

"Myths of the Ministry"

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THE READING

In his letter of resignation from NBC News this week, after more than 30 years on and off reporting, William Arkin observed that:

[T]he world and the state of journalism [are] in tandem crisis. My expertise, though seeming to be all the more central to the challenges and dangers we face, also seems to be less valued at the moment. And I find myself completely out of [sync] with the network, being neither a day-to-day reporter nor interested in the Trump circus.

I became an on-air analyst during the 1999 Kosovo War, continuing to work thereafter with Nightly News, delighting and oftentimes annoying in my peculiar position of being a mere civilian amongst THE GENERALS and former government officials. A scholar at heart, I also found myself an often lone voice that was anti-nuclear and even anti-military, anti-military for me meaning opinionated but also highly knowledgeable, somewhat akin to a movie critic, loving my subject but also not shy about making judgements regarding the flops and the losers.

When the attacks of 9/11 came, I was called back to NBC. I spent weeks on and off the air talking about al Qaeda and the various wars we were rushing into. . . I spoke up about the absence of any sort of strategy for actually defeating terrorism, annoying the increasing gaggles of those who seemed to accept that a state of perpetual war was a necessity. . . .

I thought then that there was great danger in the embrace of process and officialdom over values and public longing, and I wrote about the increasing power of the national security community. . . [T]hough they produce nothing that resembles actual safety and security, the national security leaders and generals we have are allowed to do their thing unmolested. Despite being at "war," no great wartime leaders or visionaries are emerging. There is not a soul in Washington who can say that they have won or stopped any conflict. And though there might be the beloved perfumed princes in the form of the Petraeus' and Wes Clarks', or the so-called warrior monks like Mattis and McMaster, we've had more than a generation of national security leaders who sadly and fraudulently have done little of consequence. And yet we (and others) embrace them, even the highly partisan formers who masquerade as "analysts". We do so ignoring the empirical truth of what they have wrought: There is not one country in the Middle East that is safer today than it was 18 years ago. Indeed the world becomes ever more polarized and dangerous.

As perpetual war has become accepted as a given in our lives, I'm proud to say that I've never deviated in my argument at NBC . . . that terrorists will never be defeated until we better understand why they are driven to fighting. . . . I find it disheartening that we do not report the failures of the generals and national security leaders. I find it shocking that we essentially condone continued American bumbling in the Middle East and now Africa through our ho-hum reporting.

I'm a difficult guy, not prone to either protocol or procedure and I give NBC credit that it tolerated me through my various incarnations. . . . [I was] convinced to return to NBC to join the new investigative unit in the early days of the 2016 presidential campaign. I thought that the mission was to break through the machine of perpetual war acceptance and conventional wisdom to challenge Hillary Clinton's hawkishness. . . . But then Trump got elected and Investigations got sucked into the tweeting vortex, increasingly lost in a directionless adrenaline rush. . . .

I'd argue that under Trump, the national security establishment not only hasn't missed a beat but indeed has gained dangerous strength. Now it is ever more autonomous and practically impervious to criticism. I'd also argue, ever so gingerly, that NBC has become somewhat lost in its own verve, proxies of boring moderation and conventional wisdom, defender of the government against Trump, cheerleader for open and subtle threat mongering, in love with procedure and protocol over all else (including results). I accept that there's a lot to report here, but I'm more worried about how much we are missing. Hence my desire to take a step back and think why so little changes with regard to America's wars. . . .

For me I realized how out of step I was when I looked at Trump's various bumbling intuitions: his desire to improve relations with Russia, to denuclearize North Korea, to get out of the Middle East, to question why we are fighting in Africa, even in his attacks on the intelligence community and the FBI. Of course he is an ignorant and incompetent impostor. And yet I'm alarmed at how quick NBC is to mechanically argue the contrary, to be in favor of policies that just spell more conflict and more war. Really? We shouldn't get out Syria? We shouldn't go for the bold move of denuclearizing the Korean peninsula? Even on Russia, though we should be concerned about the brittleness of our democracy that it is so vulnerable to manipulation, do we really yearn for the Cold War? And don't even get me started with the FBI: What? We now lionize this historically destructive institution?

There's a saying about consultants, that organizations hire them to hear exactly what they want to hear. I'm proud to say that NBC didn't do that when it came to me. Similarly I can say that I'm proud that I'm not guilty of giving my employers what they wanted. Still, the things this and most organizations fear most -- variability, disturbance, difference -- those things that are also the primary drivers of creativity -- are not really the things that I see valued in the reporting ranks. . . .

There is lots of media critique out there, tons of analysis of leadership and the Presidency. But on the state of our national security? Not so much. Hopefully I will find myself thinking beyond the current fire and fury and actually suggest a viable alternative. Wish me luck.

THE SERMON

[reviewing the Five Agreements]

My December sermon focused on the work of Miguel Ruiz, and particularly the five agreements that he asserts. The concept of “agreements” on which his work is based is the belief that while we are born free, during the domestication process, humans make a series of agreements with ourselves, the people around us, and our society – agreements of which we are not conscious – that lead us away from our innocent freedom into lives that are circumscribed by restrictive and false understandings of who we are and what we are not, what is possible and what is not. We receive messages from our parents, our siblings, our friends, our teachers, that set up expectations we strive to meet, expectations that lead us away from our true potential. He urges replacement of the unconscious agreements with five that can lead us to freedom. The five are:

1. Be impeccable with your word
2. Don't take anything personally
3. Don't make assumptions
4. Always do your best
5. Recognize the Power of Doubt

Each of these has a meaning which is not obvious at first. The second, on which I want to focus our attention this morning, addresses how important it is for us to realize everybody operates out of their own understanding of the world and their place in it. Nothing other people do or say is really because of you, it is always because of themselves, because of their own personal drama. If we are always worrying about what other people might say to or about us, we are creating a prison for ourselves.

I illustrated the meaning of the second agreement by speaking of the degree to which people have a variety of expectations of who ministers are and what they should be like, based on large part on their childhood experiences or the fantasies about ministers. I acknowledged that I did not match well with ministerial stereotypes and learned early on not to take it personally when people made it clear that I did not meet their expectations of a minister. Fortunately, there have been sufficient others whose expectations I came close enough to meeting for me to have had a successful 41 year career in ministry.

I want to expand on that this morning because I believe it has relevance to some of the challenges you may face in your lives.

I want to identify for you, two myths, stories, traditional examples that have been guiding stars for me in facing ministry, that have freed me from being driven by other people's expectations.

[myth #1 The Emperor's New Clothes]

The first guiding myth of my ministry has been Hans Christian Anderson's story of the Emperor's New Clothes. I'm sure you remember it well. It's about the Emperor who so loved new and beautiful clothing that he spent most of his riches on them. He was approached one day by two swindlers who promised to make him the most beautiful suit of clothes in the whole world - and it would have the added magical benefit of revealing who was stupid or unqualified for his or her job, as to all such it would appear invisible. The Emperor, not wishing to seem apprehensive under the circumstances, ordered the suit and paid a large sum of money to the swindlers.

They proceeded to pretend to weave beautiful cloth. The Emperor's advisors who were sent to monitor their work were afraid to report they saw nothing because they did not want to appear stupid or unqualified, so their reports were glowing. The Emperor himself, when he "put on" the non-existent suit, was afraid to admit that he saw nothing, and so he proceeded to march through the streets in a parade, naked.

The people who saw him, knowing of the magical power of the suit to distinguish the competent from the incompetent, all remarked on the exceptional beauty of the new suit - except for one child who blurted out, "The Emperor doesn't have any clothes on!" His father tried to hush him, but people heard, and as they repeated to each other what the child had said, they began to realize the truth of it.

The Emperor overheard the crowd's realization of the truth, but decided, like any good chief of state, that he was expected to bluff it through, and so Anderson tells us that the emperor continued walking "holding his head higher than ever and the faithful Lord Chamberlain kept on carrying the train that wasn't there." (I don't know if they called it stonewalling in those days - or if the emperor called what the boy declared "fake news.")

This has been one of my favorite stories for as long as I can remember, and it has a lot to do with my perception of my role as a minister. The story taught me that vast numbers of people can easily be convinced that something is true even if they know in their hearts is not true - that people are sometimes brought to the point where they are unwilling to trust their own good sense and powers of observation. It was expressed by George Orwell in his dystopia **1984** with the poster on the walls of the Ministry of Truth: War is Peace, Freedom is Slavery, Ignorance is Strength. Orwell knew whereof he spoke: people can believe each of these propositions is true, particularly when the source of the information carries authority. Try "Dirty Water is Clean Water" or "Poisonous Air is Clean Air." Some people will buy it!

I grew up unsettling authority figures and people who are comfortable believing what they are told to believe, because I have always identified with the little kid in the story and seen my role in life as calling the action as I see it - "Hey, you all, the Emperor is bare-assed!"

Now, that is compatible with one dimension of the ministerial role as it is traced from the long tradition of the Prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures. I believe that one of the key responsibilities of a minister is being willing to take a chance on challenging some of the realities upon which others are agreed, when he or she believes them to be unreal or inadequate. That's what Amos, and Jeremiah, and Isaiah, and Ezekiel, and Jesus, and the other Hebrew prophets did. It did not make them popular with the people in charge, or with the common people who did not like being made uncomfortable. In our Unitarian Universalist tradition that is what William Ellery Channing, Joseph May, Theodore Parker, Mary Ashton Rice Livermore, Adin Ballou, Olympia Brown, Thomas Starr King, Clarence Skinner and others took as their mantle. They believed it is one of the minister's tasks to call into question some of the assumptions of the society as to what is good or bad, better or worse.

Not everyone has the freedom to do that. It is at once a luxury and a heavy responsibility. There is no guarantee that the iconoclast is right. We all know the story of Chicken Little - the sky was NOT falling, it was just a nut from a tree. The minister has the assurance that a congregation that keeps him or her has enough respect to listen to and consider what he or she says, but also, and importantly, there is freedom because the members of a Unitarian Universalist congregation have both the responsibility to listen and to speak up when they do not agree. If I had the expectation that everyone would uncritically accept everything I said, I could never say anything, because I would be so hung up on verifying every assertion to the degree that the simplest sermon would never be completed.

Viewing the search for truths as a process, I take the chance of articulating my beliefs in the pulpit in the confidence that some of the feedback I'm going to receive will enlarge my

understanding. It is the freedom of the pew that makes the freedom of the pulpit real and creative. [That's where that fifth agreement about the power of doubt comes into play.]

We do, of course, know from history that those who are most prophetic and effective in challenging the cherished lies and shared distortions of their cultures often end up at the stake, or on the cross, or drinking hemlock. Those are the risks of the game.

The Story of the Emperor's New Clothes gives you some clues as to my ministerial style. If you don't sometimes like hearing things that make you uncomfortable, I am really not the kind of minister you would want. You have probably learned by now that it is more than a possibility that I might end up disagreeing not only with someone else's sacred cow, but with YOURS! It never ceases to amaze me how many people eloquently defend the right of a minister to speak out until it is their belief that is challenged.

[Myth #2 The Wizard of Oz]

Sheldon Kopp, A Washington psychotherapist, suggested in his book **Guru** that there were parallels between psychotherapy and the story of the Wizard of Oz. I think he was almost right - except as I see it, it is the ministry that is illuminated by that story. By the time I was ten years old, I had seen the movie version of the Wizard of Oz ten times. That is no big deal these days with videotapes and its regular broadcasts on television, but in the "Good Old Days," you had to go to a theatre to see it. I have a strong attachment to that story, and Kopp's interpretation helped me to realize what all that exposure to the story had done to me that I hadn't realized.

In the story, after Dorothy and her friends have had their interviews with OZ, the Great and Terrible, in his various forms, and are told that their wishes will be granted only upon the destruction of the Wicked Witch of the West, they proceed to accomplish their assignment. When they return to the Emerald City, Oz tries at first to avoid them, but then grants them an audience. He is hedging on his promises when Dorothy's dog Toto overturns a screen in the corner (opens a curtain in the movie) revealing a little old man with a bald head and wrinkled face standing before a control panel. The adventurers discover that this little old man is, in reality, Oz the Great and Terrible.

(In his annotated version of the classic, Michael Patrick Hearn cruelly suggests that "the power of a wizard depends upon the abundance of hair upon his head" thus the baldness proves that the wizard is a fraud.)

The wizard, in fact, confesses that he has just been making believe - that he is a common man, a humbug! He was a balloonist who was blown away from a carnival years before, and landed in Oz. Having come down from the sky, people assumed that he must be a wizard, and he was showman enough not to disappoint them. Dorothy tells him that she thinks he is a very bad man. "Oh no, my dear," he says, "I'm really a very good man, but I'm a very bad wizard, I must admit."

He proceeds, however, to demonstrate that he is, for their purposes, a rather good wizard. He produces the rewards he promised. In the movie version the gifts are more symbolic than in the book - The Scarecrow is given a diploma, in recognition of his demonstration of his brains during the adventure; the Lion is awarded a medal, for his demonstrated ability to act bravely even in the face of fear; and the Tin Woodsman is given a heart shaped clock to tick in his breast in recognition of the love he had already demonstrated for Dorothy and their companions.

The most important lessons I gleaned from the Wizard of Oz have to do with the ministerial responsibilities of counseling and administration.

What the story of the Wizard of Oz demonstrates, and I have often found it to be true, is that people frequently seek help in accomplishing things which they are capable of doing, but haven't realized. The straw man didn't need a diploma to be intelligent, the Lion didn't need his

medal to act bravely, the Tin Man was already capable of loving. All of this notwithstanding, the Wizard was called upon to help them discover these truths about themselves and to give symbolic recognition of them. He was able to do this by utilizing community - by creating a situation in which their strengths could be shared and tested with others who cared about them.

I have discovered that a minister can come out smelling like a rose when he or she can help members discover in the context of a religious community some things that are possible for them that they had not realized. That, of course, is dependent upon their willingness to commit and risk.

Churches present great opportunities for growth. The kind of caring that is shared in a vital church gives us the freedom to dare to do things that we probably wouldn't attempt in another setting, because in a real church community we have the freedom to fail sometimes as well as to succeed. And by growth, I mean not only an inward-looking personal growth, but also an outward-looking growth in relating to a community that makes demands upon us as well as serving us. It was in doing for others that Dorothy and her friends learned about themselves - not in individual therapy.

In his notes, Hearn suggests that the Wizard is confronted with a psychological conflict between role and self. "His people think of him only in terms of the part he is given to play; they cannot even consider the possibility of his being only a man. . . . He is feared because he is not understood. He is most dreadful when . . . his role is the only thing known of his presence. When the screen falls, his role falls, and he is seen as his self, a little old man."

Shortly after the Wizard was written, Karl Jung suggested the concept of the "persona" as "a kind of mask, designed on the one hand to make a definite impression upon others, and on the other to conceal the true nature of the individual. . . . [He wrote] Society expects, and indeed must expect, every individual to play the role assigned to him (or her) as perfectly as possible, so that a man who is a parson must not only carry out his official functions objectively, but must at all times and in all circumstances play the role of a parson in a flawless manner. . . ." Jung suggested that it was important for the individual to distinguish between "what he is and how he appears to himself and others." It is that role playing that the second agreement cautions us against.

Certainly there is a common theme in the stories of the Wizard and the Emperor: the authority figure is revealed as flawed - as deluding self and others. The wizard was prisoner of his role because he was afraid to see people or leave his throne room for fear of being found out. And yet, it was after he was found to be human that the gifts were given to and received by the Scarecrow, Lion, and Woodsman. After giving them what they wanted, the Wizard remarked, "How can I keep from being a humbug when all these people make me do things that everybody know can't be done?"

It is instructive to remember that the Wizard, in fact, failed at the most important task. He proved unable to help Dorothy to get home - His balloon lifted off before she was on board. While he had helped some of the characters, in the long run there were things he was unable to do. If one is attentive to reality, the ministry provides more than enough experiences to remind us of our limitations and keep us humble.

[I used that myth at the Ordination of a colleague many decades ago. His kids were there, and he told me that over breakfast the next morning, his son, who I believe was about 7 and had not appeared to have been paying attention during the service, asked, "Daddy, why did that guy last night say you were a bad man?" His daughter, who was about ten, responded, "No, he said daddy was a very bad wizard but a very good man."

In the original story of the Wizard, the adventurers saw him in different guises. For Dorothy he was an enormous head, sitting on the throne; for the Scarecrow, Oz appeared to

be a beautiful lady with wings; for the Tin Woodsman he was a terrible beast; and for the Lion, a ball of fire.

What Ruiz was stressing with his second agreement on not taking other people's reaction to us personally and let our concern about that rule our lives, coincides with what Karl Jung said about the importance of the individual distinguishing between "what he is and how he appears to himself and others." This is what the contemporary psychiatrist, Robert Jay Lifton was addressing with his image of the Proteus-like person who tries to mold him or herself after what they perceive others expectations of them are and so forget who they are at the core.

I don't know if you noticed when I was listing models earlier, I included Mary Ashton Rice Livermore who was never a minister. She was the wife of a Universalist minister, and she did preach as a guest in a number of Universalist pulpits. She was not bound by the expectations of a minister, but she was confronted by something more constraining: a female in the 19th Century. And yet, she was a free spirit, a visionary, a crusader for: abolition and women's equality with men, the double standard in sexual morality. Clinton Lee Scott, in his essay on her, observed that "Moral courage and a wide range of human interest were evident in Mrs. Livermore's lectures." [Her husband, who agreed with her on her controversial issues was ultimately unable to find a congregation that would accept him, so he purchased a Universalist newspaper in Chicago. When she died in 1905, the Boston Transcript, a major newspaper, proclaimed Mary Ashton Rice Livermore "America's foremost woman."

I would suggest that William Arkin, from whose letter of resignation I read earlier, is also a good example of someone who has had the courage to speak the truth as he's seen it and to ignore those who would mold him, into another shape.

Should it not be as transparent as I hoped, my intention has been to suggest to you the importance at any stage of our lives, of focusing on who we believe we are and the truths that we believe are important. It is a great and counter-productive burden to try to be who we think other people want us to be. I am not, for a moment, suggesting that we ignore the people we love, nor that we ignore all social niceties. Ruiz's words, taken literally could lead to grossly anti-social behavior. In his first agreement he stressed the power of the words we use to impact others. We know, for instance, that the words used by an occupant of the oval office can result in anti-Semitic, and anti-Muslim, and anti-immigrant behavior. I am suggesting, however, that we seek to be conscious of the decisions to respond to the expectations when we make them and not allow the expectations of others to drive us to renounce our true selves.

It is a problem that some people are truly driven by trying to please others all the time. We can be denied the genius of what they have to offer. It is often suggested that those of us who are of advanced years learn not to be driven by other people's expectations, but I believe a lifetime of denying ourselves does not make us open to such insights. I, therefore, commend to you again Miguel Ruiz' second agreement, "Don't take anything personally.