

## Concord

We arrived around Labor Day, and settled in to our new home, a three bedroom ranch, near Route 2, within a long walk to the church. Betsy had truncated her stay at Divinity School, earning a Masters, and was enrolled in the MSW program at Simmons College. She was able to walk to the train station, to get into Boston. I set myself up at church.

I immediately ran into a problem: myself. There was to be a meeting of the Standing Committee, and key Committee chairs at the very spacious home of the chair of the Standing Committee. The Director of Religious Education told me what I should do at this meeting. She did not ask me. She told me, she put me in my place. I became angry with her. That was a mistake, but, true to form of those in the better class, it was never mentioned.

In my short talk, I remember referring to the call Moses received, asking God to chose his brother Aron, who could speak well, while Moses thought of himself as being halting of speech. I had yet to learn how to preach, how to stand in the pulpit, and let the words out slowly.

My role Sunday mornings was to lead the adult education class in the morning, before church, to which maybe twenty people came, then assist Dana in the service, with readings or a prayer, or whatever, preaching once a month. My other major responsibility was to lead the Junior High School and Senior High School youth groups. The church was large enough, and successful enough, to have that number of children who might be interested.

But both these groups were struggling. The Junior High School group had collapsed the previous year, and the Senior High Group was sputtering. For whatever reason, perhaps different personality, perhaps luck of the draw, I was able to succeed where my predecessor was not. Of course, he was wise to the ways of the church, and knew that the more important members of the congregation had only passing interest on the success of the youth programming, at least outside the purview of the religious education program for young children.

There were some clouds on the horizon. My predecessor had been an interim appointment, and, under UUA guidelines, he could not be appointed to the permanent position. That is the only reason the job was open. Dana loved him, and he loved

Dana, in fact, wrote his hagiographic obituary for the church. So too did the members of the church love him, especially the old line, senior members, wealthy supporters of the church. And I was certainly not cut of the same cloth.

For example, whereas he always wore, even while in Divinity School, a blue blazer and grey flannel pants, I dressed far more casually. While I was in divinity school, I would wear a jacket and tie to church on Sunday. The rest of the week, I was far more casual. In Concord, I always wore a tie, but left the jacket in my office, in case I need to dress up a little, and on my day off, Monday, I dressed casually. The Divinity School allowed us graduates to audit one class a semester, so on Monday's, I took Koester's class on the letters to the Thessalonians and Galatians. For some reason, a short article appeared about me in the school newspaper, with my picture, wearing my flannel shirt. I would rather that I had worn a tie that day.

In October, the mother of a lay leader of the church died. I had visited her in the hospital several times, but she was not responsive to me. She really liked my predecessor, and had asked that he be included in her memorial service. He was serving a church nearby, so could easily attend.

Technically, this was a violation of ministerial protocol, but I did not object. Why make waves? It would show that I could work with the situation as it was, rather than show insecurity. I was not insecure. They had give me everything I might want! I was surprised that I was not included in the service with some small part, but I was extremely upset that my colleague had established a receiving line after the service. Now maybe the parishioners came to him, but he did not have the wit, nor, I believe, the desire, to realize that this completely inappropriate. In one year's service to a congregation, no interim minister should develop long term relationships, or even allow them to be encouraged by former parishioners.

I talked with the good offices person of the ministerial association, the one who handled such jurisdictional disputes in the district, and he said he would talk to my predecessor. He told me later that he had to talk with my predecessor several times.

Each month, the district ministers met at a church. Because Concord was included in the metropolitan Boston district, this was a large meeting, with "important" ministers of the denomination. I met the newly appointed Director of Religious Education at the neighboring Lexington Church, the big Church, First Parish Lexington, on the Green, where that Lexington battle was fought centuries ago. We got along very well, and

would snuggle on the couch before the meeting, just hanging out. If I had not been in my relationship with Betsy, I would have pursued more, and I believe she too.

But, of course, this was simply not done. At least that is what I think someone told her, and she told me we had to cool it, because it was causing talk. But we remained friends, and I especially became friends with her soon to be partner, who had a lot of the same attitudes I had. We were free spirits in the very staid WASP milieu of New England Unitarianism.

I did not try to hide this in Concord. My pledge, to myself, to refrain from smoking marijuana, was still in force, because how could I in good conscience tell the youth of the church to stay away from it if I myself was using it. I had heard that a core member of the high school group smoked dope with his father, no longer married to his mother, I took it upon myself to call him the "head" of the Liberal Religious Youth, he was in fact one of the leading people, as it was called, and he responded, "We don't have leaders." and I responded, "That's not what I meant." "Oh." Then I told him it did not belong in LRY. By and large, he honored that. Of course that he was from one of the old families, and that his mother was the church administrator, only added to the delicacy of the situation.

One day in the Fall, I was sitting in Dana's office, talking, and he pointed to a photo he had on his wall, of him, saying the invocation at the rude bridge crossing the Concord River, marking the bicentennial of the American Revolution. Next to him was Gerald Ford, President of the US. He mentioned with minor disgust the unkempt younger people off to the side, with the strange smelling smoke coming from their crowd. Foolishly, I said, "Those are my people." They were. They are. They are the people to whom I had hoped to minister.

This same sort of issue came up again, when I was counseling a woman in her early thirties, a free spirit, who had been married for a short time to the Episcopal Priest in the neighboring town of Lincoln. She was troubled. She was on the edge of homelessness. She was from a good family. I visited her in her apartment. When Dana heard, he advised me not to do it. It looked bad, would lead to talk.

It was in October or November that I attended, looking back on it, a social event at one of the parishoner's houses. Sitting with the men in the living room, the conversation turned to national security, and how the government might track down Russian agents, or domestic insurgents. I offered as to how the best way, it would seem to me, was to

identify one, and watch him, see with whom he was in contact. Honestly, I said that very innocently, but it was only later that I realized many of the people in the room were high level managers in the military industrial complex spun out of MIT, and they might have been talking about me. Anyway, after I had said my one sentence, the conversation moved on to some other, far less fraught, topic.

As is the custom, after church each Sunday the minister(s) stand at the door, in a receiving line, and say hello to the parishioners. It is a way of getting to know them, and an opportunity to hear if they have some special concern which they want to bring up, without going to the trouble of making an appointment.

Sometime in November, for some reason, Dana brought up Hannakuh. Dana was in every way committed to good relations with the Jewish Community, in Concord, and, around the world. It was his doing that a Jewish synagogue met at the church. But for some reason, he asked me how it was supposed to be pronounced, with a soft h or the ch sound. I looked at him, surprised, said I did not know, but from my Biblical Hebrew, it could be either, and I would have to look it up. Strange.

Looking back, I imagine he thought I was what is called a Jewnitarian, from an assimilationist Jewish family that wanted to attend a non-christian "American" religion. In many ways, this is what the more liberal UU churches had become. Even old, traditional churches, which Concord certainly was, took down the cross typically hung behind the pulpit. In a way, this was true of my father's family, deeply involved in the Ethical Culture movement since its founding in the late nineteenth century.

But there was some kind of bad blood between Dana and the Ethical Culture Society. When Dana was engineering the combination/takeover of the Universalist Church of America, there were also negotiations with the Ethical Societies, by then also struggling to keep themselves going. While it would have made great sense for them to join into a Liberal Religious Association of America, the marriage was not consummated. My guess is that, while Dana respected Judaism, and the leadership of the Jewish communities, for him, a brahmin New Englander, whose family was deeply involved in the history of American Unitarianism, it was a separate but equal kind of respect. That is just my guess.

In December, just before Christmas, the grandchild of the wife of the music director/organist was dedicated, the UU equivalent of baptism. But this one was held not during the church service, but privately, in the afternoon. Why? The child had

been born without benefit of a father, a scandal, and for whatever reason, Dana thought a private dedication was more appropriate. I was not asked to take part, for whatever reason.

It was just odd, I was upset. I believed, as a matter of principle, there were no such things as illegitimate children. Christmas Eve I had the opportunity to make my point. For the candle light service, I was given the text from Mathew, describing Mary and Joseph, and the birth of Jesus. Rather than read the standard text, which obscures the scandal, I translated it more literally, using the word, “intercourse”, was big enough that the little kids would ignore it, but those above a certain age would get the point – that the miracle was not that Jesus was born of a virgin, but that Joseph stayed with Mary even though he knew the child was not his.

Scandalous, again, except for the grandmother of the child, who looked at me full on, and said two words: “Thank you.” It was a mistake, but the kind I had promised to make when I was first interviewed at the church.

The job of the assistant minister is to make the senior minister look good. Or, as Bishop Barbara Harris put it, “If you are not the alpha dog, the view is always the same.” Suddenly, things changed.

In January, Dana went in the hospital for a check up. He did not return. Turned out he had colon cancer, underwent an operation, and was confined in the hospital for a couple of months. Suddenly, I was the minister in charge. Now, had I been more cunning, I would have invited Rhys to preach several times, who would have helped calm the waters for me, and I would have asked the other denominational leaders to preach, so that I built up a political base, and did not appear the usurper.

Instead, I did as best as I could, attending Standing Committee meetings, looking for guidance, trying to perform the duties of minister, as I understood them, at this time. I even visited Dana once in the hospital, unannounced. He asked me why. I said because I am the minister. Wrong answer. He was the minister, and he was going to beat that cancer. He did not. I was told to schedule my visits with the church administrator; I was told this by the church administrator. She worked for Dana.

February came, and I got the opportunity to preach a political sermon. At least I thought I did. It was Lincoln's birthday. The Republican party of Massachusetts had been founded in Concord. Scientific American had just published an article, by Lestor

Thurow, Dean of the Sloan School of Management at MIT. The rich were getting richer, and the poor were getting poorer. Ronald Reagan was President. In my sermon I pointed out that the Democrats had lost the War on Poverty, and the Republican Party had changed directions, was no longer the party of the middle class, but the plutocrats. Even some liberals thought I was like a bull in a china shop, though one, privately, told me I had made a lot of sense. I had made a lot of sense, as history attests, and things have only gotten worse, but then, whatever I said, I had presumed the provenance of Scientific American and MIT would have made it more palatable. So much for the prophetic ministry: Comfort the afflicted, and afflict the comfortable. I did it rarely, but I did it then.

Dana continued his recuperation at his home, but had in mind to be preach on Easter Sunday, and, as I recall, he was able to. I retreated to my role as Assistant Minister, having used the experience to learn how to preach. Dana historically had superhuman energy; this was no longer the case, of course. But he definitely was back in the saddle.

Palm Sunday, typically a social justice Sunday, the adult education leaders were from the Jewish community in Concord. I asked one of the high school students how I should introduce them, and she responded with this jingle: "Roses are red, violets are bluish, if it wasn't for Jesus, we would all be Jewish." I thought it was cute, and historically true, so I used it. When I got home, after the service, I received a call from Dana, telling me that he was devastated I had been so insensitive, and had arranged for me to meet with members of the Jewish Community to apologize, that afternoon.

Of course I did as I was told, thinking, boy, these people have thin skins, and, then during the conversation, one of the people there commented on how he thought it was really OK, funny in fact. As I write this, knowing what happened soon thereafter, I think the real problem was Dana's unresolved, well, anti-semitism is too strong a word, but his guilt over his ambivalence about the relationship between historically Christian religions, and the Jewish community. At least, as I write this, this is my guess. Plus by then he was looking at his legacy, and knew who he wanted to have succeed him.

In March, the District ministers group met for a retreat on Cape Cod, in Eastham. My friend from Lexington was there, as well as another young minister who had grown up, son of a Congregational minister in Rochester, MA. He knew the Cape, we did not, and so we played hooky one afternoon, as he showed us around. I remember walking on the beach, looking at the exposed sand cliff at Marconi Beach, and seeing a cluster of differently colored granite stones, rounded, they looked like large eggs, in a hollow in

the cliff. When I got back to the motel where we were staying, I wrote the first I ever wrote. The two of them became a couple that day, and stayed a couple until he died, 20 years later. We all remained friends.

Betsy and I were not getting along. Part of it was the pressure on me because Dana was ill. Part of it was me. Part of it was the miss match between me and Concord, part of it had to do with Betsy. In early May, we decided to end it. The couples therapy, which we had been going to, did not resolve the issues.

The phone rang. It was the Director of the Department of Ministry of the Unitarian Universalist Association. He asked me what my plans were for the next year. I said, "Stay in Concord, I presume." "Don't people talk with each other there?" was his response. He had been snookered into telling me that I was being fired. Now, our neighbor was a born again Christian, and maybe he had heard, because he, out of the blue, about then, told me that I was doing a good job with the kids, which I was, because he had heard that I was not a phony, and the kids can spot a phony a mile away. And when I told the local ministers association that I would not be returning, one of them responded that I actually deserved a raise.

The issue was that Dana did not want me there. That was it, for whatever reason. And, over the next couple of years, as the cancer metastasized into his brain, he became more and more insistent that my predecessor should succeed him, I heard. And that was it.

Betsy reconsidered. She could not abandon me at this time. I was offered a six month stipend, as long as I took another quarter of Clinical Pastoral Education, and went to a Vocational Counseling program next to Andover Newton Theological School. There, the psychologist read the letter sent to him by Dana, and told me that from it, he learned that even then, Dana was not being transparent about why I had had to leave. He also asked me to observe a session, through a one way mirror, with another of their clients. I saw a man, whose manner was abrasive, not because he was abrasive, really, but he seemed abrasive, the kind of manner which would lead to problems in the ministry. He seemed, you know, I mean, sort of like a New Yorker, sort of Jewish.

Maybe that was the problem.

I was devastated. After four years of nothing but the most wonderful support, which had followed about a decade in the wilderness, I was back in the wilderness. But I was

too stubborn to give up.