

**A response to the 2025 Berry Street Essay: *Tricksters and Tyrannies***  
**Essay delivered by The Reverend Leela Sinha**  
**The Reverend Doctor Adam Robersmith, Respondent**  
**Ministry Days**  
**June 19, 2025**

Thank you, Leela, for your challenge to us to play, experiment, make mischief...and to consider carefully when mischief is being made, and by whom, and for whose benefit, and how.

I am honored that you asked me to respond. And a little surprised, perhaps, because I don't think I'm known for being mischievous...at least as a colleague. (Some friends here and beyond will cease their snickering now, please.)

Considering your thoughts...the shape of them, the taste of them, the call of them...I find myself wanting especially to speak to those of us for whom mischief is uncomfortable, for whom this moment is not in any way the ministry that we envisioned or aimed for. I want to speak to those of us who doubt that we were made for this moment. I am right there with you.

I have had more than a few times when I wondered if I had the strength for all of this on top of everything else that I—we—have been through. From my years in ministry, I could tell you stories of flooded basements and bullying, arrested congregants and international terrorist attacks thwarted (I wish I were joking), as well as COVID and the rise of global and local fascism. I know you have your own stories...or you will if you're just starting the work of religious leadership. And all of that can make all of this daunting or worse.

So, I want to speak to those of us who don't prefer to resist, who are reluctant intensives—who overcome our discomfort because our beliefs and relationships insist that we do the good things that worry us. I want to speak to those of us who don't like breaking things: rules, laws, norms, processes.

I remember my Grandma Quigley, actually my great grandmother—deeply Irish and deeply attentive to what is right—teaching me how to color in the lines in coloring books as a child. I learned well...and then, eventually, I learned to paint with watercolors and figured out that sometimes going outside the lines was unavoidable and sometimes the best thing to do.

I learned to sing, and then had to learn to sing badly for a role in a musical. I learned that what was necessary—what was right—changed given circumstances and needs.

Sometimes, in order not to break relationships, hearts, and spirits, we have to be willing to know how to break rules and norms for best effect...without breaking communities and covenants and the trust of those we serve.

To be clear: misconduct is not mischief. Government sabotage manuals are not good operating procedures for congregations or denominations. Breaking the care we share in covenant with one another isn't mischief either.

And...when we break rules and norms—rather than care and trust—sometimes we don't manage best effect. We learn by experimenting. Sometimes, we will get it wrong.

For example: so many of the “rules” we have around preaching are designed to remind us that our preaching needs to point to something greater, something beyond ourselves.

- Don't tell the congregation your process for writing the sermon during the sermon...because, too often, it points back to ourselves, rather than a greater purpose. And, occasionally...rarely...it can be useful.
- Remember that the pulpit is not a confessional...and also know that part of our ministry is the work of demonstrating what it is to be human, with laughter and tears and mistakes and brilliance and just getting through the day with one another. If you need confession, call a good officer, a spiritual director, or a therapist; if you have something human to share, think carefully about what and why.

Nancy McDonald Ladd has said it well to me, and I bet, to others of us here: Preach from scars, not wounds. Preach from where you have healed, so that what you share points to something greater, rather than back only to yourself.

And so I find myself thinking about mischief as form of practical preaching...how can it aim toward something greater rather than just be self-serving? What if we remember that how we color outside the lines, how we are counter-cultural, how we are Unitarian Universalist, points to something greater?

And then, what do we do if, when we consider how we are living our faith, we discover that it isn't pointing to something greater? What if we discover that we are replicating old patterns in new ways because that's what we know?

What if we discover that we're trying to insist that ways of being that were cutting edge progressive in the 1950s or 1980s or 1830s were good enough then and are good enough now?

This is when breaking paradigms, finding new frameworks, experimenting is essential. Mischief is a way of opening up possibilities beyond the expected. Confounding what is intended, usual, normal.

So much of my service in ministry is grounded in my inability to ignore what is true and do what is necessary in the face of it, regardless of my desire for comfort or ease...and sometimes that means that I have to improvise, play, experiment.

I take my theological cues from the natural world...and I am delighted to tell you that nature experiments ALL THE TIME. Many experiments fail, but some excel. Evolution doesn't mean we

give up everything that has worked, it means we find additional new ways that things can work better.

So...what about choosing how we experiment, exploring how we can adapt, make new niches, find new ways forward? How can we do congregational life, community life, denominational life in ways that meet this moment?

How can we find what is best for us? Or at least the next best thing on the path into the future? Experimentation and improvisation asks: How can we learn to thrive in changing circumstances?

One of my favorite forms of experimentation is showing up in unexpected ways. Once you think you know what I'll wear or how my hair is done, I want to change it. I got my septum piercing at a GA around a decade ago, and a few of my tattoos at other GAs as well. I dyed my hair peacock colors while on sabbatical.

I am wearing leather pants and a clergy collar in honor of another mischievous colleague who once did the same – Hi Darrell! – because it tweaks what we expect. It brings me joy and encourages me to be a bit more daring.

So...if this is a small form of my mischief, my sort of trickster shapeshifting, I want to spend some time thinking about how I can break people's expectations for best effect.

How can who I am and what I do help move us toward Love, Beloved Community, the Kin-dom of the Holy, a true democracy without supremacy or oppression? How can I show up in unexpected—even daring—ways, such that the norms I break crack open possibility for others, too?

I encourage you to ask those same sorts of questions of yourselves: How can who you are and what you do help move us toward Love, Beloved Community, the Kin-dom of the Holy, a true democracy without supremacy or oppression? How can you show up such that the norms you break crack open possibility for others, too?

What sorts of mischief, experimentation, play are you good at? How can you use that in service of something greater?

If you are a reluctant intensive...please meet yourself where you are: find your mischief, find the place within you that understands how to do things differently in order to point to something larger, better, more Holy.

Do the thing that you are called to do by your convictions, your commitments, your covenants...and if it comes with discomfort, remember that discomfort and harm are not the same thing. Discomfort is a normal condition of learning, growth, and development.

If you are an enthusiastic intensive...an experienced maker of good trouble...encourage the rest of us, cherish and cheer on our versions of mischief, teach us how to use them well, and keep calling us into the service of the Holy.

So...thank you, Leela, for encouraging us, teaching us, and calling us forward into this sacred service. Like you, I believe that we can make ourselves, remake ourselves, become what is needed now. I believe that if we are grounded in our covenants and communities, we will be compelled to do something, even if we wish it weren't ours to do.

I hope you don't mind if I grumble for a little while before getting on with it, but I will get on with it. Probably today. And I have faith that many of the rest of us will, too.

People appreciate it when we tell them the truth—talk about what is really happening in the world—with kindness, in ways they can hear, such that they don't have to maintain a façade, but can just be in the real.

How can we be OK with certain kinds of failure, while avoiding others?

My favorite version of Robin Hood is the one with Bugs Bunny and Daffy Duck...Bugs is a master of mischief. Daffy is a self-righteous and pretentious Robin Hood, who inevitably gets the short end of the stick and the long end of the quarterstaff to the face.

Changing frameworks: 2U history by decade, not by minister. Who is central to the story? What happens when we change it up? Let's \*try\* something.

(Deepa Iyer's system?) Are you a Robin Hood? A Coyote? A Krishna? An Anansi? A shapeshifter? A clown?