

Blood Brain

Alex Jensen Ordination - June 6, 2021

I want to begin by congratulating First Parish of Wayland and my colleague Rev. Stephanie May in being part of Alex's journey. I know that he's received so much from you and that you in turn, through this most bizarre of times, have received countless gifts from him...well done! I would also like to congratulate the UU Congregation of Grand Traverse in Traverse City, Michigan. You are welcoming a spectacular minister into your lives and legacy. I am thrilled to witness where this relationship goes. Lastly and maybe most importantly, I would like to congratulate Mission Peak UU Congregation of Fremont, CA who I know from my own time at Mount Diablo UU in Walnut Creek, CA. When I recognize that Alex comes out of that community and that tradition of youth empowerment, I'm not surprised about how he has grown into the dynamic minister that he is today. Mission Peak, you were the spark that first lit the fire of Alex' ministry and we must all be grateful for that.

So, I want to offer a factoid that may at first seem wildly out of place...but stay with me. Most people don't realize that blood is a connective tissue. Like skin and like various other membranes of our bodies, blood is actually a continuous entity that functions because of its connectivity. When we bleed our blood is in essence torn.

I wanted to begin with this image because it speaks directly to an important and foundational aspect of ministry. Not only is our blood a tissue and not only is it torn when we bleed, but our blood indeed our whole vascular system has an intelligence that many take for granted. Unitarian Universalism tends toward the cerebral and less toward the coronary...more toward the mind than the heart...even though we all speak regularly about hearts and minds. I don't know if we completely buy that. Our big human brains like to make themselves super important; meanwhile the heart just keeps beating and our blood keeps flowing and literally keeping us alive. Our blood knows that we want to live. There is a kind of "blood brain."

I'm convinced that one reason so many of us are so very emotional when we see another harmed is that our blood brain feels it. We cannot see another human being punched, cut, strangled or shot without feeling it in our own blood.

Ministry is born of this blood brain. Ministry is a response to when the blood tissue of life is torn or when it witnesses other blood tissue being torn. Ministry cannot just watch idly. Ministry comes from a response to the depths of who we are...how we are connected by the life force, the blood of humanity. Alex, ministry comes from that depth within you. Never forget that.

The task of ministers today is daunting. How to stay relevant in a world that wants you to be obsolete? A world that more and more leans away from the blood brain and toward literally artificial brains. How does a new minister whose greatest gift is that intuitive tender place that is both light as a feather in its touch and solid as a granite mountain in its sureness find a place in this world?

That new minister must be resourceful and creative, open and wise. Yes, you must be a master of technology; yes you will have to learn healthcare policy and immigration law and housing language and all the other things that go with supporting a congregation within a denomination committed to justice. And, Lord yes... you will have to manage congregants and staff...But don't forget the blood brain and the heart.

One of the most dramatic ways in which our blood is torn is through conflicts over race. You are moving into ministry at a time when some of the most important skills you must bring with you are related to how you navigate the tears in the human fabric that have come from legacies of race and racism.

Because this is such a crucial part of where your ministry is already taking you, I have to make note that the number of white men who have had black people offer their ordination sermons in Unitarian Universalism over the last 200+ years is, I imagine, not very large. White men have dominated this faith for centuries. Yet, white men are being challenged today in their authority, their place and their voice. This raises a question that I may be uniquely poised to ask in this moment: what does a new white male minister need or want to hear from a black colleague?

believe he needs to hear history. It needs to be a nuanced history that is more than a steady celebratory diet of Channing, Emerson, Parker and such. More than the martyrdom of Reeb and Liuzzo but also the history from my and other colleagues of color's perspective that knows that being an abolitionist didn't mean someone wasn't anti black, that Asia is a continental location and not a single culture and that one can be both white and Latin-x.

At the same time, a white minister cannot just hear this history of broken promises and locked doors; pursuits of race purity and "dealing with" negro and Asian and woman problems; segregated pews and the thinly veiled racism defending freedoms of speech and individual rights.

A white minister in Unitarian Universalism needs to hear the words of Lydia Maria Child who wrote in the early 19th century of the total humanity of black people and women when even our most sainted of UU ancestors would not.

A white minister needs to know of other white ministers who put real relationship before race or cultural comfort and educational pedigree in order to listen first to native and indigenous people without feeling it necessary to put forth white solutions.

He needs to know that not all white people are bad and wrong and not all people of color are good and right, but that people are human beings first...and, yes, Black Lives Matter.

He needs to know that the awesome and twisted responsibility of the elusive thing we call "Beloved Community" is possible.

And speaking of possibilities, I believe that a white male minister needs to hear from a black colleague that trust between people of color and white people in this faith and in this world is possible. And that it is not easy. It is trust that must be carefully and fully conscious in how it is cultivated, recognizing that we are both and all in the stew of the American race project. And it is trust that must be re-cultivated and recalibrated over and over again. In the magical land of race, there are fields of battle *and* fragrant peaceful pastures; but he must know that even in the most verdant, bucolic of meadows there will always be crap that gets stepped in, because...well, life.

A white male minister needs to know that before he is either white or male, you are a minister and that is a place of huge responsibility, catastrophic terror, wild vulnerability, deep humility, exquisite joy and euphoric peace all at the same time. Good luck.

And all of that brings me back to where I started this...Blood is a connective tissue. It can and will be torn in this lifetime. Blood lives and feels and is driven by the heart. Ministry is born of the blood brain, it is both fragile and powerfully life giving.

In a world where we are all increasingly alienated from our blood brain; where we are witness to the constant and wanton tearing of our fellow human beings' blood; and where the concept of race was manufactured as a barrier in defiance of how we are connected as human beings by our blood, ministers have their work cut out for them. Alex, you have your work cut out for you.

But Alex, through all of the identities you hold, through all of your unique and individual complexity, you are up to this task. Not because of those identities and not because you are super-human...you are no 'great white hope'...there is no such thing. You are up to this task because of what I and your mentors and the congregations of Mission Peak and Wayland that have loved you and the new congregation in Travers City that is already learning to love you...because of what all of us recognize in you in the ways in which you are more human...more humble to the delicate miracle of being. You are up to this task because you have gifted us all so freely with the precious clarity of your pure and joyful, realistic, funny and fully human heart.

Blood is connective tissue. It has a brain. It is coursing through each of us at this moment. It is filling us with pride and emotion as we usher you, Alex into this place of ministry. It is the smartest, most adaptable, most compassionate brain any of us has. It is also capable of being torn by both physical harm and emotional heartbreak. Most of us don't listen closely enough to the blood brain. But Alex, you do. It is natural for you. It is why people gravitate to you and believe in you. Hold on to that...gently. Minister to the torn blood of this world with your mighty heart. Through your ministry, you have the chance now to be part of what will heal even a small part of this world in life and in love.

Blessings on you and on your ministry. Amen