

"If Our Secrets Define Us"

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Here I am before you – this august body – and all I can think about is a scene from a movie many of you saw when you were children: ‘Raiders of the Lost Ark’. The heroes Indiana Jones and Marion Ravenwood have been captured by the Nazi’s who have stolen the Ark of the Covenant. They all thought it contained God’s mighty power. As the bad guys opened the Ark, Indiana cries out – “Don’t look Marion, no matter what you do, don’t look!!!” They don’t look, but of course we in the movie audience do. We see the Nazi’s, clearly too stupid to have decent respect for real power, open the Ark. We see the Industrial Light and Magic that is unleashed and turns them into corpses, which melt into skeletons and dissolve into dust. Some things should never be seen – right?

I hate to tell you this – I hated finding this out myself – but the movie was wrong. Dead wrong. Some things SHOULD be seen. The powers released from the Ark of the Covenant are at the top of my list.

Let me tell you some stories. I intend to use these stories to show you how what I see and don’t see has changed. These are NOT the kind of stories that parents like to tell their children – stories about how it should be, stories that model good behavior and have morals at the end. These are not prescriptive stories. These are grandparent stories - as I once heard the Hebrew Bible described – descriptive stories about how we humans are vulnerable, often hurt one another and mess up a lot. These stories tell us a lot more about the potholes of life that we all face and leave the ethical discernment to us.

Once upon a time, twenty nine years ago I traveled across the country with my husband and two children to serve as a ministerial intern in Ventura, California. My supervising minister, Frederica Leigh (Lepore), taught me how to be what is sometimes called an ‘after-pastor’, clergy who serve institutions with a history of power abuses, including using those they serve sexually, by a previous minister. That congregation was struggling and had a terrible local reputation as a church where people ‘screwed around’ in the 1960’s and 70’s. Frederica Leigh kept strict confidences, but she did tell me that when a past minister died there was a line of elderly women at her office door seeking pastoral care, women who had had sexual relations with that minister and had never spoken of it before. A few years later another past minister died and a new line of women a decade younger lined up for pastoral care around the same issues. Frederica Leigh insisted on “impeccable” boundaries, faithfully offering pastoral care even to those who were hurt by the very institution we served and promoted, patiently rebuilding trust day by day - year after year - in the office of ministry, and advocating that her colleagues practice clear ethical guidelines concerning clergy sexual abuse.

Frederica Leigh’s advocacy for clear professional guidelines resulted in some of our colleagues shunning her, but she also inspired others to support women to report clergy misconduct. Three of the ministers that attended the local UUMA meetings the year I was there later had their fellowship revoked for clergy sexual misconduct. Although I did not know it then, the lessons I learned from Frederica laid the foundation for my career.

Soon after that internship I was able to attend my first national UUMA meeting. The first of those California

ministers had been censured and the program included information about the ‘problem’ of appropriate sexual boundaries. The ministers in the audience who had served for many years – almost all of them men - asked a flood of questions. This was clearly new territory. The presenter said something about how a minister serially marrying members of the congregation could be a sign of bad boundaries. From then on, the questions focused on, “how many marriages does that take – one, two, three, four?” I actually saw some of them counting their marriages on their fingers. After some back and forth with the presenter, it was decided that two minister-congregant marriages suggested a pattern of bad boundaries, but three was clearly a problem. This was bad news for several well-respected ministers. They clearly felt that the rules had changed in mid-career.

In these ways I was prepared for my first settlement in White Bear Lake, Minnesota. During Candidating Week I felt like a spectator NOT SEEING something of import right in the middle of my vision. They avoided discussing the reasons the previous minister left, so I told them I had to know church wide secrets or I could not accept a call there. Within twenty-four hours the Committee on Ministry convened and told me the whole story in detail. Their previous minister arrived single. He soon married a long time member of the congregation and they all celebrated. Several years later, the minister announced that he was divorcing his wife and marrying another member, with whom he had been doing marriage counseling. He and his wife had even double dated with the counselee and her husband. In a sermon about this change, the minister compared it to the Hebrew Bible story about Jacob, who married the older sister and worked for many years before his father-in-law finally gave him his beloved Rachael in marriage. The Committee on Ministry and board quietly arranged a resignation of the minister. I asked the divorced wife, still an active member of the congregation, what she needed. She asked for only one thing, that the previous minister never come back into the building. At minister’s meetings for the next eight years that colleague lobbied to be able to come and preach or teach, and I said ‘no’ faithfully and consistently. His new wife even took me out to lunch to explain to me why I was so wrong to do this.

The congregation had chosen to *see* the first wife – whom they recognized as mistreated –and the congregation thrived. It took, however, four years for them to trust me in the role of minister. People don’t ever say, “I don’t trust you as far as I can throw you.” At least in Minnesota they don’t. What they did do is start an ongoing very polite series of ‘misunderstandings’ about locks on the minister’s office door. When I arrived they had recently moved into a larger building that had office space which they never had before. They asked what I needed for the minister’s office. I was quickly supplied with a desk and a file cabinet. I was the only staff person there at the time and congregants came in and out of the office even when I asked for privacy or was in a pastoral care meeting with a member. So I asked for a lock - more than once. Finally they installed one, but it only worked one way – it locked me in. Our negotiations continued for several years before they made it possible for me to also lock the door from my side.

About that time the District Executive, Harry Green called me to his office. Harry said that most ministers who followed a situation like the one I followed were kicked out before two years were over – usually over authority issues. Several fellowships nearby had never called a minister again. Not only was I still there but the congregation was adapting well to rapid growth. What did I do? I had no idea.

I did know that by the time they installed the lock to work both ways, the lock wasn’t needed. They respected my privacy and trusted that I respected theirs. And they knew what happened in that office when I was meeting with them during pastoral care. They no longer interrupted. I realized we had changed how we SAW the role of minister.

The only way I could describe it was by referring to that scene from the ‘Raiders of the Lost Ark’. I could

hear the cry –“Don’t look, no matter what you do, don’t look!!!” But we were looking and the unexpected happened. We more than survived, we thrived.

When I was studying ‘grandparent stories’ from the Hebrew Bible I was fascinated by the rituals around the Ark of the Covenant when it was housed in the ancient Temple of Jerusalem. Certain people were allowed to SEE that power they called Jehovah, people with enormous respect, people who took off their shoes, people who recognized the Holy when they saw it. The Israelites at that time believed the Temple and its setting represented the whole of creation – the universe as they knew it – and that Jehovah was everywhere. They saw that the universe was in ever-changing motion and believed that the temple ritual helped keep that movement in ‘Shalom’ – not peace exactly - more like a dynamic state of harmony and balance. The room called the Holy of Holies, which housed the Ark, was only a place that Jehovah visited. And the Power of Jehovah in that place was more like a tipping point on which creation could balance than a place. Once a year the priests entered the Holy of Holies. They did the ritual equivalents of taking off their shoes and putting on mantles of respectful humility knowing that they had the power to knock all of creation off balance if they did not. They could look upon the Holiest of Powers and live. That is exactly what we learned to do in Minnesota.

One by one, two by two, people risked coming into my office to talk. Year by year they learned to trust that the minister would treat them with respect and humility. The Holy Ground where that could happen, the Holy of Holies, happened to be the place they called the ‘minister’s office.’

The congregation’s growth as religious people began by telling a secret. It continued with an analysis of power that our faith calls shared ministry – the priesthood and prophethood of all in covenant. It led to learning to see our own stories as sacred and to see sacred stories as descriptive rather prescriptive. These descriptive stories allowed us the sacred space for ongoing discernment. These lessons also opened my eyes to something that I did not want to see – the congregations in California and Minnesota who experienced ministerial misconduct were not alone. I started to pay attention to the murmuring of whispered secrets.

I belonged to MSUU (Ministerial Sisterhood UU, the women ministers’ organization at the time), where we talked opening openly about this issue. We were not popular. In 1991, Forrest Church, widely considered to be one of our stars, was scheduled to preach at the Service of the Living Tradition. In an interview with *New York Magazine*, with pictures of him with his new wife who had been a congregant where he served, Church had told a reporter that the ethical guidelines prohibiting sexual relationships with congregants were “only guidelines”. On reading the interview, many of us were angry that he was given this honorable task after making these very public comments. MSUU considered picketing the Service of the Living Tradition. I felt torn. I didn’t want to support unethical behavior but I was excited to “walk” and receive my preliminary fellowship at the annual service’s ritual. We decided not to picket. But no good deed goes unpunished. The President of the UUA, Bill Schulz walked by me that week and quietly hissed in my ear, ‘new Puritans.’ I wasn’t sure I heard it correctly, but others were also calling us that. Oh well, we had been called worse.

I became a member of the UUMA guidelines committee from 1996 - 2000. During those years we repeatedly responded to requests to facilitate collegial conversations to explore the differences between confidentiality and secrets: confidentiality requires protecting someone else’s story; keeping secrets involves hiding our own stories. In 1999, I served for both MSUU and the guidelines committee to be liaison to The UU Women Federation’s Advisory Task Force on Ministerial Sexual Misconduct, which they originally formed as Task Force One in response to the Service of the Living Tradition incident. There, I quickly discovered that many of our congregations and our Association kept secrets both large and small. For instance, several women reported that Forrest Church had had affairs with them when they were members and that the congregation

essentially exiled his DRE wife and children from the church he served. A wider circle of colleagues started to confide in me their painful stories such as - a past minister ran off with the seventeen year old daughter of a pillar of the church, and, even though they got married, her mother responded by donating millions of dollars to the local evangelical college. The UUWF Task Force entrusted our convener, Deborah Pope Lance, to report to the UUA concerns we had stemming from complaints we had received from survivors. They complained about alleged sexual misconduct by UUA staff members who were involved in an official response to clergy sexual misconduct. These allegations made survivors feel unsafe and the Task Force look complicit.

The UUA response to our concerns was to disenfranchise the Task Force and to blackball its convener. In effect the UUA broke off all relations with the Task Force as if it no longer existed. Some months later, a UUA staff member took Deborah aside, and framing it as a friendly gesture, told her she should know that she would never again work for the UUA or any UU Group. Actually, the Task Force's and its convener's exile did not stop victims/survivors, impacted congregations or struggling colleagues and after-pastors, from continuing to seek out Deborah for her professional support, nor did it stop survivors and congregational leaders from reaching out to the UUWF's Task Force for justice. I was increasingly frustrated, and those who had hoped the UUA would lead in these efforts were dumbfounded and shocked.

The UUA pushed the Woman Federation's work further away the closer it got to its own leadership, which made me wonder if whispered stories that they were protecting their own swinging culture were indeed true. It appeared that the UUA had a culture which supported keeping of secrets by offering prestige to those who complied, and exiling those who spoke openly about ministerial misconduct, including the most vulnerable of victim/survivors. It felt as if our little UU universe was tilted dangerously off balance and I wanted to shout, "Look, no matter what you do, look!!!"

SECRECY

Near the end of Donna Tartt's novel 'The Gold Finch', the main character, musing on his traumatic childhood with a secret at its center, asks, "If our secrets define us...?", which started me wondering, what if our secrets as congregations and as an association define us? When we don't tell the truth about a minister who betrayed our trust and yet another person becomes invisible to our community, who are we?

I struggled with the fact that keeping secrets seemed to be hard-wired into human nature. This was true in my family. Doing pastoral care I realized it was true in many families and that those secrets often protected family abuse and violence. I became familiar with people who were suffering from severe disassociative disorders, where the secrets of their lives were so compartmentalized that they could not be conscious of what really happened even when they tried. Through them I became aware of research about Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. After 9-11, I started to suspect that PTSD was more common than I thought. I was serving a congregation in Salem, Massachusetts with more than the usual number of members who had led obviously challenging lives, affected by poverty, violence, mental disorders and/or oppression. After 9-11 many members became even more reactive, anxious and distrustful. I couldn't respond effectively because I was feeling the same way. While driving to a family memorial service for a Port Authority police officer who was killed in the Twin Towers, I was aware that my free-floating anxiety had reached a fever pitch and I asked my husband for calm as I took my turn to drive. At one point, however, he emphatically pointed to a car cutting us off and I - within a split second and with absolutely no forethought - punched him with a strength I did not recognize - indeed - I became conscious of what I was doing only when I felt the pain in my own hand. I had to face that I too had PTSD. Recognizing that behavior from my younger days long before I became a minister, I re-committed to carefully managing my reactivity.

I realized that to successfully manage it I had to find a congregation that did not constantly press my buttons. I was called to serve First UU Church of Nashville, TN, where I still serve, now for eleven years. I was attracted to them because they were open about their history as a congregation that had suffered and healed from clergy misconduct. In 1993, a member complained to the board about sexualized behavior by the minister, David Maynard. Conny LaFerriere, a District Executive from California that the Southeast District asked to hold a hearing, recommended that they lodge a formal complaint to the UUA Ministerial Fellowship Committee. To make a complaint an individual had to identify oneself and only one person dared to do so, Anna Belle Leiserson, who reported that she had been sexually harassed. Those who had affairs with the minister choose to keep their involvement private. Rev. Maynard was found guilty of conduct unbecoming and resigned. The congregation split into two as some sought to protect Rev. Maynard's ministry and others wanted him to leave. No one suffered more than Anna Belle who was harassed, bullied and shunned by the minister's supporters. That first year, her hair turned pure white. She says that the attempts to exile her from the congregation were even more painful than the original betrayal by the minister. Healing began in the following year when First UU held a 'Listening Process' that allowed congregants to talk about their varied experiences and feelings, which was then published in a report in which everyone's personal privacy was protected.

By being open about their history First UU Nashville had developed a strong culture of shared ministry and keeping covenant. I followed the Rev. Mary Katherine Morn, who had spent seven years re-building trust in the tenderest areas of pastoral care. It felt like a total luxury to follow a minister with clear boundaries that allowed for people to enter into those sacred, whole and holy places of the heart.

I quickly discovered two things. One, there was still work for the congregation to do, and two, we had to do the work together.

I interviewed many of the people who had been clearly hurt by the clergy misconduct, some who told me they would never trust a UU congregation again – they had become the invisible ones. Those who had stayed in the congregation continued to need ongoing pastoral care, care that only the minister could do, because, as one insightful member said, "I trust you, but I don't trust the minister." In other words, only a person in the role of minister could do the slow work of rebuilding trust that a person in the role had destroyed.

I was surprised how much of the work concerned the role of the minister as administrator. I discovered this as awkwardly as possible, setting off a series of land mines buried throughout the territory in years long past by relational patterns of power and control over money and communication. When conflict arose over apparently minor disagreements about managing volunteer work, I sought coaching from one of our colleagues, Deborah Pope Lance, who helped me sort out which members needed the minister to stay in the role of pastor and which needed me to take on the role of administrator. I had to learn to be more nimble setting healthy boundaries - to become a "boundary Ninja" as one member described it. Over the decade we have very slowly built trust in clergy as able to share the ministries of communications and finances with lay leaders. We did this in multiple ways. We have developed clearer policies and procedures about who has the authority to do what, defined ethical behavior for both the ministry and membership, and worked to equip and empower volunteers to ever more responsible ministries. This work is still in process, and I suspect will always be in process.

As we do this work we have not just learned to run an institution together. To my surprise, clearer policies created the communal safety for us to go more deeply into our own wounds, heal and, with that healing, seek to heal others.

In 2005, Mary Katherine Morn asked Anna Belle Leiserson to help support a new reporter of clergy sexual misconduct, Amanda Tweed. Both Anna Belle and Mary Katherine had served on the UUA's Safe Congregational Panel that resulted in what many of us think of as the 'Muir report', named for the Panel's chair, Fred Muir. The report, presented at GA in 2000 – at the same time as the UUA Vice President Kay Montgomery's, public apology for the association's mishandling of reported misconduct and her pledge to do better in the future - had recommended that reporters of misconduct be assigned Advocates as they went through the investigation process. The Women's Federation Task Force I served on was disbanded because we thought the problem was solved.

But five years later, when Mary Katherine Morn was assigned to work with Amanda, the named role for her was that of liaison, NOT advocate. As they would quickly find out, Amanda needed more than just an intermediary between her and the UUA; she needed an advocate.

A lifelong UU, Amanda had reported to the UUA that in her first year out of college, she had approached the minister of the UU Congregation she was considering joining with concerns related to her sexual orientation. Amanda reports that, three days later, the woman minister invited her to her home where the minister sexually assaulted Amanda. Concerns about the implications for the minister's professional standing initially kept Amanda from reporting the event to anyone, but a few years later, when she learned the same minister had begun a sexual relationship with another young woman she had been serving in a ministerial role, Amanda decided to file a formal complaint of clergy sexual misconduct so the experience she had would not occur for other women. She made her report to the UUA in January 2005.

As time wore on after Amanda's initial report, it became increasingly clear the recommendations from the Muir Report had not, in fact, been adopted by the UUA. In addition to lessening the role of advocate - which Mary Katherine assumed despite the named role of liaison- the UUA kept Amanda in the dark about the status of her case – including when and whether it would be resolved.

Anna Belle Leiserson was shocked to discover that Amanda was being repeatedly dismissed by staff and told to keep all details of her story and the complaint secret because the minister could respond by suing her. Amanda felt silenced, shut out, disrespected and manipulated by the UUA staff; keeping secrets seemed to be at the heart of their response. To this day Amanda has never been officially told the results of the investigation.

The UUA's response to Amanda's report galvanized Anna Belle to carry through an idea she'd had several years before-- to create "Safety Net" – which is both a website and a Congregational Social Justice Committee Action Team. On the web site she warned people that policies from the Muir Report were not being followed and that one might feel abused a second time by the UUA if they reported clergy sexual misconduct. I joined the Safety Net Action Team, which had the mission to explore best practices for the prevention of and a just compassionate response to clergy sexual misconduct at both the congregational and the UUA level. Anna Belle led that team for over seven years, inspiring us all with her skillful analysis of institutional power and persistent advocacy for justice.

During those years, Amanda became a deeply respected affiliate of Safety Net, even though she lived in a distant state. Amanda asked me to publicly use her name because the minister who sexually abused her is still working as a Fellowshipped UU minister and she feels that to use a pseudonym continues to perpetrate the same secrecy surrounding what occurred. As recently as two years ago, Amanda was warned against going public for fear of a lawsuit. UU lay people considered informing the institution for which that minister works about this history for the sake of public safety, but decided not to, also anxious about possible

lawsuits. When the present staff at the Department of Ministries looked for the file on Amanda's case, they discovered that there were skeletal and missing files reporting ministerial misconduct, creating gaps in the record from the previous decade. Previous employees told them that some records were removed at the advice of a lawyer because a minister had threatened to sue them.

So, what would justice look like to Amanda at this point? Amanda has discussed this with me, with the UUA Board Boundaries Working Group, with the UUA Advocates and with Marie Fortune. We agreed on one thing: justice is still called for and it is all of our responsibility to discern how to find justice in cases that were mishandled in the past. How Amanda was treated by UUA staff and members of the MFC was egregious for a religion that purports to hold the inherent worth and dignity of every person as its first principle. Her complaint was filed as a written report and no one ever contacted her to discuss what she reported. In addition, the actual investigation into the abuse was botched with the investigator being directed by the minister as far as who should be contacted and interviewed. It was stacked in favor of the minister from the very beginning. It should come as no surprise that the minister was (presumably, since the official outcome remains unknown) not found guilty of conduct unbecoming a minister.

I considered naming the minister in Amanda's complaint here, during this lecture. There are good reasons to break the secrecy from a preventive risk perspective. The minister remains in a position where she could abuse others. Naming the minister could encourage other possible victims to come forward -- knowing that they weren't alone. Additional complaints shouldn't be needed to support Amanda's reporting. The evidence in her case is strong enough to stand alone but it would be difficult for the UUA to continue to hide behind the "past being the past" if others reported.

This being said, the primary reason I do not disclose the minister's identity here is because Amanda wants to avoid a kangaroo court. She believes in justice and wants the UUA to adjudicate it appropriately. What that looks like is still unknown but in the least would require a new, unbiased investigation into the events she first reported eleven years ago. While she waits for the UUA to do the right thing, Amanda continues to advocate for justice for all reporters as a consultant to the Board's Congregational Boundaries Working Group, and also the trained Advocates. We are called to figure out how to do this together.

When the Safety Net Action Team at First UU was formed, some who joined thought of themselves as secondary victims. One of them, Sara Plummer, had been a board member at the time of the initial complaint about ministerial misconduct. Sara told us how the minister's supporters became bullies, yelling threats at anyone who disagreed with them for months. Shaken, she quietly left the church. Later she received treatment for PTSD that she suspected she developed when she was an army nurse serving in Viet Nam. During the treatment, called Eye Motion Desensitization and Reprogramming, (EMDR) she found that she had a more recent trauma she needed to work on -- that year as a board member. After integrating those traumatic experiences she was able to return to church, even as she worked on healing deeper levels of trauma. Sara let me tell her story to the congregation and her example motivated me to quietly seek treatment for myself. Sara asked me to share her name in this essay, because telling her story out loud has helped her heal, and empowered her to serve as a leader again.

I was diagnosed with complex PTSD. I thought I remembered the event that caused it - I was raped by a stranger with a knife in my home - but I was wrong. I only remembered the events leading up to it and immediately afterwards. Most of the event was stored in my brain, not as a story, but as fragmented images and sensate feelings that were unattached to words. The EMDR seemed to rewire my brain by connecting up all the images and sensations into one coherent memory, not pleasant at all, but much better than the stress-hormone driven anxiety called hyper-vigilance that I had learned to manage, but could not stop. When I

could finally tell a coherent story about the life-threatening incident which became ‘just’ a bad memory, my physical responses literally changed: I was no longer stressed all the time, lost my claustrophobia and fear of heights and could actually relax for the first time in forty years. I was profoundly humbled that I had no way of knowing that I physically could not remember something that had happened to me, let alone changed me so profoundly. I began to wonder how this physical response to trauma which caused highly disassociated visual and sensate memories, played into secret keeping.

Members of Safety Net discovered that listening to each other’s and congregants’ stories has been as painful as re-memembering personal traumatic events. Many of us identified with something Mark Morrison-Reed told us about his historical research into the stories of Unitarian Universalist African Americans who, like victims of clergy sexual misconduct, have been marginalized and exiled from their UU communities: half the time he learned and half the time he cried about what he learned. Crying has been an integral part of Safety Net’s work as well.

At the same time that some of us did personal healing work, and that the congregational system was learning to share ministry ever more deeply, some of us were SEEING how the whole congregational system supported the misconduct decades ago. For instance, in the 1970’s – two decades before the allegations of sexual misconduct -- the congregation was known to be the church where people experimented with ‘open marriage’. A UU friend who attended a Nashville college then said she was warned away from the congregation because the professors from her school who had affairs with students went there. I asked their minister in the 70’s, Bill Gardner, what his ministry in Nashville was like. Bill spent much of his time doing relationship counseling. Many congregants’ partnerships and foursomes were so ever-changing that he and the administrator kept a metaphorical ‘who was with who this week chart’ in their heads to try to keep up to date. Bill generously reflected that in their exploring they were seeking love, but most of their experiments did not lead to the love they sought.

Members did not separate this sexualized culture from constructive justice work they were doing for Civil Rights, Women’s Liberation and Gay and Lesbian Rights, nor did they separate it from their administrative structure. When two treasurers in the 1980’s suspected financial misconduct of the minister that followed Gardner, David Maynard, the board asked the District Executive Roger Comstock to consult. He reported that there was no way to accuse anyone of any kind of misconduct because the congregation had no policies or procedures that defined appropriate ways to manage finances - or anything else for that matter. The Board decided that they would rather be a small church than to create those policies. Having policies might interfere with individual human freedom.

The congregation was good at celebrating its successes in the realm of justice. But every year I hear more sad stories of how people hid the inevitable failures of their experiments. The stories circle around patterns of bullying, the formation and maintenance of cliquish divisions, and distorted perceptions that led to accusations of lying – all classic symptoms of systemic secret keeping.

There were two silos of health during that time, however: the choir led by music director Keith Arnold, and the Religious Education Program led by Bill Welch. Both became areas where respectful behavior was expected which attracted healthy members. Both became areas where people could grow spiritually, serve, and build strong leadership skills. One of the supporters of Maynard told Bill Welch that he had hoped that the minister that had served before Maynard - Bill Gardner - would join them in their sexual experiments. They finally called the minister they were looking for.

Members still struggle over whether or not to talk about any of this. Some learned the limits of individual

freedom. Others are ashamed. One failing elder recently rhetorically asked me, “What were we thinking?” Hints and sighs suggest that there are secrets that will never be told.

Recently, as the Nashville church became a healthier system and the Board Members and staff at the UUA started to take Safety Net’s lobbying for a more transparent response to people who reported ministerial misconduct seriously, we found out that the secret-keeping was wider than even we suspected. I received calls from interim ministers who were sick (some quite literally) of carrying the secrets they had been told in the congregations that they served. Members told these interims stories about being sexually used by ministers who then told them to keep it a secret or the congregation would be destroyed. Some ministers who followed abusive ones said they were afraid to say anything because ‘we don’t say anything negative about each other in public.’ They named colleagues who were censured because they called out others for misconduct. The interim ministers and some district staff tried to count all of the UU congregations that they had evidence had experienced clergy misconduct in living memory. They estimated that one third to one half of our congregations in the U.S. have been affected.

First the interim ministers and then the Department of Ministries and Faith Development offered training. In the fall of 2014 the Nashville congregation was invited to come as a minister-lay leader team to join other congregations with similar histories to an ‘After-Pastor Conference’ with Deborah Pope Lance. I went with a member of our Safety Net, Doug Pasto-Crosby, who had been in the congregation since the time before the problems became known, and a newer member who was on the Board. Quite honestly we went thinking we were a shining example to others of how a congregation could heal and thrive if they did their work. What we discovered was that we had even more work to do. We wondered why some people in the congregation still got reactive at surprising times – it seemed that there were endless buttons yet to be pushed and we never knew when to expect exploding landmines. Would it never end? At the same time many members thought that we should just forget about it and move on – it was such a long time ago. When Deborah invited us to look at our histories through the lens of trauma, we realized that this was the work we had yet to do, not just for individuals, but for the body of the church as a whole system.

Amanda Tweed had already encouraged us to read [The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma](#) by Bessel Van Der Kolk, M.D. We read and preached it. As a community, we learned that trauma happens when a human being’s life is threatened, without means of escape. Our brains are overwhelmed by the over-stimulus and do not process the event as a memory or a story. Instead it is stored in the brain in unconnected fragments. If we are not able to recover afterwards by soothing the fear response and reconnecting the fragments into a remembered story, the traumatized brain becomes hardwired to react like a hair trigger to anything that resembles threat. We are always ready to fight, run or freeze. There are many reasons that we can’t recover afterwards. We may need to continue to protect ourselves from harm. We may blame ourselves for the event and feel ashamed. We may believe that we cannot protect ourselves or others if we admit how vulnerable we are. We may not be able to compute the huge gap between what we thought would happen and what indeed did occur. Often trauma is caused by accidents, tornadoes and earthquakes, but when it is caused by human violence it is easy for violators to keep their crimes secret, since the victims physically cannot tell the story or may not even remember what happened.

Van Der Kolk discusses ways to heal as individuals, but also shows that recent work on trauma suggests a central community component to healing. We cannot heal from trauma alone. He writes, “..language gives us the power to change ourselves and others by communicating our experiences, helping us to define what we know, and finding a common sense of meaning;” I have seen how central community is to healing from trauma at FUUN. Hearing individuals tell their stories, along with hearing religious and cultural stories, allows us to find common meaning and heal as a community. Covenants allow us to create social safety so

that we dare tell these sacred stories.

Critics tell us that when we talk openly about the traumas of our society – encountered in our homes, schools, criminal justice system and faith communities – including child abuse, sexual harassment, abuse and rape, bullying, generational patterns of trauma caused by war, mass migration, family violence, oppression or slavery - people will leave our congregations. We have found the opposite is true. Instead people join and tell us that because our congregation doesn't keep its own secrets they feel safe to get involved, face their deepest vulnerabilities and become empowered to change social conditions.

Safety Net invites all of you to join in this empowerment by telling your stories about these systemic secrets. We have contributed to a Safety Net Archive at Meadville Lombard Theological School by donating our own records of abuse, healing and advocacy. Archivist John Leeker has noticed that people know a lot about ministerial misconduct both past and present, but it is circulated in a limbo somewhere between gossip and records. People did not want to write any of this stuff down. We suggest that people write about or record stories about their experiences with unhealthy congregational systems including abuses by ministers so that we have our own grandparent stories that invite us to discern the ethical uses of power. We are well situated to do that. We are a religious institution and religion is about power.

POWER

How does keeping our Unitarian Universalist institutional secrets about abuse and trauma define us?

It has defined us as a religious movement without a shared power analysis. I became a Unitarian Universalist as a feminist artist seeking a power analysis that included all of human experience. I had come to the conclusion that religion was the art form that best expressed the human experience of power, defining the word 'God' as the Western sign for 'the greatest power we can conceive of.' My family joined a Universalist church that helped us to think more broadly about the powers of justice and love, but avoided looking at the actual power relationships of the people in our life as a community.

I was fortunate to find the mentor I needed, in my life and then the church, Mary Meader Wostrel, an Episcopalian lay leader and spiritual director. We were neighbors and joined the same feminist consciousness-raising group forty four years ago. I was suffering from undiagnosed post traumatic stress, had black-outs, and was cheating on my husband. She convinced me to get some help, for which I am eternally grateful. Years later, when we attended different Divinity Schools at the same time, I heard her story. Her father was an Episcopalian priest who used vulnerable women in his congregations for his own satisfaction, sexual and otherwise. He was unfaithful to his wife and abused his children. Dr. Mary spent a decade after finishing her degree working for the Episcopal Diocese of Eastern Massachusetts and her national church responding to congregations suffering from trauma caused by priests like her father. She supported me when I felt isolated by the secrecy in our association. Mary taught me that any person in a position of power with undifferentiated boundaries, high self-involvement and charisma can easily fall into patterns of unethical sexual behavior. We discussed how the only cure for such power abuses is a clear understanding of what the holy power of love is and what it is not. But when I asked her what I needed to say in this essay, she did not talk about love. Instead, she pulled out a paper she wrote in divinity school almost thirty years ago for Carter Heyward, Episcopal priest and Feminist theologian, on women entering the priesthood, and read me Heyward's comments. Heyward reflected that she was disappointed to observe that women priests were repeating the same power dynamics that the men before them had established, including exercising power over others rather than with them. Heyward correctly predicted that women would abuse that power as often as men did. Straight and lesbian women ministers abused three of the last four people

Safety Net or I have advocated for. Carter Heyward wrote that you couldn't change the ministry for the better without doing a thorough power analysis.

Our tradition and history as the Free Church gives us many places to ground this shared analysis, concepts such as shared ministry, the authority of experience and covenanted community. We have also raised these questions before. None of this is new. I realized that when I served the Universalist Congregation in Salem Massachusetts where I re-discovered the work of Nathaniel Hawthorne who struggled, as do I, with his old Puritan heritage. When visiting a sick member, he told me his apartment was where Hawthorne wrote The Scarlet Letter – that story of ministerial misconduct, secret keeping and the harm it did to all involved – and I re-read the novel in the light of the work I was doing on ministerial misconduct in the 21st century. There are colleagues in this room who have chosen to keep the harm they have done in their ministerial role a secret. Sometimes I despair and wonder if your secret tortures you as much as Hawthorne's Rev. Arthur Dimmesdale's secret tortured him. I know, however, that most of you have been faithful to the people you serve. Maybe being called a New Puritan need not be an insult. Indeed, the more I considered it, the more I wanted to claim the title as my own.

Let's imagine that a New Puritan is among those who have walked into the Holy of Holies with shoes off and eyes wide open. We have seen the damage of chaos, teetered on the point of balance and leaned in towards Shalom. We have looked upon the Powers at the tipping point – and we lived. The powers are many. I have seen the powers of love, violence, prestige, community, sex, charisma, intelligence, terror, creativity, healing, secrets and death. I have seen how those powers interact and overlap. I have seen how we mix up one power for another, thinking that sex is prestige, or that terror is love. I have seen smart people, good people, fail to understand the impact of sexual misconduct, how pervasive and systemic it is, not just among us but throughout our culture. For years the system at the UUA and in many of our congregations has been to protect the privileged instead of the vulnerable.

This is what is obvious to this New Puritan who has opened her eyes to the ways I was taught to maintain oppression on my parent's Old Puritan knees. Ministry is a role. We are given certain powers by the communities we serve so that we can meet their religious and spiritual needs. As UU's we define those religious needs as the power to love and to do justice. Vulnerable people, longing to feel special themselves, may sometimes seek affirmation from ministers as individuals, confusing the significance of our role for personal importance. We abuse the power given to us in our role when we use people to meet our own personal needs. It is our job as clergy to respond with loving behavior, which means to nurture them towards their own full and mature power embedded in a community of relationships. But our culture systematically rewards vulnerable people with the dignity of those with prestige if they serve those prestigious people's needs. It becomes the vulnerable people's job to protect the prestige of the powerful whose needs they meet. If the vulnerable people complain, their dignity is removed. If they still complain, they are exiled. Exile for the living is characterized by social death, by being shunned or silenced. Moral evolutionists propose that exile evolved with the core feeling of shame. These people, abused while they are at their most vulnerable, feel they have lost their congregational home, their human dignity, and are left with profound shame. Keeping secrets about the times we fall short of our ideals stops us from developing an ever more nuanced power analysis with others who have also suffered from intersecting cultural secrets. Could that be because our faith historically arose from a Euro-American cultural context that Ta-Nahisi Coates, in Between the World and Me, calls the dreamers? He might call our secret keeping a 'forgetting' that is a habit, a necessary component of the dream. He says, "I am convinced the Dreamers...of today, would rather be white than live free...to awaken them is to reveal that they are an empire of humans and, like all empires of humans, are built on destruction of the body. It is to strain their nobility, to make them vulnerable, fallible, breakable humans.

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If we are to stop keeping the secret that we are all vulnerable, fallible, breakable bodies, we have to re-examine some key western liberal philosophical and theological concepts about power by asking lots of questions such as: Is individual freedom possible? What is ethical behavior if we all need one another to survive? What are beauty, justice, and love if there is no ideal? Can thought or spirit free us from the vulnerabilities of the body, or is that a dream of Empire? How do vulnerable fallible breakable humans hold one another accountable? Are there actions or rituals of respect and humility that would allow us to walk again on Holy Ground and see what we do not want to see?

It can start by telling a secret – a secret that is your story to tell – a story that is descriptive and invites us to ask more questions and enter into a deeper ethical analysis of the powers together. Even as I grieve that human bodies have been hurt in the flesh, that bodies continue to be exiled into inhuman states of social death and shame, I have faith.

This is why: last year I noticed that the UUMA changed our logo to one that features a liturgical stole. I also noticed that many young ministry students thought that a stole was a very special object, something that only an ordained minister or even a minister in full fellowship could wear. I confess this sounded like poppycock to me. Both Unitarians and Universalist traditions in America were not especially liturgical. But the artist in me wondered what this symbol, the stole, might mean to us now. In that question I found a vision. I saw all of us taking off our shoes and putting on the mantle of respectful humility as we accepted the power given to us in the role of ministry. We trembled at that power knowing that as we entered into the holy of holies where vulnerable human bodies meet heart to heart, mind to mind, soul to soul, seeing one another whole, that we could throw the dynamic balance of our collective universe into chaos. We have chosen to take power seriously, to live by the law of covenant, to seek shalom, and in doing so, we may look upon the greater powers and live.

So therefore I say, let us open our eyes and see. May we continue to weave sacred stories together until we form new rituals of re-memembering. Maybe then this harm, this pain, will become just a bad memory. Maybe then the exiled will be safe to return, strong and unashamed. Maybe then we will discover what freedom, love and justice really feel like. May it be so.