

Charge to Helen Carroll at her Ordination

Jamaica Plain, June 3, 2001, Rev. Terry Burke

On June 3rd, 2001, Helen Carroll was ordained to the Unitarian Universalist ministry by both the First Church in Jamaica Plain and the Old Ship Church in Hingham. Terry Burke gave this charge to the minister at her ordination.

Helen, this year on Palm Sunday I climbed Mt. Sinai. I had the assistance of my Bedouin guide Jose as I hiked up the rigorous 3,750 "Steps of Repentance." My guide pointed out water from a recent rainfall, and thyme that had sprouted as a result. I soon realized that by imitating his experienced footsteps, my climb was easier. At one point he became concerned about his middle-aged charge, and offered to carry my backpack. At the top of the mountain, a friend of Jose's fed us bread and a wonderful green bean stew. When I offered to pay, he refused, saying, "This is Bedouin hospitality."

I was fortunate to have a guide who showed me how to walk on the trail, taught me about his desert culture, helped to carry my load, and saw that I was fed. Helen, in your ministry, I charge you to find a guide. That guide may be a person like a spiritual director, a place of sanctuary like a retreat center, the symbols and myths of a living spiritual tradition, or even a novelist like Dostoevsky. Find a guide for your pilgrimage of ministry.

This winter on my sabbatical I also visited the Greek city of Thessaloniki. You may recall that St. Paul actually liked their church. In his first letter to the Thessalonians he exhorts them to "pray without ceasing." That phrase has meant many different things to different people. I'm using it to suggest the need to consider your own worship life and spiritual practice. Without worship and prayer of some sort, you'll end up another burnt out religious professional. Remember to spend time on your relationship with that Coyote god; try to see the Holy in every surprising moment. Helen, I charge you to "pray without ceasing."

One of our UU colleagues that I most admire, the Rev. Susan Starr, once conducted a memorial service for a homeless person at the Oakland, California Unitarian Universalist church. After she invited friends of the deceased to share their memories, one speaker stood in front of the church for five minutes simply crying. Finally, Susan walked up to him and asked, "Was there something that you wanted to say?" He replied, "Yes, but I've forgotten it. It was something about love." Helen, by your life and ministry, I charge you to teach your people something about love. Embody, however imperfectly, the faithful and forgiving love of God.

A 17th century spiritual director once wrote the harsh truth that, "we love God as much as we love the person we love the least." Today I want to turn that on its head and say, "We love God as much as we love the people we love the most." As you try to embody the love of God, don't forget your family, your husband and children. I read in the writings of a 20th century monk named Lev Gillet that, 'clergy should show the same regard for their spouses as Christ has for His bride the church. They should love, care for, nurture, and greatly sacrifice for them.' That line certainly hit me between the eyes. I can't tell you how to find that balance between family and parish, between those we love most and least, and all those in between. However, by showing the importance of deepening the relationships of your family, you will teach your people something about love.

Helen, in your ministry, I charge you to find a guide, to "pray without ceasing," and to teach your people something about love. In the years of ministry ahead, I wish you joy.