

The Wilderness, Part 1

At the end of the summer, Betsy and I moved back into the city, into an apartment on Charles Street, a very nice one, with a bedroom upstairs, and living room downstairs, with a fireplace, and a tiny, tiny kitchen, really, the hallway going into the apartment. It was affordable, at least until we understood that we paid for the very expensive electric heat. I spent the Fall driving out to Worcester State Hospital, where UMass Medical Center now is, taking another quarter of CPE, while Betsy continued in her MSW program at Simmons College.

I remember sitting at the dining room table, over dinner one evening, looking at Betsy, and telling her, surprised, really, that I had married such a beautiful woman. It is one of the fondest memories I have of our relationship.

At Worcester, the clinical supervisor was far more generous in spirit than had been my first CPE supervisor. It may have been simply that, as a psychiatrist, he had no insecurities dealing with us. I learned a lot, about the mental health system, about diagnosing mental illness, about personality disorders. Many of my clients were hospitalized because they had cut themselves, harm to self is one big criteria for admittance, about the DSM. Our clients were on locked wards, but they were the relatively low risk patients, the kind who would soon be released, hopefully to halfway houses. We were never allowed onto the wards of the seriously, and incurable, mentally ill.

Concord had given me a six month stipend, and once I completed the quarter of CPE, I found work, as I remember, as a carpenter/handyman, working on my own, or for construction companies. The jobs I found came from the help wanted section of the Boston Globe. It was not the best way to find a job, because the firms hiring could not find people anyway else. Such as trying out the idiot cousin of the laborer.

I wanted to get back into the ministry, but the interview process was closed off to me, because of my experience in Concord. Professionally, I was on ice, though I still kept looking. We attended First and Second Church, and became more embedded in the congregation. The Thanksgiving dinner which I had started was continued, I helped, but did not run it. It continues until this day, close to forty years later.

The following year, we moved to an apartment overlooking the Garden plots in the

Fenway. I continued to pick up odd jobs, and continued to look for a placement as a minister. The Director of Ministry took a sabbatical, and was replaced with another person, a minister whom I had casually known. He allowed my name to go out.

I remember interviewing at three churches, Augusta, Maine, Lexington, Kentucky, and Farmington Hills, Michigan. The Augusta church turned me down, but the chair of the search committee warned me that one of my references should not be used again. I guessed who it was, and I guessed right. Lexington likewise turned me down.

Farmington Hills liked me, a lot, truncated their search process, and presented me to the congregation. We spend a week there, just outside Detroit, and I noticed there was something wrong, something was not right, especially after the social event with the Religious Education Committee. I talked it over with Betsy. She noticed it too, but, of course, it was my decision, and I wanted, first of all, a job, and second of all, a job as a minister, so I continued. I was called.

I wanted to have children. I wanted to have children with Betsy. She agreed that this was the best year to do this, she would not be in school, perhaps would transfer to a Michigan school the following year, so could spend the Fall being pregnant. And, who knows, would she even get pregnant. That question was answered almost immediately.

We arrived in late August. Across the street from the church was an apartment complex, where we rented an apartment. I did not know we were supposed to rent a condominium apartment several miles from the church, according to one of the members of the Search Committee, whose mother owned the apartment. Or something like that. I am little fuzzy on the exact details. But we only had one car. Now, in Detroit, that was a sin, but that is the way we lived.

I went to my office, and rearranged it so that I was not behind the desk when people entered, but I could turn around, while sitting at my desk, and face people openly. The chair of the Board of Trustees, when she saw this, bitterly criticized it, saying this was not the way it was when Joan, my predecessor was there. She had come to Unitarian Universalism because of Joan, and missed her deeply.

In fact, as I later learned, she had gone to visit Joan in September. Joan had taken a job with the Department of Ministry in Boston, soon after she had convinced the church to take out a mortgage on their property to make make other capital improvements on their very nice facility. The interim minister who followed her had similarly left,

abruptly, before the end of her contract, because she had been offered a full appointment at a different church. In hind sight, I think there were other issues.

I discovered the church had a history of short term ministers. It was the last church I should ever have gone to, but I was not emotionally wise enough, enough of a natural pastoral minister, to be able to adequately deal with this. It was a relatively short honeymoon.

In the Fall, the high school group had a party in the parish hall, beneath the sanctuary. A mother of one of the kids, not a member of the church, called me, at 11:30 at night. Her daughter had come home completely drunk. I said I would check it out, and call her back. I got there, saw the lay person who was the advisor to the group, and saw a line of empty hard liquor bottles, and shut the party down. I called the mother back, and apologized for what happened.

The next day, the chair of the Religious Education committee upbraided me for admitting that there was liquor there, because the church might be liable to a law suit. I tried to soothe her, but there was no unruffling those feathers. Ohhhh.

And then there was a party which the adults had. I was not really invited, as I remember, for some reason I did not attend the event, but I did drop by, and I saw an elaborately decorated parish hall, black and white theme, with broken mirrors, on the table. It looked for all the world like a cocaine party, and it felt like I was intruding. Things were going downhill.

In January, Jacob was born. I thought of naming him wolf bane, to keep the wolves from the door, only joking, but there was some truth to the joke. When we first saw him, both Betsy and I looked at each other, and almost named him Michael. To both of us, he just looked like Michael which, in Hebrew, means "Who is like God."

But there were some problems. He was born with low oxygen, because his umbilical cord was wrapped around him wrong, and he had a minor birth defect, which was later corrected. And he had low bilirubin. Whatever that is... I learned what it was, and several times, we had to drive to the hospital, on unplowed Michigan interstates ... Betsy hated it in Michigan; I wasn't so sure I was happy with it.

Looking back, I came to understand that the most important role of the minister of a mid sized congregation is to be like the social director on a cruise ship, make sure every

one is happy. My own vision of the ministry, then, was to afflict the comfortable, and comfort the afflicted. I had been extremely clear that my ministry would be successful if the congregation became integrated. To make that point, I asked Loretta Williams to preach at my installation.

Bad move, especially just outside Detroit in the mid-eighties. The city was black, and well on its way to a stunning collapse. The white flight to the suburbs, of which Farmington was one, had already happened. I belonged in a more urban setting, if I belonged in the parish ministry at all.

I did not belong in Farmington. They told me. It took me years to fully understand how I might have better approached the parish ministry. Most of all, I learned from Stephen Kendrick, when he came to First and Second Church in Boston. I observed him as, during the first two years of his ministry there, he worked hard to gain the trust and commitment of the congregation. I watched as he scanned the congregation, during his sermons, not just preaching his words, but making eye contact, emotional connection, with individuals in the congregation. I knew intellectually that all interactions with parishoners are pastoral, but I had never seen it done so thoroughly, and so well. I am not even sure that I was ever capable of such vulnerability.

We moved back to Boston, so Betsy could go back to Simmons for her MSW. Not that the year near Detroit was a complete loss. My candidating sermon, the previous Spring, had been in East Lansing, and after it, someone came up and recommended to me if I came to Michigan, I get in touch with Jack Biersdorf's Doctor of Ministry program at the Ecumenical Theological Institute in Detroit. I did that, and had not just my mind, but also my heart, opened up to embodied ministry. Jack's foundational course was entitled *The Body as a Means of Grace*. We practiced a number of pastoral care techniques based not on words, but feelings. Hypnotherapy, and transinduction, and breathwork, and anchoring, and neurolinguistic programming, woowoo words that worked. Even thirty years later my spell checker does not recognize most of these words, so 30 years later, they are still edgy. I was a natural for this way of getting in to the soul. Until that course, I thought feelings were something I might have, like mad, sad, happy angry, but I finally appreciated that feelings were better understood as bodily sensations, that other meaning of the world, and that this was a far more fruitful way of enhancing emotional communication.

This was also the year uncle Charlie's widow died. Half of the principle of his estate went to her family, no direct heirs, and the other went to my recently deceased mother,

which meant it was passed on to we three children. Uncle Charlie had been wealthy, the treasurer of the family company in Mt. Vernon, Ohio, a bachelor until the woman who was his nurse convinced him to marry her. I received \$240,000, as I recall, matching the amount of money Betsy had received when her grandmother died, while we were in Divinity School.

I knew there was a bequest coming, but I had no idea it would be so large. To my surprise, I had, we had, financial freedom. We could live where we chose. We chose to live in Fields Corner, Dorchester, part of Boston, because we wanted to make a difference, be “urban pioneers”, help reform society. Our good friend Loren, from Divinity School, and our good friends, Ken and Bob, from First and Second lived in the neighborhood. We found a Queen Anne, shingle style three family and bought it. The previous owner was an architect, who had done nothing to the outside, painted landlord green, but done excellent work restoring the second floor apartment, where we would live. Because we had a substantial down payment, we were able to get a 15 year mortgage. I became, for the first time in my life, a property owner, and a landlord.

A month after moving in, October, 1987, the stock market crashed, as did the value of housing in Dorchester. Easy come, and easy go, but we had a place to live.

Our relationship continued to struggle. I continued to struggle with my employment. Looking back, I was much more an entrepreneur than a staff member, but the social services, where I looked for work, tended to hire staff members, not entrepreneurs. Habitat for Humanity was looking for a project director for their partially completed 10 unit development just off Blue Hill Avenue. They hired me; they should have hired a licensed contractor, but, I imagine, they could not find anyone with a license willing to work that cheaply. After about four months, I better understood why they did not hire someone better qualified.

I was able to find another, appropriate job, teaching carpentry and basic math skills in a pre-apprentice program at the Home Builders Institute. When that program lost its funding, after I had been working there six months, the lead teacher hired me for another six months to help him edit a craft math text book. It was oriented towards students who were basically illiterate in math, but needed to know some to function as carpenters. And then, as I bounced around, I was able to collect unemployment. Remember, these were recessionary years.

Betsy's MSW placement was supervising Goodwill Industries employment program for

cognitively disabled people, i.e. retarded. She then got a job with Bay Cove Human Services as a social worker, dealing with the same population. I looked for work. Bay Cove posted a job, looking for a maintenance supervisor, someone to oversee the properties which Bay Cove rented in which to house their client populations. I was well qualified. The posting was taken down. I was on the non-profit shit list.

And then Betsy got pregnant, again. It was a surprise to me, but she said, I think, she planned it, because she still wanted to save the relationship. Rachael was born just a little over two years after Jacob.

In Dorchester, still, is the Ashmont Cooperative Nursery School, then in the basement of church a Lutheran church near Ashmont Station. It was our kind of people, to a fault, white, upper middle-class, well educated, who were members of food coops, and critical of the military industrial complex. Part of the deal is that parents had to be teachers on a rotating schedule, which meant that people who worked 9 to 5, five day a week jobs could not participate. Especially since the school, as I remember it, closed at 3, like the public schools, some of the parents had to get back home to their older children.

I was an activist. When we heard about a new group, Dorchester Recycles, I became involved in the monthly drop off at the UMass Boston campus, chosen by and large because it was racially neutral. Of course the group was mostly white, and while we worked with City Hall on the project, it was not until I computerized the list of participants, about a thousand as I remember, and began to build a political machine, not that this is what I meant to do, that the city introduced curbside recycling, thus killing the organization. Well, maybe it was not me, but we were surprised how quickly, and how without notice, the city wide recycling happened.

I was asked to be the community outreach for the nursery school. I noticed, it was clear to see, that the school was entirely white, and I sought to integrate the school. One of the reasons we had chosen to live in Dorchester was because it was a multi-cultural community, and yet, here we were, replicating our white society. I learned that there was a system of child care vouchers, and approached several of the institutions, to see if the mom's with small children, who had the vouchers, might want to participate.

Nope.

I noticed that the granddaughter of the woman who assisted the minister of the church where we met, the granddaughter would, when we packed up and prepared to leave, zoom over to some of the toys, and play with them. Why not her, “I asked?” the leaders of the board. Well, we were full of our licensed capacity, or something like that, and, anyway, how would she pay for it. I said, we could fit her in sub rosa, since every day at least one kid was missing school for one reason or another, and this would not increase the total size, and we could deal with the tuition but making it a donation, just as the church was giving us a good deal on the space.

Nope.

We had a board meeting. I brought it up again. The lead teacher, licensed, told me it was not going to happen. I said, very carefully, that it was not racism, but it appeared to be racism, and we should address this. The teacher, whose son was in the school, became furious with me, told me to leave. I had hit a nerve. Everyone was a liberal, like me, I thought. Well, maybe I was not a liberal. I was no longer on the board. The teacher had a very strong personality.

Jacob was 4. It was becoming more and more clear that there were some deficits, not cognitive, but as it turned out, gross and fine motor skill deficits, and some behavior patterns that were just plain odd. Today, it would be called a mild form of Asperger's syndrome. The next year, he would be in kindergarten, and when another child at the school, whose father was a close advisor to Ray Flynn, the mayor of Boston, was not admitted into the “better” public school in the district, I realized that we should make some hard choices. Jacob would have been creamed in the very tough elementary schools in Boston.

I did not want private school for Jacob; I was, and still am, prejudiced against private schools, no matter how good they are, and some are very good. So we would have to move, but housing in the towns with good school districts cost twice that of Dorchester. Besides, we wanted to stay close to the Ashmont School, so Rachael could go there the next year, even though there had been that rough spot.

I looked in the paper, and saw a for sale by owner, in the town just next to Dorchester, Milton. I knew nothing about Milton. It turned out the house was on the trolley line that connected Ashmont to Milton so we would be close to Ashmont. It was my initiative, but Betsy agreed, to make an offer 10% below the asking price. The house

was a little small, but we could afford it, especially if I put an addition on. The owners accepted the offer. Our inheritances had enough for the down payment; we owned a second house. We rented our apartment, and moved to Milton.

I knew nothing of Milton, but that it was a suburb, with good enough schools, and next to Boston. As I write this, I have lived in this town for over thirty years, and in the house where I now live for about twenty. Who knew?

By the skin of my teeth, I was by then back in the kind of ministry I had imagined for myself. A couple of years before, the Director of the Benevolent Fraternity of Unitarian Churches, now the UU Urban Ministry in Boston, had asked me to represent her at a speak out on the issues of homelessness, at City Hall. It was sponsored by the Interfaith Assembly on Housing and Homelessness, located at the Jewish Community Relations Center, and with the strong support of the Episcopal City Mission Society. The IAHH asked me to join their board, representing the Ben Frat, as it was called, and thus the Unitarian Universalists. I accepted, and was appointed chair of the Hands on Committee. Rather than advocate, and wringing our hands together, we wanted to actually do things. On the committee with me was a very effective person, a private developer who worked closely with Bnai Brith, and we worked quite smoothly together.

We established an Adopt a Room program. At that time and still today, Boston redevelops properties such as retired school buildings as apartments, or single room occupancy buildings, with support services for formerly homeless people. But of course, these formerly homeless people needed furniture, and we agreed to do what we could to get the rooms furnished. Some came from the owner of Logan furniture, who gave us a wholesale discount, though I am sure he still made some money, to the parents whose adult son had died of AIDS, donating his bedroom furniture. It was a success, and it was practical. The next year, I was chair of the board of the IAHH. No pay, but service.

Of course, the newly reconstituted Urban Ministry was just the place for a ministry for housing. All I had to do was convince the director, and raise some money. Rhys pledged \$10,000, from First and Second Church, and I wrote a proposal and sent it to the director. I had the support of a member of the board of the Urban Ministry, who attended the meetings with the director.

She rejected it, and asked me to reformulate it, with some of her suggestions. I did that, and was able to schedule another meeting. She rejected the new proposal. I then

said, "Well, maybe you might write a proposal, and I will see if I can accept it." She was caught. She did that. Honestly, I don't know what the problem was, but there was a problem.

My tasks were three fold:

1. Continue serving on the Board of the IAHH
2. Visit UU churches to describe our program, and try to resolve housing issues in their towns.
3. Work closely with the Hotel Workers Union, and their Housing Trust Fund Initiative.

The first was, of course, easy, and having an authorized perch empowered me to be more activist. The following year I was named chair of the Board of the IAHH.

The second was easy, also. I visited at least one church a month, describing the Adopt a Room program, and seeing if there was any need for elderly people, perhaps house poor, who would be helped by renting a room to a responsible adult who was employed in some kind of relatively low pay social service job in the community. Nothing came from those efforts.

The third was made for me. Bruce Marks had earned an MBA, knew what he was doing, and while the Director of the Ben Frat, at our meeting, instructed him to "work me to death," I was very happy to work with the low income members of the union, in the union's initiative to support its members in becoming home owners. In my application to divinity school, I had told of a dream I had, of working with exactly that kind of community.

Voting participation is relatively high in the suburbs, and low in the poorer city neighborhoods. Since then, I have learned how low (abysmal, actually). I had the idea of forming teams of people, suburban parishioners, and formerly homeless residents of the inner city. We would canvass neighborhoods, in the city, in the suburbs, getting to know the neighborhoods, discussing the issues of housing and homelessness, and registering the unregistered. Another member of the IAHH board, and Episcopal priest who worked in Dedham liked the idea, and we went ahead with it, as a project of the hands-on committee.

Suddenly, I was no longer chair of the IAHH. Why? No reason given. It may have been

because the Director of the UU Urban Ministry had indicated that I would no longer be on staff there, but it could just have likely been we touched the third rail of social justice, voting. As my developer friend from the Hands On Committee said, there seemed to be always smoke and mirrors when the Episcopal priest got involved, and nothing happened. Just as happened with Dorchester Recycles, the powers that be saw a loose canon was gaining political power.

Bruce Marks had kept giving me more and more to do, and I drank it up. One project, in particular, was to identify neighborhoods with high minority ownership, using the census data. My Masters in Political Science was finally useful. This was the reason I had studied political science. From the census data, I identified three neighborhoods, one in West Newton, one in West Medford, and one in Dorchester with high black population percentages, and relatively high home ownership rates. We wanted to find out if the people living there were discriminated against in mortgage interest rates.

We spent a couple of Saturdays canvassing the neighborhood in Dorchester. I turned out I knew the neighborhood far better than the other people. We discovered that the cops would stop us, we were black and white, and ask what we were doing wandering around the neighborhood. We discovered a large party in the back of a house, and were told quite clearly that this neighborhood was well organized, and needed no help from do-gooders like us.

My contract with the Ben Frat was provisional, try it for six months. Rhys's only requirement was that I not get angry. Yes, my temper was a problem, but since I had already figured out that the Ben Frat Director's strategy was to make my life as miserable as possible, I would simply wait her out. It did not work. The excuse was that I had moved from Dorchester to Milton, from the "inner city" to the "racist suburb".

The UUA had a considerably large fund, called Veatch money, which was directed toward social justice activities, but the money could not go through UU churches or organizations. It was a perfect funding vehicle for me, if it was granted to the union, not the Urban Ministry. I asked Bruce if he would accept it, he smiled, and said yes, write a proposal, I submitted it to him, he made some revisions, and I sent it to the selection committee.

It was turned down. The UUA General Assembly was in Hollywood, Florida that June, and I knew by then there was to be no funding. I was a delegate from First and Second

Church, and it was obvious to me that my career as a minister was most certainly over.

At the General Assembly we were housed in a hotel, a union hotel, that was closing, for renovations, to be reopened as a non-union hotel, and that I approached the chair of the funding selection committee, the long term minister of the church in Rochester which I had attended many years before, widely respected in the denomination, and plead my case. "Limited resources, many applicants", was, essentially his response. "Bullshit," I said to myself.

Bruce went on to found the [Neighborhood Assistance Corporation of America](#). Check out their web site. Below market loans for first time home buyers, national reach, voter registration information on their front page. He continues to do it right, and he has been extremely successful.

We moved to Milton, and I oversaw, and paid for, an addition to the house, which created a bathroom upstairs, a master bedroom, and opened up the two smaller existing bedrooms, one into an office and the other into a child's bedroom. Total cost was \$75,000, out of my pocket, from the inheritance. I believe, just in square footage value, the worth of the project was \$100,000, and I spent a large portion of my time looking for work, managing the construction project, and being an absentee landlord at the house in Fields Corner, replacing a water heater or two, as I remember.

I had also continued my D. Min, program, through the New England Colleague group, but, the problem was, I was no longer an active minister, and except for my involvement at First and Second Church. Much as I hated to do it, I knew I was soon to be dropping out of the D. Min. Program. In my sleep I was having dreams/nightmares of going West, because I could not find work in New York, only, once arriving in San Francisco, to realize that I had already done that, and it had not worked.

The world was closing in on me. The great gift I had been given, a free education in the classics, was over. I was back to the life I had had on the West Coast, scraping along, but now I was the father of two children in a very unhappy, sexless marriage. I became more and more frustrated with Betsy, while she, through therapy, and from her social work education, realized that she had made a mistake in marrying me. How big a mistake she would only come to realize more than a decade later. I remember that one of the father's from the nursery school did have a heart to heart talk with me in the Spring, compassionately telling me that unless I changed, things were going to get very bad.

In June, I took the kids to Rochester, to visit my father for his birthday, and to pick up a Franklin Stove he had, which he was not using, and which I planned to put in the addition. My brother, who lived in Syracuse, joined us, and, typically, his wife did not, but went to stay with her parents who lived nearby. Steve got to take care of the dog.

Jacob was four. He did not like dogs. They invaded his space, and he was afraid of them. I made the point that the dog and Jacob could not be in the same room, and maybe the dog should go downstairs. Steve said the dog was like his child. My father made the Solomonic suggestion that Steve put the dog in the basement, half the time, and I put Jacob in the basement half of the time. Laughable, of course, maybe he was joking, but I don't think so, and I exploded in anger, left the next day. I felt betrayed by him. Never did my kids get from my brother, sister, and father, the kind or recognition that I thought they deserved. Well, as an adult, Jacob did get this from my brother, some valuable advice about becoming a teacher, but this was not the kind of continual interaction that I wanted from them. Every family has its dysfunction.

I have difficulty remembering the exact sequence, but I think, in July, Betsy and I agreed to separate, and become half time parents, spending the other half time in the smaller apartment which had opened up in Fields Corner. The idea was that the kids would have a stable home. The teacher at the school had consulted with Betsy, about Jacob, saying he should be evaluated for his deficits, and have an IEP (Individualized Education Plan) developed for him in Milton. Part of this was the visit of a social worker, from the school, who met with Betsy, but not me, sometime in July.

At the beginning of August, Betsy ran out of the house with the kids. She just disappeared. The joint bank account was emptied. A couple of days later, a cop came to the door, and told me that I had 20 minutes to pack what I needed, and get out. A 51A had been filed against me. Betsy went out with cold fury, and with a supporting affidavit from the teacher at the nursery school. She, who had responded with cold fury about my racism remark, signed an affidavit saying I was a danger to Betsy, and to the children.

If ever wondered what a kangaroo court looks like, go to the County Family Court, and watch father after father get the shaft. There is a wonderful organization, now called the [National Parents Organization](#), that has made some progress, but I am pretty sure not much has changed. I spent two years without being allowed to have my children overnight at my house, the first three months visiting once a week, for an hour, in a

sterile room at Brigham and Women's hospital. Oh, and I had to pay for that. Oh, and when Rachael's diaper needed changing, I told I was not allowed to do that. You know, I just might be a sexual offender. As I write this, the anger in me rises.

I learned that when you take, as a single man, your small children to the playground, the other parents there, all mothers, look at you as if you are a molester, and I learned, over the years, why there was but one male teacher in the kids elementary school, and he for the fifth grade, as I remember. Equal rights are what the law says, but the practice is far, far different.

The next chapter will be my time in that very horrible wilderness.