

## ROGUES, RENEGADES, AND RELIGIOUS WORK

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I don't believe they pay me to do my work. They do, and I am grateful for the money. But my work is so much like play that I am in a full-tilt boogie quarrel with retirement. I don't want to retire. How can you retire when you haven't really been working? Play is what you want to do; work, many say, is what you have to do. I want to do my work.

I work about 60 hours a week. I work at 5 a.m. and at midnight. I almost never work 9-5, because that is when other people are working, and I work when they are not. I have made a lifelong habit of the siesta. I learned in my second job NOT to go to the office at 9:00, because there were no people who could talk to me or work with me then. That's when I became a writer and a gardener. I write in the mornings, and garden or play tennis or go biking in the afternoon, after my nap. I usually work at lunchtime. I like my free days—and also my committed early mornings and late nights. Every day around 4:00 p.m., I start a round of appointments and meetings. They usually go till 8:00/or 9:00. I also work in the interstices, pretty much all day long every day. I check my e-mail at least twice an hour, make phone calls, and sit in endless phone meetings (while double-timing them on e-mails or with writing). I am active but am not working all the

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time. I am playing.

The downside of this fully flex flextime is that I work just about every day of the week, including, of course, Sundays (why of course Sundays? She hasn't introduced that she is a pastor yet). Another downside is that my doctor insists that I should eat earlier in the evening, so as not to exacerbate my acid reflux. I just can't eat till I'm done working, and I really dislike sandwiches. Yes, I eat a lot of sandwiches.

I am a renegade and a rogue. I have been lucky enough to find renegade institutions that would employ me. I think I rode a wave of affirmative action and made the wave even more interesting than it was by taking advantage of my freedom. I'm not sure everyone has this kind of freedom. I am sure that most of us have more freedom than we use. There is a difference. What I say here about being a working pastor may not apply to many other people. Unless, of course, you want to sign up for the best non-job in the world.

### ORDINATION

The year before I was ordained, 1973, I spent every Tuesday night reading *Beyond God the Father* by, Mary Daly, with five nuns and a Presbyterian laywoman. We read a dozen or so pages each Tuesday. We also drank a lot of wine and ate a lot of cheese. We were part of the great feminist religious underground, what Dan Brown popularized as the Holy Grail. Quarterly, we went on a retreat. We stayed together as a women's group for many years, and even published an illustrated cookbook of all the good food we had eaten together.

One of our members, Patti Smith, just died. Another, Sister Rachel Fitzgerald, will receive the dedication of my forthcoming book, *I Heart Francis: Letters to the Pope from an Unlikely Admirer*.

On the day I was ordained, Reformation Sunday, October 30, 1974, I had asked if my women's group could be a part of the laying on of hands part of the ritual. The five nuns were not deacons but teachers. One was the principal of a large school. My judicatory and

its Committee on the Ministry said absolutely not. No non-ordained hands. Nothing not in the male line of Peter. No way. “It’s enough that we are ordaining you as a woman; we’ve never done this before. Don’t push it.”

When it came time for the laying on of hands, all six of the women in my group arrived to lay on hands, and nobody could do anything about it at that moment. I had no idea they were going to do this, and they did it. I was kneeling in the middle of a group of 40 or so men, feeling weird as hell, when six women nudged in and touched me. I felt doubly ordained. First by the United Church of Christ and then by my women’s group and Mary Daly’s God. I am proud to be ordained, proud to be one of the “firsts” of women to be ordained, and I am simultaneously wildly concerned about the diminishment of the meaning of the sacrament of ordination.

The idea that people in the line of Peter, who both happen to be and have to be men, is absurd. Peter was the most fallible of the disciples, denying Jesus at the drop of a rooster’s crow and making one leadership mistake after another. Surely, he was also brave and good. But the notion that Peter was better than others—when actually he was worse than others—is ludicrous. The Petrine Succession argument is a thinly veiled promotion of masculine supremacy, which, in and of itself, should, and has been, questioned by many, including Jesus.

Plus, any elevation of the ordained ministry or priesthood demeans the so-called laity, as if there were work were less important than the sacramental work. The separation of powers—the holy and the profane—is dangerous and unchristlike. You have noted, I am sure, that I rarely use the word “Christ”. It elevates Jesus into something he would never have wanted to be—the only savior, the ultimate savior, the best savior in the religious Olympics, the imperial savior, etc. But there is a worthy concept in the word “Christ”—which is the mystery and majesty of the holy, to which Jesus was always pointing. Let’s call it the divine human, which includes Peter and all his pettiness.

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My own ordination reflected this view. Laywomen and ordained men ordained me—if, by ordination, we mean the holy laying on of hands. I got a lot of rights and privileges, authority and respect, out of their action. Its goodness derives straight from the mixture of lay and clergy attending. Had it only been clergy, I would feel regularly ordained and diminished by the very act to being the pedestaled clergy in a world where most people are put down. Jesus sided with the put-down. I aim so to do also. I am irregularly ordained.

Before the ordination, when we heard that the inclusive laying on of hand was going to be prohibited, we had prepared a joke. We and all of the women attending would wear pink undies. Many did, with a kind of glee. We had a quiet bond. It was doubly good to have a loud bond as well as a quiet one. The judicatory and the Committee on the Ministry were apoplectic at the inclusive laying on of hands. Most people in the room didn't really know that women couldn't do what my friends were doing, so they just thought the mixture of genders was sweet. I never heard from the judicatory about this rogue and renegade behavior. Believe me, I also never asked. And I have gone on to serve 41 years in the ordained ministry of the UCC.

I had experienced what Roman Catholic women experience now. We could be servant leaders, “Christian education” directors, but not sacramental purveyors. I was raised in a church that still doesn't ordain women, the Missouri Synod Lutheran Church. For the first ten years of my ordination, my Lutheran mother whispered to her friends that I was going into “Christian Education,” so embarrassed was she of me doing something so unusual. She wondered if her friends would approve, which they did not. I had put her in an awkward position. They didn't even approve of my ordination, much less the pink undies. My mother did not wear pink undies to the ordination, but she did read one of the lessons, with great eloquence and articulation.

After the UCC received me, I left the Lutherans. Actually, the Lutherans left me. Then the next year, the Lutherans decided to ordain women. They paid for me to go to six years of seminary, while they lollygagged on the topic of women's ordination. They just didn't

know how to say no, so they waffled. When I had one of my endless exams, they actually asked me if I had “gender issues.” My Strong Vocational Interest Bank then designed for men only like the priesthood, had come back saying I would be best as an army general. I assured the committee, one after another, that I had incredible gender issues. Most of them had to do with being put down by men.

Rejection is big for me. Acceptance and welcome are also big for me, as being taken in when you have been thrown out means a lot to a person. But what means the most to me is the rogue behavior, the civil disobedience that marked my own ordination into the church. My women friends showed a genuine sacramental sensibility. They say only priests like me can perform the sacraments of vocation and ordination. I think not. I think all work is holy and in need of rogues and renegades.

### **SO-CALLED LAYPEOPLE**

There are lots of ways people outside the “ordination track” can show up for themselves at whatever job there is. You may know the secret codes at your work better than I ever will. Often it is the lowest person on the so-called totem pole who is the only one who knows how to fix the AC when it goes out. Or how to phone the person who’s been sacked at home that night and express a feeling, even though that kind of human behavior is against the rules. Or how to clean out the office refrigerator. Or fly just enough under the radar to get something done in the system.

My friend works at a university. He has worked there for 37 years. He calls himself “vice-president in charge of what nobody else wants to do”. He chaired the first sexual harassment committee, and now they have a whole department working on that matter. He chaired the first disability committee, the first LGBTQ committee, and the committee that eventually got the university to recognize religion. Why, I asked him. “Because I could.” Plus, “I just love prayer.” There are now 69 chaplains of all faiths at this university.

If you don’t think medical people have a holy call, then be on

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the table while the cardiologist is doing open heart surgery and the electricity goes out in the hospital. My tennis partner just told me this story. The night before, our area had had a huge electrical storm. We are in the hottest summer on human record in the Hudson Valley. All the freezers are overworking and the air conditioners are overworking. Many people are collapsing in the heat.

While my doctor friend was performing the surgery, the power went out. He then had to pump the machine with his own hands, stabilize the patient, and keep the electricity going by hand. The next day, he had to convince the hospital that all hospitals during this time of accelerated heat waves in the Northeast need to have back-up electrical systems. If they couldn't get them, he would no longer do surgery—and he would have his photo removed from their advertising. He was the best doctor they had. He prevailed. If that is not vocation—from the actual healing, to the systemic healing, to the prophetic behavior, to the refusal to work in absurd conditions—I don't know what is. It is not just rogue or renegade to behave like this. It is common sense. It is operating from a sacramental sensibility first and not from fear of losing a job first. When we have a sacramental common sense, we don't work for a paycheck, or for approval, or against rejection. We work for God. We are free from the diminishment of vocation on behalf of common sense, which is also sacramental.

My tennis partner reminds me of Quentin Young, a famous physician in Miami. His memoir is titled *Everybody In, Nobody Out: Memoirs of a Rebel Without a Pause*. Vocational meaning or meaning at work is not a given. Many of us have to fight for good work. Why not? It's a great fight.

Aimee Semple McPherson, the famous Los Angeles evangelist, founded a prayer line that was among the first of its kind. She also did another remarkable thing, right near her temple on Echo Lake in L.A. She ordered Chinese lotus for the lake. She wanted the people she was ministering to, the new immigrants, to feel at home. The lotus grows in a beautiful mud. Last Easter, I preached a sermon called "No Mud, No Lotus," which comes from a Buddhist slogan meaning

exactly what it says. What allowed McPherson to be interested in the vocation, the call, and the essence of her Buddhist congregants? Respect for them is the answer. When we respect each other, magical things happen. The lotus now takes over half of Echo Lake and blooms a magnificent yellow. The people who shipped them are to be thanked. The people who grew them are to be thanked. The people who tend them are to be thanked. The people who waded in the mud to get out the litter in the lake are to be thanked. Work is so holy that it requires our respect. All work is holy, not just the “ordained.”

By the way, Catholics join Protestants in enjoying a doctrine of the Priesthood of All Believers. By that, we mean something very similar to what I am arguing here; that all people have vocation and are to be respected for and in it. I might lose the word “believers” and just say “the Priesthood of All”. I would follow the Shaker frame: “Make it simple. Make it simpler still. And when you cannot make it simpler, make it beautiful.”

What drives me to my knees more often than not is an overwhelming appreciation for all that God made: the thistles and the thermonuclear scientists, the columbine and the caretakers, the mandrake and the musician, the lightning and the lightning bug. What drives me to my heartbreak more often than not is knowing that some people are not only unemployed but also underappreciated in their employment. How any human being could be kept unemployed is beyond me. There is so much to do and so much to give.

I would argue that the economic system does not tell you whether you have vocation or not. It only tells you whether you have a job. Of course, not having a job is brutally difficult on multiple levels. Sacramental sensibility allows us to think rogue thoughts and enjoy renegade behavior. We are valued by God and not by our paychecks. We can stop and start there. We all have holy orders. Mine happen to be word and sacrament, which is my job description. Others have other job descriptions. One does not outrank the other but, instead, circles the divine in magnificent ways.

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### BRING YOUR OWN GOD AND HERE'S MINE

In these days, when many reduce Christianity to its right-wing version, Judson Memorial Church, my employer, is an increasingly visible and alive alternative. Judson is an “early” church. It is a post-denominational church, with many Jews as members, and dually affiliated with the United Church of Christ and the American Baptist Churches. It is a traditional church—in the sense that it follows the Jesus of the Bible who privileged the poor and outcast, the sinner and not the saint. When Italians first came to the Lower East Side and many said that they smelled, Judson opened a health clinic for them. The Judson fountain brought the first clean water to the Lower East Side. Before many other churches affirmed homosexuality, Judson did. When others thought ordaining women was unbiblical, Judson did it out of a conviction for open interpretation of scripture. When others spoke of addiction as though it were a sin, Judson members gathered on Wednesday nights to create bleach kits to reduce the harm of drugs. When others poured concrete over scripture, Judson kept its meaning alive in jazz, making Al Carmines’ art sing here. When others threw the word “sacrilege” around, Judson used its meeting space to talk of drama, sex, suicide, AIDS, needles, and prostitution.

Judson’s former minister, Howard Moody, founded Clergy Consultation, which helped women get safe abortions. In that same period, a health van circulated in the village to help prostitutes and others get health care. Judson was early in affirming what mainstream Christianity is just now getting around to noticing. While issues of homosexuality and poverty rock the churches, Judson relies on its history and tradition. These are traditions of innovation and of “firsts”; they are also in the classic Judson style of incubations and midwifery. Judson continues its mission of doing what others won’t do. It follows its other famous pastor, Al Carmines in the ongoing support of emerging artists. Bailout Theater and Magic Time, as well as the gym at Judson, express the best of Judson’s fusion of the arts, politics, and spirituality, all based in a self-governing congregation



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of real people who provide mutual care for each other. We say we are “the perfect church for imperfect people”. We also taught Italian immigrants not to use garlic in cooking. “Un-American,” we said, in a weaker moment.

I keep these pots well stirred as my main job. I also visit with people about life and death, sickness and health, and jobs, jobs, jobs. I do a couple of funerals and a couple of weddings a month. I preach a sermon almost every Sunday. I build teams of leadership and manage a staff of seven. I always have something really useful to do. I love my work. I love my people. And I get paid for it too!

My work is advocacy of the rogue and the renegade. I work at it seven days a week in a rogue and renegade way.