

Creating Each Other

Rev. Jack Mendelsohn wrote: “The future of liberal religion is dependent wholly upon great congregations whether large or small and great effective ministers. The strangest feature of their relationship is that they create each other.”

We can intuitively understand this idea but what does it mean in more concrete terms? What is the role of the minister in relation to the congregation and the role of the congregation in relation to the minister? How do we create each other?

“Creating each other” implies that the minister and the congregation each have an idea of the other that they are endeavoring to realize. It might be an idea, or it might be an image. It might be real or a fantasy. The reality of it seems to me to depend upon the quality of the interaction between the minister and their congregants.

When everyone is calm and rational it is certainly easier to be engaged in a productive and creative way. When we run afoul of our expectations, it is often because some other perception or bias gets in the way.

Respect for each other is essential to the conditions for creating together. Without respect there is an adversarial dynamic that enters into the relationship and distorts perceptions, ascribes motives, and judges actions in unhealthy ways. Ministers perceiving that a parishioner is disrespectful, can create even more disconnect by focusing attention on the perceived lack of respect rather than attempting to understand the needs of the parishioner. When a minister has definite expectations of being in charge and will not allow anyone else to share an idea, or lead, there is again, an adversarial

relationship even sometimes without the parishioner having any intention of entering into this argument. A minister who feels their ego or authority is what they must assert and protect is a detriment to a church community.

Some ministers may be so enamored of the idea that they are the 'spiritual leader' of a congregation that they don't allow anyone else to be in this role. The truth is that anyone who has a sense of spiritual direction for the congregation can contribute to its spirituality. Stifling that creative impulse is damaging to a community. It is especially damaging because the attitude of possessiveness limits the number and quality of ideas to those of the minister. If the vision of the minister for the beloved community is limited to an image of themselves as "priest" and ultimate authority, the whole community is hijacked by this fantasy and cannot grow. It is very damaging to the minister as well because they are equally trapped in an image and probably not one of their own making.

When I was very new in ministry, I was afraid that congregants would see me as inadequate to the task, mainly because I felt that about myself. My energy was spent protecting myself from being found out rather than learning and growing. Here is where we get to the idea of creating each other. If I hadn't had congregants who were willing to give me feedback, who were willing to say, essentially, in their own way, "you must stop protecting yourself and pay attention to us." Had I not taken that feedback to heart I would have been very unhappy as a minister and would not have lasted long. Their feedback was more than good advice, it was transformational. It allowed me to see patterns in myself that were not conducive to good ministry. Seeing is everything. When we really see something, we begin to change it. When I saw that

I was putting up barriers because of my own fears I had to change. It was not a matter of will or pleasing the congregants but the power of seeing more clearly that what I was doing was making me miserable.

I have met at least one minister who was so determined not to be questioned that he viciously attacked any parishioner who dared to have their own ideas. They also attacked any colleague that questioned them. These ministers are few and far between but there are bullies in our denomination and it is so important that they be corrected, contained, and not allowed to damage a community. This congregation is one that has had this experience with a minister and many people were subjected to their bullying behavior. Not everyone knew about it because the minister was adept at hiding it and congregants were reluctant to name what was going on. This created a division between those that knew and those that didn't. It even created a division between those that could talk about the behavior and those that couldn't. So, no one really knew the extent of these behaviors. They may have felt it was something about them that caused the reactions from the minister. It was not. This kind of behavior from a minister is not created by a church. It can be perpetuated if parishioners cannot say, "Enough! Stop it!" When this damaging, behavior goes on for years, it can take a long time to let it go and think freely again. It can take a long time for congregants to trust a minister again and not feel they have to walk on eggs around them.

It's very sad to realize that the members of this church have been harmed in this way, because it isn't hard at all to see how truly wonderful you are: talented, loving, eager, sincere, kind and infinitely worthy of the community you are creating.

There were many signs that the relationship with the minister was not good and it is important not to ignore them and hope they will be okay, but rather use those indicators to be aware of and beware of other ministers with bullying, emotionally damaging behavior.

“My way or the highway”

“I don’t have to give you what you ask for”

“You can’t question how I do things”

“If you are not for me, you are against me.”

“Pleasing me is more important than pleasing anyone, even your spouse”

“I’m the only one that can: design a program, make a decision about something new, lead a group or workshop, etc.”

People who act and think this way are not suitable for ministry and must be called out.

Here are some ways to counter these falsehoods:

“No one can create a community alone”

“Anyone who has a clear idea at a given moment is the leader”

“It is through questioning that we come to the best ideas”

“When we respect one another, and are engaged with each other, we want to give each other what is asked for”

“We can gain more from collaborating in shared ministry than doing it alone.”

It is fun to work together.

Harvard Business Review has an article this month called, “Why Feedback Fails: Criticizing people does not help them excel. \”

Two of the many points in the article:

1. Each brain grows where it is already strongest.
2. Getting attention to our strengths from others catalyzes learning, whereas attention to our weaknesses smothers it.

All ministers have their areas of strength and weakness. We are really good at knowing what in us are strengths and weaknesses. Because we are more used to having our areas of weakness noticed, criticized, shamed, and blamed, we are reluctant to talk about them. It seems to me that a good relationship between minister and congregation involves a lot of appreciation expressed for the things we do well, and very little about what we don't. A minister might see that the congregation is reluctant to talk with newcomers at coffee hour. Rather than pointing this out critically, it would be far better to notice when say, Ruth was talking to a new person, to express your appreciation for her efforts.

We often hear the idea of moving out of our comfort zone and trying new things. Brain science shows that our best functioning is when we are in our comfort zone, not outside of it. P. 97 of article

If we are to create our minister and our congregations such that they are forming the future of our liberal religion, we must think about what it is that we are trying to create in one another. We want ministers who can appreciate the intelligence and worthiness of our congregation, whose egos are directed in service of the community and

we want congregations who can appreciate the value of shared ministry and aren't afraid to be their best selves.

I'm going to close with a poem by Mary Oliver called, The Pond

The Pond

Every year

the lilies

are so perfect

I can hardly believe

their lapped light crowding

the black,

mid-summer ponds.

Nobody could count all of them—

the muskrats swimming

among the grasses

can reach out

their muscular arms and touch

only so many, they are that

rife and wild.

But what in this world
is perfect?

I bend closer and see
how this one is clearly lopsided—
and that one wears an orange blight—
and this one is a glossy cheek

half nibbled away—
and that one is a slumped purse
full of its own
unstoppable decay.

Still, what I want in my life
is to be willing
to be dazzled—
to cast aside the weight of facts

and maybe even
to float a little
above this difficult world. I want to believe I am looking

into the white fire of a great mystery.

I want to believe that the imperfections are nothing—
that the light is everything—that it is more than the sum
of each flawed blossom rising and fading. And I do.

-- Mary Oliver