

“On the Border of the Holy,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
at the Universalist Unitarian Church of Haverhill
on April 25, 2010

A few days ago, on one of the lovely spring mornings we’ve been having lately, I was on my way to church, driving down a country road in southern New Hampshire. I went past a small pond, and for a moment, out of the corner of my eye, saw a great blue heron perched at the edge of the water. In a second I was past the pond, and my view of the heron was gone. That moment took me by surprise, and almost took my breath away. It felt like a holy moment, surprising and fleeting and beautiful. And I could have just as easily missed it. To tell the truth, it wasn’t an extraordinary moment. Driving to work I saw a bird. A common experience. But still, a gift and a blessing.

It made me think of the poem, by John Ciardi, called “White Heron:

What lifts the heron leaning on the air
I praise without a name. A crouch, a flare,
a long stroke through the cumulus of trees,
a shaped thought at the sky — then gone. O rare!
Saint Francis, being happiest on his knees,
would have cried Father! Cry anything you please

But praise. By any name or none. But praise
the white original burst that lights
the heron on his two soft kissing kites.
When saints praise heaven lit by doves and rays,
I sit by pond scums till the air recites
It’s heron back. And doubt all else. But praise.

“Have you ever found God in church?” It’s a question asked by the character Shug in Alice Walker’s novel *The Color Purple*. And she answers, “I never did. I just found a bunch of folks hoping for (God) to show. Any God I ever felt in church I brought in with me. And I think all the other folks did too. They come to church to share God, not find God.”

My religion is that we each have access to that mystery, that presence that some of us call God. There are many paths up the mountain, and those paths are accessible, and it begins with paying attention to your own deep experiences. Among the sources of our living tradition (listed near the front of our hymnal), the first one is “direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder.”

A few years ago a friend of mine was getting treatment for cancer, and one day I gave him a ride to his radiation appointment. I asked how he was holding up, and in that

conversation he surprised me by asking me to pray for him. I was in divinity school at the time, and he said, “I figure you have a better connection than I do.” Of course I said I would pray for him, and I did, but I wonder if I missed a chance there, to tell him what I want to tell you today. Something that you probably already know, but maybe need to be reminded of. You have your own connection. As human beings, we each have access to that source, that force, that is larger than us, that spirit in which we live and move and have our being. I am glad to pray for you, and I do, but that doesn’t mean I think I have a better connection to the Holy than you do--I don’t.

My sermon title comes from a book called *Living on the Border of the Holy*, by William Countryman, an Episcopal priest and seminary professor. He says, “It can be helpful to imagine our human encounter with the Holy as life in a border country. It is a country in which, at privileged moments of access, we find ourselves looking over from the everyday world into another, into a world that undergirds the everyday world, limits it defines it, gives it coherence and meaning, drives it. Yet this hidden world is not *another* world, but the familiar world discovered afresh. It is the everyday world seen at new depth, with new comprehension. It is like discovering that the small part of the iceberg we are familiar with is buoyed up by a much larger mass of ice beneath the surface. In the border country one discovers connections, roots, limits, *meaning*. To live there for a while is like having veils pulled away. In the long run we find that the border country is in fact the place we have always lived, but it is seen in a new and clearer light.”¹

We are living on the border of the Holy. Can you remember times in your life when you felt the presence of something more, when you felt more awake, more alive, more aware? When everything looked a bit clearer, a bit brighter, a little more intense? When your eyes were opened and you thought, “Oh my God, it was here all along, and I just didn’t see it”? Have you ever had a moment like that, when you didn’t want to move or even breathe, and risk breaking the spell? When you felt pulled to your knees or moved to take off your shoes because you were on holy ground? Have you had moments like that?

In my experience, these holy moments are not all times of peace or bliss--sometimes they come during periods of grief or despair. Nor are they always mountaintop or valley experiences--they can come in the most ordinary times. Often my favorite part of our Sunday service is the time that comes after the prayer and the silence, when many of you come forward and light candles while music is being played quietly.

Moments like that remind me why I love the church and why I went off to seminary and into the ministry. I wanted to spend more time in the presence of the Holy. I wanted to be invited into those border moments in people’s lives, and hopefully, to be of use. I really can’t tell you how blessed I am to be your minister, but I hope it shows. I hope you have some idea of what a good congregation you are to minister to. What I love

¹ L. William Countryman, *Living on the Border of the Holy* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1999), p. 8.

about you is that you aren't afraid to be real. And that helps make this a place where encounters with the holy are possible.

You don't need to go to seminary or be ordained to experience the holy. The truth is, too often clergy get absorbed with the business and busy-ness of the church, become more focused on keeping the institution alive than why it's here in the first place, and end up spiritually dry and malnourished. It's an occupational hazard. The way to avoid it is to have a spiritual life and remember it's not all about you. The truth is, we have different gifts and different callings. The church is meant to be a place that makes room for and welcomes all these gifts. We need what you have to offer.

William Countryman says the church has lost its way when it acts as if the real ministry is what's done by the professionals. He says that's putting things backwards, that the fundamental ministry belongs not to clergy, but to the people. He says that if you're human, then you are a priest. Now, I imagine that for some of you, hearing that word priest may evoke a particular image, perhaps one of a man wearing vestments or a clerical collar. If so, I invite you, for a moment, to set that image aside.

Instead, imagine two children, playing outdoors, who find a dead baby bird, and dig a little grave for it, and bury it, covering the grave with flower petals and a little stone for a marker. Now imagine a chance encounter with your neighbor, whose tells you her husband has just left her, and you invite her over for tea, and you sit in your kitchen and listen to her story and absorb her tears. Finally, imagine people in our downstairs kitchen, preparing meatloaf and mashed potatoes and green beans for a community meal, blessing that food with their love and care, then serving those folks who have come here to be fed.

As humans we are meant to reach out to others, and allow others to help us, to deepen our connections--with each other, with the earth and its creatures. Can you see that those images I just described are all priestly acts? That is what Bill Countryman means when he talks about the priesthood of humanity—each of us doing our part to heal and bless our world.

When I lived in Washington, DC, many years ago, I sometimes attended a lively Episcopal Church called St. Columba's. On the back of their order of service, just like here, there was a masthead listing the names of the church staff. But they did something differently. At the very top, the first listing was "Ministers:" And what it said there, next to "ministers," was "All the people of St. Columba's." Under that was the heading for clergy and other staff, where their names and positions were listed. But at the top, under "Ministers," it said, "All the people of St. Columba's." I wonder what it would take for us to be a church like that, where we could make that assertion, right there in print, that the ministers of this church are all of its people.

Sometimes I think I need a different job title. I worry that calling me the minister implies that I'm the only one. And I hope it's obvious that I'm not. On Thursday night I spent

some time with the Welcoming Congregation Committee. It's clear to me that this group of folks, in addition to doing great work on our behalf, are ministering to each other in powerful ways, just by being who they are. And they are taking this ministry outside our church's walls. On Friday four of them went to Northern Essex Community College to talk about being gay and part of a faith community. What an amazing opportunity, when religion so often is equated with narrowness and exclusion, to share our Universalist theology that says no one is left behind.

It is a great blessing to be one of the ministers here. And it's really a blessing to not be the only one! My job is to remember that, and to support and encourage you and sometimes, to get out of your way! I was talking about this with some colleagues recently, and one of them shared some wise words. She said, "Never steal the ministry from the people."

Many of you already are doing real ministry here. Some of you beautify our sanctuary with flowers, some of you write cards and visit folks who can't come to church. Some of you teach our children and participate in worship and serve on committees and share your musical talent. You greet newcomers and prepare food for coffee hour and set up tables and chairs and then put them away again. These are so many ways you are blessing one another and this community. And that's why we're here, to be part of this adventure called shared ministry. To be open to joy and wonder and pain and beauty. To wake up to the little miracles and blessings of this life, to give thanks and praise that we are right here, living on the border on the Holy, where we ought to be.

Amen.