“Many Kinds of Ministry"

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In the mid-two thousands, I spent a couple of years as a licensed subway busker on the TTC.

It was a remarkable opportunity to watch the world go by from an unusual vantage point, and to practice the giving of an offering without expectation of recognition or reward.

I wrote extensively about that experience in a daily blog,
because it brought up so many questions for me about beauty, value, recognition and also privilege.

I tried, as much as possible, to see my busking as a form of service.

But often it was I who received gifts from others...
gifts I've come to understand as forms of ministry.

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One day, a man came up to me in the subway
and stopped a few feet away, digging in his knapsack.

Instead of pulling out his wallet or a handful of coins,
he pulled out several sheets of white paper and a pair of scissors.

"I have something for you!" he said excitedly.

I stopped playing to watch him fold the paper several times
and cut them into a deliberate shape.

"These are holes-in-hearts," he told me. "I give them to people."

And sure enough, that's exactly what they were.

After he had accomplished the basic heart shape,
he cut a second heart away on the inside,
creating heart-shaped paper donuts about three inches in diameter.

Pulling away the extra paper, he gave me a large stack of them.

"Thank you so much," I said.

But I wasn't sure what I was thanking him for exactly..
and I didn't know what to do next.

I needn't have worried, because he carried right on.

"This one is special," he said, folding up a large sheet of paper and starting to cut again, this time creating a snowflake design made of larger hearts and larger holes.

"Thank you," I said again. "You're doing a wonderful thing."

I felt sure it was true; I just wasn't sure why.

Was it simply the uniqueness of his gift that was moving,
or was it the symbolism?

After all, these weren't simply hearts with random punctures in them
(though they might have been meaningful as well).

No, these were whole hearts with parallel empty hearts
in the middle.

They represented a yin/yang:
positive and negative space
within one heart and within every heart,

all parallel to each other and cut from the same cloth.

Was this what he meant?
I didn't dare ask him.

I was afraid, I suppose,
that he might talk to me too much about his hearts...

That I might find myself connecting
too long or too deeply during this chance encounter
with a highly unusual stranger in a public place.

Was this the hole
in my otherwise heartfelt "thank you"?

Finally he handed me the large, special heart-snowflake,
smiled gaily and trotted off to catch a train.

I put the cut-outs in my backpack.

And somehow, over the next few days,
the little holes-in-hearts got loose around our house.

For days afterward we found them everywhere,
scattered on the floor and on cabinets.

Dave and the kids asked,
"What are these? Where did they come from?"

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We've all heard of "random acts of kindness."

I wonder if we might also consider "deliberate acts of ministry?"

Specific ways of caring for others...arising from our own talents, abilities, contexts and opportunities.

I'm certain that everyone here engages in "ministry"
of various kinds.

The stranger on the subway offered little portable sermons, offering the message that every human heart contains emptiness and longing, yet is beautiful and whole at the same time.

Someone else might provide the blessing
of a nourishing and delicious meal prepared with love.

Another person might host a community group that becomes much like a congregation...supporting its members through life's passages of birth, marriage, divorce, illness and death.

Of course these forms of ministry all can be applied
within the formal context of the congregational church.

They certainly are at First Unitarian...where the full spectrum of talents are useful: everything from computer skills to supportive listening to renovating a building to arranging flowers.

All of these ministries and so many more contribute to
the well being of the whole.

As the Christian minister Frederick Buechner famously wrote:

“The place God calls you to
is the place where your deep gladness
and the world’s deep hunger meet."

As a person who has occupied a variety of "pulpits"
both paid and unpaid, recognized and unrecognized,
I might say also that "the place God calls you to"

is likely more than one place.

At least it is in the material sense...
when we're talking about practical contexts
and professional roles.

In that sense, we can be called to many "places"
of ministry throughout our lives.

Many settings and responsibilities.

Many people to serve and attend to,
in particular ways at particular times.

But the additional "place" that I think Buechner
was talking about,
and the place that might take an entire lifetime to find,
is the place of deep knowing at the intersection of
our material lives and our spiritual lives.

That is, the place where we're deeply engaged with
both our specific individuality
with all the practical necessities it entails...

While at the same time, being engaged with the
"Something More" of Being, Life, God, or True Self:

The dimension of life that transcends the personal
and calls us to love unconditionally
and without reservation.

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As you've likely noticed in your own lives,
it's not easy to find or stay present in that place.

Very often we find ourselves tilting toward
matters of status, material wealth,
power, ego gratification and need for security...
only to find we've lost touch with the Deeper Source of our true
ministry...and we must return to that foundational ground.

We can do this through deep listening
and mindful attention...

Through spiritual practice, prayer,
and conversation with trusted listeners.

This contemplative approach can help guide
us when we're seeking meaning and purpose.

At the same time, it's also possible
to veer too far in the opposite direction.

In our deep longing for beauty, harmony and love,
there may be times when we turn away from
the practical and urgent needs of the world...

When we avoid conflict and discomfort...
and therefore miss the opportunities for
active ministry that the world so urgently needs.

In the lifelong process of spiritual growth,
we must recognize the need for both action and contemplation...

So that we may continually expand
our capacity to minister to the world as it is
as fully and completely as we can...

And to do so from a ever-abundant wellspring
of peace, gratitude and love.

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It seems to me connection to that deep well of love
is needed, as we as a society come to terms
with all the ways we have not held each other.

As human beings, we have a responsibility to
create systems and structures that can hold all
people...especially the most vulnerable.

To recognize, for example, the human right of
safe and affordable housing...
and for a basic liveable income...
These systemic aspects of life that are
needed for wellness...

And which are currently not available to
countless people living on the streets and
in the parks and ravines in this wealthy city.

A city where security guards are currently
being deployed to prevent people from sleeping
in parks.

This is, of course, only one social issue of
dozens and dozens which command our attention
and which call us to ministry...

Whether it be witnessing...
Advocacy...
Funding...
Education...
Voting...

And opening our hearts in
compassion through meditation and prayer.

The word "minister" comes from the Latin
meaning to serve or to attend.

There are many ways to serve and to attend...
to minister to Life in its wholeness and its multiplicity.

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Throughout the process of living and growth,
we will all find there are holes in our hearts.

Areas of longing for dreams unfulfilled.

Spaces we wish we could serve in,
but find the shape of our lives does not allow it.

Awareness of personal limitations
or shortcomings.

Areas where we lack understanding
and have room for growth.

And of course in every life,
there will be griefs and losses of so many kinds...

Losses that open up...and that will remain.

All of these gaps, however,
are held in the embrace of a Larger Love.

Of this, I am sure.

This love can take the shape of a group of people:
A congregation...or a family...or a group of friends.

It can take the shape of the Interdependent Web of All Existence...which reveals our belonging within it
as surely as our bodies mirror the shapes of the Universe.

And, for some, it can take the form of a loving God
that is beyond shape and form and name...
but that comes to us in Mystery and speaks to us through love.

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As you know, the form my ministry is taking here at the congregation is changing.

In the coming year, I'll be focusing my time fully on spiritual care with a little bit of preaching thrown in...

Staying available to you for direct support in times of need,
strengthening our lay spiritual care teams
and doing some group leadership.

By significantly reducing my professional ministry here,
I'll be creating space for other forms of ministry,
including music.

As the shape of First Unitarian continues to change,
I am always interested to see how new voices emerge
as new people arrive and the roles of existing members
continue to evolve and change.

The great Canadian songwriter Jane Siberry once wrote:

I'm bound by the fire
I'm bound by the beauty
I'm bound by desire
I'm bound by the duty.

We are all bound together
in the Mystery of Life

And the ministry we share.

May it always be so.

Blessings, and amen.

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