

**"Being Unitarian 'OUT THERE'"**  
**The Unitarian Church of Edmonton**

**a sermon by Rev. Brian J. Kiely**

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All of us, I think, want to live morally acceptable lives. We may not always agree what the term 'morally acceptable' means, but I think we can agree that most of us want to be able to go to bed at night thinking we are good people, thinking that what we have done during our waking hours is acceptable. Part of the process of ensuring untroubled sleep is taking the time to work on the principles that guide the actions of our waking hours. Many in this church come here - at least some of the time - to think through those guiding precepts. It's not that we find THE ANSWER every week, or even any given week, but that over the course of time we get used to considering our lives in a moral and ethical way. It's like church is practice for real-time decision-making. We look to our own Unitarian Universalist principles at the very least as a starting point for that process.

But doing the brain work alone is not enough. To have meaning, to truly ensure blissful slumber, we have to find ways to put our principles into practice. We have to find ways to take them out of this book, out of this building and bring them to life beyond our walls. The big question is how do we live morally out there where workplaces and market forces seem to have so much control over our lives?

A good place to start is by figuring out just where in our lives we do have control. There are portions of our days where the question of whether or not we can do the right thing is completely in our charge. We can decide whether or not to drive courteously or how we will treat the grocery clerk. We even have a fair amount of control over how we will behave in our homes. But there is one large chunk of the day for many of us where that control is weakened and where our choices about living well are sorely tested. That is when we are at work.

It is there that we most often encounter the gap between what we believe and what we are forced by circumstances to practice. John Cowan, author Small Decencies, Reflections and Meditations on Being Human at Work noted that people in one of his seminars summed up the problem this way: "How can I be who I am in a world that does not reward me for being me, but rewards me for being someone else?"

On Sundays we wrestle with what it means for Unitarians to be good. But come Monday, we may find ourselves arriving at a place where employers are only willing to reward behaviour, attitudes and actions that are sometimes in conflict with what we believe. As well we may work in a setting where other employees help create the culture of the workplace...and that culture may not be conducive to working in a principled way. It is a sad fact that there are times when we are forced to choose between our UU values and the realities of the job. This can create an awful tension in our lives.

Many, if not most of us, will have had an experience of working for someone whose

moral values we cannot respect, and yet this person holds a great deal of power over us. We need to work in order to support ourselves and these days, jobs are not all that easy to come by. We can get trapped in a working environment that requires us to do, or to feel pressured to do, things we think are morally questionable. And once in that job, it is often difficult to get out again. Some large car dealership have a policy where the low sales person at the end of the month is fired -- no questions asked. I can't imagine that in such a place there is a lot of humanity or compassion for one's co-worker... or one's customers. I also imagine the staffers go through an awful lot of antacid in a month.

Or perhaps the challenge comes from another direction. We find ourselves in a job that is ethically satisfactory, but where there is a climate created by co-workers which is uncomfortable for someone who shares our liberal religious values. Off colour and abusive humor, overt and covert racism, sexism and homophobia, harassment sometimes sexual, sometimes physical all can make work a tough place to be. And even if those obvious problems don't arise, a work climate based on secrecy or all-out competition can wear on the soul.

And finally, even if the co-workers are okay, and the employers try to be fair, I have known people who realized that as medical workers or teachers or civil servants or administrators, they just could not endure that system any longer. Whether it is staffing cuts or program changes or even a poisoned office structure, they have found that the on-the-ground values of the organization are so far out of synch with their own, that continuing to work in such a system becomes impossible.

What to do? Several options are available. The first, and most obvious is to leave the job. Some of us are lucky enough or free of responsibilities enough that we can make that sort of change in our lives. I was one of those lucky ones. For four years I worked in a Toronto photo studio doing portraits and weddings, fulfilling an early career aspiration to capture the world and people's lives in an artistic way. In the quest to become a good portrait artist, I took the opportunity and the security the job provided and asked few questions about the business or my employer.

For the first couple of years, things were okay...or perhaps I trained myself to not notice the imperfections. But around year three my boss began showing me some of the business side of things preparing me for a management role. And quite simply, I became aware that the man was a swindler. He overcharged for simple supplies and outright lied about some of his products. But most troubling was watching how he would sit down with some young couple whose wedding I had photographed. I had been in their home, knew that just starting out they could barely afford the rent and some used furniture for a one bedroom home, and I watched this man sell them thousands of dollars worth of wedding pictures they did not need, could not afford, but were too starry eyed to turn down. He played on their emotions and exploited their love for each other and their families. And then I would watch my boss go to his expensive suburban home proud of how he was providing for his family with other people's money.

Don't get me wrong. I have nothing against a career in sales. My father spent most of his life buying and selling as has my brother. But the difference between them and my employer was that Dad and Marty looked to make fair sales of a good and reliable product and build their repeat business. My boss just wanted to wring out every nickel he could...and was almost as amazed as I was on the rare occasions when repeat business came through the door.

As I said, I was lucky. When I could no longer stomach that workplace, I was single and free of responsibility. And when I felt the call to ministry, I was able to quit that job and go back to school. Indeed, I think that boss can take a fair amount of credit for my subsequent career. I have been told that I bring some gifts to ministry, but in truth the greatest gift comes to me in that I am able to live a life where my values and my workplace don't seriously conflict. I am no perfect human being, nor do I live my values as well or as consistently as I could, but unlike many, I am at least free from moral tension in the workplace.

Well, I know a lot of you, and I know I am not alone. There are several people in this congregation who have been able to alter or shape career paths so that you would find it easier to 'walk your talk' if not all the time, then often enough to allow you to sleep peacefully. Others don't have that flexibility.

Quitting a morally problematic job is not easy. Sometimes it takes years to get the courage, the sufficient level of frustration with the workplace, the freedom or the training needed to make a change. If you feel that tension in your working life, you may not be able to do anything about leaving right now, but you can begin to look around, to decide that you need not stay there for the rest of your life. If you begin to believe there are other options available, you will find them in time - maybe several years, but you will find them.

In the meantime, there are other strategies, and they all begin with you, with being yourself.

### **1. Find ways to affirm who you really are.**

In the tension of being rewarded for who you are not, it's important to put something of who you are in your workplace. Keep a favorite book of meditations, or a plant on your desk, or hang a photograph or poster of someone you admire. One friend had a lovely artistic fabric hanging of the flaming chalice in her office. Most visitors saw it only as art, she kept it as a reminder of what her most important values were.

When the gap between belief and practice grows too great, it is important to have something on hand to remind you who you are and what you believe.

### **2. Bellyaching turns people off. Find ways to quietly stand your ground and know that positive alternative suggestions can make friends and bring change.**

Perhaps you have had this experience, I have. You are sitting with some co-workers

and the otherwise neutral discussion crosses the line of good taste, or maybe ventures into tricky political terrain. Suddenly someone jumps up and begins to lecture one or all on how bad they are and how wrong headed for speaking or even listening to that stuff. I don't know about you, but I respond very badly to such lectures and will usually dismiss the over-the-top haranguer. But I have also been in situations where the conversation has gone in a similar direction and someone has courageously, but quietly said, "I am not comfortable with this," and left. I don't know about you, but I usually find myself thinking about this quiet protest with some admiration. It spurs me to examine my conscience, and I often find my actions wanting.

I am always impressed by people who will quietly stand their ground, even if I do not always agree with them, and when the leader of the group that began the conversation tries to dismiss the protester, I find myself far more likely to side with the outsider. So I suggest you accept your co-workers for who they are and not try actively to change them. Yelling at them will only isolate you and make them resentful. But at the same time you can stand up for yourself and refuse to participate in things that make you uncomfortable - drinking, breaking rules, vicious gossip, disrespectful humour. It will win you respect and peace of mind, and even friends.

### **3. Know that small things make a difference. Find allies who will walk with you, comfort you and give you courage.**

When I first started attending as a student, my ministerial association chapter was still largely an 'old boy's club'. Meetings featured a crew of mostly old guard men who stayed up late drinking, telling one upmanship stories, putting down the people they did not like, and harassing the newcomers --especially the students. Some of them were good ministers most of the time, but playground bullies when meeting together. These gatherings were, at times, so vicious that a number of colleagues refused to attend.

But over the years new ministers came in, a good many of them women. And a couple of those women stood up and challenged the culture just when I started back in 1988. At first nothing happened, other than these outspoken folk were mostly ignored or occasionally harassed. But by speaking out, they found each other and started working to change the culture of our group. It took a few years, and a few of the old boys had to move or retire, but today, our ministerial meetings are entirely different and much more caring and supportive.

### **4. Focus on what you can do. Don't get fixated on what you cannot change.**

This is another version of the classic philosophical question: Is the glass half empty or half full? I am an optimist. It is a choice I make nearly every day. I see every glass as half full and try to see ways to make it fill up a little more.

It's easy to look at the workplace only in negative terms: long hours, poor pay, a poisoned system, a place where your belief and their practice do not mix. But it's easy to get too fixated on the negatives and miss the good things...those workers who can be friends and allies, clients and suppliers who you can respect and like, and most importantly, the ways that you as an individual can act with self-respect and dignity to

make your workplace more humane. Never underestimate the power of your own optimism and goodwill.

**5. Measure in the long-term. Accept short-term defeats gracefully but don't give up.**

No one can change a workplace culture overnight, not even the owner of that workplace. Make constructive suggestions, even when you know they will be rejected, for in defeat, you will have planted the seeds of change. If you are stuck in a situation you cannot leave, you can work quietly to make it more humane, even if it's only in some very small area over which you have a measure of control. And when you fail to make a big difference, believe in your heart that you are making a small one, simply by being you and living your principles as best you can.

Let me leave you with a passage from a John Cowan's book. He is a former priest who worked many years for Honeywell and now presents independent management seminars in the US.

*No matter how bleak the scene, no matter how imminent the disaster, in my heart of hearts I remained optimistic. Not that I thought the answers would miraculously emerge, but that if we people kept at it, the answer would emerge from our collective wisdom. Not that I thought that I would get the most obvious fortunate outcome, but that whatever the outcome, it would turn out to be fortunate.*

*But why did I expect this? It made no sense for either an agnostic or an atheist to expect it. I was forced to think through my position and realize that I believed that all of us are caught up in a creative force that is determined to do the good. The more I affirmed the belief, the more it informed my practice.*

*I am now on the lookout for friends who are interested in integrating belief and practice. I have already found quite a few. They are people who know what they believe. They don't have their beliefs because someone gave them a list of what to believe. They are people who build their lives around their beliefs. Their everyday actions give voice to what they believe. They test everything against their picture of the universe and take the risk of choosing what they feel is right behaviour and rejecting what they think is wrong.*

*I am on the lookout for people like these because I find them exciting, vital, worthwhile. I am on the lookout for them because they make a difference. I am on the lookout for them because if we hold hands, perhaps we will not slip between that crack in the universe -- the crack between belief and practice. Perhaps together, in this our day, we will do something quite extraordinary.*