

For the Time Being: Notes on the Interim Journey
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At the service two weeks ago, I told the story of Rabbi Eisik of Krakov. He went to Prague looking for a great treasure - only to be told by a stranger that the treasure was at home, behind the stove. The story teaches us a couple of things: First, the treasure is always at home, is always found deep in our heart of hearts. But second, we don't always find that out until we've made a journey to a far country, encountering a stranger who guides us to the treasure.

When I told that story, I wasn't thinking about interim ministry. But as I was preparing for today, it occurred to me: the interim period in which UUCD is now in is a bit like that journey away from home.

A well-loved minister leaves, and suddenly the congregation "leaves home" - is catapulted out of its comfort zone. A stranger comes in, in the person of the interim minister. He or she is here for a year, maybe two. This person isn't like the beloved former minister, she does things differently, she may rub some people the wrong way. But this is in the interest of helping the congregation understand where its treasure is buried: To discover who it is in the changed situation, and to make its way home again.

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Within the last generation, ways of thinking about interim ministry have evolved. Those of you who are long-term members of UUCD have probably witnessed that evolution. After all, I'm the fourth interim minister here since the mid-eighties.

Once upon a time, interims were seen as placeholders, clergy sent in to "hold the fort" while the search committee did its work. Often, there was an assumption that the interim year was a static time: It wouldn't be possible to move forward on anything, and even worse, Sunday attendance and pledging would fall.

Fortunately, this view has changed. Interim work began to be seen as a specialized vocation, and the interim year as an active time. Interim ministers began to be viewed as change agents - sometimes purely for the sake of change. The interim was expected to go in to a congregation to "blow out the cobwebs," to "clean house."

I remember hearing older colleagues speak of going in as interim and "shaking the place up." This was supposed to pave the way for the new minister, who would inevitably be different from the former one.

These days, while there still may be room for some "shaking up," the thinking about interim ministry has evolved away from that model. Interim ministry is still meant to help a congregation prepare for a new settled minister. But the way it's envisioned is more

nuanced. These days, interim ministry is still seen as transformational work – but the real “change agent” is the congregation! The interim minister is there to assist, as the congregation finds a new way of being in the world.

I served a small congregation out west for a time in the late 90s; my ministry was preceded by a one-year interim. This spring, when I went out for the congregation’s anniversary party, I learned that this minister is *still* remembered as “the taskmaster.” But this summer, at Interim Ministry training, we were specifically told (I have it in my notes): “You are *not* their taskmaster; you are their coach.” Different words can be used to describe the interim’s job – “coach” is one; “midwife” is another, “consultant” is a third. But always the idea is that the congregation who is doing the work, with the interim there to assist and support.

This assistance may take many forms. The interim minister engages in “appreciative inquiry,” drawing out the congregation’s strengths. She brings “fresh eyes,” sharing her observations as a person new to the system. She asks questions: Why do we do things this way? How did this particular practice come into being? She encourages people to imagine new possibilities. And she helps create a safe space where the congregation can experiment and do its work.

And what is the “work” that you, the congregation, are called to do in the interim years? These days, interim ministers speak of the Five Developmental Tasks that a congregation must complete during the interim period. The tasks come from the Alban Institute, a “church think tank,” with many years’ experience in the church consulting business. Every congregation is different, so there’s nothing “cookbooky” about them. But Alban believes that, the more successful a congregation is in completing the Five Tasks during the interim period, the greater likelihood of a successful settled ministry.

The UUA Transitions Office takes these developmental tasks very seriously – seriously enough that they require me to frame my reports to the UUA in terms of them: “How is UUCD progressing in each of these tasks?” Given this, it seems only fair that you know what the tasks are! That way, we can all be on the same page.

Let me say what the five tasks are, and then we can consider them one by one. Don’t worry about taking notes – they’ll be in the *Comment* this week.

- The first task is “Coming to Terms with History.”
- The second is “Discovering a New Identity.”
- The third is “Allowing Leadership Changes, and Empowering New Leaders.”
- The fourth is “Renewing Denominational Connections.”
- Together, these four make the fifth task possible: “Committing to New Leadership and a New Future.”

Looking at Task #1, what does it mean to “Come to Terms with History”? Although “coming to terms” may suggest something negative or painful, an important part of this task is celebration! Here’s just one example: In my conversations with many of you, I’ve heard so much about The Barn and all the good things that happened there. We need to

celebrate those times – just as we need to celebrate the visionary decision to move into Danbury!

One purpose of celebrating the congregation's history is bringing new people on board. Even if they never experienced The Barn, new people can "own" that part of the story, *if* long-time members share the lore with them! Some congregations do this kind of story sharing through an exercise called the "wall of history." We should plan to do this together – most people find it fun!

"Coming to terms with history" might also mean looking for recurring patterns: Is there anything in the congregational story line that you'd like to change? For example, as I look at the recent history, I wonder: Do you assume that your ministers will stay for, at most, seven or eight years? That's not bad, actually - that's about the average ministerial tenure these days. It wouldn't raise a red flag for prospective ministerial candidates. Even so, here's a question for you: how might the story line be different, if your next minister came and stayed till the year 2020? Or even to the 200th anniversary of Universalism in Danbury, 2022? What if she or he stayed even longer, for 20 or 30 years? It could lead to a sustained momentum, which would allow you to achieve things never thought possible before!

For some of you, a critical part of the "history" task will be grieving the departure of Linda Hansen. Some of this work has already been done - Linda was considerate, and gave you plenty of notice – but there may be more yet to do. In this connection, let me tell you a story:

Ten years ago, I was the settled minister in a church whose beloved ministers had left, to serve a much larger congregation. Somehow, congregational members had gotten the idea that "we're not allowed to talk about X and Y." What this meant, of course, is that the grief went underground and was more complicated than it might have been otherwise. For the record, then, let me be clear: You are allowed to talk about Linda – and it's definitely okay to talk with *me* about Linda!

Task #2 is "Discovering a New Identity." During my first settlement, as Associate Minister in a large church, the Senior Minister retired after over 30 years. I remember someone at the UUA saying, "They are going to have to *get really messy* about who they are without him." And they proceeded to do just that! One purpose of the interim is to allow you to get messy *now*, rather than later with a settled minister.

Here are some of the identity questions: "Who are we as a congregation? Who are we *really*?" "How did Linda's ministry with us shape our identity? And who are we now that she has gone?" Also, "Who were we when we were the Fellowship, and met at The Barn? And who are we now – now that we're the Congregation who meets on the Ridge, and in the City?"

We'll size up UUCD's identity through self-study: by looking around, by listening to one another, and by asking outsiders for their views. If I understand correctly, some of this

work was done in the 20/20 vision process. Still more will be done by the Search Committee, as it surveys the congregation. And parts of the identity question will become clear as we work on the other tasks. As your new identity comes into focus, you will get a better sense of the kind of minister you want to call in the year 2010. You may also have clearer answers to other questions: “What is our mission?” and “Who do we want to become?”

Task #3 is Allowing Leadership Changes and Empowering New Leadership. When there’s a change of ministerial leadership, shifts in lay leadership often naturally follow in its wake. Someone with strong ties to the former minister may realize it’s time to take a break. Meanwhile, someone else will step forward – perhaps someone who felt excluded earlier, and now sees an opportunity to serve. Events like today’s “Five to Thrive” Fair are great ways to facilitate this.

If leadership changes are going to take place – especially if there’s a substantial turnover – it’s best that it happen during the interim period. A new settled minister could be demoralized by such turnover, while the interim is trained to expect it, even consider it “normal.”

“Renewing Denominational Connections” is Task #4. As with Task 3, some of this happens naturally during the interim period. Once Linda announced her resignation, you didn’t have much choice. You *had* to be in touch with Andrea Lerner of the Metro New York District, and with John Weston of the UUA Transitions Office. Over the next two years, the Search Committee will regularly be talking to UUA representatives, and so will I.

Beneath the practical aspects of denominational linkages, there runs a deeper current. As we make the connections needed to move forward, we become aware once again: We are part of a wider religious movement with a vital message. We are part of something larger than ourselves. We are not alone.

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The first four tasks are not sequential. They can all be running at once. But they all have the same purpose – they culminate in the fifth task: *Committing to New Leadership and a New Future*. This is the *pièce de résistance*, the *sine qua non* – the goal that gives meaning to all the rest of the interim work.

Please note – this is not *only* about finding a new minister. Even more important, it’s about *joyfully moving into a new future* with that minister. Loren Mead, former Alban Institute president, puts it this way: “The installation service is more than the installing of a person into a job.” It’s also “the installation of a new sense of mission and of an invigorated leadership” – lay *and* clergy.

Over the last decade, UUCD has done a lot of important work. As I look at the work you’ve done – moving to Danbury, the 20/20 vision process, New Sanctuary, the wonderful R.E. program, the great Caring Committee, to name only a few – I’m not only

impressed, I'm bowled over! But now, in the one-on-one conversations I've been having, many have expressed concern that the work has gotten stalled. I don't yet understand all the reasons for this, but my gut feeling is that this is normal. Growth of organisms isn't continuous. It comes in spurts, and then things have to lie fallow for a while, while growth continues underground. Perhaps that is what's been happening here.

Maybe I'm crazy, but I have this glimmer of an intuition. It surfaced in my imagination a few weeks ago, and it's been sitting there, giving off a little sparkle, ever since. The intuition is this: As a congregation, your best days, your "glory days" are not behind you – they're still in front of you!

This is not magical thinking. It comes from what I've seen in you so far – the love, the dedication, the sheer talent – and the eagerness to be involved! I believe that you *can* and *will* realize the promise – the promise that led you to leave a barn in West Redding, and come here, to a high ridge in Danbury.

By the time you realize it, I'll be gone from here – interim ministers never get to enter the "promised land." But the seeds of the transformation have already been planted – and they'll be nurtured through the work we do here now, together.

Benediction

Now is the accepted time – not tomorrow, not some more convenient season.

It is today that our best work can be done – and not some future day or future year.

It is today that we fit ourselves for the greater usefulness of tomorrow.

Today is the seed time, now are the hours of work – and tomorrow comes the harvest, and the playtime. (W. E. B. DuBois)

Go in peace.
Walk in love.
Return with light.