

**We Are the Change**  
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UUMH Chatham

(note: please read “No Time to Think” first)

There is a question in the evaluation form that we Interim ministers have to answer every six months or so. It wasn't asked until a couple of years ago. The question is this:

*Has the leadership encouraged and has the interim minister attended to the self-care and spiritual practice which are essential to a rich, insightful, effective, and inspiring ministry?*

The question threw me for a loop the first time I read it. Spiritual practice. Hmmm. I thought about it for a while, quite a while, until I realized that my spiritual practice was my activism. It may sound odd, but that is the fact. Activism feeds my soul. It is the only thing I can do to ward off the despair I would feel if all I did was read the news and then try to do my pastoral job. The funny thing is that I've become more of a radical since I became a minister than I was beforehand. Perhaps it is because I cannot preach or teach or do anything else with my back to the world. Perhaps it is because the tradition that has called me here is a prophetic one. Perhaps it is basically the best way I can think of to justify my existence. In any case, you have an activist for an interim minister. If you don't like it, then you will know not to look for an activist minister as you search for your next settled minister.

In the mean time, today my task is to share with you some of the insights I gleaned two weeks ago when I traveled to Las Vegas to attend the first gathering of the progressive blog world. Before going on, I probably should explain some of the vocabulary. A web log, or “blog” is a form of story telling or diary writing that is done on the internet or world wide web. There are many millions of blogs about every topic you could imagine from cooking to motorcycle maintenance to raising pets or children. The kind of blogs that I frequent, are political blogs, to be more precise, liberal or progressive blogs. This began a couple of years ago when I was trying to find out more about the candidacy of VT governor, Howard Dean. From his web site I started following links. A link appears as underlined text that may be rendered in a different color than the rest of the story and it takes you to another web page. From that site, I discovered “the hamster” a web site run by a student at George Washington University named Eric. Every day he would scan web based online newspapers around the country and find good stories and good commentary. I would follow his links. On the side bar he had a permanent series of links to other web sites. I started following those links and discovered a whole new world filled with brilliant insightful people who write well and attempt to understand politics. I also found enough humor to keep me from despair after reading or listening to the news. Between the humor and the information, I was hooked. Eric, by the way, now works for Al Franken as blogger/ researcher for Al's show on Air America Radio.

This new addiction of mine grew gradually. I would read news on Common Dreams or Truthout. I'd start my day with Liberal Oasis. The Smirking Chimp also had news gleaned from newspapers around the country. I mostly read the web sites intermittently, but never voraciously. It took a while until I discovered that many of the writers invited comments. There would be a link that literally said, "comments" and once clicked, a box would open and there would be a thread of comments, questions, theories, and other links written by people all over the country, and in some instances far beyond. I discovered the DailyKos founded by a guy named Markos Moulitsas Zuninga, which has become the largest progressive blog, and now the largest political blog on the web. It is an incredibly interactive site which provides essentially a gathering place for storytelling, analysis and thought. People write stories, or "diaries" and once you have opened an "account" that is signed up and adopted a screen name, you are welcome to jump into the conversation or start your own. The DailyKos averages about a million page views a day and is read by more people than most newspapers in the US. There are almost 100,000 registered users now. I signed up more than 75,000 users ago.

By now you are asking, "What does all of this mean" and "Has she gone off the deep end and entered a cult or something?"

Let me tell you what I have learned since reading the blogs.

1. Understanding what the news means is more important than knowing what the news is. We live in an era of spin. Much of the news is pre-packaged by the administration and the corporations. Good analysis used to be hard to find, but is now freely available on the web and in some print magazines.
2. There is literally NO news media that can be trusted to give the whole story about a news item any more. Finding truth takes effort. "Truthiness" a term coined by comedian Stephen Colbert, is everywhere.

*"Truthiness is the quality by which a person purports to know something emotionally or instinctively, without regard to evidence or to what the person might conclude from intellectual examination."<sup>1</sup>*

Even NPR and PBS can no longer be trusted as they are now being run by people the administration has appointed to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. The appointees have been political ones with all that implies.

3. The traditional news media now considers balance to be telling both "sides" of a story. The story could be about evolution and creation or about global warming and the media will give equal time to both "sides" and not mention that one side has the facts behind it and the other doesn't. This includes PBS! Journalism, real journalism is hard to find.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Truthiness>

Writers who might consider themselves personally to be liberal will bend over backwards not to seem so in their writing.

4. There are a lot of really really smart people who have taken to the internet to try to speak the truth and tell the full story of what is going on this country and around the world. Most of them give their time freely with the hope of finding ways to fix so much of what is broken in our system. Surprisingly, many of the liberal or progressive bloggers used to be apolitical or even conservatives.

We come together to talk about candidates, the courts, the wireless wiretaps, science, economics, the aftermath of Katrina, and a world of other issues. This week, the mother of one of the bloggers died, and the blog community stepped forward and left hundreds of messages of condolence while other bloggers stepped in to guest write on her blog.

About a year and a half ago, some of the people who actively participate on the DailyKos decided that online chatting was not enough. Raising money for promising candidates was not enough. Generating phone calls and faxes to congressional offices was not enough. They decided to plan a gathering where those who were highly motivated could meet face to face and increase our activism. The YearlyKos was born. As stated in the program:

“The mission of the YearlyKos Convention is to empower everyday blog readers and on-line activists to amplify their voices by engaging on the issues they care about in personal face-to-face discussions with elected officials, expert scholars, leading bloggers, and other blog readers. We are pioneers, exploring the power of online organizations to effect real changes in the offline world.

The agenda for this conference was developed and designed online by convention attendees and blog readers. We used blogging technology to develop agenda items, and used the online feedback of volunteers, advisors, and the entire blog community to shape what would be talked about and whom the extensive guest list should include.”

I have been to many conferences and conventions. I’ve been going to our General Assemblies since 1986—not every year, but to at least half of them since that date. I’ve gone to gatherings of liberal religious people on several occasions including the Summit on Ethics and Meaning, and the Progressive Religious Partnership. They all do good work in their own way. They motivate people, they connect people. The workshops and presentations inform and illuminate. Some even leave us with things to do when we get back home, but in many cases, the event is the endpoint, not necessarily the beginning. This one was different. One thousand people came together to meet, talk, strategize, and learn. And 125 media people came to watch us and try to figure out who were were.

Why would an ordained minister choose to go to such a gathering? I believe it is because I serve congregations in a tradition that is called to bring hope. Universalist preacher John Murray said it so well.

*"Go out into the highways and bi-ways. Give the people something of your new vision. You may possess a small light, but uncover it, let it shine, use it in order to bring more light and understanding to the hearts and minds of men and women. Give them not hell, but hope and courage; preach the kindness and everlasting love of God."*

We are living in frightening times. Those with personal memories of Germany in the 1930's are wondering how this country, the land of opportunity, the shining star of democracy, how we will stop the steady erosion of our liberties, of our constitution. The reading describing the gradual transformation of Germany during those years feels all to eerie and foreboding to those of us paying attention to what is happening in our country. With much of the traditional media refusing to challenge so many of the actions of the government, the hope we seek, the means to understand what is going on and be able to stand up and say NO is coming through the internet. Via e-mail we hear from the organizations doing work on the ground on a multitude of issues. Via the web, we have found new ways to communicate and organize, and yes, bring people together to talk about remedies and solutions.

So after several days in Washington DC working with the Spiritual Youth for Reproductive Freedom, I arrived in Las Vegas and immediately went to caucus rooms where I met with others from Massachusetts who also came for the long weekend. Some names were already familiar, some, new. All of the faces were new. Then I met the people who I am now working with in grass routes activities around the country. That evening was the opening event complete with the crew from Laughing Liberally. Our community knows that without humor, the movement starves.

In the morning and for the next three days there were panels with folks from MoveOn, The Progressive Majority, Democracy for America, and others. That morning there was the all star panel of experts, those who know more about the story than anyone, on the CIA Leak investigation—the one that has thus far indicted Irving Scooter Libby. Ambassador Joe Wilson was there along with Dan Froomkin of the Washington Post and the great bloggers, Jane Hamsher, Christy Hardin Smith, and Marcy Wheeler. The ballroom was filled for that panel. Senator Barbara Boxer came to cheer us on as did Howard Dean and Senator Harry Reid. I attended the Religion Roundtable, a small gathering of maybe 40 people as was the Roundtable on Abortion. I saw presentations on the changing demographics and media, I listened to George Lakoff talk about the right wing's use of the words "freedom and liberty." (new book alert, coming out in July) I missed sessions on the environment and sustainable energy, on labor, on health care, on so many issues that are important. With four great events scheduled in every time slot, there was no way to do everything! I also missed the big parties. I was tired and had a terrible cold and didn't make it to Gov. Mark Warner's extravagant event complete with chocolate fountains and ice sculptures! C'est la vie.

I had the pleasure of being in a small meeting with John Javna, the author of [50 Simple](#)

Things You Can Do to Save the Earth. That book came out in 1990 and sold more than 4 million copies! He has a new one out which we are adopting as our “field manual”, 50 Simple Things You Can Do to Fight the Right. John says of himself, “I’m an average guy who wants to do something for my kids.” We met with him because we are working on the “Roots Project” literally the beginning of a progressive grass roots organizing and action project.

John’s book contains a treasure trove of information, tips, links and suggestions. He talks about values the way we talk about values. What matters to us at the deepest level? Do we believe in equal opportunity? that everyone deserves health care? the right to privacy? protecting the environment? These are progressive values and they are traditional American values. He quotes Gary Bauer of the Family Research Council, “*We are engaged in a social, political and cultural war. There’s a lot of talk in America about pluralism. But the bottom line is, somebody’s values will prevail. And the winner gets the right to teach our children what to believe.*” (p. 15) Well we have a lot of work to do to hold on to those pluralistic values.

We came to Las Vegas not quite knowing what to expect. Those outside the blogisphere knew even less what to expect. Maureen Dowd was hanging out with us trying to figure us out, as were “spies” from the Weekly Standard and other right wing and traditional media outlets. What we learned was not necessarily in the content of the presentations, though many were outstanding. What we learned was that we truly ARE the change we are waiting for. We are common people who want to work for the common good. We are intent on sharing our energy, our expertise, our ideas and tools with one another to challenge bad policies, to elect good progressive candidates, to put pressure on people and institutions that we feel are doing harm to the country.

SusanG from the DailyKos wrote this:

*“Walking into the reception hall the size of an airport hangar last night, I was struck dumb: Video screens hanging from the ceiling near the stage, a half acre of tables, subdued lighting, a low buzz of anticipation and excitement, the room had the feel you sense before a rock concert - except we ourselves were part of the upcoming performance. We came together in the desert to celebrate what people can do who love their country and dedicate their lives to bettering it.”<sup>2</sup>*

We arrived as an unknown, the picture of who “bloggers” were had been a caricature of a twenty-something who sat in their mom’s basement penning pithy prose. The reality is that we are people like me, many middle aged, most well informed, very motivated and all around good citizens. We are using a new technology to reach out to one another and the wider world of progressives to learn and teach, to research and develop ways to effect change in a political system that seems broken.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.dailykos.com/storyonly/2006/6/9/115348/0341>

We left having made new friends, new connections, new commitments to the work we have ahead of us. If you are interested in getting involved there is plenty of room for all and plenty of work to be done.

I close with the prayer I wrote for the worship service that was held Sunday morning near the end of the conference:

## **PRAYER**

As we look around this room today, we now have faces to match with the names we have seen so often. Each face has a story and a circle of family and friends and coworkers who know them in a different way than we do. For a few short days we left those circles behind to come to this place and take up the work that calls us. Before we give voice to that call, let us take a moment to remember those whom we left behind, their faces, their importance to us, their needs that we may try to fill but sometimes fail. We offer a prayer for those left behind, For their health, their well being; for their love, for their light. We give thanks for their presence in our lives.

Each of us has people with names and faces who entered our lives at crucial times. Family, friends, teachers, strangers whose words or deeds sounded as our personal call to action. May we take a moment to reflect on them as well for without them, we would not be here.

Each of us has a higher power, someone or some thing greater than ourselves that is sought for strength, for solace, for encouragement in times of need. May we take a moment to honor and give thanks to that power, whatever it may be, which sees us through the long days and dark nights of the soul.

We are gathered here because we have been called to act on behalf of those who cannot. We have been called to speak up for those who have no voice. We have been called to stand up for those unable to do so by themselves. We are called to be prophets in our own time. We, here assembled, came to answer that call.

There was a time when a despot ruled and one by one people were arrested, imprisoned, executed for things they may or may not have done, or simply for who they were. Their friends, neighbors, countrymen were afraid and did not speak up to try to stop the injustice. We cannot let that happen again, we cannot let that happen here, thus we are called to speak up.

I invite you to speak the refrain, "We will speak up"

For those who have been unjustly imprisoned,

***We will speak up***

For those who have been tortured or abused

***We will speak up***

For mothers, fathers, wives and children, grieving over the loss of a soldier in wars for

away

***We will speak up***

For mothers, fathers, wives and children grieving over the loss of a civilian loved one lost in wars and conflicts far away

***We will speak up***

For those still left homeless or jobless after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina

***We will speak up***

For those suffering losses from natural disasters world wide

***We will speak up***

For those who are poor and in need of the basics, food, shelter, healthcare

***We will speak up***

For those suffering from terrible diseases for want of medicines

***We will speak up***

For those toiling in sweatshops being paid slave wages

***We will speak up***

For those who cross borders looking for freedom and a living wage

***We will speak up***

For those who love and seek commitment but are are legally barred from marriage

***We will speak up***

For those who would make choices over their childbearing but are being denied that choice

***We will speak up***

For those denied basic rights and freedoms

***We will speak up***

For those who bravely challenge corrupt authorities at great risk to themselves

***We will speak up***

For the sake of our country, our democracy and all that it stands for

***We will speak up***

We will speak up for one another, for our elected leaders who speak up, for our country and the promise of freedom that it has held out to us for 230 years. When the great theologian, Reinhold Neibuhr penned the serenity prayer, he urged us to discern the things we could change and recognize the things we could not. Creator spirit, grant us the courage to change those things we can.

May it ever be so.