



Installation Remarks on Becoming the Rabbi of The City Congregation by Rabbi Peter H. Schweitzer

Adapted from an address delivered on May 5, 2006

It is with great honor that I stand here today to assume the position of rabbi of The City Congregation for Humanistic Judaism. Now, when some of my colleagues are anticipating early retirement, I'm really excited to have a chance to return to this field once again. For me, finding The City Congregation 13 years ago was one of the best things that I've done with my life.

Now a rabbi without a community makes just as much noise as a tree in a forest when nobody is there to hear it fall. Well, I'm not sure that really is true – about the tree, and also about the rabbi, but it is with really great warmth that I thank the members of The City Congregation for joining this community in the first place and for giving me the opportunity to fill this position.

For me, the path getting here has been somewhat circuitous. I started out in the rabbinate over twenty-five years ago, wandered off into a less-than satisfying stint in publishing, and used the opportunity of my company's relocation out of the city to re-train as a social worker. I then settled down for over a dozen mostly fulfilling years in that field, and it has not been easy these last few weeks to leave my work and my colleagues and especially my clients.

But, finally, I am getting back to where I started. Granted, I've been doing rabbi-things, unofficially or semi-officially or quasi-officially, all these years, but it's good, very good, to make it official again.

I've also been on a journey of self-discovery. The path I took began in an assimilated, secular home in suburbia. I was not exactly a cooperative Sunday school student and in my adolescence questioned the belief systems that were being handed down to me. I did not proceed to a bar mitzvah though I was confirmed. My strong Jewish identity came not from our temple affiliation, but from proud connections to particular relatives who made a significant mark in the Jewish world. My father's journey from Germany as a teen in 1937 also had a profound effect on me.

Later, in college, I went to Israel for the first time and worked at an archaeological site. This opened up a new world to me as I imagined my ancestors passing through the same semi-arid desert area where we were encamped. This spurred on my interest to learn Hebrew. Not atypically, I became enthusiastic about exploring my Jewish roots, not just academically but experientially. Not only did I switch my major to Judaic and Near Eastern Studies, I also joined Hillel and the Kosher Food Co-op. Later, in rabbinic school, I took it a step further and briefly went through an ultra-observant phase. My journey, not unlike that of many others seeking their roots, was one of Judaism by immersion. But not questioning or thinking.

In fact, I avoided questioning what I was doing or saying. This, too, is not uncommon. Most Jews, I think, adopt a kind of self-imposed "don't ask, don't tell" strategy. God forbid they should ask you in rabbinic school about your beliefs. It's not safe to think too hard about what we're saying or doing.

But I couldn't do that. Like many of you, I started paying attention to the content. And, to my consternation, I discovered that it didn't work for me. I say consternation because it's much easier to stay with the familiar despite its drawbacks. For quite a while I also felt a sense of disloyalty and betrayal of my upbringing, and a kind of loss that comes from parting with the past. These tugs eventually shaped my approach today of retaining traditions that we can adapt, particularly music that can be preserved with new lyrics that keep the traditional melodies alive for us.

When Rabbi Sherwin Wine introduced his new ideas about Humanistic Judaism some forty years ago, they were not exactly warmly received. His notion of a human-centered approach to Judaism that would be inspiring and compelling, captivating and stimulating, and even, for those comfortable with the term, spiritually uplifting, unleashed a storm of condemnation. But for the rest us, they also brought, excuse the term, intellectual and emotional salvation.

Humanistic Judaism was waiting for us already. Now, these forty years later, the hard trailblazing work is done. The first and hardest ten miles have already been walked. Our movement is finding wider acceptance all the time. We are well into the next generation, already ordaining rabbis who grew up as children in our movement.

Yet despite all this work, each one of us finds ourselves anew on our own path to discovery. And the first ten miles for each of us personally is often the most difficult. We each need to find our own way.

We are all at different stages on this journey of discovery. Some have been thinking about these matters for years. Others are gingerly dipping their feet in the water, loyal to the old and also drawn to the new. All are welcome here. We are stronger because of our diversity, not because we walk in lock-step together. We are a movement that encourages individuality of beliefs. Not only would it be unrealistic to expect agreement on everything; it would also be boring.

It's a worn-out cliché to say that there needs to be room for everyone at the table, or under the tent. So I won't use those metaphors. I prefer the one about the boat, about it being big enough to accommodate all of us. That's because a boat is a symbol of a journey. It's not stagnant or fixed. Sometimes it's moored, but most of the time it's at sea, in motion, heading some place, and often someplace new that has not yet been discovered.

Rabbi Wine has been prodding me for years to take the helm. For quite a while, I wasn't ready, nor was the congregation. We have actually been like one those couples who has been living together for a long time and just weren't ready yet to get married. But gradually, step by step, we have finally decided that it's time to walk down the aisle together.

So here is what I tell couples at weddings:

Commit yourselves to each other in a unique bond of friendship and loving partnership.

Be each others' source of strength and support.

Embrace conflict as well as peace. Give as well as receive.

Be with, stay with, and move toward one another in trust, in devotion, and in love.

Sound words, I hope, for us as we continue this wonderful journey together.

Thank you and Shalom.