

## “Doing Right Things’: Leadership as a Spiritual Practice”

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This morning, Rebecca told us a story about a boy named Bobby. I want to tell you a story about my friend Zach. Zach and I met when we were both teenagers. Over time, even though we eventually went to different colleges and moved to different cities, every so often we reach out and get in touch.

A couple things you should know about Zach. He was, as a young man, about a hundred pounds soaking wet. And, politically, he might say that the socialists are far too conservative for his beliefs. So, when I reconnected with Zach in our early twenties, I was surprised to hear that he had just taken a job as a night shift security guard, not the kind of role for someone of diminutive stature with significant objections to the coveting of property.

As news of Zach’s new job sunk in, an image formed in my mind, an image of Zach patrolling a closed office building in the dark, his uniform hanging on his slender frame. Suddenly, he hears a noise. And the first thing Zach thinks is, “I should call security!” And then the next thing Zach thinks is, “Oh, no! I *am* security!”

Zach is now no longer a security guard, which is perhaps best for both his psychology and those whose property he protected. But Zach has claimed another role, that of university professor. Zach was not meant to be a leader in law enforcement but he has become an intellectual leader for generations of students.

I often turn to Zach’s story as it serves as a parable about leadership. No one enters into this world knowing how to effectively use our agency and energies. But at some point, something happens that asks – maybe even demands – that we take action, even though we are certain we are not the right person to respond.

Yet, everyone has a calling. Everyone has gifts, gifts within ourselves we can’t even see or imagine. Zach said “yes” to serving as a security guard as he needed a paycheck but he said “yes” to pursuing a doctorate and an academic position because, for as long as I have known him, Zach has had the most curious and

brilliant mind. I know if I could go back in time and tell adolescent Zach that he would become a professor, he would laugh at me. But the origins of Zach as this kind of leader were obvious at a young age.

Many who have served as leaders since I began my ministry here are familiar with my favorite leadership resource, a short video featuring congregational consultant Gil Rendle. In this video, Rendle invites his audience to consider the difference between “leadership” and “management.”

We practice management when we consider the question, “Are we doing things right?” Rendle recalls, from his days in parish ministry, that the governing board of a congregation he served would regularly raise the issue of whether they had enough candles for the Christmas Eve service. That is management.<sup>1</sup>

But leadership is grounded in a different question – “Are we doing right things?” Do we need to change “business as usual,” do we need to go in a different direction, to best fulfill our mission as a congregation?

Rendle tells another story, about a church that descended from a renowned congregation in their tradition. Because of this celebrated lineage, the church Rendle worked with played the same musical arrangement from the historic church every Christmas Eve, an arrangement that the current music director found dreadful. So Rendle contacted the music director of the flagship church to see how they coped with this terrible music. “Oh, that thing,” the director replied, “we got rid of that more than twenty years ago.” They had decided that their musical arrangement did not serve the needs of the moment and, despite the risks of deviating from tradition, chose to go in another direction.

Every group, every community and institution needs both management and leadership. Pure management keeps everything stable and the same indefinitely; not a good recipe for vitality. Perpetual innovation is benevolent chaos, where nothing receives the time, attention or consistency to flourish.

After worship, our Nomination and Leadership Development Committee will invite you to consider serving on one of our committees next program year. Serving on a committee asks us to function as both managers and leaders,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z9GINfufUQ>

sustaining systems and mandates we inherit while also revisiting the discrete mission of our committee. Are we doing what is asked of us in the congregation's by-laws? Are we doing things right? And are we stewarding this particular ministry in a way that is relevant and effective? Are we doing right things? Is there something missing in our collective ministries that calls on our attention?

Should you choose to serve on a committee – and I hope many will, especially those who have not served before – you may find that the work not only advances the ministry for which you take responsibility but also fosters your own evolution. You may find that your leadership becomes a spiritual practice.

I have named leadership as a risky, soul-growing endeavor as inquiring whether we are “doing right things” means setting aside the familiar and routine and moving into the unknown. Moving into the unknown requires the imagination to discern the place where a group – be it a committee at the Winchester Unitarian Society or a nation – should arrive, even though there is no road map, no operational checklist. To dwell in the unfamiliar also means inviting greater likelihood of failure which, for those of us who have spent significant time in the white middle class, is particularly daunting.

Here is where spiritual development comes in. When we cultivate this imagination, this vision, we are moved to understand ourselves not only as faithful doers of tasks but prophets among our peers. And when we begin to serve as prophets, we are bound to grow in confidence and wisdom and insight.

When we function as leaders, we take the brave step of asking people to choose change. While we need variation for vitality and new energy, it is often threatening to lose something familiar, consistent and potentially beloved.

The fear of change in congregational life is perhaps best illustrated through one of my favorite church jokes: How many Unitarian Universalists does it take to screw in a lightbulb? Don't touch that lightbulb; my grandmother donated it! Even we liberal religionists, who often claim to have few rituals, find meaning in what is consistent. How else can we explain why long-term members often sit in the same seat every week?

Lest we think we are comfortable with change, I invite us to consider the following. We know that our organ is beginning to show its age and, relatively soon, will need extensive work, to the tune – pun intended – of about \$100,000. What if we just stopped playing the organ? Or, what if we invest all we have in the organ and do away with the piano?

Or, we know that enrollment and participation in our religious education program is declining. What if we follow the contemporary thinking about religious education and make every worship service multigenerational, with adult and child-oriented programming afterwards? What if, since so many children's sports games are played on Sunday morning, we move the day of congregational gathering – worship, coffee hour and religious education - to Wednesday night instead?

My guess is that at least one of these questions inspires a response in your mind and my further guess is that not all the responses are positive. To suggest and move towards change is to welcome such strong human reactions. And therein lies more risk.

When we ask people to imagine that which is currently just an idea, when we ask people to give up the familiar, when we as leaders make hard and potentially unpopular decisions, we render our human ties more vulnerable.

It is natural to want to be liked and respected. It is human nature to want to be loved. Sometimes people are less fond or even angry with those who threaten the status quo. There is wisdom in John Orthberg's observation that, "leadership is the art of disappointing people at a rate they can stand."<sup>2</sup> For those of us socialized as women, disappointing people can be difficult, no matter how good the reason.

In its purest essence, leadership is a practice that, if done for the right reasons, does not serve the individual ego but the collective. This fosters maturity. This fosters courage. While daunting, choosing what is right over what is easy or what will curry favor can be some of the most meaningful lessons in life.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/680427-leadership-is-the-art-of-disappointing-people-at-a-rate>

In the relatively short time I have served as your minister, I have heard a number of stories of leaders who rose to the occasion to ask if we are “doing right things.” As the story goes, something within them asked– maybe even demanded – that we take action. Here are just a couple of these stories.

Next Sunday, we will hold the Chili Cookoff, in part as a fundraiser for the youth group’s upcoming service trip to Nicaragua. I know this congregation is proud of the youth group’s long history of service trips. There is a moment that serves as the initial catalyst to this history.

In the book “What We Do Matters: Reflections of a UU Congregation on 15 Years of Service Work,” it is recalled that

After a dedicated Youth Sunday service in which the graduating high school seniors were disinclined to participate, member Sandy Fries stood in the pulpit and delivered what was nothing less than a “call to action.” She told us of the Sunday afternoon meetings she had been leading with the youth and the many ways they felt disengaged. The congregation was riveted, and soon the congregation found a way to hire its first youth director...Slowly and surely the program for youth began to grow, both in numbers and influence.

Following this recollection, this memoir of the youth group’s service work illustrates experiences by adults and youth “doing right things” by responding to the need for practical and spiritual support in communities far and near.

Similarly, I recall the experience of long-time leader Karen Erikson. Just a few days after 9/11, her father died in a tragic train accident. This was not the only significant loss Karen endured in her relatively young life.

When we lose a loved one, especially suddenly, that is when we need a loving and supportive community the most. But, frankly, the congregation wasn’t there for her and her family, including the ministers. The culture around loss and grief in the congregation at that time was one of leaving people to their privacy, whether they wanted emotional distance or not.

So, one day – like Sandy Fries – Karen entered the pulpit and stated, honestly, that she was struggling. She spoke to how little the congregation acknowledged loss and openly dealt with grief. Karen then invited those who wanted to begin a grief support ministry to join her in the Parlor after worship. Twenty three people came.

Thus began the Grief Support ministry, later enhanced by the lay pastoral care ministry first organized by my predecessor Mary Harrington. Since then, members have also organized the Mental Health Awareness and Support Initiative, featuring a regular support group for caregivers of loved ones with mental health challenges. The culture around grief, pastoral care and personal crisis within the Winchester Unitarian Society has been transformed and, thus, our souls have collectively grown.

A week ago Saturday, I, too, heard the horrible news about a stabbing in the Winchester Library. At first, we thought the primary victim might survive. I was horrified that something like this could happen anywhere, never mind in a quiet town like Winchester.

But then I received a text message from Sam Wilson, our Youth Director, letting me know of the rumor that the victim was the older sister of two of our youth group members. By then, I heard that the victim had died. Soon thereafter, I received confirmation from Temple Shir Tikvah that the deceased was Deane Kenny Stryker.

That moment was not unlike my imagined vignette of Zach in the dark office building. “This is a crisis,” I thought. “Someone needs to contact the minister. Oh, wait...”

Through reaching out to colleagues who, sadly, had past experience with responding to tragedy, I learned that setting aside the planned worship service was the “right thing” to do. And, so, we organized an impromptu community gathering and service, offering what comfort we could in the first hours of a nightmare for so many. This was the prelude to hosting Deane’s memorial, just four days later.

We hosted this service because it was also the right thing to do. Like me, our tech guru James Pidacks, sought outside guidance and was then able to transmit the audio of the service throughout the building. And, through Karen Erikson's clear and insightful direction, countless volunteers were able to "do things right" as we welcomed more than 800 attendees on that sad day.

As the service began, I spoke of Deane's time in our youth group, a story that might never have been told if Sandy Fries had remained silent so long ago. Throughout the day, I observed how, now fluent in the language of bereavement, we in so many ways held all those who entered our doors.

Over time, Sandy's vision and Karen's vision have become part of the identity of this congregation, some of the ways we "do things right." But this would have never become true without those who take personal risks and question "business as usual."

Today, I am grateful for these acts of courage and hopeful that the tradition of not only "doing things right" but moving us to "do right things" carries on. And I am certain that with each leap of faith, there are personal challenges but also rewards for those who take the risk.