

## ***“Lessons Learned Along the Way”***

Rev. Scott W. Alexander

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Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Vero Beach

Well good morning...I am so pleased to be sharing this day with all of you!

When I pondered all the many different ways I might introduce myself to you this morning (as we together begin our all-important candidating week here in Vero Beach) I decided (after what I will admit to you was a bit of folderol and fussing) the best way to give you some sort of “window” into who I am as a minister and a human being would be to tell you about some of the people I have met along the way in my 36 years of ministry, and the important life lessons I have learned from them. Over the course of my varied and happy ministerial career -- first as a village pastor in bucolic Houlton, Maine (for four satisfying years)...then as an

inner-city minister in troubled Plainfield, New Jersey (for a full decade)...then as a “global” executive minister serving the whole movement at UUA headquarters in Boston, Massachusetts (for another decade)...and finally (for the last 12 years) as the Senior minister at a large, and influential congregation just outside Washington, DC – I have (of course) met and served many thousands of wonderful and fascinating persons. But over the years, there have been some noteworthy individuals and situations have given me invaluable lessons about what life (and the Unitarian Universalist faith and ministry) are all about...and I want to share just a few of these stories with you this morning. So let’s get going!

The first person I want to tell you about is Edna – the long-time organist of the first church I served way up in Houlton, Maine. Edna -- bless her sweet and ever-loving heart – was in her early 80’s when I arrived to serve that struggling little rural congregation, and she had been the organist there for as long as anyone could remember. Unfortunately, it wasn’t many Sundays into that first church year, when I realized that there was (how can I put this?) **SOMETHING OF A PROBLEM** with Edna’s organ

playing. It wasn't just the obvious and occasional keyboard mistakes she made (those I suppose could – and indeed were easily overlooked), but in addition (and with increasing frequency, I'm sorry to say) when one of the morning's selected hymns was announced, Edna (sitting cheerfully and upright at the keyboard) would blissfully and enthusiastically launch into **some other tune** entirely! Not sure what the problem was (we later learned Edna was suffering from encroaching dementia) I spoke to the Board Chair about it, and he simply said (to his newly-minted 24 year old minister who wanted everything just right and competent in his first church) not to worry about it. And worry I should not have...for that wise, little congregation knew **exactly** what to do. For you see every time when Edna began playing the wrong tune, the members of the congregation in attendance – usually about 40 or so – would all start feverishly flipping through the hymnal trying to figure out **what in God's name Edna was playing!** And the first person to figure it out (it was often Howie Bowman, who had once been a Baptist minister, but we all took our turns) the first person to figure it out would alert the rest

of us in a loud stage whisper **“NUMBER 54!”** so we could all quickly flip to the right page and catch up with Edna. We routinely did this without (and this is the key part of the story) without Edna ever being the wiser! Edna retired from the organist job just before I left 4 years later, but she never figured out how regularly (and graciously) that congregation covered for her declining musical abilities by playing our own version of **“Let’s Name that Tune!”** She was never the wiser!

**[PAUSE...]**

The first principle of Unitarian Universalism – the bedrock principle to which we must always return as we strive to live out our faith in the beautiful and challenging world of ours -- is ***“The inherent worth and dignity of every person.”*** Now to some, this might seem a shimmering abstraction or glittering generality...but to the members of that little gem of a congregation it was a simple, everyday truth worth living up to. By their gracious acceptance of Edna’s errors on the organ, they taught me (in the earliest days of my ministerial career, blessedly) what it truly means to ***“affirm and promote***

***the inherent worth and dignity of every person.***” Edna was affirmed and blessed by that congregation for as long as she wanted to be the organist. And I have since learned (over and over and over again in my ministry) that indeed every human being – myself most definitely included – **regularly stands in need of such gracious forbearance and understanding.** For who amongst us does not (from time to time) play **jarring notes** and **dissonant melodies** in the small symphonies that are our individual lives? Our Unitarian Universalist heritage calls upon us to accept and embrace one another (in all our imperfect humanness) as we all strive to make our life’s music as best we can...this I learned from Edna, and that loving little congregation which chose to only see her inherent worth and dignity, even as she lead us right through the wrong hymn!

**[PAUSE...]**

The second story is also from my Houlton years, about a little girl in the congregation named Sam (short, as you might suspect, for Samantha) who regularly and enthusiastically attended our Sunday School, and was

thus exposed to our Unitarian Universalist values and principles. Sam was as bright and perky as little girls get...I will never forget the autumnal day I visited the farm where she lived with her parents Arthur and Jane...as Arthur and I talked in the dooryard, Sam was out in a nearby field of tall golden grass, skipping and laughing, full of boundless life and joy. I left Houlton in 1978, and honestly never expected to keep track of Sam, until she roared back into my consciousness four years later when she became a worldwide celebrity! For you see in 1982 when she was ten years old -- at the very depths of the dangerous cold war between the United States and the Soviet Union -- Sam (whose full name was Samantha Smith) was that little Maine School girl who wrote Yuri Andropov, the Leader of the Soviet Union, to ask why our two nations couldn't live in peace without the threat of nuclear War. Sam asked Mr. Andropov in her letter: ***“Why do the people of the United States and the Soviet union have to be enemies? Everybody wants peace and happiness, why can't we just get along as brothers and sisters of the same human family?”*** Mr. Andropov (for whatever reasons) wrote back, and this

exchange of letters lead to Sam and her parents being invited to the Soviet Union for a peace and goodwill tour, which caught the attention of the worldwide media. Here is a copy of the book about the trip ***[SCOTT HOLDS THE BOOK UP FOR THE CONGREGATION TO SEE]***, it will be up here in the pulpit following this morning's service if any of you want to look at the pictures and text. After Sam's big media-covered trip to Russia (where she spent time with Soviet youth just like herself), she wanted to do more to further peace, and so (with the help of many Americans devoted to international peace and understanding) she arranged for hundreds of Soviet youth to visit the United States the next summer, and spend time with American youth...and other "goodwill" exchanges between Soviet and American youth ensued. Samantha Smith became famous as an emissary for world peace and international understanding, and made a real contribution to the lessening of tensions between the two nations armed to the teeth with nuclear weapons. Ironically, all it took was a little girl's dream of peace to begin thawing the hard hearts of two giant,

enemy nations...I like to think she was perhaps the first, true ***“diplomat of détente.”***

Sam's personal story, unfortunately, ended on a tragic note...for a couple of years later she and her father Arthur died in a commuter plane crash one dark and rainy night when she was returning home to Augusta Maine from Hollywood after the taping of the network television show she starred in with actor Robert Wagner. But in her short life, Sam made a **large and lasting contribution to humanity**...this little ten year old Maine school girl (dare I say) may have played a role in saving the world as we know it, or at least in teaching all of us to treasure and work for peace. What I learned from Sam (who was, I remind you, a Unitarian Universalist child through and through) was that no matter how insignificant or powerless you might feel at any point in your life, you can make a positive difference in this world of ours if you simply speak out and live out your values and dreams. As a child, Sam taught me that peace and hope and love are always possibilities in this beautiful, broken world of ours.

**[PAUSE...]**

One last story from my Houlton years if I might. That first year when the all church canvass time came around (just like it does in every congregation, every year) I confidently marched downtown to the business office of the chair of the board (a wise and salty old gentleman names Baldy Inman) and shared with him the details of ***“The Blue Book”*** -- the canvass “how to” book put out by the UUA. With a huge, stinky cigar jutting out of his mouth, Baldy sat at his desk (blowing smoke and listening patiently) as I suggested that (according to UUA best “practices”) we should prepare a canvass brochure, have a gala fellowship dinner, then sensitively canvass all the church families one-on-one at home. When I was finished presenting the UUA formula, Baldy simply said, ***“Well, that’s all well and good Scott, but we do it just a little differently up here...me and the boys will pick you up on Friday evening, be ready for dinner and a canvass planning meeting down at Fred’s camp.”*** Now “Fred’s camp” was a rustic cabin way out of town on a beautiful wilderness stream deep in the woods, and when we got there, about 10 men from the church (all men, mind

you!) were fixing a hearty steak and potato dinner on the wood stove. After dinner, the cigars and scotch were broken out, the off color jokes and stories began, and then, after about an hour of absolutely silly **“boys night out”** stuff we settled down to business. Baldy sat us all down at the big long camp table lit by two kerosene lamps and, like a riverboat gambler, fanned out the 40- or- so pledge cards for every family in the church. Then he began, **“Alright...let’s get this done...the first card is Alan Clark...that cheap son of a gun owns the dairy (which, as you all know is doing very well), but only gave us \$300 last year...who’s gonna get \$500 out of him this year?”** Henry White, quietly-but-determinedly raised his hand, **“I’ll get it,”** and Baldy handed him the card, **“Great!”** and then continued. **“Next is Amber Corliss, she’s retired now and living on a fixed income, but that’s no excuse for the small pledge she made last year, who’s gonna get \$350 out of her?”** Fred Donald (the retired banker) quietly raised his hand, **“You bet I will”** he said with a banker’s steely resolve, and the card was passed to him. So it went for the next 30 minutes or so, Baldy would deal out the card, call out the name,

make a comment (not all of them terribly subtle or kind I might add!), and get someone to agree to get a higher pledge than last year. As the evening ended, the neophyte minister was absolutely stunned by what had occurred. They never told me anything like this in seminary...but (by God) sure enough in just nine days the Houlton canvass was complete, and the budget for the new year balanced -- right to the penny!

What I learned from that first crusty “good old boys” canvass committee is that many times in a Unitarian Universalist congregation it pays to **NOT “do things by the book,”** each congregation is unique, and people need to think and act **“outside the box,”** to get done what needs getting done. This story, need I point out, is more-than-a-little-relevant to all of you here at the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Vero Beach, for you are (I assume you know this!) a rather unique **“heads up”...“thinking outside the box”** kind of congregation. Unless I’ve got this wrong – and tell me right away, because this is our candidating week! – I understand the UU fellowship of Vero Beach to be a particularly energetic, complex, committed, caring, thoughtful,

innovative, warm and adventurous group! I want you to know right off the bat this morning that I am genuinely excited by the possibility of serving such an active and enthusiastic congregation! Just one example, I am so impressed that (as a relatively small congregation) you took the risk (a few years back) to both acquire and renovate this exquisite and wonderful building as your congregational home. And let me digress, just for a brief moment here, if I might. I want to tell you this morning that I have waited my whole career (all 36 years, by god!) for the chance to serve a UU congregation with a truly welcoming, beautiful and well-maintained building! I have spent an entire career trying to fix up neglected and shabby UU buildings, and I'm honestly sick of it! I for one am so thrilled that as a congregation you have not been restrained by the "common wisdom" about what kind of facility a congregation of this size can afford, and look forward to the adventure of continuing to think BIG AND BOLD for this fellowship (and ***The Emerson Center*** and ***Bridges Early Learning Center*** and all your other service programs to the community), as we reach out here on "The Treasure Coast" sharing our Unitarian Universalist

faith and values with as many of our good neighbors as we possibly can, and welcoming them regularly into our fine facility. But I digress...back to my stories if I might.

***[PAUSE...]***

The next story I want to share with you comes from Plainfield, New Jersey, which I served for a decade from 1978 until 1988. The incident I want to describe was, by any measure I guess, an ordinary and unostentatious moment, but it made as great an impression on me as any single moment of my life. In the Plainfield congregation, we had an elderly couple by the name of Walter and Carol, and during my time there, Walter became gravely ill with advanced Alzheimer's disease. Carol, his wife of many decades, could no longer drive, so members of the congregation took turns transporting her to the nursing home where Walter lay, usually in a passive stupor. Every couple of weeks or so, I would take my turn, and would pick Carol up at her home and drive her over to the convalescent center for her afternoon visit. The last time we together visited Walter before his death, Carol and I were standing by Walter's

bedside...she was alternately rubbing his arm, talking to him sweetly (even though he was totally unresponsive) and chatting with me about current events (as was our habit on such visits to help us pass the time with Walter and his tragic silence), when, all of a sudden, she nonchalantly (and without a hint of self-consciousness) opened the bed stand drawer, pulled out an old silver-plated hairbrush of theirs, and started gently guiding the brush through her dying husband's matted and disheveled hair. As I watched her gently run the brush – again and again and again – through his hair, I suddenly felt compelled to look away, my eyes went to the floor as **my whole body filled with emotion for the holiness of it all**. I looked away not because I was squeamish about the tragedy and sadness of the moment-- as a minister I am frequently in the presence of great sorrow --I looked away because I suddenly felt a profound spiritual embarrassment for being witness to so tender a moment of human devotion and love. I suddenly felt the interloper... the voyeur if you will... present in an intense moment of intimacy (of love-making really) that deserved a holy privacy and respect. Surgeon Richard

Salzer in his book *Mortal Lessons*, describes a similar moment at a hospital bed when he witnessed a pure moment of human devotion between a married couple, where a husband had tenderly kissed his hospitalized wife. ***“All at once [Salzer writes] I [understood], and [I lowered] my gaze. One is not bold in an encounter with a god...I remember that the gods appeared in ancient Greece as mortals, and I hold my breath and let the wonder in.”*** Over the course of my ministerial career, I have, of course, been at countless bedsides with people struggling to come to terms with illness, loss, tragedy and death...but none spoke to me more powerfully than that moment with that simple silver-plated hairbrush. What I witnessed in that moment -- in full and holy and redeeming clarity – was the holy power of love and devotion which one person can (so simply) bestow on another. Of all the many sacred things which give this life its nobility, grace, and hope none is more powerful than such love – such pure and simple love --given from one person to another. I will carry the memory of that moment between husband and wife close to my heart for as long as I live.

**[PAUSE...]**

My next story from those Plainfield years is totally different, but equally important to me. This is perhaps a bit complicated to describe, but here goes. Early in the 1980's the mayor of Plainfield (who had been the assistant superintendent of schools before he was elected mayor) upon assuming office quickly dismissed the school board (which he could do) and appointed six of his political cronies to the same Board, and then (in a blatantly cynical and corrupt move) took a "leave of absence as mayor," appointing one of his corrupt friends as "acting mayor" so that he could be appointed to the well-paying position of Superintendent of schools!

Sharing the outrage of many other citizens committed to quality schools and good government, I organized the city's clergy (and other leaders) to demand the superintendent's resignation, and (with a dozen other city leaders) filed a civil suit against the acting mayor.

Because my name was on the suit (the curse of having a last name that begins with the letter "A"), I received a great deal of attention from the new media in the New York metropolitan area, and became the spokesperson

for the effort. Well, to make a long story short, within weeks, the superintendant (Mr. Lattimore) was indeed forced to resign, the acting mayor was put on the defensive for his role in the scheme, and was eventually defeated at the polls. Now many in the community thanked me for my leadership role in confronting this blatant wrong-doing. But I must tell you that getting to this positive outcome for the city was a harrowing experience for me. Immediately after I took these actions (in the role as a minister of the city, on behalf of the wider community, stepping up to genuine leadership in a difficult situation) my life was threatened. Soon after we filed the suit, a bomb threat was called into my home one evening...and knowledgeable leaders in the community warned me that because of the hardball politics of the city my life was perhaps in danger, and that I should be very careful moving about the community, including refraining from jogging alone through town as was my noontime habit. For several months, I genuinely feared for my life, and while I never doubted that I had done the right thing for the community, was nonetheless chastened to realize how

high the stakes can be (both for the congregation and me personally) whenever you challenge the prevailing “powers and principalities” on behalf of your values. What this rather dramatic situation taught me is the truth that every once and a while over the course of a ministry, one does get called upon (either by circumstance, random luck or fate) to take risks for the principles and values of our faith. I honestly waded into this conflict without fully appreciating what the risks and outcomes were, which was maybe a good thing! There have been several other times over the course of my ministry where I have similarly been called up on stand up on behalf of our religious principles and values, and I pray I will never abrogate that duty, for this is one part of the role of the minister that is as important as anything else we do.

***[PAUSE...]***

After ten years in Plainfield (and let me tell you that was a rough-and-tumble place to do ministry!), I moved to UUA headquarters in Boston -- where I took up an entirely different kind of ministry for the next ten years.

For this decade -- Instead of serving one local congregation with a precise pool of familiar people -- I found myself in a broad executive and consultative role – writing books and publications, designing and running programs, and flying around the country working with many thousands of Unitarian Universalists. These were rich and wonderful years for me, and the people I will never forget from this chapter of my life were the countless Unitarian Universalists (I worked with during this period) who were so committed to their faith and to the health of their congregations. I can't tell you how inspiring it was for me – week after week as I traveled all over this country to talk about our faith and share strategies for making our congregations both strong and effective – to meet so many wonderful lay leaders in our congregations (both big and small) who were willing and able to invest significant time and energy (significant heart and soul) to sharing our faith and building our congregations. I must digress again and tell you that one of the primary reasons I was so attracted to this congregation here in Vero Beach (during my search process this year) is that your history and leadership

shows that you are a congregation serious about doing our religion right! I hope (in the years to come) to be able to partner with all of you in making the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Vero Beach all that it can be, so that (as a congregation) we stands here as a beacon on ***The Treasure Coast*** for the principles and dreams and duties of our faith. What I can tell you from my “**UUA Years**” is that there are many such congregations all across this land...we Unitarian Universalists are a serious religious people seriously practicing our religion, both within our congregations, and in the wider world which so needs our message of compassion, responsibility and hope.

***[PAUSE...]***

The last story I want to tell this morning, is more recent, from my work with the River Road congregation just outside our nation’s capital. About four years ago, during the last presidential administration, one of my parishioners came to me one day and said with deep and powerful conviction, “***Scott, I just can’t stand it that my nation is torturing people. I know these terrorists in***

***Iraq and Afghanistan are bad characters who mean us harm, but I can't stand it that America is forsaking its own highest principles because of fear over our national security. I've got to do something about this.*** I said to her, ***"Linda, I too am terribly troubled by America's torture policies, and so is Ginger Luke*** [River Road's other minister] ***let's see if we can't do something to stop it.*** I encouraged Linda to come up with a plan as to how we might get started having our voices heard on this all important national policy issue, and what she came up with proved to be straightforward genius. It was February, and (despite the cold of that season) she suggested that we get as many members of the congregation as possible (who shared our outrage) to come and stand with us for an hour and a half (during the evening rush hour) in front of the Vice President's residency at the Naval Observatory -- not far from River Road. Vice President Dick Cheney was -- as you all know -- the primary architect and defender of our government's open torture policy, so we felt it was only right that we should protest outside his official home as he motorcade arrived back from the White House during the evening

rush hour. So Linda got some of her friends organized, and I announced (and advocated) this social justice initiative from the pulpit on Sundays, encouraging members of the congregation to join Linda and me in this protest effort.

And a quick-but-important aside here. As the Senior Minister of the congregation I fully understood that not all the members of the congregation would share Linda's and my conclusion of the immorality of this policy. I was careful to say, "***If you find yourself in agreement with us, join us,***" and not assume there was unanimous agreement in the congregation. I share this because I want you here in Vero Beach to know that I understand the absolute importance (whenever we do social justice work and advocacy in a Unitarian Universalist context) to show respect for the diversity of perspectives that are out there in the congregation. No one -- most certainly not the minister -- has a monopoly on truth and morality...we must always be respectful of one another, even as we take stands in the larger culture.

In any case, the first torture protest (and let me tell you it was one cold February night out there on Massachusetts Avenue!) we were over 70 strong. A couple of weeks later we got other local congregation's and clergy involved (Quaker, Episcopal, Presbyterian, and others) and we started drawing well over 100 protesters with large banners that declared "**TORTURE IS IMMORAL!**" and "**SHAME ON US!**" Soon -- in addition to hearing from thousands of motorists honking approval at us as we stood silently in protest --we started to get some local media attention for these protests, and formed an organization called (WRCAT—"Weercat") the ***Washington Religious coalition Against Torture***, which soon spawned the (NRCAT – "*Nearcat*") the ***National Religious Coalition Against Torture***. Much to my surprise (for I honestly never imagined we would have all that much success with this campaign), these organizations caught the attention of several large national foundations, including the ***Ford Foundation***, which substantially funded the national effort, and helped us create a fully staffed Washington office for effective lobbying against torture as a policy of our

government. One thing led to the next, and soon we were regularly holding protests and rallies (some which received national media attention in front of the White House) and engaging in quieter lobbying efforts, culminating in the organization being invited into the White House just before President Obama officially ended torture as a policy of the United States.

Now I want to be very clear here...as proud of the leadership role that some of us in the River Road congregation played in this development, I clearly played only a secondary role, compared to the phenomenal efforts of Linda and other lay leaders who got the whole ball rolling. Linda is now national president of **NRCAT** and continues to work diligently for the absolute elimination of torture around the globe. To me, this is a story about a members of a single Unitarian Universalist congregation (both concerned laity and clergy) standing up for the principles of our faith, and making a difference in the world. The point here is that ministers, it seems to me, often work best when they collaborate, support and encourage -- not necessarily rush to march at the front of every parade (and thus drawing immediate attention

to themselves) but rather responding to and encouraging lay voices and broader leadership. This is the kind of leadership I would hope to demonstrate here in Vero Beach in the years to come, as together, we strive to be a responsible (but active) voice for our Unitarian Universalist principles here on the Treasure Coast (while always respecting the diversity of opinions in our midst).

***[PAUSE...]***

Well... so there you have a few stories (a few fleeting glimpses) of a few of the wonderful (and in some cases amazing) people I have met along the way of my ministry. I am profoundly grateful for the opportunity I have had (over these last 36 years) to be in this “people profession.” I have learned so very much over the years, and have been so blessed by being a minister, I can’t really imagine doing anything else professionally (although every once and awhile I fantasize about opening a bike shop!). This is why I am here with you this morning, looking ahead to what I hope will be “the next chapter” of my ministry here in Vero Beach. Your Ministerial Search Committee and I both feel this is an

excellent fit between a minister and a congregation, and I pray that our busy and intense candidating week together (which begins today with such a bang) will confirm this judgment. I hope that our respective stories – yours as a congregation and mine as a minister – will be woven creatively together for years – happy and useful years -- to come.

Standing here now -- on the thresh hold of what may well be a whole new chapter for both of us in our lives -- we do not know precisely what the future holds. There will, of course always be twists and turns, tragedies and triumphs, mysteries and surprises. But this we do know: what kinds of stories will be told about us (in the days and years that are to come) is in no small measure **up to us**. We are free to give shape to a shared future that will reflect the best of our Unitarian Universalist faith. We are free to live lives in service of justice, mercy, compassion, decency, wholeness, peace and love. As we begin our candidating week together, my dream is as simple as it is heart-felt. I want to spend the next chapter of my life with you, together writing a story of faith and purpose with the very heart and soul (sum and

substance) of our lives. Shall we begin that journey together? I pray so.

Amen.