I have had the extraordinary experience of stepping away from my duties as minister of this church for six months. Indeed, stepping out of the clergy role altogether for that time, including denominational involvements and such.

Most people don’t get that kind of opportunity, except when unemployed or changing careers, which is very different because you are preoccupied with trying to moving into a new situation. So I appreciate that this is a wonderful opportunity and rare privilege.

It’s a bodacious thing, sabbatical, but really important because there is a tendency, over time, for ministers to get too wrapped up in the affairs of the church, too absorbed in the ministerial role, too obsessed with the myriad tasks and deadlines, and discouraged by the distance between aspiration and reality in their ministries.

A pastor has to lay all that aside for a time to rebalance and remember. It’s important for the health of the person who is a minister. Equally, it’s important for the health of the church that its minister periodically do this kind of mental-emotional-spiritual housecleaning.

I was aware of all that at the outset, but one aspect surprised me. I have a dedicated home office line for ministry business, with a ring that distinguishes it from the home line. (I seldom answer the family line – it’s almost never for me – but I always answer the home office phone.)

When the office line rings, we often say “Bat Phone!” And it is a little bit like when Bruce Wayne (aka Batman) gets a call on the Bat Phone from the Police Commissioner, summoning him to the city’s aid. In reality, my calls are usually about routine matters, and mostly pleasant. Still, each time I reach for the handset, I know it could be “the commissioner.”

I don’t mind answering the Bat Phone. As a minister, it’s an “of course” thing. And yet, when I stopped answering it, I could feel the 24/7 aspect of ministry fall from my shoulders, and I confess it was nice.

I know people are curious about what I did on my sabbatical. So here’s a quick rundown. I attended three workshops:
* a five-day Gestalt workshop at Esalen Institute (the famous personal growth center in California)
* a one-day Holotropic Breathwork event in Seattle
* a two-day Enneagram workshop in Portland.

I went away on two solo retreats at a cabin on the Puget Sound and one retreat at the Oregon coast with a clergy colleague. I did a three-day home retreat with Jennifer.

I got involved with some recurring groups:
* an insight meditation group,
* a non-dual spirituality group,
* a contact improvisation dance jam,
* an informal spiritual exploration group.

I did a course of individual therapy and Jennifer and I did a course of relationship counseling.

I read five books in spirituality. I viewed two Great Courses on DVD – one on evolution and one on communication. I listened to some recorded talks by spiritual teachers.

I toured the Smithsonian Institution’s Hall of Human Origins and Air & Space Museum.

I took a road trip down to my old haunts in Berkeley California, had a two-week visit with friends in Washington, D.C., and a two-week visit with my siblings and extended family Chicago.

To top it off, I painted both my home office and my church office, rearranged and streamlined the furnishings, and did a major purge/reorg of papers and books. The idea here is to make something of a fresh start. Not plunking back down into the same old dusty environment full of old habits and assumptions.

So there. I hope you are suitably impressed. It is a lot of stuff when you rattle it all off at once.
But now I want to go back through my sabbatical experience from an entirely different angle, because I’m clear that sabbatical, like life itself, is actually not about doing this and that.

I want to tell you about some of the meaningful and transformative experiences I had during my time away.

In the months before the sabbatical, I spent time clarifying my essential aims. I would not just draw up a list of places to go and things to do. I know that it’s important and enormously beneficial to get as clear as possible about the experiential differences I want to invite into my life.

The key is not what do I want to do; but how do I want my experience to be different? Clarity about that helps in choosing the events to put on my agenda – things I hope conduce to the experiences I have in mind. But perhaps even more importantly, clarity about essential aims helps me engage the planned events in such a way as to truly cultivate the experiences I have in mind.

Further, this clarity helps keep me alert to opportunities to find what I seek in unplanned or even contrary circumstances. Growth and learning do not come just in planned events.

One of my essential aims was a to have clear sense of my deeper being – a sense that remains unperturbed by conflict or disapproval; I want to be loving my life. The Gestalt workshop, the various retreats, the spiritual groups, the contact improv, the books, the therapy – all were chosen with this essential aim in mind.

Let’s pull out one piece for a closer look, the Gestalt workshop at Esalen. It seemed likely to provide opportunities for experiencing afresh, for letting go of stuck patterns and cultivating more honest, authentic, and life-affirming ones. There were also tons of things about the whole situation that could lead to frustration and inner turmoil. Which would I find and take to heart?

First of all, Esalen in rather expensive for my comfort. Part of me leaned toward skipping it. But I had a intuition that this was a thing it was time for me to do. And in truth, the money was there. So to back away out of mere miserliness – I knew that was not right. So I pressed through the discomfort about the money.

Then there was the matter of how I would get there. Esalen is about 150 miles the other side of San Francisco, so I assumed I would need to fly. That adds to the cost, of course. Plus, being so far from the city added quite a lot more to the cost and to the complexity of transportation.

It was a vexing puzzle, but, remembering my essential aim, I laid aside the assumption that I must fly and reconceived it as a road trip. Turns out, that would save money and aggravation, and gain me a day in Berkeley on the way down and on the way back up.

I went to seminary in Berkeley. It’s a place where I found a great deal of liberation and heart-opening. Perhaps a taste of the atmosphere there could help me feel a renewed sense of rich possibilities…

As it happens, on the long drive through northern California, I had a totally unplanned and spontaneous experience which had perhaps more impact on my life than any other in the entire sabbatical.

Somehow, in the reverie of the road, a certain feeling and knowing grew in my breast, which at first had no words associated with it. It was a shift of disposition, a re-orientation of the mind and heart, which I recognized as being both deeply sane and humane.

It was a few days before the words came me: “Note the impulse, but do not pursue…”

Yes, that’s it. But what impulse? And not pursue what? After another day or two, I was surprised at the name of the impulse was which it makes such a difference to note but not pursue. It’s the impulse to condemn.

I certainly did not think of myself as someone who condemns a lot. And I know that, as a UU, I am “not supposed to” do that. But suddenly it was clear to me that a whole lot of what I did not primarily think of as condemning, actually is. And how much of it I was doing. And how debilitating all this was for my spirit – how pursuing the urge to condemn ruins a perfectly good moment.

Some forms of condemning are plain enough to see, like saying, “Those idiots!” (Though even here, we often pretend it is not condemning: “I’m not condemning, they’re just idiots!”)

Much of it flies under the radar in the more polite guise of critique, like, “You know what’s the problem with this?” Or “Let me tell you how this really ought to be.” Or even sometimes, “You
know what might be better?” This last one is probably not always condemning, but depending on the tone of voice, it can be. I’m talking about the tone of voice in the heart.

I don’t expect everyone to see this the way I do, but to me it became clear how all this nipping at reality – critiquing this and, in my imagination, improving that – is actually a polite, dressed up way of condemning, of saying “No!” to what is.

The liberating insight, though, was to notice the impulse to condemn, but refrain from pursuing it. The impulse is not anything to be ashamed of. And it does no harm – if not pursued.

The impulse itself, if simply noted with loving-kindness, can be just a source of amusement. The impulse to condemn does not set me against reality. Unless I pursue it, it’s just another passing thought.

Anyway, this took ahold of me on the drive down to Berkeley.

Lo and behold! as I explored places laden with memory and meaning for me, I was not disappointed with how they had changed. Nor was I disillusioned to realize how in memory I had romanticized certain things and that they were dingier than I recalled. No, everything was just fine. And, by virtue of not pursuing numerous impulses, the moments turned out to be chock full of opportunity to love my life.

The following day’s drive from Berkeley to Esalen put this lovely inspiration to a severe test. Navigating an unfamiliar six-lane interstate highway with frequent mergers and splits and heavy traffic at 65 miles an hour was quite stressful for me. The fact that the cars around me were going 75-80-85 miles per hour, passing me right and left, darting to and fro, turns this into a terror ride.

I constantly felt that only through the utmost vigilance was death was being narrowly averted. And this was indeed the case. A moment’s inattention and there would be a fiery wreck. This went on for three and half hours. In the last hour or so, the stress was in the form of navigating the hairpin turns of the Big Sur bluffs, in the dark.

When I finally pulled into Esalen and stopped the car, I was literally quivering and whimpering. I don’t recall ever being so stressed out.

And yet, I was also strangely okay. I had not been pursuing the urge to condemn any of it – the other drivers, the highway designers, or myself. It’s true I was having intense emotions, but that was okay. I wasn’t even embarrassed about my pitiful state.

Remembering my essential aim, I accepted this pitiful state as an honorable, and perhaps very useful starting point. Though it was very much at odds with the peaceful, groovy Esalen scene I had come to be part of, it was an authentic experience. It turns out “deeper being” is available from an unflattering but honest, quivering state of massive stress.

Esalen itself was gorgeous and delicious, nestled on a sheer bluff overlooking the Pacific. Soon enough I was calm and no longer a source of grave concern to those around me. The workshop was solid – learning to be more fiercely honest in experiencing our feelings. The people were generally splendid.

Yes, there also were plenty of things to get snarky about – were one inclined to ruin a perfectly good moment. It’s a lovely thing to not be so inclined.

By the time I got home, I knew that something within me that had been out of whack was back into alignment. Was this the result of the workshop? Or the way I got to the workshop? Or the clarity of the essential aim? Or serendipity? Or all of the above?

Out of all this, further cultivated in my various retreats and groups, and in my time just padding around the house, I am happy to report that I do feel a tremendously strengthened sense of my inner spirit, underneath the veneer of personal reaction and commentary.

A pastor’s relationship with the church partly like a job and partly like a marriage. And that can put a little stress on the pastor’s “other” marriage. So another of my essential aims was to bring renewed vitality into my marriage with Jennifer.

During sabbatical, we’ve had more relaxed time together and, even though Jennifer was still working, we’ve had significantly more time and energy available for exploring things together – a retreat, a workshop, cultivating our relationship with the help of a counselor. These things have been helpful.

But these relationship activities have not, in themselves, made the biggest difference. The key was the choice and willingness to reveal ourselves
more honestly, leaning into our marriage, and being willing to see where that leads. – mostly at random moments of our own choosing, outside of structured events, though the pump may have been primed by structured events.

There was a clear essential aim with related actions in support of it, and Lo! there is increased vitality between Jennifer and I. Perhaps not entirely unrelated, I now cook dinner one evening a week. Feels good.

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For some time I have been plagued by feelings of frustration and inadequacy in relation to technology. Feeling that I’ve been left behind by the world – that I am way too young to be so “out of it.” Instead of complaining and whining for another thirty or forty years, I formed an intention to develop a more empowered relationship with my technology.

So first thing, I got a cell phone. Yes, that is how backwards I was. After only a few months I managed to successfully answer a call as it came in. (You have to press not OK or POWER ON or that symbol that looks like a speaker, but the SEND button). Also, I can text, and use the stop watch function. This device has probably several hundred other functions, but this enough for now.

Next I got an MP3 – a little hand-held digital music player. This triggered the necessity to learn how to deal with digital audio files on the computer and synch them with the MP3. It was a hard-fought struggle, not yet complete, but I have attained basic functionality in this medium. Yea!

During my various travels, I learned to Skype with Jennifer. That was fun.

And just a few weeks ago, after a wonderful extended visit with family in Chicago, I got on Facebook as a way of staying connected with them. (By the way, I am using Facebook just for family, so please don’t be offended when I don’t “friend” you. I really don’t mean to be “unfriendly.”)

I am still not your technical wizard, by any means, but I declare mission-accomplished: I am no longer a flaming unintentional Luddite.

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It feels odd to talk about my own doings and experience so much. But ministry is not just a matter of doing the tasks the job requires. It is well-known that the condition of the minister’s heart and spirit has a powerful, even though intangible, influence on the life of a congregation.

One of my prime concerns in recent years has been the sense that my own life has lacked the kind of clarity, vitality, and applied wisdom that I would wish for my church community. More than any particular program or structural change, probably the thing the church needs is a minister who is living a balanced and vital life.

I feel like I am that now – clear-headed, open-hearted, confident, trusting, curious. And may it continue. I look forward to reconnecting with you-all and hearing about your inspirations.