

Ministry's Journey Toward Mission

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Odd, isn't it? As soon as you're asked to focus on something, your mind travels to thousands of other places, distracting, deflecting, and diverting your attention from the task at hand. For months now, I've been trying to concentrate on writing a paper about ministry; defining it from my perspective as a woman religious, noting how my concept of it has "changed" by virtue of a sabbatical funded by the Louisville Institute, a division of the Lilly Endowment, Inc. Ironically, it has been the very doing of ministry that has consumed my energies of late, leaving little time for pondering, much less writing about it. Perhaps, "changing" is a more accurate word to characterize my views on ministry.

Almost three years post sabbatical, I'm still struggling for language to frame my experiences. Somewhere within, I suppose, I'm harboring a secret hope that there will come a point when my thinking magically coalesces in the midst of disparate theories and divergent realities. More often than not, when I do find myself inching toward a moment of integration, it seems to take the form of fleeting prayer. With keys in hand and one foot out the door, I beseech God to bless the endeavors I'm caught in, entrust my efforts to God's mercy, then rush to catch yet another plane, all the while hoping desperately that what I'm about is somehow ministry, is somehow the work of God.

There never seems to be a single point of arrival, a situation in which I know for sure that I've got it, have mastered it, and am certainly engaged in ministry. Instead, the challenge for ministerial health and holiness seems lightly tethered to a fragile equilibrium of intersecting orbits: (a) an attentive listening to what has been; (b) an active participation in the moment before me; and (c) a ready availability for what is yet to come. How can I listen so as to be informed by the wisdom of experience? How can I participate in the grace of the present moment? How can I hold myself in a state of ready hope so as to be available to

transformative invitations of future? Put more simply, how can I live deeply the Paschal mystery?

To engage ministry is to engage a process of mystery. Because of its fluidity, its power to make known that which is yet to come, ministry defies stasis. Ministry cannot be confined to the safe, orderly niches that afford us even the illusion of control. And therein rests the caution. We don't do ministry. Ministry does us.

Ministry is alive, the multi-headed, mythical Hydra, ever on the prowl. It is voracious in its appetite for unsuspecting souls, savoring especially the self-complacent minister. You've heard the maxim, “caveat emptor,” “buyer beware”? Caveat minister et ministra quoque!

Yes, ministers, beware. Beware of ministry, for it will eat you alive. Without so much as a hiccup, it can swallow all that you offer: your most genuine desires to serve in a healthy, holy way; your best intentions to care for relationships with God, others and self; your sincerest resolutions to model a balanced lifestyle. With little regard for its prey, ministry will chew upon your deepest ideals and passions, your profoundest hopes and commitment. In due course, in what seems like the blink of an eye or the expanse of ages, ministry will ultimately spew forth a minister: dedicated, committed, energized, impassioned, creative, and reverent. Or, just as possibly, exhausted, discouraged, disengaged, and depleted.

Of course, rarely is it all or nothing. Usually, on any given day, we find ourselves somewhere in between these polarities. There may, indeed, be the occasional day of triumph or the night of dejected defeat, but generally, a life of ministry is about the spirit cited by novelist Reynolds Price's character, Kate Vaiden, “...you stand up at sunrise and meet what they send you and keep your hair combed.” Like the paradoxes proclaimed in the Exultet of Easter, “Oh necessary sin of Adam, oh happy fault,” the blessing of ministry seems to come in knowing that there is grace in the contradictions, reconciliation in the tension of opposites, and salvation in the journey between.

I know about ministry's appetite. I've traveled its labyrinthine innards and have the bite marks to prove it. I've been marked by the joy of seeing elders reclaim their sense of dignity, and discouraged by the systemic biases in our society against them. I've been moved to tears by the beauty of a Congregation's faith-filled discernment, and dismayed by the Machiavellian scheming for power and control that can infiltrate groups. I've been humbled by people who seek my counsel, and become self-righteous when they don't. Ministry has swallowed me whole and spit forth a woman intermittently triumphant, defeated, content, bored, happy, and discouraged, often within a single day.

For me, even with an informed sense of self as a psychologist, some measure of personal balance, and a supportive grounding in prayer as a member of a religious community - the Sisters of St. Joseph of Baden, Pennsylvania - ministry has not been an easy path to follow. But I believe it is my vocation. Good hair days and bad, ministry calls me to embrace my Congregation's mission of unioning love, and that, I believe, is the center of God's summons. There, in a communal stance of love with God and all creation, ministry moves to mission. In the context of vocation, doing shifts to being; ministry extends beyond the scope of the particular services any minister can offer.

Certainly, our world is in need of our best efforts to help, teach, counsel, heal, organize, lead, guide, provide for, and pray with and for all people. But more importantly, it seems in need of our presence as ministers. How we are when we perform our varied ministries is, I believe, the point of transmission for deeper gifts – gifts that will touch the hearts and souls of the people.

In the face of retaliation and violence, we can offer forgiveness and peace. In the arena of competition and profit margins, we can hold forth values of collaboration and mutuality. Conversion, not intractability; gentleness, not might; inquiry, not answers; hope, not despair - these are among the endless opportunities that we have to invert societal values. Ministry frees us from the constraints of our world's expectations and invites us into the wondrously convoluted reasoning of Jesus: to lose one's life in order to find it; to serve, not to be served; to die in order to live.

Just as there are perils in the lifeform of ministry, so also are there abundant blessings expanding the scope of grace in which we live. Though sporadic in their appearances, ministry will always hold moments of awakening desire, of deepening call, of invitation into mystery. In these very moments, when your life seems to pivot on the head of a pin, if you listen deeply, you will know of ministry as vocation, as a calling from God that invites not just occasional efforts, but your entire life. You have, then, only to respond, not so much with what you do, but with your very being, with the essence of who and how you are in relation to God, to others, to all of creation. Then, you become minister. Then, your ministry becomes mission.

Naturally, there is no single point at which this happens. The maturing of a minister's ministry into mission is a lifelong process. But if we stop to look, we can usually trace the gossamer threads that bind our lives to God's mystery. We can see those pin points upon which we've danced in discernment, straining to listen to God's voice, to participate in the invitations of the moment, to be available to future's transformative mystery. And if we're honest, we'll also find those voids of sleepless nights, when in the pre-dawn hours, caution and logic rise quietly within, gently grab hold of our eyelids, and with one quick yank, leave us staring wide-eyed into the shadows. While our hearts race wildly, our inner

muses begin their chants of reason. “Are you out of your mind?” they intone. “Are you really going to risk all that you’ve worked so hard to establish – credibility, expertise, position, reputation?” And so our day of ministry begins.

In four part harmony, the music continues. Our lives go forward. People and events nudge us this way and that, forming us as ministers while we waltz with the beast of ministry. Weaving in, out, and around those intersecting orbits of listening, participation, and hope filled availability, we live as best we can God’s summons of love.

Several years ago, my dance of ministry brought me close to a state of frenzied exhaustion. Long overdue for some time off, a friend practically dragged me to the wilds of northern Idaho for some days of rest. “Listen to me,” she kept saying, “Listen. You’ve got to stop.” Under great protest, and with secreted papers and books along for study, I went on vacation.

This particular day, after hiking for several hours, my friend and I found ourselves in the midst of an old growth forest. Standing among huge cedars said to be literally thousands of years old, we were so overwhelmed by beauty that neither of us spoke. And suddenly, in the silence, it happened. I listened. I heard the wind.

Now that may not seem very extraordinary, for you only have to stand still and listen on a summer’s evening, or stick your head out the window of a moving car to hear the sound of wind. But for me, it was amazing. I realized that for the first time in well over three years, I had finally stopped long enough to be quietly conscious of listening to the sound of the wind. There, in the midst of a grove of ancient cedars, I was drawn to simply stop and listen; to witness to the faithful, stationary presence those tree bore before God; to hear the richness of their play with the currents of air moving through branches hundreds of feet above me.

In that listening, I heard far more than the wind. I heard the frantic pace of my own life that had brought me to a point of exhaustion. Working to build a consulting service that focused on the needs of aging members of Catholic Communities of Women Religious, I had said “yes” to every request that came my way. Entrepreneurial principles were guiding my choices rather than discerning prayer. My practice was becoming a success. My ministry and I were weakening.

I returned from my vacation desirous of tending the listening that was awakened amidst those ancient cedars. I was determined to make some changes in my life. I realized that I needed to find some time and ways to simply listen, to unfold the wisdoms God offers in the daily routines of life if we will only pause to hear. Rather than indiscriminately hopping up at the sound of every voice, much like the Old Testament youth, Samuel, did when he first began to receive his call, I

needed to give time to that disposition of listening, to inviting God to speak. Surely then, I thought, I would be a more effective minister. All I had to do was to listen.

I was no different from anyone else engaged in ministry. We are all overworked. We could all benefit from a quieting of spirit. Our desire to *do* for God is great. We are all Samuels, jumping up with “here I am!” We are programmed for total availability. “Need a board member? Call me.” “Late night visit to the hospital? It will only take me a moment.” “Books won’t balance? I’ll take a look.” “Need a minute of my time? I’m all yours.”

We’ve all heard the same needs and given the same responses. We have attached a certain prestige to being so busy that there are never enough hours in the day. It is as if time is the coin of our realm and ironically, the less we have, the better we feel about ourselves. When do we stop? How can we tend the silences? How can we learn, like Samuel, to listen?

Listening is no easy task. Listening demands that we step from behind our barriers of control; that we lower the boundaries that offer and project a false sense of invulnerability; that we let others see our fallibilities; that we open ourselves in a stance of humility and charity to the possibility of a need for mutual conversion, for mutual change with those we are called to serve. That is the unitive stance of the listening servant, of the listening minister. We shift from a position of being the empowered other to a relationship of mutuality, to shared community.

When we can do this, when we can release our ego’s need for affirmation, when we can quiet ourselves in order to listen as servant, as minister of God and of one another, we will dwell in a spirit of contemplation. Life ceases to be a problem to be solved and becomes, instead, a grace-filled mystery to be engaged. We stand not over and against, but as one with all creation, blessings flowing simultaneously from and to the other. We become both gift and gifted in a stance of relationship. Our ministry will assume new levels of mutual empowerment, of shared creativity. In listening, we become co-creators with God, sharers in the work of the Divine. And all we have to do is to begin to listen.

It was just such a listening among the cedars of Idaho that led me to seek a Study Grant for Pastoral Leaders from the Louisville Institute. In turn, their generous funding enabled me the extraordinary opportunity of taking intentional time to continue listening, to deepening a spirit of discernment. Long awaited and eagerly anticipated, my time had finally come. Now I would really learn to listen.

Honoring a long standing personal attraction to the geography of America’s southwest, I chose to spend my Sabbath time in the desert. As usual, I thought I knew what I was doing. If I was to be about the task of listening, what better

place to do it than one of total silence? I had studied the desert's mystique, its language of stripping and dying. Holy inhabitants throughout the centuries have fled to desert caves and cliffs in order to find their union with God, unencumbered, unadulterated, unadorned. This desert place of silence would surely afford me an opportunity to listen, to ease my pace of living, to enjoy the warmth of God's embrace. No hungry beast of ministry there.

What I discovered, instead, was the hunger of God. In the silence of the desert, in a place of sacred wilderness, I suddenly lost my identifying roles of Sister-psychologist-consultant-facilitator. Much to my surprise, I was simply myself, called like any other to be graced with the lessons of life. There in the high desert country, I was to be stilled long enough not only to listen, but to be invited to a deeper stance - one of simple, unfettered participation in the present moment. Unbeknownst to me, God had upped the ante.

My desert grace, my Sabbatical blessing, was the lesson of humility that is integral to life and essential to ministry. It is an old friend, a familiar siren song that daily stirs my ego into a dance of resistance. But somehow in the desert, the invitation was clearer, purified, perhaps, by the void of the desert, by the presence of absence. “The desert is a great leveler,” my director said to me shortly after my arrival. It was one of her non sequiturs that sent my intuitive radar into overtime. A remark tossed in from nowhere and followed by nothing, I was left to figure it out on my own.

Ever so gradually, I discovered that there was nothing for me to do in the desert. I did not have to accomplish, perform, control, or excel. I simply had to be, to stand in radical simplicity before God, and thus, to participate in the grace of the present moment.

Over time, in that precious gift of external stillness, I found myself invited still deeper into a posture of availability. With no guarantees of what future might bring, I had to learn to trust all over again; to come to believe in my own goodness, especially in light of my human failings. This time, it was a sense of self grounded not in ability or achievement as Sister or minister, but in the exquisite reality of being a creation of God, profoundly forgiven and profligately loved.

I went to the desert to listen. I found there an invitation for participation in the grace of the present moment, and availability to transformative mystery. I found there a unity of existence, of my very being and God. I began to understand more deeply the concept of ministry as mission, as being about the essence of who I am in God's love rather than what I can do to facilitate God's love. And this was to be my point of departure for home.

I have always believed in the power and grace of simply dwelling in God. I believe that our world stands in need of witness to the value of contemplative being, especially now when our nation seems to be moving ever more frantically toward a destructive sense of acting in the name of justice. But now, by virtue of my sabbatical time in the desert, I have experienced first hand that simple state of being as opposed to doing. The message has moved from theory to lived reality. It has not been easy. My sabbatical time has changed me. And it is still changing my ministry in service of mission.

As a consultant and facilitator, in addition to posing to clients the prosaic beauty and necessity of being still in order to listen, I own the struggle of resisting the lure of a frenetic society, the risk of possibly “missing” something as it rushes by. In proposing a surrender of achievement orientations, I acknowledge the pain that comes with the absence of power, the difficult self-emptying that companions a lifestyle of surrendering control. In portraying the response to God’s transformative invitations of future, I confess the late night terrors that will riddle your dreams with doubts and misgivings. Grace, enfleshed as lived experience, is not always easy. The ever evolving vocation of ministry has its costs.

Away from the measured routine and silence of the desert, caught again in the tangle of schedules, airports, and meetings, my dance with the multi-headed creature of ministry continues. Rarely is the music soothing and peaceful. Each turn of ministry’s orbits of listening, participation, and availability calls forth a deepening faith and recommitment to radical values that find little support in our world’s culture. When I waver, I pray, and I remember.

I remember the grace of my sabbatical time, of softening, slowing, listening, and opening to an indwelling of God like none other I have ever experienced. I remember being caught in Mystery greater than my scheming could imagine. I remember the high desert, a place of holiness enfolding the sacred of ages past, present and yet to come.

For a fleeting moment, grounded in these graces, I am able to surrender. It is then when I know most clearly that my deepest expression of ministry is my life as a Sister of St. Joseph. Together with women who are my Sisters, our response to God is in living our Congregation’s mission of unioning love.

Smiling gratefully, I give voice to the mantra my director entrusted to my care – “Jesus, teach me to love.” Then, for the briefest of moments, the dance pauses. The hungry beast of ministry rears its heads and gently spews forth minister, grounded in peace, grounded in God. May it be so for you.