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Jane and I are traveling in a well-used Pontiac Transport. Here, we're putting more road miles on this van than on any other place we've lived. Although our resources are divided, both monetary, emotional, physical, we've needed to face reality. We need to give some thought to the purchase of a newer vehicle.

In the parking lot at Food Lion, a vehicle snatched our attention. I wanted to find out where the driver purchased this particular Mazda. I'm approaching the vehicle. I'm seeing it's a middle-aged woman. I'm noticing she does not notice me. She has just taken a big bite of the burger she took out from McDonald's. She sees me. I'm ill at ease.

There is a reason I'm not comfortable, feebly waving at her and gesturing in a way that means you'd like a person to roll down their window so she can be asked a question. We come from a metropolitan area. There, in the beliefs of some people, particularly a single woman, it is lunacy to respond to a strange male, even if white, even if "over the hill" around some of his edges.

She tries to chew and swallow. She wants to accommodate me. She really listens to my question about her vehicle, and she gives me an answer. She elaborates on her answer. She shares her experiences with the vehicle and shares her opinions with me. She listens to additional questions. Incredibly, I think, she anticipates some of my questions. More incredibly, she gives me information about her vehicle which I did not think to ask about, but which I find interesting and helpful.

We were engaged in a very helpful and satisfying dialogue. We were sharing—me my needs to know and she her need to inform.

She asked my name. "Bob", I told her. "I'm Pastor Karen," she replied, when I asked for her name. She was ministering to me—she recognized my need and she responded to it—with enthusiasm, good energy, positiveness, with no condescendingness.

That's my opening for Sunday, I told myself. I'm planning to say some things about caring and ministering in our Fellowship and Pastor Karen has ministered to me. I'm going to lay that anecdote on them. It is a most appropriate example.

We are a liberal religious group without a formal pastoral person. This makes us fairly unique. We are lay-led and have strong lay leadership. As any spiritual group, we have ministerial needs. Depending how you look upon it, we have a wide variety of ministerial needs. And, these needs are from time to time but, overall, quite constant in a group our size with our demographics:

- Geographically spread out
- Beyond average age—as a group
- Rather well-off economically—as a group
- Unfortunately, not culturally diverse

(but, maybe diverse enough that our collective life stories and anecdotes are still able to be instructive to one another.)

And –

- We are without a clergyperson

Our ministering, when needed, needs to be done by ourselves, us, one another and we do minister with our Fellowship. Can we do more?

The action of this very powerful verb is more accessible for your consideration if we understand that, to minister, our need not be clergy or in any way caught up in anything religious.

To minister is to give service, care, or aid. It is also to contribute as to comfort, happiness, etc. It is to recognize that other person and their needs, desires, anxieties, goals and aspirations. And we can each do that.

Ministering is to be other-centered—compared to self-centered.

Does the activity or behavior of this verb seem to you remote? Novel? Goody, good-ism? Not-for-you-ish?

Not so! There are folks right here ministering—

- Folks who are interested in, sustain, and give time to Audobon Society
- A person who sees to it that we have speakers and a worship program each Sunday.
- A person, with much help from others, in seeing to it that our first home was designed, planned, the land cleared, and the building now taking shape.
- A person who provides the accompaniment for our hymns.
- Another person who operates our mechanical music via tapes/discs.
- A group of people who craft and decorate and thereby create things of beauty and whimsy and raise money for charity, and last but not least, help UUFR gain visibility in the community.
- There is each person who has been president of the Fellowship.

What, then, is ministering/caring?

Well, for Jane and me, when we gave birth to a Down's syndrome child, our energies, our day-to-day planning, our financial planning, our love, our public relations for our family was one example of a ministry.

Jane became an advocate for accessibility for persons with handicaps. She was also president of the PTA to thump for more and better devices for students with handicaps. I took a “bend” in my career activities both in terms of the educational programs I administered and in the course I taught. I also branched out to a clinical practice in addition to my academic involvements.

Because she has shared it with us, I know that Ann has a ministry—her daughter who now lives in Hyannis on Cape Cod.

Because I’m new to the Fellowship, I can’t be aware of the many and various ministries each person has elected to be involved in. Most likely many of your ministries have not been shared with others.

What is a ministry? It is anything you do which focuses upon other persons or some activity which generally benefits other persons. It is what you bring your energy to, your focus to. It may be here, in your home, in your job. In your work you may try to see to it that it is a friendly atmosphere, that it is an arena free of pettiness, that it is an arena of helpfulness and fairness.

Our ministering is an outgrowth of the person focus and person centeredness of UU. We elevate the worthfulness of the individual to a high status and we always recognize the potential growth.

We can do this because we are not rigidly deity centered. We do not feel that it is the will of a deity that is so important that we lose sight of the significance of the individual person. We are strongly person centered. And this is what I am grateful to UU for. Its person centeredness.

What are you grateful to UU for? Ann helped us consider this in a program she led a few weeks ago. Humorously, a friend related this “gratefulness” to UU to me.

In Ithaca, New York, as long ago as 1892, when the Reverend John M. Scott finished leading service at the UU church, he went downtown to the Platt and Colt Pharmacy. He got a dish of vanilla ice cream. One day Charter Plath, the man behind the counter, poured cherry syrup over the ice cream and then put a candied cherry on top. Like all good ministers, Reverend Scott knew a miracle when he encountered one. He suggested naming the new sensation after the day it was created. Thus was the “ice cream Sunday” born.

We are a person-oriented Christian sect. We value one another, at least or more maybe, than a particular set of beliefs. So, it shouldn’t be difficult for us to minister to one another and to aid one another to grow spiritually.

There is a concept of Carl Rogers which UU’s find easy to understand. It is a little more difficult to put into practice than it is to understand—Unconditional Positive Regard.

This concept was the key to Roger's system of psychotherapy. It was also integral to his explanation of personality development.

And Unconditional Positive Regard was an idea that naturally emerged from Rogers' studying theology before turning to psychotherapy. It helped him become a very influential humanistic psychologist. His client centered therapy/person centered therapy places emphasis upon the person's subjective point of view—eye of the beholder. To promote human welfare, that is, to help in the other person's personal growth, Rogers maintains we should relate to one another with Unconditional Positive Regard.

Thomas Harris (1967) has described this relationship with the phrase, "I'm OK, you're OK" in his book by that title.

Unconditional Positive Regard, complete, unqualified acceptance of another person, much like the love of a parent for a child. If one expresses anger, or even a desire to kill, the listener should accept that as an understandable feeling, even while discouraging the other one from acting on the impulse. Doesn't this view resemble the Christian admonition to "hate a sin but love the sinner?"

Rogers advocates a caring for others—uncontaminated by evaluations—his/her thoughts, feelings or behavior. Pursuits of caring, or listeners who are ministering, make affections or acknowledgement unconditional—that is, the other one is assured he/she is worthy. Affections, attention—no matter what they say, think, or do.

Personal growth—emotional healing—overcoming stress—is difficult and perhaps actually distorted—when the listener (the one who is ministering) is conditional in offering or providing attention, affection or love. It is not helpful to have to live up to the other one's expectations.

One very unhappy husband in my practice at one time didn't know what was wrong—well, he did know it came to the fact his wife was beginning an affair with the scout master of his teen age son's scout group and at the same time the man was sexually molesting his son—with his wife's knowledge. As my client related incident after incident between him and his wife, "I said," "she said/did", etc., it became clear that she never validated, never substantiated, never confirmed his perceptions, his views and opinions. He realized it had always been this way, and he knew her well after twenty-five years, and decided separation was appropriate. He was very relieved. He said he had turned himself inside out seeking her validation. He started to focus upon where he got it elsewhere—work as a music teacher in a school setting, in other social relationships, singing in a choir. He gradually became more self-assured and also became a happier man.

Surrounded by, responded to with Unconditional Positive Regard, people are able to accept themselves and others, realistically and accurately—and treat all with Unconditional Positive Regard.

My wish for our Fellowship is to foster ministering and, in addition, the freedom to ask for ministering. What are your wishes for UUFR?

Here's a poem about wishing. It's written by a former US poet laureate, Billy Collins.

The Three Wishes

Because he has been hungry for days,
the woodsman wishes for a skillet of hot sausages
and because she is infuriated at his stupidity,
his lack of vision, shall we say,

his wife wishes the skillet would stick to his nose,
and so the last wish must also be squandered,
by asking the genie to please
remove the heavy iron pan from the poor man's face.

Hovering in the smoke that wafts up
from his exotic green bottle,
the genie knew all along the couple
would never escape their miserable lot—

the cheerless hovel, the thin dog in the corner,
cold skillet on a cold stove—
and we knew this too, looking down from
the cloud of a sofa into the world of a book.

The man is a fool, it is easily said.
He could have wished for a million gold coins
as his wife will remind him hourly
for the rest of their rueful lives.

or a million golden skillets
if he had a little imaginative flair,
and that is the cinder of truth
the story wishes to place in one of our shoes,

Nothing can come from nothing,
I nod with the rest of the congregation,
Three wishes is three wishes too many
I mutter piously as I look up from the story.

But every time I think of it,
all I ever really feel besides a quiver
of sympathy for the poor woodsman
is a gnawing hunger for sausages—

a sudden longing for a winter night,
a light snow falling outside,
my ax leaning by the door,
my devoted, heavysset wife at the stove,

and a skillet full of sizzling sausages,
maybe some green peppers and onions,
and for my seventh and final wish,
a decent bottle of Italian, no, wait...make that Chilean red.