

“Who's In Charge Here?”
The Dance between Shared Ministry and Authority

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Our focus for this morning is the dance between shared ministry and authority. **As Unitarian Universalists, we are heirs to a proud tradition of heretics bucking unjust authority.** As Thoreau famously wrote, “An unjust law is no law at all.” And as Americans, last week we celebrated, our Independence Day, when we commemorate bucking the authority of the British monarchy: the slogan “No taxation without representation” is rooted in the same idea that, “An unjust law is no law at all.” As Jefferson wrote in the Declaration of Independence:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. — That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, — That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness..... The history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States. To prove this, let Facts be submitted to a candid world. [And then continues a long list of grievances.]

So from many difference sources, both religious and secular, we Unitarian Universalists, have inherited a suspicion of authority. And I suspect that if I were to invite you to name authority figures that have disrespected you, marginalized you, manipulated you, or taken advantage of you, I suspect that many of you could quickly make a long list, perhaps starting with former babysitters and continuing on to abusive bosses, corrupt politicians and many other negative authority figures. And I’m grateful for that part of our religious and civil heritage that

encourages us to question authority. But in the minute or so of silence that will follow, I invite you to remember some authority figures from your past and present that you do respect — who deserve their position, and whose leadership help you and others accomplish more than you likely would have on your own. **Who are the *positive* authority figures in your life?**

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At the summer camp I attended when I was younger, there would often be a song or album that became inexplicably popular for a few weeks — not in the rest of world, but just among some part of the camp population. And sometime in the mid-90s, for whatever odd confluence of reasons, John Cougar Mellencamp's 1983 album *Uh-Huh* — at least a decade after its initial release — became an unexpected hit in that small corner of western North Carolina. Some of you may remember some of the singles from that album: “Cumblin’ Down” and “Pink Houses.” But the big hit that summer was track three: “Authority Song.”

That song had the sound of a fairly defiant anthem, and the chorus goes, “I fight authority, Authority always wins / Well, I fight authority, Authority always wins / Well, I've been doing it since I was a young kid I come out grinnin' / Well, I fight authority, Authority always wins.” I heard that song a lot that summer, and after a few weeks I suddenly realized that **although the music sounds like an anti-authoritarian protest song, the lyrics are incredibly depressing.** Over and over Mellencamp sings, “I fight authority, *Authority always wins.*” I remember thinking to myself, “Authority always win? This song is a terrible!” Catchy...but a terrible message

I'm reminded of a [political cartoon](#) I saw about a month ago with two panels. Both panels show the same person, but the caption above the left-hand panel says, “*Then*” and shows a scruffy-looking hippie with long brown hair, a bushy beard, and circular, John Lennon-style glasses. He has on a leather vest over a white T-shirt that says, “Question Authority.” His left-hand is raised in a peace sign.

The caption over the right-hand panel says, “*Now,*” and depicts the same man, presumably forty or fifty years later. He's wearing a T-shirt with the Obama campaign logo that has a slogan pasted in underneath it: “Question Anyone Questioning Authority.” And instead of a peace sign, he's holding a subpoena.”

During a national political campaign, everyone wants to be perceived as a “Washington Outsider,” who is questioning authority and seeking to “Subvert the Dominant Paradigm.” But **once you are in power, it is easy to find yourself, “Questing anyone who questions *your* authority.”**

Looking to recent headlines, we’ve seen President Obama visiting with relatives of Nelson Mandela, who may be on his deathbed. Talk about questioning authority: Mandela served 27 years in prison for his anti-colonial and anti-apartheid activism before being vindicated through his election as the first black President of South Africa. Or to look at Egypt, where opinions vary widely about whether the Egyptian people were wise to overthrow their first democratically-elected President. But from President Obama’s conflicts with Congress to Egypt’s struggle to live into the full promise of the Arab Spring — and to our own daily work with various authority figures in our own lives — **the dance is a tricky between authority and accountability, cooperation and control.**

Earlier I invited you to consider, “Who are (or have been) *positive* authority figures in your life?” For myself, I can think of a few professors I had over the years that — even though they were grading me — I just wanted to sit at their feet and soak in their lifetime of knowledge. And the fact that they were grading me — had some authority over me and could impose consequences on me — only made me focus more intently, research more thoroughly, and revise many more times than I would have if left to my own devices to explore the given subject area. That’s a good, healthy authority figure as far as I’m concerned, which isn’t to say that I didn’t have professors that were boring, unfair, or who burdened us with useless busywork.

Or to give another example, although there is much to criticize about the racially-based “Stop-and-frisk” tactics that many police departments are employing, when a strange man (who happened to be white) grabbed my wife Magin’s arm a few weeks ago and started randomly yelling at her (when all she was doing was walking in a straight line down a public sidewalk toward the Louisville Convention Center in the middle of the afternoon), she was grateful that three uniformed officers were pedaling by on bikes at that precise moment. She yelled for them, and the three burly officers confronted the man harassing her, and she was able to proceed safely to meet me a few blocks away.

And although there is much more to be said about authority in general, in politics, and in life, I would like us to turn our focus for this morning to authority in Unitarian Universalism and in UU congregational life. The reason I'm bringing up this subject this morning is that the Unitarian Universalist Association's Commission on Appraisal released a new report a few weeks ago titled [*Who's in Charge Here?: The Complex Relationship Between Ministry and Authority*](#). Now, we're about to dip briefly into some nerdy details of UUA governance, but bear with me. I think it's important for us here on the local congregational level to be aware of what is happening at the associational level. [The Commission on Appraisal](#) is a nine-member committee of elected volunteers, who are charged with conducting independent reviews of any aspect of the UUA that it deems of worth and interest. And this commission publishes a report about what it has learned at least once every four years.¹

Ironically, I can't help wondering if the choice to focus on *authority* the past four years was affected by the *rejection* of the Commission of Appraisal's last proposal four years ago, back in 2009, to revise Article II of the UUA Bylaws (the "Principles and Purposes"). One major objection was the [recommendation to change the "Six Sources" to three paragraphs](#). The recommendation to even consider the proposal [failed by thirteen votes](#). **The dance is a tricky between authority and accountability, cooperation and control.**

In an adaptation of the Commission on Appraisal report's title, I've titled this sermon, "Who's In Charge *Here?* The Dance between Shared Ministry and Authority." The term "Shared Ministry" is a buzzword in some circles for what congregational life at its best should be. Basically what it means that we should avoid a perception that ministry is only something that paid, professional ministers do — or the equally harmful perception that my job is to simply tell you what to do, and then sit back and relax as you do it. To me, naming "Shared Ministry" as our way of being together is the difference between asking someone, "Will you do this *for* me?" and "Will you *help me* do this?" And to me the difference between those two approaches is all the difference in the world. Shared Ministry is about *partnership* — and *power-with* instead of

¹ Previous Commission on Appraisal reports are available online at: <http://www.uua.org/uuagovernance/committees/coa/185525.shtml>.

power-over. The approach of **shared ministry says that we are *together* in this work of transforming ourselves and of transforming this world.**

In somewhat of an equivalent to the Committee on Appraisal's role within the UUA, here at UUCF we have a Committee on Ministry. And once a year that Committee on Ministry is charged with facilitating a congregational conversation on the state of our shared ministry. Be on the lookout for information about that event that will be coming up in September. This year, the Committee on Ministry is planning to partner with our Comprehensive Planning Committee to shape that conversation, as we continue to work to discern what the best focus of our Shared Ministry should be here at UUCF over the next 3-5 years.

There are 10,000 worthy things that we could do as a congregation at any one time, but if we try to do all 10,000 of those things, our attention and energy will likely end up scattered. And we will likely accomplish less than if we were to join in a focus on only three, four, or five goals — which, of course, does not preclude individuals and small groups continuing to work on whatever parts of those 10,000 things they wish to do.

But as Unitarian Universalists, **our independent streak — that empowers us to question authority — can make us much better at pursuing our individual goals than in joining to accomplish a few major things that are only possible with all of us working together as a congregation.** And that complex dance with authority comes into play whenever some individual or group tries to herd the cats.

The Commission on Appraisal writes that, **“we have come to understand authority as the ability to influence and cause growth and change in an institution, or to block and derail growth and change in an institution”** (73). And that catalyst for change or the derailment of change can come from any part of the shared ministry: the minister, the Board of Trustees, committees, or individual members.

Rev. Fred Muir, who has been the minister of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Annapolis for almost 30 years — and who has helped that congregation grow and mature and who has been active on the continental level of the UUA as well — wrote last year that **he sees three major factors holding back Unitarian Universalist congregations from living into their full potential.** He writes:

First, we are being held back and stymied — really, we are being held captive — by a persistent, pervasive, disturbing and disruptive commitment to individualism that misguides our ability to engage the changing times; Second, we cling to a Unitarian Universalist exceptionalism that is often insulting to others and undermines our good news; Third, we refuse to acknowledge and treat our allergy to authority and power, though all the symptoms compromise a healthy future.

There is a lot more to be said about those three critiques, and I encourage you to [read Rev. Muir's full essay](#), but for now I want to move from his criticism to part of his suggested solution.

We spend much time as UUs talked about our Seven Principles and Six Sources. They are listed on the back of your Order of Service. But Rev. Muir says that we too often miss the *context* in which those Principles and Sources are found. Look at the back page of your Order of Service. Notice that the first sentence that introduces the Seven Principles: “We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, *covenant* to affirm and promote.” Take note of that word covenant. See also the final sentence in the paragraph after the Sources: “As free congregations we enter into this *covenant*, promising to one another our *mutual trust and support*.” Notice the repetition of that word covenant, and the promise of mutual trust and support. The parallel situation here at UUCF is that **as free individuals we are invited to enter into membership in this congregation, promising to one another our mutual trust and support**. We UUs tend to be really good at the free individual part. But Rev. Muir invites us to consider how much more might be possible if we were to spend more time emphasizing **what becomes possible when free individuals invest themselves in mutual trust and support**. And the hope of myself, the members of the UUCF Board of Trustees that you elected, and of your Committee on Ministry and Comprehensive Planning Committee — as well as many more individuals and groups here at UUCF — is that we are on our way, slowly but hopefully surely, toward discerning a focus for our shared ministry, of what we might accomplish together through a 3-5 year Strategic Plan and through our covenant of mutual trust and support.

This coming Tuesday, July 9 marks the one-year anniversary of my time serving as your minister. And yesterday, July 6 was the 10th anniversary of my ordination as a minister. So considering all this talk of “Who's in Charge Here?” I'd like to say a few words about the dance

of congregational dynamics that some of you have heard me say before, but that I think bear repeating as a way of taking a step back and understanding some of the underlying dynamics that shape how we interact together as a congregation.

Sociologists call congregations with an average worship attendance of 50 people “Family-sized,” and the authority tends to be held by a lay leader, who functions as a patriarch and/or matriarch. If there is a part-time paid clergy, that person tends to function as a congregational chaplain.

When worship attendance reaches 51-150 people, the shift tends to move toward a *Pastoral-sized* congregation in which the leadership of a professional clergy person can help catalyze the shared ministry of this growing tribe of people. And I would reflect back to you, what some of you likely already know: that when this congregation took a leap of faith to launch a dual fundraising drive for both the operating fund and a full-time minister fund to lay the groundwork to make it possible for me (or someone else) to come as your minister, I suspect that you could sense both unconsciously and consciously the dynamic that sociologists have named: that this congregation was large enough at that time that it either needed to call a full-time minister or it would risk shrinking back toward a family-sized congregation.

We now find ourselves on the cusp of a shift toward a *Program-sized* congregation, which — depending on whom you talk to — ranges from an average worship attendance of 151-400. And on many Sundays this past spring we had worship attendance in the 150s and above. The reason I’ve bringing this up is that whereas the pastor becomes, in some ways, more centrally important in the shift from a Family- to Pastoral-sized congregation, **it is the *shared ministry* that becomes more centrally important in the shift from a Pastoral- to a Program-sized congregation.** Studies show that 150 is approximately the number of people that the average person can “know by name and miss when absent.”² So as we hopefully continue to grow, neither myself nor any other minister can “hold” all the ministry that is needed within and beyond this congregation. And that dance between authority and accountability, control and cooperation becomes all the more important to negotiate with intentionality, mutual trust, and

² For more on the **sociological analysis of congregational size**, see the following:

- <http://www.alban.org/raisingtheroof/changingSize.asp>
- <http://www.uua.org/documents/jonassonstefan/sizedoesmakedifference.pdf>

support. If new people do continue coming through our doors to find out what Unitarian Universalism is all about, then our attendance does increase, we'll either find our way into a healthy, inviting shared ministry that intentionally creates programs to make room for more people, or we'll continue to shrink back toward 150 people or below, which is the number that can be held by a single minister. **That transition will depend on all of us.**

Now, of course, a healthy shared ministry doesn't always happen. To look at the UUA as a negative example, as the UU World has [reported](#), there has been conflict the past few years between the board and the president about whether the budget priorities match the stated "ends" (or goals") as well as how to measure progress (or evaluate failure). And I'd like to share with you only a few insights from Gini Courter. Gini ended a ten-year term as chair of the UUA Board of Trustees at last month's UUA General Assembly. In commenting on the six-year process required to make a small change in the nondiscrimination change in the UUA Bylaws, Gini noted, **"There's a lesson here about what happens when we write bylaws in a state of mistrust."**

Gini also potentially has a word for us here at UUCF as we consider the shape of our 3-5 year strategic plan. Criticizing the way that priorities have changed drastically with each new UUA President, she said, "You can't have a worthy vision 4 or 6 years at a time, one faddish thing after another. **We need a 50-year vision of Unitarian Universalism.**" Part of her criticism is also an insistence that UUs have often failed to set up "measurable goals," such that we keep coming up with new ideas, throwing the old ones one "without really knowing if the old ideas did or didn't work." (There are, of course, applications here for all of our personal and work lives as well!) She said, "You can love and trust me and still hold me accountable." And quoting one of the UUA's anti-racism activists, Gini also rightly said that **if you want to know what an organization's highest priorities are, then "Follow the money."**

I would encourage you to read the full text of Gini's passionate [final moderator's report](#) — which turned into a sermon of sorts — that served as the capstone to her decade as the chair of the UUA Board, but I shared these few excerpts in the hope that they might provide some insight or challenge to us here at UUCF in setting our own vision.

And as we work to articulate our vision, even for 3-5 years, it may seem inconceivable to

articulate a 50-year vision for us here at UUCF. But I invite you to consider that if you study the last few decades of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Annapolis, Maryland, there is a sense in which Rev. Fred Muir and that congregation have been living into a 50-year vision of trying to live into becoming what Martin Luther King, Jr. called the Beloved Community, and in recent years they have made measurable strides toward becoming more multicultural in both their staff and membership. But even with the remarkable tenure of having Fred as their minister for going on 30 years, I doubt that Fred will be on staff at UUCA another 20 years to see the full fruition (or not) of what can come from such a longterm commitment to a worthy goal.

But in that spirit, as we continue to discern our own vision here at UUCF in the coming weeks, months, and years for our shared ministry, I would like to share with you a reflection that I've adapted from Ken Untener. The original was written as part of a homily in a mass for deceased priests. He writes:

It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view. The [Beloved Community] is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision. We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is [work we are called to]. Nothing we do is complete, which is a way of saying that the [Beloved Community] always lies beyond us. No statement says all that could be said. No [covenant] fully expresses our faith. No confession brings perfection. No pastoral visit brings wholeness. No program accomplishes the [congregation's] mission. No set of goals and objectives includes everything. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way.... We may never see the end results.... We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own. This is what we are about. We plant the seeds that one day will grow. We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise. We lay foundations that will need further development. We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities. **We**

cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.³

I'm grateful to have been with your minister here for the past year year, and I look forward to what we can accomplish together in many more years to come. And in our search for a shared ministry here at UUCF, may we find liberation in the realization that we cannot do 10,000 things at once. And may that sense of freedom enable us to focus on a few things that we are uniquely able to do together — and to do those things very well.

³ *“It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view...”* — quoted in “The Peace Pulpit: Homiles” by Bishop Thomas J. Gumbleton, available at <http://www.nationalcatholicreporter.org/peace/pfg032804.htm>. An excerpt about the background of the quote:

Wednesday was the anniversary of the assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero. For the reflection that day, Bishop Untener included a passage titled “The mystery of the Romero Prayer.” The mystery is that the words of the prayer are attributed to Oscar Romero, but they were never spoken by him. They were, in fact, spoken by John Cardinal Dearden in November of 1979. They come from a homily he gave at a Mass for deceased priests. But what is even more important to know is that they were words drafted for Cardinal Dearden by Ken Untener. They are really his words, and they show us an insight that I think is very important.