

For the Time Being: Notes on the Interim Journey
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Reading: A Rabbinic Tale

A long time ago, in the Polish town of Krakov, there was a rabbi named Eisik. Now, Eisik and his family were very, very poor. They lived in the most down-and-out part of town, on the most dusty, unpaved street, in the tiniest, most dilapidated house. Their clothes were full of patches, and they had to struggle for every morsel of food they put on the table.

But then, one night, Rabbi Eisik had a dream. In this dream, a voice spoke to him, saying, "Eisik! Eisik! I have good news for you! You don't have to be poor any more! There's buried treasure waiting for you, which will put an end to your poverty. You'll find it in the great city of Prague, along the riverbank, by the bridge that leads to the royal palace. All you have to do is go there, and dig it up!"

Eisik woke up from the dream, and said, "Wow!!" But then he said, "Yes, but it's only a dream." And so he got out of bed and got on with the day's work. But that night, what do you think - he had the same dream again! And once again, he woke up from it, saying "Wow!!" But then he said, "Ah, yes, but it's only a dream."

But the next night, for the third time, the dream came. It was the very same dream, the very same voice, the very same promise. If Eisik would make the long journey to Prague, and look by the bridge that leads to the royal palace, he would find the treasure that would end his poverty.

Well, finally, Eisik paid attention. He got out his only pair of shoes, and his walking stick. He filled a little knapsack with some bread and cheese, and strapped a small shovel on the back. With a picture in his mind of a treasure chest full of gold, and diamonds, and rubies, and pearls, he kissed his wife and children, and started out on the road to Prague.

After many days of travel, he arrived. And sure enough, along the riverbank, there was a bridge, leading to the royal palace. But the voice in the dream had left one thing out - and that was the guards! Yes, at each end of the bridge there were big, burly guards, resplendent in red and gold uniforms. They all had swords, and they all meant business.

Eisik's heart sank. He had come all this way, and for what? How could he dig for the treasure, with those guards standing by? All he could do was hang around by the bridge, hoping that they might turn their backs, or go to sleep. But nothing like that happened. One day passed, and then another.

Finally, Eisik attracted one of the guards' attention. This was a huge man with a big, black mustache. But he seemed kind when he asked, "My good man, may I help you? Have you lost something?" Eisik shyly told him about his dream, and about the voice, and how he had come all the way from Krakov to find the treasure.

When the guard heard this, he burst out laughing! "Oh, you poor man! Just imagine wearing out a pair of shoes to come here - and all because of a dream!"

He went on: "Let me tell you about the foolish dream *I* had last night. A voice commanded *me* to go to Krakov, and search for the home of rabbi Eisik, son of Jekel. There, on the poorest street in town, on the most ramshackle house on the street, I would find a great treasure. It would be buried in a dirty corner behind the stove! But imagine believing in such a dream!" And the guard laughed again.

When he heard this, Rabbi Eisik bowed politely, bade the guard farewell, and went as fast as he could back to Krakov. He entered his little house, went into the kitchen, and dug behind the stove. There he found the treasure - and he and his family were never poor again.

Retold from a story in Martin Buber's
Tales of the Hassidim

Sermon:

The story of Rabbi Eisik is one of my favorites. Like any good story, it may be understood at different levels of meaning. It might apply to our personal lives, or to the life of the church.

What is the "treasure" we seek? Love? True happiness? Inner peace? God, perhaps? No matter what we're seeking, the story tells us that it's always at home! It's right in front of us, in our midst. Or it's buried deep inside us - in our hearts, as close as our breathing! German mythologist Heinrich Zimmer put it this way:

The real treasure is never far away...it lies buried in the innermost recess of our own home, that is to say, our own being." Not only that, but "it lies behind the stove, the life-and-warmth-giving center...our heart of hearts."

But the story also tells us something else - a paradox. To find this treasure at home, we have to go away! We have to take some kind of journey, whether it's literal, geographic or metaphorical. Again, Heinrich Zimmer says, "There is the odd and persistent fact" that we find our treasure *only* "after a faithful journey to a distant region, a far-off country, a strange land."

This story can inform our personal quests, and it may also tell us something about the life of the church, and interim ministry. I don't have to tell you: UUCG is in transition. It's been that way at least since Bill Haney announced his departure, a year ago, and it will be that way for at least a

year or two into your new settled ministry. This transition that you're in now, is something like a journey away from home.

When a long-time minister leaves, the church is forced to "leave home." That is, it's catapulted out of its comfort zone. A stranger makes an appearance - not as a burly guard, but in the person of an interim minister. She is there for a finite period of time - one or two years.

This person isn't like the beloved former minister. She does things differently. She also tells the truth as she sees it, which is not always comfortable. Sometimes she rubs people the wrong way. But she does all this in the interest of helping the church discover its treasure - which is buried close at hand. She helps the congregation rediscover who it is, and to make its way back home.

Theories of transitional ministry have evolved over the years. Once upon a time, interims were seen only as placeholders, clergy sent in to "hold the fort" while the search committee did its work. People assumed that the interim period was a static time: Sunday attendance and pledging would automatically fall, and it wouldn't be possible to move forward on anything.

Fortunately, thinking has shifted away from this dismal view. A generation ago, a new view came to the fore. Interim work began to be seen as a specialized vocation, and the transitional period as a very active time. Interim ministers were viewed as change agents - sometimes purely *for the sake of* change. The interim was expected to go into a congregation to "blow out the cobwebs," and "clean house."

I have older colleagues who spoke of going in as an interim and "shaking the place up." This was supposed to pave the way for the new settled minister, who would of course be different from the former one.

But then, the thinking shifted again. Yes, the interim minister is still there to help pave the way for a new ministry, and yes, there may still be room for some "shaking up." But these days, overall, interim ministry is envisioned in a more complex way. It's still seen as transformational work - but the *real* "change agent" is not the interim minister, but the congregation. (Yes, that's right - you!) The interim is there to assist, as the church finds new ways of being in the world.

For a time in the late 1990s, I served a small congregation in Utah. My ministry there was preceded by a one-year interim period. Two years ago, when I went back out for the congregation's 25th anniversary, I discovered that the interim minister was still being referred to as "the taskmaster." But when I went to interim training, we were expressly told, "You are *not* their taskmaster - you're their coach."

"Coach" is one way to describe the interim's work. "Midwife" is another; "consultant" is a third. I'm sure we can come up with other metaphors. But always, the idea is that it's the congregation doing the work. The interim is there to assist, support, consult, advise.

What forms does this assistance take? One thing is to engage in “appreciative inquiry,” drawing out the church’s strengths. The interim also brings fresh eyes, sharing her observations as a person new to the system. She asks questions: Why do you do things this way? How did this particular practice come into being? And sometimes, “What’s up with that?” Or, “What just happened?” The interim also encourages people to imagine new possibilities. And she helps create a safe space where people can experiment and do the work.

But what is “the work” that the church is called upon to do? Thinking about this has coalesced around a series of tasks, called “The Five Developmental Tasks.” These were developed by the Alban Institute, a “church think tank” with many years in the consulting business, and they’re widely shared among denominations.

At first hearing, the tasks may sound kind of abstract to you. But I encourage you, as I lay them out, to hang in there with me - for it turns out they provide a very good frame for our work together. They’re broad enough that many things can happen as we engage them. And they’re in no way cut-and-dried, since every congregation is different.

Alban believes that the more successful a church is in completing the Five Tasks during the interim period, the greater likelihood of a successful ministerial search and a fruitful new ministry. Picking up on this, the UUA Transitions Office takes the tasks very seriously. They require that the Board and I write our denominational reports in terms of them: “How is UUCC progressing in each of these tasks?”

Given this, it’s only fair to let all of you know what the Five Tasks are! I’ll give you the list first, and then say a bit more about each of them. Don’t worry about taking notes, as I’ve also written about them for the next *Searchlight*, coming soon.

- ❖ Task #1 is “Coming to Terms with History.”
- ❖ Task #2 is “Discovering a New Identity.”
- ❖ Task #3 is “Allowing Leadership Changes, and Empowering New Leaders.”
- ❖ Task #4 is “Renewing Denominational Connections.”
- ❖ Together, these four make Task #5 possible: “Committing to New Leadership and a New Future.”

Looking at Task 1, what does it mean to “Come to Terms with History?” Although the phrase “coming to terms” may suggest something negative or painful, an important part of this is actually celebration! In the case of UUCC, it could mean making a big deal of your 60th birthday, which comes up early next year. Why not do a year-long celebration, of “60 Years of Unitarian Universalism in Columbia”?

One purpose of celebrating the church’s history is to bring new people on board. Even if they missed the first 20 years - or the first 59 years - new people can “own” the whole story, if long-time members share the lore with them. There will be an opportunity for doing this sometime

soon - I've tentatively marked the calendar for November. It will take the form of a workshop featuring a "Wall of History." This should prove to be a lot of fun, and it will facilitate the sharing of stories about the congregation.

"Coming to terms with history" might also mean looking for recurring patterns. Do certain things here seem to happen over and over again - for better or for worse? If it's "for worse," the act of raising a pattern to a conscious level is sometimes all that's needed to change it.

Task #2 is "Discovering a New Identity." During my very first settled ministry, as Associate Minister in a 600-member church, the Senior Minister retired after 35 years. I remember David Pohl, at the UUA, telling me then, "They are going to have to get *really messy* about who they are without Phillip." And they proceeded to do just that! One purpose of the interim is to allow you to get messy *now*, rather than later with a called minister.

Here are some of the identity questions: Who are we as a congregation? Who are we *really*? We've had several major chapters in our history; how has each of these shaped our identity? What about Bill Haney's ministry - how did that shape us? Who are we now that he's moved on? Even more important, who do we *want* to be?"

Over the next two years, we'll be sizing up UUCC's identity through self-study: by looking around, by listening to one another, and by asking outsiders for their views of us. Still more intense work will be done when the Search Committee starts its work next spring and summer. There is usually a congregational survey, supplemented by cottage meetings and other forums for conversation.

As your new identity comes into focus, you'll get a better sense of what kind of minister you want to call in the year 2012. But perhaps even more important, you'll have good answers to other questions, like "Why do we exist? What's our mission? What's our purpose?"

The third task is Allowing Leadership Changes and Empowering New Leadership. When there's a change of ministerial leadership, shifts in lay leadership often follow in its wake. Someone with strong ties to the former minister may decide it's time for a break. Meanwhile, someone else will step forward - perhaps someone who felt excluded earlier, and now sees an opportunity to serve.

If major leadership changes are in the cards, it's best that this happen during the interim period. A new settled minister might be demoralized by such a turnover, while the interim is trained to expect it, even consider it normal.

Task #4 is Renewing Denominational Connections. As with Task 3, some of this happens naturally during the interim period. Once Bill announced his resignation, you didn't have much choice. You had to be in touch with Ian Evison and Dori Davenport Thexton of the Central Midwest District, and with the director of the UUA Transitions Office. (John Weston held that position through last June; Keith Kron is now the person in charge.) Over the next two years, the Search Committee will regularly be talking to UUA representatives, and so will I.

Beneath the practical aspects of denominational linkages, there runs a deeper current. As we make the connections needed to move forward, we learn once again: UUCC is not alone here in Columbia. We're part of something larger than ourselves - a wider religious movement, with a vital message.

The first four tasks are not sequential. We can be working on all of them at once. But we hope they all move in the same direction, and that they culminate in ***Task #5: Committing to New Leadership and a New Future.*** This is the treasure, the *pièce de resistance* - the goal that gives meaning to the rest of the work.

Please note: This is partly about "finding a new minister" - but it's not only about that. If things go well, it's about *joyfully moving into a new future with that minister!* Loren Mead, veteran church consultant, puts it this way: "The installation service is more than the installing of a person into a job." It's also "the installation of a new sense of mission, and of an invigorated leadership" - clergy *and* lay.

By the time of this installation, I'll be long gone from here. Interim clergy never get to enter the "promised land" with the congregations they serve. But some of the seeds of the transformation have already been planted - and they'll be nurtured through the work we do here, now, together.