

## The Second Letter to the Graduates

*Rev. Daniel Kanter*

*The Rev. Kanter serves as minister of the First Unitarian Church of Dallas, Texas, and as president of the Starr King board of trustees. He delivered this speech June 23, 2006 in St. Louis at the SKSM Graduates Association Dinner, held annually at the General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association.*

From Daniel, minister to the Dallasites, to the saints of plenty, graduates of Starr King and friends, grace to you and the peace of God be with you.

Many thanks to you for this great honor, for your few precious minutes, and for your faith that I might lift up some wisdom to shine it on our beloved school. For all thanks goes to Starr King, the school on the hill, for uniting us in fellowship and purpose—its purpose to prepare people for the Unitarian Universalist ministry and service to the world.

Many thanks for the people who make it run and who make it possible for such a small and unique place to exist. Thanks to students and faculty who make it sing with fortitude and freedom. Thanks to you who watch and admittedly sometimes wonder what the heck must be happening there but remain faithful to its larger arc of purpose none the less. Gratitude in abundance for its existence as a place for ministry to be embodied not just digested and considered, but embodied in the world.

My first letter to you was last year at this gathering albeit a different sort of thing. That one was the bearer of bad news for me and for you. This one a reflection on one journey to and from the school house. I presented my first letter to you with a heavy heart and this second one with joy and hope.

It is now for me to tell you my story in part. Brother Disrud asked me to speak I think since my unique position of a recent graduate and board member has given me a view of the school few have had. In fact I have been part of the schools life through perhaps it's most intense times in recent history, transitions that brought new faculty, new strategies for survival, changes in approach and personnel building and focus.

I wish I could tell you all of what I have seen and I intend to tell you some, But first a personal note. I arrived at Starr King a year late. In fact I was admitted for the class beginning in 1993. Only two years earlier on a silent hiking retreat with one friend up into the Himalayas just five kilometers from Tibet I received a call to ministry. That call was a clear and understandable message in my ear that said, "Return home and serve your people."

I had been running from my life, pushing it to the edge of my being and literally to the edge of the earth where further on probably only held more dangerous and tumultuous options. I was to be a Buddhist monk, I thought, but this call turned me back, back to home in myself, back to home where my people were, back to the religious tradition of my upbringing, back to service to a larger cause.

And then I returned, went to work as a farmer in Vermont, then a teacher of disturbed teens, and then forgetting the call altogether I attempted a return to India. I had received the invitation to a job in the desert in India documenting farming techniques at the same time that I received the acceptance letter to Starr King. I took the former, asking for a deferment to which Patti Lawrence told me I could re-apply when I returned.

Little did I know that only a few months later I would be back in the U.S. after a freak accident on a motor bike in Greece--the country not the by-product---with a broken leg and broken heart, but that is a different story.

It did force me to listen again to that call--in that year I met my would-be wife, who didn't know anything about UUism on our first date and, after she heard I was going to study for the ministry, asked, "Are Unitarian ministers... celibate?"

We came to Berkeley together and settled in to a time at the school that included the retirement of both Ron Cook and Bob Kimball and the arrival of three new faculty members--each arriving with their own controversies--but arriving none the less with grace and impact. This is the transition time

I spoke of earlier. A lot changed in those years from 1994 to 1998. And since then even much more has happened of which you know something about.

I felt a bit like a witness to these changes. Ron and Bob and Clare were my professors. I remember thinking, “How could we possibly let two of them go and welcome three new ones???”

But such sideline observations seem unworthy now that I look back and see what a positive impact each of them had on the school, the GTU, and the students, myself included.

I learned a lot all the same, especially from Ron and Bob. Ron who in preaching class routinely sat in the back of the class, hunched over, eyeing the preacher, and when a sermon went on too long would either pretend to snore or sleep or even fall out of his chair with fatigue. He taught us that --just--saying--something from--the pulpit--in just--the right--way--wasn't ever enough! He taught us how to preach what we knew with heart and soul and say it directly. He taught us to believe in ourselves, and he taught us how to end a conversation while walking down the hall with a quick and agile dash into the bathroom just at the moment he knew the conversation was ready to end... a skill I still use today. He also saved me from leaving seminary.

Like many of you I am guessing, that moment of despair about being in seminary settled over the land of my fragile soul and led me to Ron. I was sitting in Ron's office looking at that old Volkswagen window he had perched on his shelf, entirely cracked yet intact with just a bullet hole in the corner... an image perhaps for some moments in ministry I'm sure... I told him I was done, caput, through with this nonsense--that UUism was dead--that we had nothing to rely on, that even without the vow of celibacy, I couldn't go on. He looked calmly at me and said, “Maybe we are done?” and then reached for the phone and dialed a number and put me on the phone with Barbara Merritt. who talked to me about reading Dostoyevsky with her congregants and that real work was happening in the churches to further a spiritual revolution and that ministry made a difference at least in a few lives here and there. When I left Cook's office, we walked down the hall and he slipped into the bathroom leaving me there knowing that I had to go on. I remember reflecting at that moment on my call. He had asked me, “Why should you be a minister?”

I also remember sitting with Bob Kimball as he neared retirement. It was like visiting a reclusive monk in his cave. I went in to be with him once a week for a semester. I remember doing things like talking for an hour about the Corinthians passage about being a fool for Christ. I can't remember a word of what we said about it, but I remember his willingness and joy in looking at the verse with me. I remember best his child-like spirit in it all.

And I remember his philosophy that a minister can do things to keep his church just sick enough to be so needy that their only conclusion is to keep the minister with them--a lesson in faith about ones calling as I see it now. You decode it. I remember one piece of practical advice he gave me--I told him I was having trouble managing the time in my week, especially with my wife. He said when you need some time for yourself; write the word, "something" in your calendar. And then do something.

And of course Clare's presence was important to me. Even when I had no idea what she was talking about, I knew she cared and encouraged me to deepen my intellect and to read, read, read.

Those were good times. And the new professors who arrived brought gifts unseen by critics and maybe only known by the students who were loved into a deepening sense of reality by them. Ibrahim, Yielbonzie and Rosemary all brought gifts we soaked up. And, despite the questions they raised in the minds of many of you, I can say they were the right people to teach in that moment of the life of the school. The gift the school is that makes room for it to open doors to souls and enliven the activist in its students were furthered by them, embraced them, as it does embrace the new faculty now.

All that said, I think the school could never have prepared me to serve as assistant minister in a church like King's Chapel during its biggest transition in over 30 years. To say that my time serving there was a unique experience is just the beginning of that story.

Nor could it have prepared me to stand on the steps of the church while Boston evacuated on September 11 with my colleague Earl Holt, who had just arrived to be the new senior minister. Nothing prepared us for that day when we kneeled in the reading box for the few who had come to church and we read the psalms,

Save me O God by your name vindicate me by your might. Hear my prayer...for the insolent have risen against me, the ruthless seek my life...

I am distraught by the noise of the enemy... the clamor of the wicked...

I say, "O that I had wings like a dove! I would fly away and be at rest..."

And nothing prepared me to forgive that act, even while in the weeks following the lectionary text was turn the other cheek and love thy neighbor. The difficulty of forgiveness came true as I spoke with family in New York and New Jersey while the ashes of human flesh and stone rained down on them day and night.

And nothing prepared me to wade through thousands of refugees from New Orleans who had landed in Dallas with their lives in plastic bags and their hearts broken to do ministry with them.

And little prepared me for two wars, for the palpable political hypocrisy that we see today, for the many efforts in the public square to seed an “us-them” national attitude. Nothing prepared me for intelligent design, the defense of marriage act, the rise of fundamentalist kooks as advisors in the White House. Little prepared me to serve deep in the heart of Texas, where my near neighbors are the Methodist church of George Bush and three churches of 20,000 members and up all with literalist perspectives and evangelical missions, one of which rolled a tank onto the stage when the war started.

Not much prepared me to answer the mother who was concerned that after seeing me greeting outside of church in my robes, her child wondered if I was God. Or to answer my own daughter, who told me from the backseat of the car when she was 4 years old that she knew where God was--hiding in the bushes.

And yet I was reminded what I learned recently when helping lead an interfaith spiritual practice seminar with two swamis, a Buddhist, a Jewish laywoman, me and the minister of the Science of Mind Church for 200 attendants. In that event I was reminded of our school. After the swamis led a breathe-in and breathe-out meditation for an hour, and I led with thoughts on our Universalist ancestors and centering prayer, and the Zen Buddhists chanted, then came the minister of the Center for Spiritual Living. She got on the floor in front of us and had us close our eyes and imagine a door into our hearts, she asked what shape that door was, what fixtures, what materials it was made of.

And then she told us open that door and see the green and blue lights shining in and about us and going out and merging in the pure light of the creator and returning she said to the blue and green light and this went on and on and on and on. And my parishioner who was there later told me while this was happening that he could only think of the Backyard Burger Barn serving burgers 24 hours a day with their signature blue and green flashing lights. And on it went. The minister led us as we imagined the lights of each essence merging and twirling, and I was really finally ready to fall off my chair onto the stage and snore loudly when a terrifying electric jolt came through the sound system

and even the blissful swamis jumped two inches off their chairs. Only then did I have to recite the mantra professor Til Evens taught us--"Everyone knows something, everyone knows something, everyone knows something..."

Little prepared me for these experiences, serious and not so serious, except the lessons I learned in that schoolhouse that do not appear on any transcript or course description but happened in the halls and interactions with my classmates, faculty, members of the GTU and all who were part of that small school on the hill.

Nothing except those lessons that taught us that every person does know something, that mere tolerance isn't sufficient ever—that we can and must move from and "us-them" perspective to an "us-us" perspective in all our dealings and make it mean something. That we are truly enough, and that we can stand up to those who would bully us from the pews, that we must face terror and pain and not shrink back, and we can sit in the home of a family whose teenager just took his own life as I had to do my first week in Dallas--and make a difference.

The school taught me we can stand with parents who smile over their gurgling newborn, that we can preach to thousands and make sense most of the time, that we can speak clearly and effectively on the steps of city hall, that we can listen deeply to our call and answer it--every day, and we can do all that our ministries so impossibly require of us--and do it well. And still give thanks for what is real and what is unknown.

From where I sit, I see that the school has made changes and had staff and faculty come and go and still it continues to push students deeper into ministry in ways we cannot predict. It has deepened its demand for scholarship and for theological reflection that looks through a lens of justice, while reminding students of the pitfall that we can sometimes think our way out of compassion. And from where I sit, I see that in just a few years the school is a better place than it was when I was there, stronger, clearer about its mission, and more effective. And I see that the school remains on the leading edge of theological education, challenging to many, incomprehensible to some but on the leading edge of theological education just the same, where we want it to be and where it should remain.

Each of us has a journey to tell, I hope each of you get a chance to tell it. For now I thank you for hearing at least part of mine and I hope that it might make a difference for you to have been here tonight.

Dear friends, farewell for now, live in peace, give thanks for all things, greet one another with the love you have to give, look forward with me to a future for Starr King that is bright and worthy and means something powerful to us and to those yet to be touched by it. Go in peace, walk softly on your path, and may God shine on you all the days of your life. *Amen.*

***STARR KING SCHOOL for the MINISTRY***  
***Educating Unitarian Universalist ministers and***  
***progressive religious leaders since 1904***