



FAITH MATTERS

DISCOMBOBULATED...

JANUARY 20, 2012

Two hours into the party, a sophisticated, successful woman asked me what I did for a living. She'd had more than a little bit to drink and had shared more about herself than perhaps she had intended, so when I told her I was a minister she found herself momentarily wide-eyed and speechless. When she regained her voice she blurted out, "But you don't *look* like a minister!" She added, "Don't you ever wear a collar?" And by the inflection in her voice I could tell she meant, "*Don't you think you should do everyone a favor by warning them ahead of time about the nature of your occupation?*"

You've likely heard me report how I learned early on that the sudden revelation of my ordination in an otherwise anonymous setting could be quite jarring for people. Sometimes that has to do with a vague feeling they've been caught with their pants down, so to speak. And for others who lack a religious history/perspective I might seem an oddly exotic specimen inducing incomprehension and stupefaction.

Recovering her composure, our conversation settled into a rather deep sharing. Eventually she wanted to come to understand why I became a minister (a not uncommon question) and we spoke of the different directions our lives had taken. She allowed that she wasn't entirely happy. Though she hadn't confided this to anyone of late, at the age of 45 she felt a bit lost. "Successful...but lost," she snorted. I could tell by the look in her eyes that she definitely now felt she had said way too much. Then quietly staring into her drink she mused that had I worn the collar she probably would have avoided me.

I told her that for most day to day matters I preferred to be known principally through my nature as a man, father, husband, friend, fellow traveler, seeker, even sinner, who nevertheless yearns to grow up and who also finds he has been twice born as God would have it. She said she didn't know about her relationship with God, but since we were on the subject, she wondered about what it meant to be "called." She wondered what she was called to do or be. She thought this was as spiritual a matter as she knew and she thought it had something to do with her present unhappiness. I told her that our tradition teaches that the same God who created all, calls all, probably in as many different voices as there are different types of people, no two outcomes exactly identical.

That was about as far as our conversation was going to go under the circumstance. My new friend said she was surprised to find herself thanking me for this little chat. But then, if only I had worn a collar she could have avoided all this introspection. As it was, she said she was now headed home with more than just a few drinks in her system...and oh, she thought I would likely see her on Sunday...

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And I hope I see you this Sunday. You may have heard that while I was in Israel on a terrific interfaith trip with senior religious leaders from NYC, I learned of my 90-year-old mother's catastrophic physical failure. I managed to arrange a flight upon immediately landing at JFK for Ft. Myers and I arrived in time to embrace her before she slipped into her final sleep—she had been waiting for me. She died with her three sons by her side, quietly, comfortably and her leave-taking came gently. I am filled with tremendous gratitude for her and for this experience. Grateful as well for many expressions of support. God is good.

Over the next week I will be able to reflect more fully on my Israel experience and post an initial summary comment. Be watching for an opportunity for further conversation about this.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Stephen". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping tail that extends to the right.