

Minilogue

My first settled ministry was in Rutland, Vermont, a town nestled in a remote little valley just west of the Green Mountains. Rutland began as a marble quarrying and railroad center, but by the time I arrived there in 1983, the local economy was dominated by the ski industry, as Killington Mountain — the largest ski area in New England— loomed large over the town, both topographically and economically. I used to joke about being involved in ‘urban ministry,’ since Rutland, with a population of 14,000 souls, was the second-largest city in Vermont at the time!



The Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Rutland was located in the downtown commercial district of the city at a busy intersection with a four-way traffic light. The congregation was housed in a lovely little marble structure that resembled a miniature castle, complete with a slate roof and a stone turret. The congregation had been formed in 1888, and the dated cornerstone, now overgrown with ivy, read, “St. Paul’s Universalist Church.” The founders must have made some money in the marble business, because the building had eight Tiffany stained-glass windows and a beautiful Tracker Organ.

On the front lawn of the church stood a small glass-encased billboard called the “Wayside Pulpit” (to the left, just out of the frame of this old photograph). These signs were a fairly common sight back in the days before the internet, and there are still a few in use, especially in New England. Churches would pay for an annual Wayside Pulpit subscription and receive a year’s supply of 3’ by 5’ posters, with big black block letters printed on a white background, quoting some words of encouragement, wisdom or inspiration. The congregation in Rutland hadn’t subscribed to the series for years, but I managed to find a backlog of old posters archived in the stone tower, rolled up tightly in slightly yellowed scrolls, like a cache of ancient sacred manuscripts. There were more than enough to recycle throughout the years of my ministry in Rutland. It became my job to replace the message each week. I would carefully page through the collection and choose a quotation that I thought came closest to expressing the topic of the upcoming service. The fit was never perfect, but the chosen quote was often surprisingly appropriate, and always worth pondering in its own right.

The location of our “Wayside Pulpit” was excellent. As people were stopped and idling at the traffic light, all they had to do was glance to their right and read the words on display. I often received appreciative comments from community members about how meaningful these messages were. Which brings me to the point of this little story. More than forty years later, I can still recall the words of the very first Wayside Pulpit message that I posted. It read: **“Be kind. Everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle.”** I don’t remember who said that, but it

doesn't really matter, does it? The words ring as true today as they did back in 1983. Wisdom and compassion truly are timeless. The 'social media' through which we communicate our Unitarian Universalist values to the world have changed dramatically over the past four decades, of course. The "Wayside Pulpit" may seem ancient, quaint and cumbersome in comparison with a Facebook page or an X account or a fancy website, but the simple truth abides, and the essential message remains: Let us remember to be kind to one another.

In Fellowship,

Rev. Bruce