

# “Images of Ranch Palos Verdes”

June 18, 2017

I want to say Four (4) Things today →

- Say good-bye.
- PUC story: late nineteen-eighties – today
- Offer my analysis (Ecclesiological update)
- Offer my blessing (and use the occasion to say a word or two about and in support of prayer)

1) I have been saying good-bye for a couple of months now. Certain protocols prevail...

- Thank leadership, staff
- Remind everyone that it's *co-ministry* we do here
- Hand back the keys and DEPART

2) Al Henriksen retired in 1988 after 24 years

David Cole (a good preacher good old boy cruising into retirement) did a one-year interim. The church then called the Reverend Don Beaudreault. Don had been an intern here a few years earlier and had been well liked. He was/is a great piano player. Indeed, in many ways Don was more of a showman than a minister and he lasted four years before a departure under pressure. I've known Don and enjoyed his company since seminary in the mid '70s; he's always been a very creative guy, but also—especially in these years before he came out as gay—somewhat tormented it seemed to me. In any case Don left and, almost simultaneously Victor Carpenter, having just been pressured to quit in San Francisco, came to Palos Verdes with his lovely wife Cathie. It was a brief healing respite for all. The Carpenters then left for a church in suburban Boston (Belmont), where Victor served until he retired (2002). The Rev. Frances Day then served a two-year interim. She was the first female Minister here and transforming (just *starting* the transformation of) the male-oriented, strongly humanist and overly lousy-goosey congregational culture was not easy. She had some charged interactions with the Minister Emeritus, Al Henriksen, getting him to actually quit trying to impress *his* particular vision on PUC, and to let her, as the Minister-of-Record lead in her own way. Part of her ministry—this was going on across the UUA at the time—involved calling out as harassingly inappropriate some of Al's behavior. The upshot: Al got the message and grew from the experience, as did the congregation.

Then in 1996 the church called Jane Bechle and Bob Klein as co-ministers. Different members say different things about their preaching styles, but there's general agreement they were competent administrators, active in the community, and organized good adult

programs. Under their leadership the church became a welcoming congregation and, in other ways advanced humans rights. But they, too, eventually found themselves in the crosshairs, fell on their swords and departed in less than ten years.

The Reverend Jim Grant, formerly a Southern Baptist, wonderful church systems analyst, and all-around good fellow served as Interim Minister after Bob and Jane. During the Beaudreault years ('89-'93), lay leaders pretty much ran the church and so when Bob and Jane arrived most PUCers were looking forward to handing things back to the professionals, but once the newly installed co-ministers started taking charge they met resistance. Which slowly metastasized. Meanwhile, to help meet household expenses Jane and Bob took up (together) an additional part-time (“contract”) ministry in Bakersfield..., which somehow added to the growing tension. After they left for Little Rock, Jim Grant was hired as Interim; he worked hard getting PUC to look at itself and make the changes—administrative and procedural as well as cultural—that would allow your next minister to actually lead.

It was in that context that John Morehouse was called in 2005. An excellent preacher with a bold vision of a more engaged church, John rallied support and—for a time—the church under his leadership was a hopping place. This was during the second George W. Bush administration:

- The era of “irrational exuberance” *before* the 2008 global economic collapse; the church’s coffers and membership numbers were all up. But suddenly conditions changed.
- Meanwhile, musings about potentially selling the property and moving to a less chichi neighborhood touched off for some folks’ ire.
- When the preschool director retired John used the occasion to promote his vision of turning the south wing and grounds into a human potential and interfaith spiritual center—a vision enthusiastically taken up, but...never with the intensity (and capital) needed to make a real go of the idea. Meanwhile...2008. Plus the untimely departures through death and relocation of some key members. And Reverend Morehouse, reading the tealeaves, deftly segued into a prominent settlement back East.
- As Minister, John was a CEO type leader; his framework was based on the so-called Carver (“Policy Governance”) Model. (“UU’s are like other people, but they like things that glitter.” Fashion (i.e. fad) played into this in that the Carver Model of policy governance was all the rage among denominational leadership in the early years of the millennium). The Carver Model requires an EXECUTIVE, not an autocrat. (My leadership model = *servant leadership*, + Rabbi Edwin Friedman’s “Family Process In Church & Synagogue” formula: Non-anxious presence, self-differentiation, staying in touch). Robert K. Greenleaf & Peter Drucker in the world of management theory. SO: My analysis of your situation →

What you do well: Conducting worship, maintaining a nice facility, fundraising, Top Chef food ministry. You have a good, competent, mutually supportive staff. And a convivial, attentive Board. What you could do better: small group ministry; a social justice council, and including lay engagement with Toberman House and the South Coast Interfaith Council. (Nudge your new minister to come along with you!) You're kind of "clubby", i.e., inward looking and somewhat 'imprecise' about forms. That 'imprecision' is what led, in the past, to a culture permitting less-than-clear boundaries. My immediate Interim predecessor, UU Zen master James Ishmael Ford, focused his interim ministry on two critical tasks. 1) Completing the re-establishment of healthy boundary guidelines at PUC by facilitating a thorough changing of the guard among the staff. And 2) helping the lay leadership reconfigure their budget along simpler, more fiducially responsible principles. In completing the second year of the Interim Ministry Program I must say that I feel extraordinarily indebted to James...and to John, and Bob&Jane, and Don, and Jim Grant, and Frances Day: to all of these women and men whose creative energy and good work made possible my modest endeavors.

I tried to help you relax about the crisis you've been going through. And I think I did a pretty good job. You raised the budget you needed. You called the minister you were looking for. You were broken into and robbed twice, but you never allowed it to break your spirits or rob you of your commitment to being instruments of justice and beauty in your community. As you have done for sixty years. Pretty impressive, if you ask me.

So now...the blessing... But first: Joanni Thompson asked me to fulfill a Service Auction obligation by writing a sermon on prayer. I don't really have time to do a thorough job, but I will scratch the surface. Let me begin this section of my sermon by saying that a lot of my thinking on prayer comes out of the great Universalist preacher, theologian, and social activist of a century ago, Clarence R. Skinner. In its broadest sense, prayer exists wherever there is tension between a person and an object, which she or he holds to be of the highest value and significance. It is the efforts of men and women to attain union with this object—to know it, to feel it, and to experience it that constitute the essence, the heart, of prayer. It's giving voice to the longings of one's heart.

There are many kinds of prayer: First: petitionary prayer: "Oh Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes-Benz?" as Janice Joplin put it. There are other forms—petitionary prayer, prayers of supplication, of thanksgiving, of praise. *Usually* prayer is directed towards a deity, but it *can* be to a spirit, deceased person, or lofty idea; as a focus of community identification, or to request guidance or assistance; or for the confessing of transgressions (sins); or simply to express one's thoughts or feelings. People pray for many reasons; for personal benefits, of course, such as health or prosperity, but also when asking for divine grace, for spiritual connection, or for the sake of other people, communities, of institutions. Prayer helps even the most secular by helping prioritize: 'What do I *really* care about?'

Conventional wisdom would have it that contemporary UUs no longer pray, but I disagree. I think prayer is intrinsic; that we can't help but pray. Not the way our ancestors prayed, but people are hardwired in such a way that we can't escape the necessity of reaching upward and outward toward something greater than our selves. That something may be an unachieved ideal that beckons and urges us; it may be the summation and creative advance of the sustaining forces of the universe; or, sad to say, it may be a brutal social order that exalts naked power. Whatever the unseen and distant goal, people can't live, in my estimation, without shared dreams to inspire them. Some, it's clear, are content to adjust their lives to things as they are, but most people (and anyone who's really alive) require some goal or ideal to strive after. The light that inspires creativity and faith "never was on sea or land," wrote the poet William Wordsworth<sup>1</sup> And on behalf of *that splendid vision* humanity has set armies in motion, flown into deep space, penetrated high mountains and dismal swamps. Nothing prosaic can ever really satisfy the hunger within our hearts and minds. Amid the dross there shines an unearthly flame—and *prayer bridges the gap*. Prayer illuminates the distance between the ideals we strive for and the reality with which we presently contend. So...let us pray:

O Spirit of Life, Spirit of community and conscience that has inspired the founders and sustainers of this church for over six decades, we are thankful for the many blessings thou hast generously bequeathed to us, including this beautiful building and its grounds and these good people with whom we share our hopes and dreams and who help sustain us when times are tough and our resolve threatens to flag.

Make our hearts thy dwelling place that we may grow as a community of conscience and congruence, a community where the new members who joined us this morning will find their honored place, helping us become and even stronger and more beloved community of growing souls in the days and months and years ahead.

So may it be. Amen. Namaste. Shalom. Blessed be.

*Reverend Dr. Stephen H. Furrer, Interim Minister / Pacific Unitarian Universalist Church*

*5621 Montemalaga Dr., Rancho Palos Verdes, Ca. 90275*

---

<sup>1</sup> William Wordsworth, "Elegiac Stanzas"