

IF ALL THE WORLD'S A STAGE—WHAT PART DO WE PLAY?
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As some of you may or may not know I began my career in the ministry at the First Unitarian Society in Middleboro, Mass. from the fall of 1964 to the spring of 1969. During this four and a half year period I had a brief but illustrious stage career in the local drama theatre there, which was called the Cranberry Players. Each year at the end of the drama season the Cranberry Players would gather for an awards ceremony dinner at which they would give their version of mini-Oscar statuettes for the best performance for minor and major parts. It was great fun and we all enjoyed ourselves immensely. I am pleased to report that I won two Cranberry Player awards during my brief acting career in Middleboro.

You might be asking yourself how was I able to find the time for amateur theatre while being a full time minister in my very first parish. Well, truth be told, in those days the church in Middleboro was much smaller than it is today, and besides it was a good way for me to get to know some folks in the community, and I think the membership felt it was a good thing to do. And it was. Moreover, I felt then, and still do, that acting and ministry have much in common. I will say more about that a bit later.

Last October 24th the Norwell Community Theatre did a production of Noel Coward's wonderful comedy, "Blithe Spirit." I went to see it with my friend Connie Johnson and we enjoyed it immensely. The acting was first rate and the set was fantastic. I was especially curious to see their rendition of that

play because it was the first stage production I had ever appeared in back in February 1965. I played the part of Charles Condomine who struggles with the dilemma of being pulled by opposing forces exerted by his former and present wives. The former wife is dead and has come back to haunt him. He can see her and hear her (though no one else can). He talks out loud to her and to his present wife and to others who think he is talking only to them, which makes for some very confusing and hilarious conversations. I found it hard to believe as I watched the play some 45 years later that I had actually memorized all those lines.

The interesting thing about this role is that it was fortuitous of my own budding interest in psychic and spiritual phenomena, which I was to pursue in the UU Psi Symposium organization founded in 1969. Over the years I have attended a number of séances and message circles, led and participated in telepathy and ESP experiments, done reincarnation regressions and dream workshops, and met and befriended a number of spiritualist mediums from both England and America. These pursuits have been both serious and humorous and I have laughed and cried at some of the results.

I remain to this day a questioning but honest seeker about the truth or fallacy of the survival of the spirit, and the question of life after death. These are, of course, religious and existential questions, that every human being wonders about. “Blithe Spirit” did it with humor and lightheartedness. Religion does it with more seriousness. Both have their place. The role I played on stage very much fit the role I have played and continue to play in my life as a minister and existentially concerned human being.

I also believe that we all have symbolic ghosts who inhabit our psyches. These may be living or dead ghosts. To become fully human we need to make them conscious and own them as part of who we are.

You might be interested to know that my stage career played a significant role in my becoming the candidate for the First Parish in Norwell back in 1968-69. The Norwell Pulpit Committee was coming to hear me preach at my home church in Middleboro. They weren't supposed to do this without the minister's permission. The night before, in the middle of writing my sermon, the Chair of the committee called to let me know they were coming. They wanted to surprise me, but he was letting me know as a courtesy. There wasn't much I could do about my sermon at this point. It was titled "The Beginning And The End". I figured it would be either the beginning or end of my relationship with the folks from Norwell. It was a sermon about human wonderment and the infinitude of the creation.

What could I do to impress these people? Suddenly, it came to me in a flash. I had just finished a Cranberry Player's performance in "Send Me No Flowers" in which I played the part of, would you believe, a cemetery plot salesman. There is one section in the play where my character waxes eloquent about the wonder and mystery of flowers and trees and stars. It was perfect filler for my sermon and would, I hope, impress the Norwell contingent with my thespian talents.

Well, it worked. At least I hoped it did. For a while I wasn't too sure. One of the pulpit committee members, who was a history professor at Mass. College of Art, commented afterwards that the philosopher, William James, died of

ontological wonder sickness, and that one had to be careful about not getting overwhelmed by the infinity of the cosmos. I just prayed that the Pulpit Committee hadn't got lost in my sermonic cosmos and that when they got back to earth they would ask me to be the candidate. Fortunately, they did. The rest is history. And it lasted for 31 years.

I must admit it. I'm somewhat of a ham. Which is one reason I ended up in the ministry and found myself playing the part of a cemetery plot salesman, which by the way, is a closely related profession to ministry. Like undertakers we both are called upon to minister to people who must come to terms with the death of friends and loved ones. We do our best to offer comfort and support, inspiration and courage, in the face of death and loss. Though death eventually comes to us all, life goes on and we must play our part.

Though our loved ones die love endures, and though we grieve and mourn we must learn to live and love again. We recover our capacity to rejoice in the mystery of creation, not to die of ontological wonder sickness, but to appreciate the beauty and wonder of existence, to "kiss the joy as it flies into eternity's sunrise" (Wm. Blake), to embrace our human mortality and hold it close to the heart, though eventually we must part, and say farewell.

Ministers and cemetery plot salesman are both engaged in the business of selling ontological wonder to those who hunger for it. If we have anything to give it is "the courage to be" to all who walk the road to dusty death, and who know that nonetheless life is the greatest gift of all when shared unstintingly with others.

When I was a student at Andover Newton I took some courses in Religion, Drama and Literature. We read ancient and contemporary plays along with classic and modern literature. We read *Job* and *J.B.*, *Jonah* and *Moby Dick*, Camus' *The Stranger* and Hemmingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*. In each novel and play we sought to uncover and reveal the underlying religious and spiritual themes—good and evil, guilt and suffering, hope and redemption—and to see how the drama of sin and salvation plays itself out in every human life, actual and fictional.

I remember reading a book about *The Book of Job As a Greek Tragedy*. I was very much impressed with the argument that the Book of Job in the O.T. was heavily influenced by the structure of ancient Greek tragedies and that the writer of *Job* took an ancient pagan story and weaved it into a Hebrew drama involving God, Satan and an innocent man who suffered unjustly at the hands of the gods. It is a theme that is perennial and one that Archibald MacLeish rewrote in a modern play called *J.B.* Why do the good suffer for no just cause? Why are the innocent destroyed by human or natural design?

We wrestle with these same questions again and again from the tragic events of the 9-11 attacks in 2001 to the latest hurricane or major disaster to come down the pike. The drama of sin and salvation, the struggle of good and evil, is one that is played out every day in the history of the world and in the course of our own lives. All the world is indeed a stage and we are the ones caught up in the drama, and we do indeed play many parts as the play unfolds.

One of my favorite movies from a number of years ago, starring Jim Carey, was “The Truman Show”. It had nothing whatever to do with President Harry Truman. The main character, whose first name is Truman, plays the part of a man who from birth has been living in a small town where everyone he meets is playing a part in a soap opera of his life. The only one who’s not playing a part is he himself. He has no idea that his whole life has been broadcast on television and that the people he meets at home and at work are all paid actors.

Later on in the film he discovers that the town, which he has never left, and all its citizens, and every building, and the lake where he goes boating, even the sky overhead, is all part of a gigantic and elaborate television stage set, where his every move and action is being recorded and broadcast to the world at large. His whole life has been one big soap opera and he is the only one who doesn’t know it. The climax of the film is when he is faced with the choice of staying in the soap opera, knowing that his entire life is a phony play, or to choose his freedom by leaving the set and entering the real world of human existence.

Do you ever have the feeling that your life is like a soap opera and that you’re playing to an unseen audience, and you wonder if your life is real? Well, it is a soap opera, but it is also real, so you’d better be careful how you deliver your lines. That is in some sense what we do with our lives. We write the script of our lives as we live them except that we deliver our lines unrehearsed. One of the problems we face, as we grow older is that we tend to forget our lines, more and more, and some of us even forget who we are.

In Woody Allen's film, "The Purple Rose of Cairo", one of the romantic film heroes comes off the screen and enters into the life of a female movie addict. She has to learn to separate fantasy from reality and to find satisfaction in real flesh and blood relationships rather than in make believe characters. Yes, but the make believe characters on stage and film can also help us discover what is true about ourselves. We can face the good and evil in ourselves and thereby become the heroes and heroines of our own lives. We can come to realize that the tragic flaws we see in the characters on stage or film exist in us also. The challenge is to know this, really know it, and to turn our potential tragedies into comedy by learning to laugh at ourselves. A good comedy helps us to do just that.

Some years ago the Italian playwright, Pirandello, wrote a play called, "Six Characters In Search of An Author." I don't remember much of the play, but I do recall that the characters all wondered who they really were, who was writing the script, and who if anyone was directing the play. I submit to you that they represent all of us. We find ourselves thrown into existence by a power or providence we know not of and we wonder what it's all about, what it's all for, and what part we are supposed to play. We are all of us characters in search of our Author. The Bible and the history of religion is a record of humanity's quest for the Source of all Being and the purpose of human existence. There are those who say, "The world is God's play, created in play, as a stage upon which we might dance and dazzle and delight the Creator of all things." That is certainly an interesting notion and one worth contemplating.

I like the way Annie Dillard, put it in our Opening Words: "We are here to

abet creation and to witness to it, to notice each other's beautiful face and complex nature, so that creation need not play to an empty house." Thank you for coming and filling this beautiful New England House of Worship with your presence! The play must go on and we are all actors in this continuing drama of life.

Being a good minister is something like being a good actor. I call to mind some verses from the apostle Paul: "Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep." (Ro. 12:15) An actor plays many parts and tries to become like those whose parts he plays that he might win the approbation and applause of those who see something of themselves in the characters he or she portrays.

Likewise, ministers seek to identify themselves with those whom they serve that they might bring a message and a presence of caring compassion to those in need. We are all of us in need and we are all of us called upon to do the work of ministry and to become that message and presence of caring compassion to one another. In the final analysis that is what the drama of ministry, and the drama of worship, is all about.

In our worship together we celebrate the gift of life in all of its pain and glory. In our life and living we seek to share the gift of life with one another and with those in need. Each of us has a part to play to bring a measure of healing, salvation and wholeness into a broken world. What parts you play, in this living drama of souls in the making, depends in large measure on whether you can accept the cast of characters who share the stage with you, and whether you wish to be a help or a hindrance to others in their various

endeavors to become fully human.

A church at its best helps us to define and refine our roles and to assist one another in the challenge to become a truly caring community. We do indeed have our exits and our entrances and we make note of the acts and actions that take place between these two great mysteries—the beginning and the end of the play that is our lives.

Closing Words From Shakespeare:

Our revels now are ended. These our actors,
 As I foretold you, were all spirits, and
 Are melted into air, into thin air.
 And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,
 The cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces,
 The solemn temples, the great globe itself -
 Yea, all which it inherit - shall dissolve
 And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
 Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
 As dreams are made on, and our little life
 Is rounded with a sleep.

Well, dear friends, it is time to wake up
 And get on with the business of living.