

Awakened from the Forest: Theologies of Leadership

Reflections by Rev. Jackie Clement and Sandra Lindberg

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Awakened from the Forest: Origins

Rev. Jackie Clement

You can learn a lot about the theology of leadership in a particular religion or sect by looking at the origins of their leadership. So today, I will share a few glimpses into the origins and theologies of leadership in the Religions of the Book, but I want to start in our own Unitarian Universalist tradition and with this poem, *Some Herons*, by Mary Oliver.

A blue preacher
flew toward the swamp
in slow motion.

On the leafy banks,
an old Chinese poet,
hunched in the white gown of his wings,

was waiting.
The water
was the kind of dark silk

that has silver lines
shot through it
when it is touched by the wind

or is splashed upward,
in a small, quick flower,
by the life beneath it.

The preacher
made his difficult landing,
his skirts up around his knees.

The poet's eyes
flared, just as poet's eyes
are said to do

when the poet is awakened
from the forest of meditation.
It was summer.

It was only a few moments past the sun's rising,
 which meant that the whole long sweet day
 lay before them.

They greeted each other,
 rumpling their gowns for an instant,
 and then smoothing them.

They entered the water,
 and instantly two more herons—
 equally as beautiful—

joined them and stood just beneath them
 in the black, polished water
 where they fished, all day.

This poem, while not about things overtly ecclesiastical, points to truths about church life as we gather with the preachers and the poets to stand together doing the work of the world. It also shares a great truth about leadership in Unitarian Universalism in the line that we are awakened out of the forest, for our leaders are called out of our congregations.

When I received fellowship as a Unitarian Universalist minister I was recognized along with all the others entering ministry or retiring from ministry at our General Assembly of congregations. We call it “walking” because, as your name is called, you walk across the stage in front of the combined assembly shaking hands with the UUA president and head of the office of ministry. Back then, we clerics gathered before the Service of the Living Tradition, segregated in a room at the other end of the convention center, and at the appropriate time were herded like ecclesiastical sheep around the back of the convention center, and held in interminable limbo and Southern California heat beside the dumpsters before it was our turn to be paraded before the assembly.

Today, the ministerial candidates and retirees seat themselves, just like everyone else, with friends and family and fellow congregants, in the hall. When their names are called, the ministers come out of the congregation mirroring what is truly our tradition: that our ministers come out of our combined numbers.

Thus has it ever been that leaders arise out of the people, but in many traditions leaders, particularly the professional clergy, are led out and to an exalted position of difference. This creates a divide between clergy and flock that Unitarians and Universalists set aside early on. But once it was that you had to be born into the right class to be priest or scribe.

In biblical times, Jewish religious authority came largely from hereditary lines within certain tribes that traced their sacred mandate as leaders to the revelation at Sinai. Religious authority in that period was very complex, including Elders, Priests and Scribes who all played a part in the Sanhedrin ruling religious and legal life. With the destruction of the second Temple in the year 70 came enormous changes in religious life, in ritual and leadership. With more simplified ritual

and broader definition of sacred space came a more egalitarian theology of leadership. The learned class of Scribes became the foundation of today's rabbinical tradition.

But the biblical Jewish tradition included not only the high born but prophets who were lowly shepherds and dressers of trees. They were not professional clergy, but those ordained by God to carry messages of righteousness to the people, and the Hebrew Bible is filled with narratives of their calls when they are ordained by God to a certain task, to carry a certain message. Almost invariably, the response is a bewildered looking prophet casting around for whose cell phone just went off because they know it couldn't be theirs. "You can't possibly mean me," is the stock reply. There is an underlying theology here that God often picks the most unlikely folks, the folks who never think of themselves as leaders, the folks no one else sees as leaders. Not only to lead the common people, but to lead the kings and high born priests back to the ways of righteousness.

This ethic carried over into Christianity where the primary figure was the son of a carpenter born in a stable and with fishermen and tax collectors as disciples. Humble beginnings and personal humility are key points in the message and life of Jesus. Salvation was not for the exalted but for the common man. Leadership arose out of humble beginnings and did not grasp at power but sought to serve others. The concept of servant leadership, which can be found in certain Eastern religions, was born into Christianity, and remains a strong theme in today's leadership.

Islam developed in context that included the traditions of both Judaism and Christianity, though in a very specific tribal culture that influenced its theology of leadership. The direct origins of Islamic leadership lie, of course, with the Prophet Muhammad. Born into the ruling class yet orphaned early, Muhammad combined both the high born *and* humble aspects of a leader. But he was born into a society of power struggles between tribes where class and economic means ensured stability and were therefore prized. Before receiving the revelation of the Qur'an, Muhammad was a very successful businessman, which in that society was seen as a sign of favor by the gods. Poverty as a virtue would have been a puzzling concept.

The leadership of the Prophet Muhammad also set aside the supernatural and miraculous. Unlike Moses, Muhammad performed no miracles. Unlike Jesus, there were no marks of a miraculous birth. This fully human and embodied sense of leadership has changed some over the centuries in some of the more conservative sects with a sense that some are preordained to lead. The word *ayatollah*, a leader in the Shi'a tradition, means "sign of God" conferring a special divine ordination upon the person, though ayatollahs can be declared by consent of the people, so that they, too, may be called out of a congregation. Sunni Muslim leaders, imams, can be professional clergy or lay leaders, *imam* meaning simply "the one in front." There is even a recent shift in Islam with women taking the lead, not as ordained clergy and not leading congregations, but through social media and written theology.

Matters of leadership to shift, not only in Islam, but in all the Religions of the Book, as social ideas of gender roles and inclusivity change, as new ways of communicating ideas come into play and as new concepts of what it means to be a religious community form. But one of the most profound theological shifts for us as UUs came in the Protestant Reformation of Christianity when Martin Luther declared the priesthood of all believers. Over the years and

under the strains of social and political constraints, the theology of Christian leadership had narrowed to exclude all but well educated men of the dominant culture. Luther's insistence on the priesthood of all believers harkened back to the earliest days of the church, redefining church leadership and who could participate in it. This major shift was one in a series of theological shifts that opened ideas of what it means to be a leader in a religious context and to see the roles lay leaders play as real and religious.

Today, for Unitarian Universalists, as for many denominations, only a very small fraction of our leaders are ordained clergy. Our leaders include presidents and clerks, treasurers and teachers, paid staff, volunteer committee chairs, academicians and theologians. As our idea of what constitutes a religious community broadens, we also have café owners and co-housing administrators move into the role of religious leadership. A leader, in my definition, is anyone who is willing to step into the role of helping a group get where it wants to go. A religious leader grounds that in the mission and values of their faith.

A Personal Perspective

Sandra Lindberg

When Reverend Clement began to develop a series of services on theology, I volunteered to work on one of those. As we talked together about them, I agreed to participate on this service focused on the theology of leadership.

These Sundays focus on the People of the Book. I recognize how central this tradition is to our culture, but my own approach to these ideas has grown to include other ways of seeing the world. I grew up in a Lutheran family, but I left that church while I was still in junior high. Since then I have studied yogic texts, some very old and some more recent, as well as contemporary books by pagans who are recreating a way of worship that the People of the Book tried very hard to destroy. I'll share here the thoughts I have on the theology of leadership, as they relate to a very eclectic perspective.

In many of the texts I've read, spiritual leaders are often in disguise. They may look poor, old and weak, or even downright dirty. Sometimes such a spiritual leader seems to be living a perfectly ordinary life in a city, going to work every day in an ordinary way. But if a person approaches such a spiritual being with an open heart, she may be able to perceive the wisdom and gifts that lie beneath what looks like an unappealing or forgettable exterior. Sometimes, even if a person can see a spiritual leader's true nature and asks to study with him or her, the leader may actually send an aspirant away, or deny that she or he has anything to offer the aspirant. Only through the persistence of the aspirant may the spiritual leader—actually I would call this being a teacher, rather than a leader—agree to share a special way of seeing the world.

Leaders like these appeal to me. They help me to remember that I might encounter spiritual guidance in the most unexpected of places. The stories help me to remember what both the yogic and pagan traditions emphasize—that the divine is within each of us, and within everything we think of as surrounding us, even though we often spend our hours thinking of being separate from all of this divinity.

Reverend Clement also gave me an interesting book to read about leadership in churches as it involves women. One of my favorite parts of the book came at the very beginning when the author described her efforts to organize religious education classes. The author wrote that leading meant she worked side by side with other women on the project, helping to create consensus. She suggested that someone coming into a working session of the women would not have been able to tell who the leader of the group was, as everybody was working equally hard to accomplish the goal. I like that story very much.

All of this may sound very idealistic—I'll admit it does even to me—so let me be more practical. I understand that sometimes people really want someone to tell them what to do—to direct them, if you will. Maybe that's because our culture so often rewards those who go along, who do what is asked of them, and who make few waves. It's understandable that after a lifetime of such training, some people actually become afraid of taking on any kind of a leadership role. In such situations, patient leaders may offer people the possibility of exploring tasks unlike their customary ways of being.

Sometimes creating a group approach to spiritual work means that people must see at least one person really enjoying the task. That joy can be catching, and if a whole group of people catches that joy, a lot of tasks can be accomplished as if they were all very easy to do.

Words I do not associate with effective leadership include: guilt, duty, responsibility, hierarchy, reward, status, power. I think these words actually bleed energy out of spiritual work.

Words I associate with spiritual leadership include: joy, patience, empathy, teaching, learning and working as a collective. Whether raising energy at a Wiccan ritual, or practicing yoga with other students, I have experienced how shared efforts are richer. And sometimes any leadership within such groups is a subtle presence indeed.

A UU Theology of Leadership **Rev. Clement**

I recognized by the time I was in high school that I eventually and always ended up leading any group I was part of. This is not because I saw myself as any sort of leader then, nor do I still, in any traditional sense. Yet, I always ended up as the editor, the chair, the president, the minister.

This is not, I think, from any innate qualities that we would associate with a traditional theology of leadership, though other factors such as desire, education, calling and love now make me the sort of leader I aspire to be, at least on most days. But my early leadership, in many cases, arose from a hyper sense of responsibility. I was and remain unable to watch things fall to the floor or go undone when I have the capacity to do them. I also lack the ability to say “no” when anything seems interesting or important. I also sense there is a certain slowness to get out of the way when someone is looking for a volunteer to do something. As an introvert, I lack the ready excuse as to why I should not be put in charge of something.

But my ideas about leadership and what it takes to be a leader have changed since then, and I hope you are not now thinking, “Why on earth did we ever hire her as our minister?” What I am

hoping to inspire is the thought, “Well, if she can do it then, certainly, I can.” Yes, this is a recruiting speech—recruiting to a new theology of what it means to be a leader.

In this theology, a leader is part of, not ahead of pulling people along or behind pushing them, but *part of*. In this theology some leaders are talkative and some are quiet, but they are neither of them demanding, selfish or 100% convinced of their own infallibility. This theology does require flexibility on the part of leaders to offer space where space is needed and the courage to hold the group to its vision. Above all, what this theology requires of leaders is to support the leadership of others, to see the ways in which others advance the mission of the group as a blessing and not as a challenge.

And to bring this leadership into religious community means something else besides. It means to tell your truth even when you might be afraid, but to always tell it with kindness and to try not to worry about whether you are satisfying people—the religious journey is not about satisfaction. It is about yearning and restlessness and depth and awe. It is about walking through deep waters, sometimes very troubled waters. What we are called to do as leaders in sacred community is to wade in and walk, and to do our best to keep those we walk beside good company.

For the church is *our* church, and it takes all of us going forward together to *be* a church. It needs each of us to be leaders at times, and all of us to support those who would lead. When this service concludes we will vote in a new group of congregational leaders. With our vote let us include our thanks for their willingness to serve and our pledge of support as they navigate the deep waters of religious leadership. In calling new leaders from our midst, let us do so in thankfulness for all those who have served that we might come to this day, and hold hope in our faithfulness that in another 154 years others will follow us in leadership.

Namaste.

Por lo tanto puede ser.

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