

# Becoming Fit for Service

Joseph Pierce, Seminary Student

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Wow. Let's start there...I can't help but think that some of you remember me when I was about this tall...and now...here I am...this tall... Some of you remember me, buzzing through the old hall of worship...I remember the wooden marble playset...I put the marble in the slide...then "plink"...then slide...it's still there, by the way. I remember a tree house where I could climb and crawl in and out...to my little heart's content.

And so here we are...and I am so nervous... When Mark told me that I would be given the opportunity to preach, I responded eloquently... "eyes wide...u...mmm..." What could I say...? Why should I say...? I stressed long and hard about a perfect sermon. I went to Eric with the grand plan of giving the greatest sermon ever written. Silly as it is, I feel like I owe that to you. Luckily, Eric replied: "Um, Joe, not that you don't have a lot you could say, but you have a story to tell. It is your story...maybe you should start there." Sweet... there is nothing I am more qualified to talk about than this man!

So I am coming today with my story, and I am telling it because, very soon, I will be asking this congregation to endorse me for candidacy as a UU minister. I'd like to be known by you before I ask.

With that in mind, let us begin with my first religious experience. When I was young, we had a pet guinea pig named Squirmy. He was a beautiful little animal, all brown and furry. And...like many other things in my life, I didn't appreciate him until he was gone. One night, my younger brother had taken Squirmy

into the bathroom with him when he took his bath. I had done this many times as well, it was...normal. I heard a scream from the bathroom...and that...that was not normal. It was the first time I had ever heard pain. Heard anguish. Squirmy had fallen into the tub. Squirmy had drowned. My brother was crying, my mother was comforting him, and...there was Squirmy. I picked him up and took him into my mother's room. I laid him on the bed and did chest compressions and mouth to mouth...

I had never prayed before. I don't remember ever having asked God for anything. I begged God that day...I told God that I would do anything to get our precious Squirmy back! God did not give Squirmy back. We buried Squirmy in a box in our back yard. I hated God. I had asked, I had begged, I had pleaded, and God was...absent. I remember looking at the sky that day, with tears in my eyes, and rejecting God. I became an Atheist that day. As I grew older, my increasingly rational mind wanted to be able to say more than just "I reject God because God hurt me."

So, during my High School years, I became a qualified Atheist. There were several reasons for this. Perhaps the most important was that my father was an Atheist. I have always idolized my father. Some of my favorite adolescent moments are of when we would talk about the silliness of the Christian God. I strove to please my father with logical arguments that disproved a Christian God, and he always seemed so passionate when he taught me new ones.

Notice the scope of our rejection: "Christian God."

Another reason I became such an ardent professor of Atheism is that it annoyed many of the Christians in my High School. Oh, and did I mention that I loved to argue. A match made in a heaven that I didn't believe in.

Let me summarize my reasons for being an

Atheist thus far: Father veneration; it annoyed People; I love to argue. Perhaps, if I am honest here, I may have been...seeking some attention. But I think there is another reason for my atheism: I loved religion. This may seem counter-intuitive, but stick with me. As an Atheist, I was allowed to be critical and evaluative of religion and religions. I had the freedom to speculate and examine...without all the suppositions and assumptions that a religious person might begin with. As an Atheist, I was able to marvel at the beauties and oddities of religion, and much to my surprise, I fell deeply in love with it. The process I have just described took a little while though. I still had a lot of growing up to do.

When I look back at my adolescence, I sometimes smile at the things I did and what I valued. And sometimes I'm ashamed. What motivated me at that time was gaining social power and being perceived as "right." In hindsight, my actions revealed a highly narcissistic young man. I thought that I could make people do things, think things, and believe things, and that made me... happy. Perhaps I could have stayed that way, a happily self-centered little manipulator...if not for a few bad break-up experiences.

The next part of my story stars my first love. We were both seventeen when she got pregnant and that...was a problem for me. In my own mind, I had always been the "golden boy." I wanted to be an example that my mother could take to her family and say, "See, I didn't screw up." I was going to go to college, have a career, make lots of money, and do everything right. I told my mom about the pregnancy and she cried. I didn't tell my father for a very long time. Reacting out of fear, I asked her to get an abortion. She declined. I had no choice but to own up to my responsibility as a father. Life would be tough...but we would make it. I began to want this child more than anything.

She had a miscarriage about three months

in. To help me grieve, my friends built a little wooden boat; we placed a yellow toy duck on it and burned it in a pool. I have a yellow duck tattooed on my chest...over my heart. I feel that that child sacrificed itself for us. The tattoo reminds me of that sacrifice...and my responsibility to it.

The pregnancy-miscarriage kept us together for a while, but then the relationship got bad again, and we broke up.

The amount of emotion that this caused in me was terrible and overwhelming. I had never felt anything like it, and I didn't know how to handle it. I started to cut myself. I believed I could trade one kind of pain for another. I was right, at first, but each time it brought less relief. It also brought me a new problem: shame. Shame when others saw the scabs. Shame when I had to explain them. Shame that I knew that I could not control my self or my emotions. I didn't. I started dating another girl. In the end, I tried to do the same things to keep her with me. However, there was one key difference with this relationship: I learned from it.

In the months that followed, I started to work seriously on finding out what I believed and what mattered in life. Throughout these relationships I had failed to appreciate the feelings of these women, and, more importantly, I deliberately tried to hurt them. This led me to another crucial realization: the pain I felt was...in some way...deserved. In this moment, this beautiful moment, I knew that my actions had consequences. I was developing a conscience...

It could not have come at a better time. Our relationship ended during my sophomore year of college. I was struggling academically for the first time. I was also struggling to find meaning in what I was doing, and that...was new.

One day, in the middle of a physics lecture, I got up and walked out. I couldn't do it anymore. Something deep inside of me had been telling me that this life path was not for me. As I walked in a

sort of horrified haze of uncertainty, I asked myself what was important to me. The first thought that entered my mind was “helping people.” This thought moved me deeply.

I decided on a new major: psychology. I had been helped previously by psychologists, and it seemed a practical and positive application of the abilities and gifts that I had. It also gave my life a purpose and meaning that it had not had before.

I also began to volunteer for the Suicide Prevention Hotline. For two years, every Friday at 12:01 a.m., I would begin a six-hour shift at North Central Mental Health on High Street.

This experience taught me many valuable lessons and skills. It taught me how to pour compassion into my voice, to make it resonate over a phone line, and how to be present with a person in a highly stressful situation. I learned to listen attentively, to hear emotions and anxieties. I also learned that I cannot help everyone. Although this realization was painful, it is a reality that must be understood if one is to maintain their sanity in the helping professions.

Over countless phone calls, one subject came up continually and unexpectedly: religion and spirituality. At first, I was reluctant to engage in this kind of discussion. However, over time, I discovered that, not only was I able to have these sorts of conversations, but that they were an important and effective tool for walking people back from...the edge. Religion became a place where I could connect with a caller, and reestablish their link to their own self-worth.

I would like to say that I saved people...I now realize that these stories, these people, their plights and anguish, their hopes and dreams, were changing me, teaching me, and developing my understanding of what it is to be human. They were saving me.

Something inside my own heart was building. I was becoming more spiritual. This came to a climax one day when I was delivering pizzas. I was musing

about karma and theology when a small warmth began behind my shoulders, and moved throughout my body. The feeling grew to something indescribable. It was total, and the greatest gift I have ever been given.

I had to pull over it was so intense. One thought entered into my mind: Intent. It was both loud and soft. Accusatory and consoling. Beautiful and terrible. And that my friends, is my conversion experience. I wanted something from God and I didn't get it, I didn't want anything from God and I got something profound.

In that moment, some part of the divine became evident in my life. I didn't deserve it. I still don't. But, for whatever reason, it happened and my life had changed. I started going back to the church of my childhood, here. I began to teach our Sunday School classes for the 3rd – 4th graders. I have taught our High School OWL and Coming of Age classes for the last three years. It has been rewarding in ways that I would never have imagined.

Do you want to hear new and profound ways of understanding the world? Try asking our youth what they believe, and you may find yourself surprised and challenged. I know I was. I still am.

And this brings us to a special story, the moment of my Call. One day, sitting in the back row of this church, I considered what I wanted to do after college. What kind of psychologist did I want to be? Where would I go for graduate school? Could I leave my family, my friends? What was I going to do with my life? I looked up at the pulpit and mused, "I could do that, I could be up there preaching."

I rejected that idea immediately.

You see, my mother had told me, at a very young age, that I would be a minister some day. The irony of my many years of Atheism, coupled with the absurdity of my mother ever being right, caused me to want to laugh out loud.

And I might have, if I hadn't almost emptied the contents of my stomach onto the parishioner in front of me.

Yes, someone in this congregation was this close

to wearing my breakfast!

My rejection of ministry caused a visceral reaction in my body. My rejection felt wrong on a level that I can only describe as total. I have come to understand this moment as my blessed moment of calling, although at the time it terrified me.

This was my Call.

and so, in some strange way, it was decided that I was going to go into ministry.

The terrifying thing for me was that I did not feel in any way worthy of this Call. I knew that I had not experienced enough in my life nor lived into my own beliefs long enough, to presuppose that I could minister to anybody.

With my work on the Suicide Prevention Hotline, my RE work, and other volunteer experiences, Service, as a concept, had grown deep roots within me, and I didn't think that I had performed enough service to be a minister.

I have a memory of my father talking about the Peace Corps. I do not remember the context, but my father had said that he had always wanted to join the Peace Corps. He had even filled out the application. I would join the Peace Corps. I would do something that my father had always wanted to do. In 2007, I became a volunteer for the United States Peace Corps. in Ghana, After training, I was placed in Portripor, an extremely rural village with no running water or electricity.

When I got on the plane to leave, I had never felt so alone in my entire life.

I remember looking back at the people who had come to see me off, and smiling...with tears in my eyes...and walking away.

In the village I didn't have instant access to all of the amenities I take for granted here. If I needed water, I would take buckets to the water hole. If I needed groceries, it was a 45 minute bike ride to Bonakye. If I needed money, it was an all day commute to Nkwanta on a dirt road in a crowded van.

Thank goodness for it. I don't think I ever

understood how good I have it here. For nothing other than luck, I am white, middle class, American, male, heterosexual, and well educated. The benefits I receive from these descriptions are so underserved as to be close to criminal. I am still coming to grips with the perspectives I gained from my experience, but I try hard everyday to be thankful for what I have.

Thankfulness is just one of many things I learned in the Ghanaian bush. I learned how to organize communities in a multi-cultural setting. I learned how to coordinate resources, write grants, and develop programs and events centered on education and development. I have taught in multi-lingual schools, established Moringa farms, and participated in customs and practices of a non-native culture. In short, I became a much more dynamic person than I had been before this experience, and not a day goes by that I don't miss being who I was in Ghana.

Does Moringa ring a bell for anyone here? About six years ago, I wrote our church asking for money for a fairly audacious Moringa planting project. Moringa is a fast growing tree. Its leaves are like a multi-vitamin with protein. Our church sent about \$200 dollars which I used to purchase the seeds. Over the life of the project, we planted over 10,000 of these trees. Through the money given by this church, food has been grown and people have been nourished. I am not the only one who thanks you now. Thank you.

I came back from the Peace Corps ready to move on with my plan for ministry. I went directly into seminary. I began with two emotions: wonder and anxiety. The wonder arose from the feeling of being able to study, academically, the subjects of theology, ethics, and pastoral care. The anxiety arose because I was attending a Christian seminary, and I was not a Christian.

Experience has proven my anxieties were exaggerated. Not only did I find my ideas and beliefs to be, for the most part, accepted, they were



also encouraged and engaged by my colleagues and professors.

Also during my seminary experience, I added two more titles to my name: Sifu and Father. Sifu is the proper title of an instructor in the Shao-Lin Do system. I have been practicing martial arts for over 10 years now and am currently the assistant instructor at our school in Hilliard, under Sifu Max Watkins.

I also became a father. On August 24th, 2011, my wife gave birth to Apollo Brayden Pierce. He is simply amazing. The first time I held him is the most proud I have ever been. Everyday he surprises me, and to hear him laugh...it puts a giant smile on my face.

This brings us to where I am now: I am in my last semester of seminary. Four classes to go, and I will walk with a Master of Divinity in May. In one week I will have completed one unit of Clinical Pastoral Education at Nationwide Children's Hospital. I am also serving on our Pastoral Team and doing my field education requirements with this congregation.

My time as a Chaplain at the hospital has been truly formative for me and given a new direction to my call. I went into my training as a chaplain believing that I was already good at providing pastoral care, and I had very little to learn. I am trying to think of a good way to describe that... some Greek word...oh yeah...hubris...that's what that was.

My time at Children's hospital has left me feeling exposed, vulnerable, and humbled...which is the exact foundation I now believe necessary to build up a good chaplain.

I was once asked what I thought it took to be a good chaplain. I replied that it was the ability to put the events of life into a spiritual context and to relieve spiritual angst.

And surely that is a part of it. But now, I understand that to be a chaplain, to provide

meaningful pastoral care, requires the willingness to be truly present with another human being...and the strength to let your heart break...over and over again.

I have come to find out that I am a chaplain, and it is my place to be present in the midst of crisis.

Over time, and with many experiences, I believe I have become...able to be a spiritual resource to people in crisis, and to be a spiritual leader in my community. I tested the waters with the suicide hotline. I immersed myself with the Peace Corps. I learned how to swim at Children's Hospital. So what is next?

The call to service has become ingrained in Me, and I have decided to become a chaplain in the United States Army. I find it deeply meaningful to be a spiritual resource to people whose mortality and lethality are constantly in play. I know that I can be relevant in that theater, in that ethos, to those men and women who serve, so I will seek active duty as soon as it is available to me.

Many in this congregation and our denomination are apprehensive about the military, its history, and its current use in the greater world. Me too. But I ask of you, how does one change the way our military operates? It takes two things: outside pressure and inside pressure. Who speaks to the inherent worth and dignity of all people on the inside? Who raises the voice of justice, equity, and compassion as a three part harmony? Chaplains do. And I wish there were a thousand more Unitarian Universalist chaplains serving in the military. Even one more makes a difference.

In summation, I want to say that my heart truly wants to comfort people. I have built my life around it. I believe that the position of chaplain is unique in that it has the possibility of offering a powerful spiritual outlet to those who desperately need it. Chaplains can be healing and restorative in a way that no one else can be. Chaplains can also

speaking truth to power in a way that no other profession can.

I have come to the conclusion that my Call is to be a chaplain in the Army and I will fulfill that call to the best of my abilities.

And finally, I would like to say that I appreciate you taking the time to listen to me. If all goes as planned, I will ship off to basic training in June. I will not be going alone. I will take the love of my friends and my family. I will take all the experiences that have made me who I am now. And I will be taking all of you with me, and I am deeply appreciative of the love I have received from this community.