



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK
Spirituality · Community · Justice

**To Bless, to Hope, to Ordain:
*A Sermon for the Ordination of Megan Mathieson***

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One of my favorite podcasts is [Harry Potter and the Sacred Text](#). It features two graduates of Harvard Divinity School reading the *Harry Potter* series with the same attention, care, and interpretive practices often reserved only for traditional sacred texts. This approach of seeking the wisdom from all parts of this world and this life is quite at home in Unitarian Universalism.

The podcast started a little more than three years ago. And at the pace of a chapter per episode, they recently completed book five, *The Order of the Phoenix*. I have a lot to say about this podcast—and Harry Potter generally—and for those of you who are interested, stay tuned for late October when I have a sermon in the works titled “Defense against the Dark Arts.”

I am bringing up this podcast this afternoon because one of the most poignant parts of each episode comes at the end when each of the co-hosts selects a character from that week’s chapter to receive a blessing. Vanessa, one of the co-hosts, has said about this practice that:

What I love about blessings is that...**when you bless something, you are tapping in to your most vulnerable wish for someone.** And that when you bless something, you are admitting that you have no power over something, and yet you are hoping with every fiber of your being.

I love that description of blessing.

The other co-host, Casper, has said, “Blessing is really a lost art these days, and it's been something that's so important in so many people's lives. That's something we want to retrieve a little bit.” I also appreciate this idea of **retrieval**: returning to the past to *reclaim, recover*, perhaps even *redeem* ancient practices in ways that are relevant for today.

As UUs, we can be a present- and future-oriented people. In the words of one of our classic hymns, we are a people who “**revere the past, but trust the dawning future more.**” But we have gathered here today to participate in the venerable practice of ordaining a minister—and offering our blessing is a key part of that:

when you bless something, you are tapping in to your most vulnerable wish for someone.... You are admitting that you have no power over something, and yet you are hoping with every fiber of your being.

I was ordained on July 6, 2003—sixteen years ago this coming Saturday. That day—that service—was a blessing, as I hope today is for you, Megan. But I also want to let you all in on an open secret: *it wasn't enough.*

Well, it was for a while. Megan, like you, I had excellent teachers, had read lots of books, had a three-year Master of Divinity degree, had been endorsed by an ordination council. And that was enough for a while. But after about three-years of full-time ministry, I felt a growing sense that I needed more training if I was going to sustain a decades-long ministry.

I don't know what that might look like for you. Back then, for me, it meant enrolling in a three-year, low-residency Diploma in the Art of Spiritual Direction program which ended up doubling in length to a total of six years, enabling me to also complete a Doctor of Ministry degree. Today, my continuing educational explorations have taken the form of a serious investment and focus on the practice of meditation.

Along these lines, you are coming into UU ministry at a time when we are in the midst of a significant paradigm shift from a “**Learned Ministry**” to a “**Learning Ministry.**” Although much is required to reach the point of ordination—and Megan can testify to that—it is now further required that all UU ministers engage in ongoing, lifelong, covenanted practices of continuing education.

But even as I celebrate this shift to a ministry of lifelong learning, I want to offer you one final blessing that can potentially serve as a counterbalance. As you prepare—only one month from now!—to begin your first full-time ministry, you will find, I suspect, that there are ten thousand things that might fruitfully occupy your time and attention. But for better or worse, none of us can do ten thousand things well.

Trust me: I tried back in 2013/2014 during my third year here at UUCF, and ended up getting sick three times in a matter of months. Historically, I have rarely gotten sick, before or since, and that winter was a red flag that I was pushing through exhaustion too frequently and wearing down my immune system. In the years since, I have tried to set better boundaries and work more pragmatically and strategically.

In that spirit, I offer you two quotes that have become touchstones for me in discerning a sustainable path forward. The first quote is from the book “**Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander**” by the twentieth-century Trappist monk Thomas Merton. He writes:

There is a pervasive form of modern violence to which the *idealist*...most easily succumbs: activism and over-work. The rush and pressure of modern life are a form, perhaps the most common form, of its innate violence. To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything is to succumb to violence. **The frenzy of the activist neutralizes [their] work.... because it kills the root of inner wisdom, which makes work fruitful.**” (86)

I’ll read that last line one more time because I think it is particularly significant for such a time as this: “**The frenzy of the activist neutralizes [their] work.... because it kills the root of inner wisdom, which makes work fruitful.**” Part of what I understand Merton to mean is that just because we are doing a lot of things doesn’t mean we are being effective.

The second quote is from a book titled *Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community*. They write:

- Even when a need exists *and* we are well qualified to meet it, we are *not* necessarily called to respond to it.

- Something may seem *logical* for us to do, but that does *not* mean that [we are] call[ed] to do it....
- Simply because a task or undertaking is *good* to do, does *not* mean that we are called to do it or that we should *continue* doing it?.
- **To be doing good can be the greatest obstacle to doing something even better.**

Discernment between good and bad is often fairly simple. A much more complex choice is discerning good from better from best.

Megan, bless you—on this your Ordination Day. Bless you, and may your ministry be a blessing. That is my most vulnerable wish for you. I have no power over it. And yet I hope for it with every fiber of my being. Amen. And blessed be.