit ... times where touch and hugs and

kisses and warm wishes are a natural part of our life, not some cold place where one's body of emotion is tied-up, knotted-up, bundled-up, and jumbled up."

Sometimes, as with the questioner, one feels the strong need to do something to express joy and gratitude and good-will. And can we not encourage the children with our generous appreciation of their efforts?

So: To clap or not to clap in our services? Not an issue, as the questioner suggests, that is up there with global warming and planetary degradation, but still a part of our lives. Some have sought solution, as again the questioner indicates, by the rubbing of palms or the waving of hands ... which perhaps works somewhat.

But, it seems to me, it's difficult to establish hard and fast rules on this. As with so many things, it's not so much a question to be solved as a tension to be lived with. Or, to add an additional line to chapter three of the Book of Ecclesiastes, "There's a time to clap and a time to refrain from clapping." But the trick is to know when to honor each.

As a general guiding principle I might say this: If you have to think very long about whether or not to clap, probably you should refrain; your neighbors may well appreciate your decision.

QUESTION: A third question has to with the nature of love:

"Bruce, here is a question I have been working on for the last 20 years: Is love something you feel or something you do? (The implied corollary is: how can I love when I don't feel it?) Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to answer this question."

RESPONSE: Dear Questioner: Part of the reason for your long-standing struggle with this question may to some extent be a language-related one. That's because in the English language the word "love" covers so much territory; indeed, it covers the territory of both "feeling" and "doing," depending on what definition of love you're working with.

So is "love" something you feel? Well, yes, if you're talking about what the Greeks speak of as "*eros*," that powerful, sexual, biologically-related attraction, which Joseph Campbell says is indiscriminate in its orientation –

“the zeal of the organs for each other,” as he humorously quips. There’s definitely feeling connected with erotic love.

And, yes, again, if you’re speaking of the Latin, “*amor*,” which is more discriminate, at least as Campbell describes it, but still has to do with attraction – the delicious feeling experience of eyes meeting eyes, of mind communicating with mind, of soul mating with soul, of spirit soaring with spirit, and body connecting with body.

And, yes, again, if you’re talking about the love of parent to child, or child to parent, or friend to friend. In Sanskrit, I’m read, there are ninety-six different words for love, (Robert Johnson, *The Fisher King and the Handless Maiden*, p. 6) words that differentiate and discriminate between the different types of love relationships, most of them, no doubt, having to do with different kinds of attractions we experience.

But, in addition to the word “love” being related to feeling attraction, we also have another aspect of our experience covered by “love,” and this has to do with treating others kindly, decently, compassionately, “lovingly.” It has to do how we act. This is the kind of “love” spoken of in the Christian scriptures, a translation of another Greek word, the word “*agape*.”

*Agape*, like *eros*, is also an indiscriminate love, but, unlike *eros*, *agape* is not based on feeling or attraction; rather, it’s based on a way of being in the world. It has to do with your posture in the world, your life-stance, a decision you make, a commitment you undertake.

*Agape* is a kind of love that can be commanded, as when the Christian scriptures say, “Love one another, for love is of God.” In other words, treat others justly, honestly, with dignity, looking for the best in them and seeking the best for them. That is what your humanity requires of you; that is what your God demands of you.

Agapic love doesn’t say, “Treat others kindly and justly *if* you’re attracted to them, or *if* they are of your kind or kin, but treat them well and seek their best because that is what you are called to do.”

Agapic love is not something pulled out of you, but rather it comes from you. You strive to act lovingly toward others whether or not you feel like it, whether or not you like them at the moment. (Now, of course, often if you

do treat others kindly, justly, and compassionately, you will find more to like about them, but that's another topic.)

So to the question, "How can I love when I don't feel it?" With *agape*, this self-giving love, it's not a theoretical issue, since it's not based on feeling or attraction; you simply treat others decently because that's what humans are supposed to do.

But if we're talking about a kind of love that is related to being attracted to another person, or being "in love," then there's a complication. It's like asking, "How can I feel attracted to you when I don't actually feel attracted to you."

Attraction can't really be commanded. It doesn't work to say: "I want you to feel attracted to that person." Such a command tends to have the opposite effect; it creates resistance.

Who can say how attraction is created, or why it stays, or why it leaves! In this regard, I think of the opening lines of a poem by Robert Bly in which he speaks of the end of attraction and the withdrawing of energy:

Those great sweeps of snow that stop suddenly six feet from the house...

Thoughts that go so far.

The boy gets out of high school and reads no more books;  
the son stops calling home.

The mother puts down her rolling pin and makes no more bread.

And the wife looks at her husband one night at a party, and loves him no more.

The energy leaves the wine, and the minister falls leaving the church.

It will not come closer –

the one inside moves back, and the hands touch nothing, and are safe.

(from "Snowbanks North of the House," The Man in the Black Coat Turns)

So this is part of what makes life interesting ... and a challenge: these two basic orientations of passion and compassion, of feeling and action, both covered by the same English word "love."

QUESTION: A fourth question also has to with balance in life, this question:

“Bruce, how can I balance my need for people and learning as well as the desire to be alone to write and practice?”

RESPONSE: Dear Questioner: This may seem a little odd, but I don't think you or anyone has the capacity to achieve “balance” in life. Balance, I believe, belongs to a deeper center than our conscious minds, a system of energy within us that is comparable to the tides of the sea.

Can you control the flowing and the ebbing of the tides of the sea? Of course not. So, too, the energy currents of our lives have their own rhythm and character as they move beneath the surface structure of our conscious mentality.

Thus, what I would suggest for you is that you watch as carefully as you can the flowing and ebbing of the desires and needs within yourself. In the case you mention, this is the twin desire to both be with others and to learn from the thoughts and ideas of others, and the desire to be alone and to attend to your own thoughts and practice.

I suggest that you enter into conversation with these movements within yourself. Don't fight or quarrel with them too much, for then you will lose your balance; you will feel out of balance.

This past week here in Port Townsend, we experienced what I was told was a hundred-year low tide. Now, we didn't create that tide, but through careful study over many years and even centuries we learned about it and, remarkably, could even predict its coming and going. In so doing we could respond to it in various ways.

So, too, when you attend to and respond to the tidal movements within yourself, you will feel in balance. But if you are always fighting the current, or insisting that the current do something that it's not going to do, then the tides of your life will play havoc with your mental equilibrium, may even dash the vessel of your life against the rough and unmovable rocks of hard reality.

QUESTION: I also have two questions that relate to the pastoral role of ministry. I'll take them together. Here is the first:

“Hi, I have a question, but it is more of a topic than a clearly formulated sentence. It has to do with pastoral counseling. I want to know how much you or other similar ministers are trained to do it, how much a part of your job it is, if you like that part of your job, and if that was in your thoughts in your decision to become a minister. It really is the meaning of the word “minister,” but from my upbringing, it is a part of the position I did not even know existed until QUUF started talking about getting a full-time minister, and it is actually why I voted “yes.” And you seem very good at it.”

And a second question on the same general topic is as follows:

“Bruce, your most public ministerial role is that of leading Sunday worship services; your actions as a counselor or comforter to individuals, couples or groups are necessarily private. Would you tell us more about this role – and how it is appropriately accessed?”

RESPONSE: I make the distinction – and always have – between “pastoral counselor,” “religious counselor,” “spiritual counselor,” on the one hand, and therapist, psychologist, or psychiatrist, on the other hand, even though there can be a fair amount of overlap between the two.

And as I have thought about this role this week, I see that my understanding of the pastoral role moves consistently out of my understanding of what it means to be religious, and what the role of a religious institution is our lives.

As I’ve said on a number of occasions, religion (following the definition of philosopher of religion, Frederick Ferre) has to do with “one’s way of valuing most comprehensively and intensively.” It thus relates to such perennial questions as: Who am I in this vast cosmos? How should I live in midst of it? To what should I commit and devote myself to, what should I serve?

A “religious” community, to my mind, is one that is formed to consciously attend to these basic questions and concerns, and a minister’s role is to keep these questions and concerns before the community as a whole. Its weekly Sunday services are first of all about that. The role of religious, spiritual, or pastoral counselor is, thus, the more private, individual, and personal side of this.

But, of course, nearly anything in life can bring these perennial concerns and

questions to the fore. It might be a concern in marriage and personal relationships, or a work-related situation, or a health-related concern. So I see my role as “religious counselor” to help others with the overall perspective and framework in their lives.

Typically, I don’t do long-term marriage counseling, or anything long-term – though occasionally I have. But, as I rule, I try to have a group of therapists whose names I might recommend for longer-term work.

As to access: Call, e-mail, or write. And, understanding the personal and sensitive nature of this area, I will seek to make this as private and as confidential as possible, whether that be in my church office, or by going to your place; or a breakfast, lunch, walk – whatever works for you.

I might add that the pastoral area is one of my top priorities, something I take very seriously, and something that I generally find life-energizing as opposed to life-draining.

I regard it as one of the great fortunes of my life to have the opportunity to meet people at their deepest personal level. The opportunity to sit one-to-one with another human being is truly sacred space. I might describe it as the personal and private counterpart to meeting as a community in this sacred space.

QUESTION: And the final question for today:

“Are you happy here? Will you be with us ‘forever’? Under what circumstances would you leave (or be made to leave by an external force like the UUA)? Do UU ministers ever retire? Are you going to retire? What do you want to do in your retirement (besides golf)? Do you see living in PT in your retirement, if you have one? (You could weave this into one question, right?)

RESPONSE: This series of questions has to do with the role of a minister in the religious community, and, more specifically, the question of whether a person who has had the role of minister in the community can still be part of that community once the person is no longer in that role.

To put it more personally: I see my primary role as the minister of this congregation to be that of helping to create and promote a religious

community, a religious fellowship. Now, to what extent can I be part of this community that I am trying to foster?

At the beginning of my ministry with you four years ago, I indicated – not something necessarily recommended – but I said directly that I intended this as my last ministry. I said this because, first of all, it was my inner intention, but I also said it because of a circumstance that brought me here, namely, the fact that this Fellowship's first full-time minister had surprisingly left after only a year. Thus, I wanted to assure people that I had come here to put my shoulder to the wheel, and that I was not looking at this as a temporary commitment, or a stepping stone to something else.

As to retirement – and, yes, ministers do retire – and if my health holds, I hope one day to do the same – but at this point, I haven't given it much thought at all. I think partially this is because I do enjoy my work – I am happy here – and, secondly, because being the lead minister of a congregation is something new to me – most of my ministerial career has been spend as an associate minister in a large congregation with a large staff.

It had been my intention to end my career there and to continue to be part of that congregation, as several other associate ministers had done; but various circumstances, which I don't need to rehearse, caused me to make a decision to leave, which was painful in the extreme – the uprooting of my life and that of my family.

Clearly, ministers must always be prepared to leave ... for the health of the community they serve, and/or for their own health.

I know one minister who says that a minister comes to a congregation with a certain number of chits in hand. You spend those chits and when they're gone, you leave. I don't really believe that, but still it has a point.

And, particularly, ministers must be prepared to leave a community upon retirement. And probably most Unitarian Universalist ministers do leave at least the congregations they have last served, if not the larger community.

Some retired ministers serve in an emeritus capacity, taking on various pastoral roles, or whatever can be worked out with the incoming minister and the congregation. But it's a tricky business, often goes badly, and its success depends in large part upon the character and personalities of the two

ministers and the maturity of the members of the congregation.

All of this talk seems very premature to me at this time because I'm not inclined to think seriously about my life for more than a year or two ahead. Who can tell what's going to happen very far into the future, so why try to make definitive plans? And to do so would make me wonder what wasn't working in the present.

And that's where I'm at now – in the present – looking forward in this coming week to a vacation break, and upon my return in late July to perhaps pick up a shovel or swing a hammer ... for it looks to me like some interesting days immediately ahead in this Fellowship and this community!

### **Benediction**

And now may the faith we nourish here  
And the memories we gather here  
Give us hope for the future.  
May the love that we share  
And the companionship we feel  
Strengthen us and bring joy to our hearts.  
And may the blessings of our fellowship rest upon us,  
This day and forevermore. Amen.

### **Extinguishing of Chalice**

We extinguish our chalice  
But not the light of truth,  
The warmth of community,  
Or the fire of commitment.  
These we carry in our hearts  
Until we are together again.

(NOTE: This is a manuscript version of the service given by The Reverend Bruce A. Bode at the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship on June 8, 2008, the concluding Sunday of the church year. The spoken service, available on audio cassette at the Fellowship, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)