

Useful Work
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for the Rev. Eliza Galaher
Wildflower Church
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[Readings: "We Arrive Out of Many Singular Rooms," by Kenneth Patton
and "To Be of Use," by Marge Piercy]

This is a special occasion for all of us, and most especially for Eliza and Wildflower Church—for both of you, your first full-time, settled ministry after years of anticipation and preparation! It was a pleasure to coach your hard-working search committee through the long process required to find an excellent minister who meets your needs in this time and place. You will grow together in a grand spiritual journey throughout your ministry together.

To be sure, ministry is a full time endeavor: it never ends. It calls for those of us in this strange vocation to sift through the claims upon our time and do some triage in the service of a larger vision. "We arrive out of many singular rooms, walking over the branching streets," Kenneth Patton tells us. The streets continue to branch out as though we are meandering, but we are drawn back to our primary road toward a vision that remains just out of sight, perhaps around the next bend.

As the branching streets serve as collectors, you will find yourselves accompanied by a multitude, both present and invisible. Some of them have formed a community of welcome known as Wildflower Church, whose words and songs have become familiar to you over time.

Sermons have already begun to seep into the sub-consciousness of the congregation so that the sermons actually grow deeper over time as Eliza knows you more intimately and you all understand where you and she are going together..

There will also be among the multitude those who do not know us; those who do not approve of us; and those who have been disappointed in us. Eliza will disappoint you or herself from time to time. Even heroes have clay feet and

character flaws. Ministers are held to a high standard and they will fall short.

A few examples: As a seminary student, I was invited to Horizon Church in Carrollton, TX, to conduct the service. Everything was going well in spite of my nervous excitement. In fact, I was so eager that I gave the opening words and continued directly into the sermon, my next part in the service. By the second sentence I recognized my error and found a way to backpedal to the scheduled opening hymn and the welcome from the church president.

When I was serving our congregation in Waco, I promised a member that I would do her wedding even though I would be moving on to another ministry in College Station. The summer day finally arrived and my husband Jon and I drove up together from Austin to Waco, about a two-hour journey.

We allowed plenty of time for a leisurely lunch, and another half hour in case there was a delay. Jon let me out at the front door on his way to the church parking lot. I grabbed my robe and stole and my folder and discovered to my chagrin that I had arrived promptly at the starting time for the wedding. They were waiting for me. Fortunately, the bride was calm, certain that I would be there in time. Jon was quite surprised when he came in from the parking lot and realized the processional had ended and the ceremony had already begun!

Speaking of processions, the Rev. John Morgan told a bunch of UU colleagues that he had recently followed a line of clergy up the steps into the chancel on an occasion similar to this one. On the first step, his toe barely caught the edge of his robe and by the third step both feet were trapped inside the robe. The only thing he could do was to stop where he was, halting the procession, then carefully step back down the stairs before he could go up again, now thoroughly embarrassed.

No wonder we ministers have dreams and nightmares about messing things up—forgetting a wedding or a memorial service, losing our notes when they are picked up by the previous speaker, failing to keep an appointment, or looking in vain for the chalice we are supposed to light at that very moment. These nightmares serve both to keep us alert and also to keep us humble. They are also all true!

Yet in II Timothy, chapter 4, verse 5, comes this advice: "Keep calm and sane at all times; face hardship, work to spread the gospel and do all the duties of your calling." (NRSV).

The duties of our calling, both as ministers and as congregations, are many. Lots of people are willing to tell us how it ought to be done. The Rev. David Rankin shared some of the letters he received during his years as minister in San Francisco, including these three:

"Dear Sir: Politics has no place in the pulpit. When you said that in choosing between Nixon and Humphrey we should vote for the best man, you were obviously attacking Mr. Nixon.

"Dear David: Could you speak louder on Sunday mornings? Those of us who always sit in the back cannot hear.

"Dear Pastor: I hate churches and ministers. Could I see you on Tuesday? I have a problem."

Eliza is willing to urge you to vote for the best candidate, to speak louder when necessary, and to help you sort out your problems and to help you find your niche in the church. Just like Marge Piercy, she wants to be with people who work in the field and pass the bags along. There is so much to be done.

Together you will get your hands dirty, wrestle with messy differences, and stretch your resources, but the results will shine and your influence will extend beyond your doors. Work that is real means that each of you is needed to carry some of the water that is sorely needed in this thirsty world. The vessels in which you carry the water will sometimes be filled to overflowing and sometimes they will leak, so that you may not even know who or what will benefit from your labor. Each of you shares the burden, breaks the bread of hospitality, and makes the sacrifice of time and money to make your dreams real.

Eliza has the gifts for ministry, the life experience shared by so many souls, the savvy to find resources when she needs them, and the clarity-of-thinking that wards off manipulation, projection, and general contrariness.

Your job as a congregation is to support the ministry of the church, and that includes taking good care of Eliza, your first full-time minister who has brought everything she has into this good work.

She'll be most visible on Sunday mornings, but you'll also find her in meetings large and small; out in the community, sometimes with her colleagues. She'll raise her voice in song and she'll speak out for peace and justice. The promotion of minority rights is, at its core, a call to human rights, and we all need to speak out.

Eliza will roll up her sleeves to improve Austin area housing, keep your highway stretch of Austin beautiful, support local charities, and apply her muscles and leadership to volunteer work in New Orleans.

The real work of ministry can also be invisible—such as reading, reflection, writing, continuing education, seminars, and sharing her insights with other ministers. Confidential work includes pastoral calls (by phone or in person), conferences, consultations, and collegial support. Spiritual work will ensure the health of Eliza's soul. She must have enough time in solitude and prayer to replenish her spirit from the demands of the day. She must have enough time to play.

But Eliza will not be doing this all alone. She wants to be with the people Marge Piercy describes: "people who submerge in the task." Wildflower Church is a place where individuals become a community as you "move in a common rhythm when the food must come in or the fire be put out." You will sometimes get muddy or bruised by your efforts, but the water you carry will provide cleansing refreshment and healing for body and soul.

Wildflower is not alone, either. Look around at the allies from other congregations and organizations, all of whom are willing to roll up our sleeves to help transform ourselves and the world into "a shape that satisfies, clean and evident."

Ministry is an art form. The people we serve "arrive out of many singular rooms," longing for a community engaged together in "work that is real." "What wondrous love is this" to guide your life and your work. Take your message of hope and transformation into the world and your pitcher will be full to overflowing and your spirit will rest in peace. As Kenneth Patton wrote, "this is the reason of cities, of homes, of assemblies in the houses of worship. It is good to be with one another."

Amen