

RESPECT IS THE BEGINNING AND THE WAY OF MINISTRY

by Peter Short¹

The United Church of Canada has a fiercely populist take on leadership. Every 3 years the General Council gets together and kicks up a new spiritual leader for the denomination. It could be anybody — woman or man, lay or ordered, old or young. Just two things are required: the prospective moderator must be a member of the church and a commissioner to the General Council.

At the 39th Council in Thunder Bay commissioners elected David Giuliano. David did not climb up any ecclesiastical ladder. There was no being Vice Moderator in order for him to get some orientation and training. There was no period of domestication to the ways and needs of the administration. The whole thing is democratic and abrupt to a fault. One day David is a local pastor in Marathon, Ontario, where he has been serving for 19 years. The next day he is being addressed as “Moderator”. It’s like falling down a rabbit hole and waking up in another world. And the whole thing ends as abruptly as it began. There is no exit interview, no briefing of the next moderator; just turn in the keys, walk out of the hall when the General Council meeting is ended and get on with your life.

One sees the fingerprints of our Presbyterian heritage all over this: don’t let power fall into the clutches of an entrenched hierarchy. Let’s not have an episcopal college of electors. Let the people choose — and often — lest power become vested and unresponsive. All of which is to say that while I have served the office of moderator I am not an expert in anything — except perhaps in finding myself in situations for which I feel inadequately equipped.

¹ This is an address that Peter Short delivered in Kingston, Ontario, at Queen’s Theological College Annual Conference on October 16, 2006.

Of course any minister who, say, walks into a hospital room where a family is letting go a precious life, any pastor who breathes the air of devastation in that room knows what it is to find oneself in a situation for which one feels inadequately equipped. It is part of pastoral work to walk into places where every human technique has been tried, every strategy exhausted, and where there is nothing more to be done. A crack has opened in the universe. Ministers must walk into places like that. We must become accustomed to the landscape at the borders of a far country from which the human creature does not return. It is in such places that we in large measure learn the work, if we ever learn it at all. Human beings do not live by expertise alone.

I remember my first opportunity to speak to the church as a newly-elected moderator. I was addressing the Council that had just decided to petition the Government of Canada to include same-sex marriage in the marriage legislation. I looked out at the faces of 600 people seated in the arena. For many of us this was a glorious day, one that had long been awaited. But then I looked up in the stands and I saw the faces of my mother and father in the crowd. Neither of them believed at the time that same-sex marriage was the right thing for Canadian society or for the church. I knew they represented many thousands of good people who lend heart and hand generously to the mission of the United Church. For them the foundations of a known world had been shaken. Catching sight of their faces, I saw that the most important thing was to speak with respect for the people — all the people — for all belonged to the beloved community, not just the ones who agreed with the decision.

Honour thy father and thy mother.

Learning to respect the people of the church is a good beginning place in ministry. It is remarkable how often we ministers view the people of our congregations as a problem to be dealt with: “The people are not progressive, they are not interested in my study groups, they do not practice good

stewardship, they do not want to be on committees, they are going to hockey instead of coming to church.”

Honestly, when the medium in which the artist works becomes the problem, the artist has lost something essential. Imagine a potter for whom clay is the problem. Imagine a poet who is fed up with words. The people are the medium in which the pastor’s art is ordered. Every medium has its characteristics, it’s necessities, limits and potential. A pastor begins with respect for the people as the photographer begins with respect for the light. Just as the artist can “see” the work before it emerges from the materials, so the pastor learns to see what is within the people. This is heart work. The heart is what makes it possible for the eyes to see.

An elder of the Cree people, my friend Floyd Steinhauer, taught me about this. He used to tell of a young man who came to him wanting to learn how to hunt. Floyd had taken him out into the woods and at the edge of a clearing they stopped. Across the clearing Floyd could see a deer standing in the trees. Floyd pointed out the animal. The young man looked and looked but he couldn’t see it. He was too agitated, too anxious to shoot the gun and get home with the prize. Floyd would say, “You can’t see if your heart isn’t right.” Eventually, with the help of Floyd and the teaching of the elders, the young man began to see. It is a skill to be learned by heart.

The work of any good pastor is first to see what is standing there alive and quiet in the trees. It will be impossible for pastors to see if they are anxious about outcomes and in a hurry to achieve the desired results.

When I was settled by the church on the Gaspé Coast and had been living for a few months in the big old manse in New Carlisle, I found myself irritated that the house didn’t have a shower. At a meeting of the manse committee I asked if a shower could be installed in the bathroom. A few days later a volunteer from the committee arrived at the door with the necessary parts and equipment. When he had finished the work we turned it on. Perfect. When he saw that I was happy with the new shower a

broad smile of delight spread across his face. He packed up his tools and went home. The next day I was driving down the coast doing some visiting and I decided to turn up the lane toward his little house and barn. I hadn't been there before. We had a good chat in the kitchen and at one point he said we should have a cup of tea. I watched him pick up a bucket from the counter, go out the screen door and into the yard where he started to pump water from the well. As I watched him working the pump handle it dawned on me that this man didn't have running water in his own home. He hadn't even mentioned it. How could he have taken such delight in providing for me what he didn't have for himself? He taught me things about grace that I still can't describe in words.

Ministers don't have to create grace in the lives of people — couldn't create such a thing even if they wanted to. It's already there — standing in the trees. Respect is how we begin to see. Has the minister any idea of the sacrifice that is the daily bread of so many of the people? The hidden disappointments and grief they carry? The stunning generosity with which they give their lives to those they love? Has the pastor caught even a glimpse of the devastation in which so many people must put their feet on the floor in the morning and go out to live faithfully another day? I love the way Thomas Merton said it: "There's no way of telling people they're walking around shining like the sun."

When I am with the children at the front of the church, singing a song or telling a story, I am aware that I am in the presence of intellectual superiors. It is only a matter of time before that becomes apparent. In the congregation I am always in the presence of spiritual superiors. This is truth only perceived with the eyes of the heart.

Many of us are deceived by the facility we have acquired because we have learned the theological code. We have picked up the language of religion and sworn loyalty to the brand of the church. But whenever we get to the place where the people we work with are the problem, we know the jig is up. We've lost

respect for the medium which is essential to our art. You can't see if your heart isn't right.

But then what are we to do in those inevitable days when the atmosphere grows tense with conflict? People are arguing or have retreated into silence. They are threatening to withdraw support or to leave. At such times, hearing their voices, I try to remember that in my own mind I carry many conflicting voices. I have, for example, a voice of caution. I often hear it say something like: "Now you just be careful! Don't go rushing in without thinking things through and considering all the implications. You don't want to make a fool of yourself or do something you'll regret. Better to be safe than sorry." That voice of caution has my best interest at heart. It is trying to protect me — and others too.

On the other hand, I have a voice of adventure as well. It's every bit as much my voice even though it counsels exactly the opposite approach: "Now you just remember that you only go around once in this life. You of all people ought to know what faith is for. You can't live as a prisoner of your own anxieties. Sure there's a risk. Life is a risk, so is love. You must take the current when it serves or lose your ventures." That voice of adventure has my best interest at heart. It is trying to encourage me.

So which voice is my real, authentic voice? Both of them.

Which voice should I listen to? Both of them.

Which one is right? Both of them.

Which should I respect? Both.

That's only two of the voices within. They are legion. Although it is not always apparent or convenient, the voices are a sign of health. Why? Because if you've ever looked into the eyes of someone who has no struggle with any question, who is hearing only one voice and for whom doubt does not exist, you are not looking into the eyes of great faith. You are in the presence of madness.

If we respect the voices within ourselves as necessary to a healthy psyche, why would we not respect the voices within the body of Christ? These voices struggle with one another just as our own inner voices do and they have the best interest of the beloved community at heart. It may be hard to see, but with extremely rare exceptions, all the people the minister works with are doing what they believe is right and best for the community. You may not agree with their point of view. You may be disgusted at the tactics they use. You may find their approach to be divisive and condescending and unhelpful. But if you look carefully you will almost always discover that they are struggling to hold on to something that is precious to them.

Here's the thing. People don't resist change. Everybody wants change in the church. From the youngest to the oldest and from every side of the great ideological divides, nobody thinks the church is perfect. They all want it to change in some manner. People don't resist change. They long for it. Sharon Daloz Parks observes that what people resist is not change, but loss. If the minister is attempting to support and guide the congregation when it is making a difficult decision on a controversial issue, that minister has to be able to see how people who seem resistant are struggling to hold on to something that is precious to them. The minister who will not offer the time and the heart to deal with shock, grief, anger, bargaining and loss, who has little inclination to listen to hearts broken by the ending of a known world, will not understand why people are resistant to some proposal. What they are losing must be named, respected for the place it has held in peoples' lives and laid to rest with dignity so that the past does not become an imperfect guide to the future.

This means among other things that the people of a congregation need to see their minister lose sometimes. They need to see how the leader passes through the valley of grief and anger. They need to know whether this person will be a reliable companion and guide for them when they pass through the landscape of loss. They need to see the minister lose because they lose constantly in life. They lose not just at meetings of the

Official Board, they lose jobs, and precious ones, and youth, and love, and self-respect, and hope. If the minister is fixed on little else than winning outcomes, people will think, "This one starts to build alright, but we have no idea if he will be able to finish."

Any minister who "loses" a vote or a struggle in a meeting and who considers the result to be entirely and unequivocally a loss does not understand the depth of the mystery of this work. Simone Weil tells of a fine saying used by European craftsmen and peasants in the last century. When an apprentice got hurt or complained of being tired the workmen would say, "It is the trade entering his body." For a pastor, loss is not just loss. It is the trade entering the body, just as the trade enters the dancer's body through blistered feet and the farmer's body through swollen fingers. Loss is never just loss. There is always something of the trade wanting to enter, something for the widening of the heart and the deepening of the craft.

One of the things that subverts our gospel is the culture's false paradigm of winners and losers. We do not belong to a gospel of winning. We belong to the victory of our brother Jesus. He leads us to the knowledge that life is a victory, but you don't always win. We know this to be true because we know people who apparently have nothing to celebrate; those who may, for example, be living with terminal illness, yet whose lives are a victory of grace and wonder and tenderness. We know people whose lives are victories of generosity in the midst of mean and difficult circumstance.

The opposite of winning is losing. But the opposite of victory is not losing; it is anxiety. Anxiety is all about fear and control and oppression. Northrop Frye said that anxiety is what some people have instead of faith. In the pastor's world the enemy is not loss but the anxiety that masquerades as righteous love and concern. In the pastor's world the victory of Christ lives fully in the dark day of loss as much as it does in the fair day of success. The people need to see their minister lose if the church is to help them find their way safely through the world.

Win or lose, the victory of Christ is revealed when respect is the beginning and the way of ministry.