

WORSHIP WITH OPEN HEARTS  
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SERVE JUSTICE WITH COMPASSION  
LOVE WITHOUT JUDGMENT



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## FINAL REPORT ON CO-MINISTERS' 2013 SABBATICAL

by Revs. Barbara and Jaco ten Hove — May 23, 2013



**INTRODUCTION:** Unitarian Universalist congregations have been creating ministerial sabbatical leaves for many generations, offering clergy with longer settlements the opportunity to further educate themselves on various aspects of their work and a break to reflect deeply on what it means to minister in their times.

Ministerial sabbaticals, while sharing some common elements with academic sabbaticals, are not identical to that model. (Ours are usually shorter, for instance.) While it is common for clergy to work on projects, develop new ideas, and perhaps do some more focused or extensive writing, the sabbatical is also and, perhaps primarily, an opportunity for deep reflection on the meaning and purpose of the religious life and ministry. It also provides a refreshing break from the ongoingness of the church calendar, in order to generate resilience and energy for a longer, successful ministry.

Our recent four-month sabbatical (Jan. 15 – May 15) gave us a chance to travel, study, attend professional development events, and advance some projects that we are confident will serve us and the Cedars community for many years to come. We are extremely grateful that we have been given this opportunity and look forward to sharing the fruits of it with you.

While we spent most of the sabbatical time happily together, the learnings from this period are both shared and uniquely our own. Here are some of the important things that we did and learned during our time away from you.

**BARBARA'S SABBATICAL:** I took part in three Unitarian Universalist collegial activities during the sabbatical. The first is a program I applied to in 2012, which is designed to help me and the 17 other participants (chosen through a rigorous application process) deepen our understanding of worship and preaching. This two-year program began in January 2013 near the start of our sabbatical with a long weekend of sharing and learning together, followed by a webinar and a number of phone calls as a group. I am also preparing to take part in a 5-day training as a part of this program in August.

The second educational opportunity I availed myself of during the sabbatical was at the annual continuing education Institute developed and put on by the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association (which directly followed the aforementioned weekend program). Over the course of 5 days I had the unique experience of studying preaching with the Rev. Dr. James Forbes, minister emeritus of the Riverside Church in New York City. Dr. Forbes is considered one of the greatest living preachers and our group of 20 got to learn from the best! I am confident that many of the ideas and suggestions that emerged from this training program will impact my preaching in significant ways.

Finally, the third Unitarian Universalist activity I participated in was as a leader of the Sunday morning service at the historic first Regional Assembly of the Western UU region, held in San Jose, CA, in late April. I had spent many hours during the sabbatical working online and on conference calls with a talented group of ministers from all over the West, developing and creating what we were told was a deeply meaningful worship service (in which Jaco also participated musically).

Along with the above training and experience, one of the many gifts of our sabbatical was the unusual opportunity to be at Sunday worship services of the following churches:

- 1st Unitarian Universalist Church in Richmond, Virginia (Barbara attended three and Jaco led one service there);
- Unitarian Universalist Congregation of the Outer Banks, Kitty Hawk, North Carolina;
- Paint Branch Unitarian Universalist Church in Adelphi, Maryland (the congregation we served for 9 years prior to Cedars; we led this service together);
- The Unitarian Church in Horsham, England (Jaco led the Easter service there);
- 1st Unitarian Church in Dublin, Ireland;
- The non-subscribing Presbyterian Church in Clough, Northern Ireland (related to UUs); and
- 1st Unitarian Universalist Church in San Diego, California.

The services at all of these congregations were different and meaningful. As in previous sabbaticals, we gained valuable perspective and ideas from these experiences.

Certainly a most significant aspect of the sabbatical was our six-week overseas travel. Having time to spend in three countries deepened our understanding of many things, including the state of religious life in Israel, England and Ireland. The two weeks in Israel will stay with me forever and I expect to reflect on them and share those reflections as best I can with Cedars. In my journal, I wrote these words about that experience:

*It was toward the end of our visit that we gained a stronger sense of how Israel and Israelis understand the Jewish religion. For many, "religion" has become a dirty word. This is mostly because of the ways the ultra-Orthodox and the Orthodox Jews in Israel have co-opted politics and have made so many things an us-versus-them reality. For many who consider themselves more secular the idea of being religious has become something quite negative. So much so that our friends, who are at their heart deeply spiritual, felt that the creation of a synagogue in their village was a bad thing! I found this powerfully sad even as I understood why they felt that way.*

Our experience with the churches in England was also very disheartening. Another journal entry:

*The first day that we were in London we went on a journey through the London Tube to have lunch with some American UU clergy serving congregations in England. We talked about ministry and about the way the church in England is disappearing. It was both saddening and enlightening for I think the church in America has the potential to follow the English pattern. This is particularly true where we live in the Pacific Northwest. Talking with these two colleagues and going to see the beautiful, though barely attended (Unitarian) church in Hampstead reminded me how precious the religious life is, and how tenuous. When, later that day Jaco and I went to St. Paul's Cathedral and we saw in that amazing space a testament to 1000 years of religion in all its beauty and glory, we still understood that we were there as tourists along with pretty much everybody else. So many of the churches in England and Ireland support themselves by charging admission to people who want to see the past. Very few have an actual congregation alive in the present. It's a sobering reality that struck me deeply.*

We were heartened to see at least one church in Ireland thriving. The Unitarian Church in Dublin was bustling with energy, including many young families. We were told that in the Republic of Ireland church-going is still considered important even as more and more families are leaving the Roman Catholic Church. Liberal religion offers a real alternative there and we were glad to spend part of a Sunday with this lively group.

The last piece of the sabbatical learning for me is more practical. I learned how to use Dragon Dictate, a computer dictation program. It wasn't easy and I'm still working out kinks, but it has already made writing much easier on my back and arms, and I'm confident this will continue.

And speaking of writing, I did a lot of it during the sabbatical, most of it in journal form. Besides the articles we sent to Cedars and regular journal writing, I also wrote four "Missives" to friends, family and colleagues documenting the learnings from the sabbatical. From all this writing, I have outlined ten sermons that I look forward to preaching over the next year at Cedars.

**JACO'S SABBATICAL:** I shared most of the experiences Barbara has described above (other than her personal projects), and also find that the time in Israel especially percolates dynamically in my soul. We look forward to presenting about this (with lots of pictures) at our Cedars Pilgrimage evening on June 16.

But my primary project was to shape a written publication I expect to debut at Cedars later this summer, based on a series of my UU history sermons. I had initially wanted to do this with the recent "Spiritual Strengths" series, but as I got into that work, it was feeling awkward and unproductive, so I switched over to consider aligning some of my history presentations, and that has felt quite effective.

I edited, rewrote and added to six sermons, using a "both/andian" angle to tie them all together, along with an Introduction and Epilogue. I envision this as a substantially informative (maybe even inspirational), yet easily digestible and readable booklet for newcomers and longer-term UUs alike. The manuscript draft is now out to four readers for their comments and perspectives on it, with responses due July 1, after which I will polish it up and format for self-publishing.

I also read a good handful of books, some of which were intriguing intellectual stimulation, one was an affirming interfaith presentation that also used "both/and" language (more than any other work I've ever seen, other than my own), and one was another Parker Palmer effort, "A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life." This last book continues my deepening interest in and appreciation of Palmer's teachings, and has already provided me with much sermon material, plus an idea for a fall class and more.

Thus endeth this brief report about the focused activities of our sabbatical. Happily, all our many arrangements and various spontaneous moments played out smoothly, with great relief also that we survived well the rather dangerous Israeli driving styles and the Irish left-side orientation.

With very best wishes,

*Jaco & Barbara ten Hove*