

LIE BACK
BUC, September 12, 2010

Whenever I begin the church year with a new congregation, the experience tends to send me on a round of reminiscing about my initial foray into ministry as a student intern with a large Unitarian Universalist church in St. Paul, Minnesota. As a sweet young thing those many years ago, I was startled, even dismayed, by the initial lessons my supervisor chose to teach me. Student ministers are usually surprised to discover how much of what they assumed about the work of ministry turns out to be irrelevant, unimportant, even downright wrong. I had expected as an intern instruction in preaching, or conducting rites of passage, or effective pastoral techniques to be the first order of the day, since I believed those to be a minister's most important responsibilities.

But no such instruction ensued. Instead, my supervisor decided that his first ministerial lecture for me would be on the subject of perception. "A minister," he told me, "is a walking Rorschach blot. As such, you will be the target of your congregation's projections. Always keep that in mind when you work with your people."

Like most such oracular pronouncements, my supervisor's statement says at least as much about the speaker as it does about its purported subject.

Furthermore, the observation does not go far enough: if ministers are Rorschach blots, receptacles of projection, for their congregations, then congregations must also be Rorschach blots for their ministers. You and I, the congregation and the minister, both trigger projections in one another (and you must be wondering what I'm thinking about you just now).

This Rorschach-blot theory of minister-congregation relationships seems worthy of examination particularly now, as you and I begin this Sunday our yearlong journey together in our partnership of ministry. We come to this beginning with high expectations, wondering whether each will live up to the reputation that has preceded us (perhaps also fearing the other will live up to the reputation that has preceded us); and with high anxieties, wondering whether a relationship with the other will bring satisfaction and growth, along with the predictable challenges, or just one challenge after another.

High expectations and anxieties on both sides, and laced with projections that can make it frustratingly difficult to distinguish the reality from the perception, the minister and the congregation from the Rorschach blot. While we begin this time together with some background information about the other and a few initial encounters, any psychologist will tell you that Rorschach blots are devilishly difficult to decipher. How can you know

whether you see the person or the projection, the Rorschach or the reality?

For in order to do good ministry together, it seems crucial that we be able to see just who it is we are dealing with.

Ever since the beginning of time, when some creative—or troubled—person first pointed at a bush and claimed to see a divine spirit moving through the branches and leaves, religious traditions have struggled to find some criteria for determining authentic spiritual perceptions. The claim to have found God in a bush only lasted a short time, until some other creative—or troubled—person insisted that divinity resided in a nearby mountain, while the vision of God in a bush was nothing more than the projection of the first human’s wishes. No, insisted a third creative—or troubled—person, both of you are caught up in your own projections; I see clearly, and I know that God is in the sky, not some stupid mountain or bush. Get some therapy, and you will see that a mountain is just a mountain, and a bush is just a bush.

And so the debate rages over the truth of various spiritual insights, with the label of “projection” being a near-invincible weapon. Calling someone’s truth a “projection” defies rebuttal; any further attempt to explain only adds to the initial projection, and defending one’s truth seals the argument.

Suppose I describe God in parental language, and you respond by observing

that I am projecting my wish to be cared for as a child is cared for by a loving parent onto the notion of God: how do I refute your observation without digging the hole deeper? Suppose you tell me that, as a minister, I sound pompous and authoritarian, and I respond by observing that you are projecting your unresolved issues with authority figures onto me: how will you ever prove the truth of your observation, once I have decided that what you say to me is projection? You see God, I see wishful thinking; I see divine revelation, you see delusions of grandeur; some see a resurrected Christ, others see a denial of death; we see questions and mystery, they see control issues, and who sees the reality? Surrounded by Rorschach blots and ensnared in projections, where is the hard nugget of spiritual truth?

“Creo in unum Deum: I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of all things visible and invisible: And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten from the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, one in being with the Father, through whom all things were made in heaven and on earth, who for the sake of us and for the purpose of our salvation came down and became incarnate, suffered and rose again on the third day”

Some churches, perhaps including churches that some of you grew up in, responded to the challenge of sorting projections and reality and revelation

and illusion by developing a creed like the one I just quoted, an air-tight belief system that can be a highly efficient method of keeping everyone in line and on the same page, screening out projection from truth and ensuring that all the members come to the same conclusions no matter what their perception or projection. Creeds give direction when choices big and small have to be made, when life challenges become overwhelming, even when death stands at the door. In an instant, a creed casts light into all of life's dark corners, sends the monsters of doubt and ambiguity and projection scurrying, establishes an unshakeable foundation of certainty in place of the shifting sands of the unknown.

For Unitarian Universalists, the problem is more complex. In place of a creed, we offer freedom, the opportunity and responsibility to work out one's own spiritual perspective guided by the teachings of all the great traditions, a reasoning mind, the exchange of views with others, and the promptings of the Spirit in the silence of the individual heart. True, even in a noncreedal church the possibility of the development of a creed is not necessarily eliminated; some Unitarian Universalists have managed to create for themselves a closed, comprehensive, dogmatic, world view that nails matters down as securely as any conventional church creed. But for those who do attempt to maintain a noncreedal stance, to continue living out of

soul freedom and living in the questions, the challenges can seem insurmountable: How do I negotiate the all the chances and changes of life? Without sure guideposts, how do I make the right choices? When can I be sure that am following a sacred calling rather than my own wishful thinking? How do I know when I have laid hold on a truth that will support me, when I can no longer support myself?

Two paintings: the first by a Florentine painter known to few outside art history circles, Paolo Uccello, the second by an artist whose name is familiar even to those unaware of art, Leonardo Da Vinci. Uccello's painting, of a famous battle in Florentine history, is neat and mathematical in arrangement, with every figure precisely executed, details carefully rendered, perspective. Indeed, so perfect is the picture that it appears unreal, lacking interest, wooden. By contrast, Da Vinci's painting of Mona Lisa jumps to life, even seeming to breathe and follow the viewer around the room with her eyes. Though many aspects of Mona Lisa are skillfully rendered, her form remains a little vague, her outlines are not firmly drawn, many of her features disappear into shadow. Oddly enough, this *sfumato* effect—the blurred outlines, mellowed colors, blending into shadows—is precisely what breathes life into Mona Lisa. Da Vinci discovered, in painting her, that the more accurate and comprehensive an artist attempts to be, the less real the

result. Only with vagueness, with an ambiguous line that leaves something to be imagined by the viewer, can a sense of reality be conveyed in painting. Liveliness enters when the imagination is engaged.

“By faith Noah, being warned concerning events as yet unseen, took heed and constructed an ark for the saving of his household;

“By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place which he was to receive as an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was to go.

“By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age.

“By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter, choosing rather to share ill treatment with the Israelites.

“By faith the people crossed the Red Sea as if on dry land.

“And what more shall I say? Of Gideon, Barak, Sampson, of David and Samuel and the prophets—who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, received promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness”

(Hebrews 11, *passim*).

Prior to the advent of creeds and unbending doctrinal legal systems in all the major world religious traditions, people seemed to be able to confront the

unknown in their lives by relying on an element called faith. In the sample passage I just read from the Biblical book of Hebrews, the author uses the word faith in a kind of *sfumato* fashion as the vague, shadowy, undefined component which transforms his characters' lives from the everyday, the uninspired, the limited, to the level of the heroic. Other world religions point to faith in a similar fashion: whether the *prasada* of Buddhism, the surrender of Islam, or the core character trait of Hinduism, faith becomes the key quality, the foundation, of any spiritual expression.

Mark Twain once wrote approvingly of the schoolboy's definition of faith as "believing what you know ain't so." In much of the religion of Twain's day, as in much religion of our day, faith and belief—originally two very different matters—tended to be fused into a single concept.

Propositions about God, the universe, the meaning of life, the stuff of which belief statements are made, became faith questions. To have faith and to accept doctrinal systems of belief were synonymous; conversely, if one found it impossible to accept certain doctrines because they defied personal experience, one was judged to be faithless.

But in original uses of the term, faith is quite a different matter from belief. As first conceived, across all traditions, faith is a personal quality akin to deep and profound trust. In contrast to belief, which suggests

precision and comprehension and certainty and proof, faith has a *sfumato* effect on experience, blurring outlines so that the use of imagination is required for completion and meaning. Faith is an ability to tolerate, even enjoy, a high degree of uncertainty, a capacity for living richly and daring greatly without reliance on creeds or systems of belief but rather on trust: trust in oneself, in others, in the universe, trust in the Sacred Mystery that surrounds and permeates our lives. As tolerance for ambiguity, faith enables us to remain open to the unknown without nailing it into a creedal box, to find in questions not threats but possibilities for ongoing discovery, to walk with confidence through projections and differing opinions to decisions that are wise and truths we can stake our lives on. Walking together in faith does not promise us predictability or ready answers; if anything, faithful walking will take us to places we never expected to go, give us ministers we never thought to see, grant us insights we never imagined to find, challenge us to actions we never intended to take. Faith is not a sure thing in the way our culture envisions a sure thing, something specific and manageable and concrete and easy to control. But faith *is* a sure thing in the way it was first envisioned, as the fundamental relationship that ties us to one another, to all the world we see, to all that we cannot see in the interconnected web of our existence, to the Love that lasts beyond time.

So as we launch into another church year this morning, you with yet another new minister, me with yet another new congregation, with projections and expectations and anxieties swirling around us, we head out in faith, trusting that we will be able to work together in creative ways to build this beloved community that so engages us and frustrates us and cares for us and calls us to be our best selves.

My favorite image of faith comes from a poem by Philip Booth called “First Lesson.” The poem describes a parent teaching a child to float on her back as the first and most crucial swimming lesson. Learning to trust is the first lesson we all learn, and a lesson we usually have to relearn whenever life backs us into a corner and demands what we do not have in us to give. So on this first Sunday of the church year, we go back to a first lesson, our lifelong lesson:

Lie back, daughter.
 Let your head be tipped back in the cup of my hand.
 Gently, and I will hold you.
 Spread your arms wide, lie out on the stream, and look high at the gulls.
 A dead man’s float is face down.
 You will dive and swim soon enough, where this tidewater ebbs to the sea.
 Daughter, believe me,
 When you tire on the long thrash to your island,
 Lie up, and survive.
 As you float now, where I held you and let go,
 Remember when fear cramps your heart what I told you:
 Lie gently and wide to the light-year stars,
 Lie back, and the sea will hold you.