There and Back Again

a sermon by Rev. Jackie Clement
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Reflect rejuvenate recommit reconnect
Just before I started seminary, I was visiting a friend (a UU minister) in Seattle when he insisted I buy the book *The Soul's Code* by James Hillman to kick start my theological education. I could tell by reading the cover blurb that I disagreed with the thesis of the book, but dutifully bought and read it. I'm pleased to report that in the intervening 16 years I at least had the backbone to dispose of the book.

Hillman's contention is that "each life is formed by its unique image, an image that is the essence of that life and calls it to a destiny." Based on the ancient Greek idea of the daimon, a holy spirit that lives in each of us, Hillman asserts all people have a unique purpose programmed into us from the beginning, just the way an oak tree is programmed into an acorn. This is not my worldview. I have a pretty strong investment in the idea of free will, but I do believe that we each have a purpose or many purposes to be sought in a lifetime. Sometimes we do not fully manifest these, but we can find *and create* purpose. If we will.

16 years ago I chose or found or gave in to the call of my daimon to make ministry my life's purpose. I can see how it might well be looked at from any of those viewpoints. However I got to it, the calling seemed true and right. These past five months of sabbatical have been really, at their core, about revisiting that call. As the reading said "in this parenthesis, this time of reflection."

Like most of ministry, sabbatical seemed to be about the tasks—writing the book, traveling, taking courses—doing the ministry that doesn't fit into a regular work week. But it was truly a parenthesis. It's much easier to communicate the tasks, and there were plenty of those, but I'll skip to the end and tell you that the one true product of my sabbatical was a renewal of my calling to be a Unitarian Universalist minister, to minister in a parish, to minister in this parish, to be your minister.

But this is not a calling to business as usual, to resume the status quo, to go on as if the parenthesis never happened. This time of reflection affirmed my calling, and it also gave me a sense of what else might be possible. So let's back up to the beginning, to January, and see what unfolded.

In a way, my sabbatical can be taken as support for Newton's laws of motion. Newton's first law of motion says that a body in motion tends to remain in motion. This is OK for a period of time.

The second law tells us that it will remain in motion only until an outside and unequal force is applied. This, too, is OK for period.

Eventually the first law reasserted itself and the second half of my sabbatical was characterized by the portion of the law that says that a body at rest tends to stay at rest. *This* is OK for a period.

For the first half of my sabbatical I maintained the sort of busy organization I do regularly. Each day had a rule of three – clean one thing, create one thing, accomplish one thing. The categories are somewhat fluid and I realize that cleaning and creating are often seen as accomplishments, but the task-oriented labels are a bit misleading. Cleaning one thing was wholly about internal intrinsic motivation. I like to clean. I like to have things clean. Organizing my pantry into matching containers, clearly labeled and lined up on the shelf is a little bit of heaven for me.

Likewise, time in my studio creating is wholly self-driven. Not always successful, not even always satisfying, but always motivated from within. Often it meant paper arts, but occasionally creativity took the form of baking or cooking.

Accomplishing, on the other hand, was the designation for all things extrinsic, those things that needed some externally motivating force to act upon the system. This included things like paying bills, something I do not embrace with a glad song on my lips, yet something that I see value in having done. Writing falls in this category. There are moments when it is flowing that it moves from extrinsic reward to internal satisfaction, but that is certainly not its primary locus and I was never meant to write a book sitting home alone. But clean one thing, create one thing and accomplish one thing and eventually the bills get paid and the pages get written.

So that was the first half of my sabbatical with organized categories where it wasn't too hard to figure out what I should be doing or wanted to be doing. As I said, good for a period. But times of parenthesis, times of reflection, can't be programmed into rules of three. Unless that outside force acts upon the system and lends change, it is hard to move from action to reflection.

Enter the outside force… About halfway in to my sabbatical I headed to Boston to attend one of the three yearly meetings of the Ministerial Fellowship Committee, our denominational body that credentials new ministers. I have been privileged to serve on that committee for a year now, and being on sabbatical offered the space to see that work in new ways. More on that later. But traveling to Boston for a week of meetings offered the opportunity to visit with friends in Massachusetts. John joined me and we headed to New York. There we attended ten Broadway shows in seven days, pushing us just to the edge of overload without quite tipping the scale.

This month away—away from the things I see on a daily basis, away from my computer and my email, even away from my art studio—was the outside and unequal force needed to move the system from motion to rest. This is when the time for reflection became deeper. This is when I knew that that the result of doing ministry differently for five months would be the desire to return to this ministry, here with you. It was time in which to remember why I became a minister, what I wanted to do, how I wanted to be in ministry. It offered a chance to look at the ways that those early dreams have been fulfilled and the ways in which they have not.

In many ways, I as looking at this time as a chance to return to what was – to my early intentions and motivations for ministry. There was indeed some of that, but we never venture on 16 years without being changed. It's good to remember why I became a minister and what dreams I had then, but the reasons and hopes of *now* are informed by what has been with all its losses and

gains, new understandings and new delusions. My 16 years of ministry have changed me, and therefore have changed my ministry.

Nor could this time away leave me unchanged. I titled this sermon "There and Back Again" after the subtitle of JRR Tolkien's book *The Hobbit*, one of the great tales of venturing out and coming home again. My sabbatical didn't face anything so frightening as fire breathing dragons or golems, but still it was an adventure into a different way of being, away from my Hobbit hole of the known and the routine. And in this archetype of homecoming tale, the protagonist never returns unchanged. To find or return to your own purpose never leaves you quite the same. Dorothy, the scarecrow and the tin man didn't come back from Oz the same as when they went. Odysseus returned home a different man. Lebron James probably didn't even go back to the Cavaliers unchanged by his time in Miami. If you are paying attention, if it is a real, true adventure, you do not come away from it unchanged. Like the boy in our story this morning, we are all changed by searching for our purpose, even if that purpose is short lived and even if we hadn't meant to go finding purpose in the first place.

So I return to this sanctuary with some of the old purpose, having accomplished our third R of our sabbatical theme—reflect, rejuvenate, recommit, and reconnect. I recommitted to my purpose a minister. With that came the opportunity to see new ways to do and be in ministry. The most important of these is that I have come to understand how deeply I need to be in a collaborative ministry. One of the attractions of this church when I came six years ago was its strong lay leadership and that there were two other ministers here: Rosie and Ruth. I knew to some extent then—and the last six years have confirmed with deep understanding—that I am not interested in anything less than collaborative, shared ministry. Although there are days, and I imagine we all have them, when I wish everyone in the world would just do what I tell them (particularly in politics), I am truly not interested in the kind of ministry where I make the decisions or even provide the spiritual leadership alone.

When we take the opportunity in this coming year to re-imagine what the leadership of our religious education programming will look like, I hope we will seek someone who will be a full participant in the ministry of this church. Not someone with a narrow focus on children's classes, but on ministry to children. Not someone with a narrow focus on children, but on the developmental needs across the lifespan. Not someone with a narrow focus on education as classroom instruction, but someone who understands that committees and administration and potlucks *are* religious education and are ministry. Someone who wants to be full partners in shared leadership, who will bring new ideas and new paradigms, who will love as we are *and* move us to be better.

This is a basic understanding of how I wish to be in ministry. Sabbatical reflection time also came with new ideas and recommitment to old ones, but this basic ethos of sharing and collaboration are foundational. So on to the ideas. I have a list. It is in no specific order, and many of the ideas are not new ones. It's just that this feels like the right time as we face the fourth R of reconnecting to consider moving some of these to the front of the line. So, in no particular order…

Become a teaching congregation. This congregation has nurtured some wonderful ministers into being. One so well that she, Ruth, is still with us 16 years later! Lynnda White's experience as the Sabbatical Minister affirms what I already knew that this is a terrifically warm and supportive environment to grow in ministry. I would love to see us find a way to support an intern again. There is so much strength in leadership from which a new minister could learn what a healthy thriving congregation looks like.

Next, let's find ways to build strength in our youth programs. The teen years are the most common time people drift away from the church of their childhood, never to return. Can you name three programs we offer to our youth? Can you identify the people that run them? The youth group is wonderful, but it lives on the efforts of a few people. Investment in our youth is critical. Let's lower the age of membership so that our youth can become fully involved in governance and doing the work of the church. Let's invite them more deeply into the ministry of this congregation so that when they go to college they carry more than wonderful memories, but a commitment to sustaining progressive religion. Let's experiment with new forms of worship that attract and engage youth. Let's give them a voice in our church so that it becomes their church.

We all know that despite our booming RE program churches are aging as younger people remain uninspired by committee work and sanctuary based worship. Yet young people have no less need of spiritual sustenance and face no fewer questions about how to live their values in the world than anyone who founded this church 157 years ago. In my work with the Ministerial Fellowship Committee, I've been encountering so many new and exciting ways of doing ministry. New ministries are springing up like spiritual discussion groups held in coffee houses and brew pubs. Groups with no denominational affiliation or building to call home, but where possibility is alive in the search for meaning. New ministries are springing up in communities where the disadvantaged are – ministering on the streets and in shelters, with food and care instead of proselytizing and dogma. New ministries are springing up on line for people in isolated geographic areas, people in prisons, people who don't drive and people whose lives are simply too packed to take a morning together in community. These all require different ways of ministering. I am not necessarily well qualified for any of them, but someone here is, and I am well qualified to be their support.

This is the time of reimagining church. Of looking for the needs in our community and molding ourselves to that rather than asking those in need to mold themselves to our ways of doing church. It is such an exciting time, to see what all these new entrepreneurial ministries look like! We have so much to offer, it can fill many channels at once.

Some of you were at the Black Lives Matter discussion hosted by the Humanist group at the Normal Public Library in May. That is the kind of new ministry – taking it to the people – that we are capable of. That effort wasn't branded a UUBN event, though we were listed as a sponsor, but it arose from within this congregation both in vision and in making it happen. These are the kinds of exciting, community making, world-changing ministries we can be part of, we can be the catalyst for.

If we were to have an intern, they might well want to engage in a new ministry of this type. You might want to engage in a ministry of this type. Ministry requires neither and Masters of Divinity nor ordination. *You* can be the future of this church.

And there are many things we can do right here, within these walls to create and sustain new ways of being church. All we need is to open ourselves to hear new voices. With change comes discomfort. We know that. But living into your purpose? What greater joy is there? The father who sent his son to find a treasure that didn't exist knew that in finding and in fulfilling purpose comes a satisfaction far beyond the price of rubies.

I return to this sanctuary with renewed sense of purpose, rejuvenated, recommitted and ready to reconnect. I return with deep gratitude for this opportunity you have given me and with far too much to say for one day. So let me say simply, thank you. It is so good to be home.

So what did you do while I was gone?

Namaste. Por lo tanto puede ser.

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