

# Clergy Sexual Abuse and Misconduct 2010

## A Sermon by Reverend Lynn Strauss

### Part I: The Problem

For weeks now I have been clipping articles from the newspapers : commentary, editorials, reporting – anything written that touches on the sexual abuse scandal that continues to unfold in the Vatican and around the world.

But it's hard to let it sink in...it's hard to believe that men of the cloth, priests of the Roman Catholic church, men trusted with the spiritual well-being of children and youth, boys and girls...could abuse their God-given authority to exert power over innocent bodies and souls.

Perhaps I'm naïve, but I am always taken by surprise by the cruelties of which human nature is capable. And I must remind myself that slavery was prohibited by law in this country a mere 145 years ago. I must remind myself that sex trafficking is an international reality that we rarely think about.

I have to remind myself that sexual abuse of children, child pornography and rape of boys and girls and women is a world-wide, daily occurrence.

But it's hard to let it sink in.

And even if I face the scope of sexual violence and domination—justifying some of it through the apologetic of human nature and its baser instincts...even if I see the sex and violence portrayed on television, in movies, and in video games, I still have trouble believing that ordained, spiritual leaders—that clergy—can transgress their vows so flagrantly...and that the

system, the church hierarchy has colluded to keep terrible secrets- thus allowing abuse of children...*abuse of children!*... to continue. My father was an altar boy, many of you here this morning are former catholics- I'm sure you struggle with the fallout of this scandal- I'm sure it is hurtful to you...parents send their children to catholic school and to mass for moral instruction...and to keep them safe from life on the streets...

Shouldn't clergy be held to a higher standard?

It's too easy to blame it all on the structures of the Catholic priesthood...too easy to blame it on celibacy.

Though certainly to separate men from women and women from men as the catholic religious orders do...is problematic and against scripture. The ministry of Jesus was a ministry of inclusion, a ministry that empowered women, a ministry that valued family, a ministry that honored children. Jesus' ministry was a ministry of non-violence.

But institutionalized religion has moved far from its source.

The separation of body from spirit as a theology...was a much later idea, St. Augustine's idea... one with dire consequences for all of us. And it bred fear. And it bred shame. And it bred guilt. And it bred abuse. And it fostered the idea that women were inferior to men. A legacy that is yet to be overcome.

Neither has it been overcome within Unitarian Universalism.

We too have a history of clergy sexual abuse and misconduct. Our Association, for too long, also refused to see and respond to the truth of abuse of power by some of our ministers.

If a minister was accused of sexual misconduct, he (it was almost always a he) he was merely transferred to another congregation...to another district. And no healing or opportunity for truth telling was offered to the women or to the congregations that were harmed.

I have no doubt that there are women here this morning and even some men, who have been victims of abuse of power by spiritual leaders...by priests, or ministers, or gurus or therapists. Those people who are most trusted.

I am also aware that there may be those among us who have sometime in their lives, hurt others, either intentionally or unintentionally through the misuse of power that was entrusted to them.

So let us take a moment to grieve. In this safe, sacred space, let us remember the secret we may have kept...let us remember the hurt that was done...let us remember...

And let us acknowledge the strength we found within ourselves as survivors...let us find the compassion to understand...and let us hope for the courage both to witness to our experience and to forgive. For we are all wounded by the oppressive systems of domination of which we are a part. Where ever we are in the hierarchy, we are all wounded. We all need forgiveness. We all need reconciliation.

The problem of clergy sexual abuse and misconduct is not only a problem of wayward individuals...not solely a problem of criminal behavior...and let's be clear, that sexual abuse of children is a criminal act...one we are required by law to report.

Clergy act within systems. If clergy are allowed to act in unethical and immoral ways, the systems: the Vatican, the UUA, the parishes, the congregations...also are culpable.

Ministers are called to serve UU congregations in a covenantal relationship...in mutual trust and shared responsibility.

Ministers and lay church members share a calling to higher principles, to right relationship- together we promise to our children, a safe space in which to grow their souls.

Acknowledging a shared responsibility is not to excuse the charge to the minister in the service of installation to follow UU Ministers' professional ethical guidelines...nor is it to excuse ministers from the unique, and I believe higher moral responsibilities of a spiritual leader...but congregations have a shared responsibility to hold one another accountable to be our best selves to keep our covenant...whether clergy or lay, we all have responsibilities. We have promises to Keep.

ANTHEM " A Promise I Will Keep" by Nick Page

## Part II - Reconciliation

I loved the Methodist minister of my youth. Reverend Jim Reed. I admit, I put him on a pedestal. He was the smartest person I knew. He was committed to influencing change in our neighborhood. He preached beautiful words and concepts from the Bible. He and my small urban congregation changed my life.

That's why I'm a minister today...because I believe that ministers and congregations change lives.

It is a small percentage of clergy who abuse their power. It is a small percentage of clergy who abuse children or have inappropriate sexual relations with members of their congregation.

Some of my best friends are ministers...and I have the utmost respect for all of them. It is important, I think, to protect the professional ministry from the taint of this scandal. It is important to remember the good that organized religion does and hold up those religious leaders who are excellent role models and inspiring presences in our lives.

We are so proud of our interns...and here within the embrace of this teaching congregation they are learning how to lead with integrity and compassion. We send them forth expecting that they will take a respected place in the communities where they serve. In the act of ordination, we confer on them sacramental authority. Not power over...but sacred authority to minister.

There was one wonderful story in the Post about the first Catholic Chaplain of the House of Representatives here in the Capitol. Father Daniel Coughlin was appointed 10 years ago and

is now retiring. At the time of his appointment, he followed 58 consecutive Protestants in the office.

As Chaplain, he offered counseling and spiritual guidance to all who worked in the House, from his office in the basement of the Capitol. He also organized regular Bible study groups, Torah study and a Muslim prayer service. He offered inclusive prayers to open each day's house session. The article made it clear that he was well-respected for his wisdom and his inclusive style.

Even as I encourage appreciation and respect for deserving clergy, I want to be clear that if ever you suspect or experience sexual misconduct by a Unitarian Universalist minister...you are expected to report it. Call the District Executive, Call Boston. Report it.

We pray that the Catholic Church will be healed from this scandal. There are signs that Pope Benedict will become increasingly responsible in his handling of the church's painful history of abuse and will soon step forward with true repentance and clear apology.

There are signs that the attempt to blame homosexual priests unfairly will not be sustained. Episcopal Bishop of New Hampshire, Gene Robinson writes in a letter to the Pope making it clear that clergy sexual abuse has no correlation to sexual orientation...as he says "it is a problem of abuse, not orientation".

Within the UUA, our healing and responsible actions have been spurred by the role of women as leaders in our Association.

As women entered our ministry in larger numbers in the 1980s and 1990s , during the advent of the feminist movement -

things changed at UUA headquarters in Boston. There is no more tolerance for misconduct. There are good policies and procedures and clear guidelines posted on the UUA website-look for the link to "Restorative Justice for All".

Any allegation is investigated with an approach of advocacy for the victim /survivor. The focus is on restorative justice in which everyone is heard. If deemed justified, censure occurs, and ministers can be removed from Fellowship in the UUA. When this happens all ministers and congregations are notified by letter.

The expectation of keeping secrets has been replaced with the expectation of truth-telling.

UU ministers who have abused their power are offered therapy and other means for healing. In some cases if they meet certain requirements, they can petition to return to Fellowship, but a record of the case is kept in their file.

The victims are also offered therapy and continuing support. And where appropriate they are supported in bringing criminal complaints. The congregations where the abuse occurred are also offered services for healing....sometimes for several years.

As we can see by watching the events in the Vatican...a breach of trust by one...affects the whole.

Since the focus on education and reconciliation which occurred primarily in 1998-2003, there are been many fewer reported incidents of abuse within the UUA, though there are still some.

Here at UUCR we are held in a covenant of right relations... you can find this covenant on our website. The most relevant line is this: "We covenant to respect personal boundaries of each

person and be mindful of the importance that UUCR be a safe place for all.”

May we all find ways to reduce the violence to which we are exposed in our lives, and in our families.

May we be responsible for creating safe space in all the institutions of which we are a part.

May we expect moral and ethical behavior of ourselves and of our religious leaders.

May compassion for others overcome all else.

So May It BE/Amen/Blessed BE