

The Voice That Wouldn't Go Away

February 5, 2006
 The Rev. Suzelle Lynch
 Unitarian Universalist Church West, Brookfield, WI

READING: *Variation on a theme by Rilke* by Denise Levertov

A certain day became a presence to me;
 there it was, confronting me--a sky, air, light:
 a being. And before it started to descend
 from the height of noon, it leaned over
 and struck my shoulder as if with
 the flat of a sword, granting me
 honor and a task. The day's blow
 rang out, metallic -- or it was I, a bell awakened,
 and what I heard was my whole self
 saying and singing what it knew: I can.

SERMON

Behold. A sacred voice is calling you. All across the earth, all across the sky, a sacred voice is calling -- you.

Have you heard such a voice...? Have you ever felt something like a tug, or a sense of yearning or a kind of uneasiness with the way things are – coupled with a feeling from deep in your very marrow that there is something that you must do?

I believe all of us are called.

When we were born, we were called into being by life itself, like seeds planted and longing to grow. And sometime in our lives, perhaps many times, we are called to service, to compassion and kindness, called to something more important than we know, until we answer the call.

A few weeks ago I met with our high school youth group and one of things they asked was whether I had felt myself called to ministry. Now, despite the fact that the idea of a “call” to become a minister evokes the image of a caller – perhaps a God far more authoritarian and all-powerful than any of us might believe in, many Unitarian Universalist ministers do speak quite passionately about hearing a call to ministry. Many of us can pinpoint with great accuracy when we first heard it – that voice that wouldn't go away, saying, “You, ministry, now.”

That sense of being called is also known as vocation. The best words I've read about it come from educator Parker Palmer, in his book, *Let Your Life Speak*. "Vocation," he says "does not come from willfulness. It comes from listening. I must listen to my life and try to understand what it is truly about -- quite apart from what I would like it to be about -- or my life will never represent anything real in the world, no matter how earnest my intentions."

Palmer realized, after many struggles, that the life he was living was not the same as the life that wanted to live in him. He began to ask, "What am I meant to do? Who am I meant to be?" and in response to the way these questions changed his life he wrote "*Let Your Life Speak*" to encourage others to do the same. He says, "Before I can tell my life what I want to do with it, I must listen to my life telling me who I am." (*Page 4*).

The Rev. Dr. Howard Thurman spoke similarly. He wrote: "There is something in every one of you that waits and listens for the sound of the genuine in yourself. It is the only true guide you will ever have. And if you cannot hear it, you will all of your life spend your days on the ends of strings that somebody else pulls."

Parker Palmer is a Quaker, and his insights are grounded in the Quaker practice of listening in silent worship meetings, listening for a leading, waiting in silence for light, for a call. It's a powerful discipline, this watchful listening. He does believe in God, but his words remind us that calling doesn't have to be tied to a transcendent caller.

Howard Thurman is no longer alive, but he too was a liberal Christian, a spiritual mentor of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and at one time was in fellowship with the American Unitarian Association. His quote at the top of your order of service also speaks of listening not to an outer authority, but to our inner voice: "Don't ask so much what the world needs. Go out and do what makes you come alive, because what the world needs most are people who have come alive." Dr. Thurman spoke from a deep knowing. In 1940, as World War II was still raging, he quit his job as a tenured professor of religion at Howard University and co-founded our nation's first inter-denominational, interracial church. The vision that made him come alive was of a church where all seekers were welcome, no matter their creed or color. Dr. Thurman wrote: "A strange necessity has been laid upon me to devote my life to the central concern that transcends the walls that divide and would achieve in literal fact what is experienced as literal truth: human life is one and all men are members one of another."

Listening to your life, hearing the voice of "strange necessity", finding out what makes you come alive. I think of my friend Arne, who is a pension fund accountant. His calling is to the poetry of his profession, a shaping of order, giving space and weight to each number, tuning in to a harmony of wholeness

when the fund he is balancing transforms from columns of figures and variables having to do with interest and returns and capital gains and losses, and suddenly rounds out into a vehicle for people's lives when they retire. He tells me it is like the blooming of a flower, this transformation, a flower whose seeds will grow into a blessed future for others. He's called to his work, and his clients are glad of it.

But I think Arne is rare in finding that his passion also puts bread on the table. The greater majority of us work at the jobs we have because we must. Mortgages, heating bills, healthcare, children – life is expensive, and our options for more fulfilling work may seem like fantasies. And even if we are blessed to work at our calling, chances are it isn't always blissful. I think of my friend Melinda, a gifted junior high school teacher who loves her work, but sometimes dreams of running a yarn shop. Or Kent, who is a therapist, but sometimes yearns to be a writer. And most Unitarian Universalist ministers I know, have, in their difficult moments, fantasies of other lives. One imagines herself driving a truck for UPS, another thinks about being an undertaker, and a third imagines a quiet life as a librarian.

To be called, then, must be about something more than the work we do. In a deeper, more universal, more religious sense, it has to do with the meaning in our lives. It's about waking up in the morning, and what it is that has us reach for another day. It's about the religious task of opening our hearts, noticing how and when we are most profoundly touched, discovering both our gifts and where they can most truly be used.

That leads me back to the story I told our high school group the other day about my call to ministry. It happened on a lovely spring day, about sixteen years ago, as I was standing on the balcony at the Washington State Convention Center in downtown Seattle, waiting for a friend to meet me for lunch. I was there attending a conference called "Women Plus Business," because the corporation where I worked was sponsoring it, and actually, because I worked in the corporation's public relations department, I had to be there to represent the company.

Unfortunately it was a terribly boring conference. As I stood there, waiting for my friend, I said to myself, "If this conference is what it means to be a woman in business, then I don't want any part of it!" And a dialogue started up in my mind. "If I don't want to be a woman in the business world any more, what do I want to be?" I asked myself. No answer came, but as I stood there for a while, waiting, another question, and then another, came. "Where's the joy in your life? When are you happiest? What gives you energy?"

Those questions were easy to answer. My joy was in the volunteer work I was doing for my Unitarian Universalist church. A couple of years earlier, out of a restless yearning for something more, something deeper in my life, I had gone back to church. I quickly got involved in serving on a committee and also as a

leader of a vibrant group of people in their twenties and thirties – something like our new “East of 36” group here. My joy was in helping people connect with each other and with the quest for meaning they could find at church. Yes, I liked my regular job – it was creative, fun, and challenging. But my spark, my joy, my passion was at church. As I thought through these things, the little voice inside my head that had been engaging me in this chatty little dialogue suddenly stopped chatting, and boomed: “You want to be a minister!” And besides, to be a minister I’d have to leave my home, my job, my friends – no way!

And I promptly said, “Eeek! No, I don’t. Not me. No way.” I couldn’t imagine doing such a thing. The very idea was terrifying. I was good friends with a couple of ministers, and I had a good sense of how consuming their work was. Surely I didn’t want to do that.

Just then, the friend I had been waiting for arrived, and as we went off to have lunch, I pushed the whole thing to the back of my mind. It had been pretty strange, anyway. I mean, really. A booming voice from within me and beyond me telling me I wanted to be a minister? Come on. I didn’t believe in such things.

I didn’t know it at the time, but the Bible, especially the Hebrew scriptures, are full of stories of God calling to people with a voice booming or quiet, calling them to step up, get involved, take action, lead the people, or whatever. Sometimes, like Abraham, they respond to God’s call by saying, simply, “Here I am.” But more often, they respond like Moses, who says, “Not me, God. I can’t do it. No one will listen to me. I stutter. I’m too ordinary.” Or they act like Jonah, who, when God orders him to tell the people at Nineveh that they are sinful and have to change, jumps on the nearest ship and sails away to Tarshish, miles in the opposite direction.

I don’t mean to equate myself to the Hebrew prophets, of course. What I am trying to say is that when we find ourselves called, it is rarely uncomplicated. It is nearly always an occasion for discernment.

You see, we Unitarian Universalists believe that each and every person is born inherently worthy. That’s the first of the Unitarian Universalist Association principles, which as a congregation we covenant to affirm and promote. We know that each of us comes into the world with a unique consciousness, a particular set of gifts and skills and limitations held by no one else. As we grow, we’re shaped by the people around us, of course, and by the environment and opportunities we experience, yet our singularity remains a miracle. Each of us represents an opportunity that has never been, and never will be again. And thus, our calling, that we rise into the gifts and skills and desires we bring into the world, is imperative.

But there's something equally, if not more important we Unitarian Universalists hold dear. Our seventh principle names it: "respect for the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part." As important as we each are as individuals, we recognize and affirm that individuality is not supreme. Interdependent means we understand that we do not exist without our planet, without each other, without the mothers and fathers who bore us, without the mothers and fathers who bore them, without the animals and plants down to the smallest one-celled organisms... Our culture would name human beings as most evolved, top of the heap, king of the hill, but in this religious community, we remember that for our life's music we are beholden to a far larger and more inclusive chorus of beings.

In this context, vocation has a new meaning. Theologian Frederick Buechner says it best. Vocation is "the place where your deep gladness meets the world's deep need." (*in "Wishful Thinking."*) To know our calling means listening for our deep personal gladness, but also recognizing how intricately we are woven into the larger tapestry of the world. The imperative of our gifts and desires is only one set of threads on the loom of destiny – the world holds the shuttle with its ever-unwinding twist of tragedy, bliss and opportunity. "Our calling has to do with the way in which (the) unique thread of our life serves the wholeness, makes richer the large pattern into which we have been born." (Kathleen McTigue) Carl Jung gave us another way to think of this when he wrote that the purpose of life is the unfolding of the unique, individual inner core in every person, but the larger purpose of our unfolding is to advance the greater consciousness of which we are part.

That's why our calling, our vocation, has to do with more than what we want to do or to be, with more than our freedom to choose what to do with our lives. When I had that amazing, weird experience of being "called to ministry," my "deep gladness" was very much in the church. I loved singing the hymns, hearing the choir; I loved sitting in church knowing I was surrounded by people with whom I shared a spiritual path. I didn't always enjoy the minister's sermons, let me be frank, but that was all right. I loved serving the church, and being a leader in the church.

And all around me in the world I saw a deep need – people were isolated, they desired meaning in their lives and folks with whom they could connect as they unfolded that meaning. I saw that people wanted personal meaning and to be part of something larger. And I wanted to help.

But I was afraid that my wanting, my desire, was more about ego than true calling.

Parker Palmer tells a funny story about this kind of thing. At one point in his career he was offered the position of president of a small college. He was excited, and felt confident that it was the right job for him. But as was the custom

in the Quaker community where he lived, before he took the job he called upon half a dozen trusted friends to serve as a “clearness committee” for him.

The purpose of a clearness committee is to help you discover your own inner truth about something. Your friends sit with you for a couple of hours and ask honest questions, offering no advice, only compassion. At first, Palmer’s group asked questions he found easy, questions about his vision for the institution, and how would he handle decision-making. Then, about halfway into the process came a question that sounded even easier, but proved quite difficult. “What would you like most about being a president?” someone asked. Palmer writes, “The simplicity of that question loosened me from my head and lowered me into my heart.” He started talking about not what he would like about being president, but instead gave a long litany of what he would not like about it. Gently but firmly, the person who had originally asked the question asked it again – what would he most like about being a president? It took several such askings before Palmer finally replied, in the smallest voice he could muster, “Well, I guess what I’d like most is getting my picture in the paper with the word ‘president’ under it.” Needless to say, he didn’t take the job. He wrote, “Behind (our) understanding of vocation is a truth that the ego does not want to hear...: Everyone has a life that is different from the 'I' of daily consciousness, a life that is trying to live through the 'I' who is its vessel. It takes time and hard experience to sense the difference between the two ... I do not feel despondent about my mistakes, ...though I grieve the pain they have sometimes caused others. ... (for) ...I have no idea how I would have learned the truth about myself and my calling without the mistakes I have made.”

In my own process of discernment around becoming a minister, I didn’t have a clearness committee. But Marvin Evans, a kindly, retired Methodist minister who served on the staff of my UU church did take me aside one day. “Suzelle,” he said, “Do you HAVE to do this? Because if you don’t HAVE to become a minister, don’t do it.”

Marvin’s question pushed me to more discernment, more waiting, more testing of my “call”. But ultimately there came a day like the one Denise Levertov names in her poem – a day that became a presence to me. It leaned over and struck my shoulder and for good or ill I decided to follow the nagging voice that kept insisting I become a minister. And I am glad I did. But truly, even as I have passionately pursued this profession for eleven years, I still see that I could very well have answered that call in a dozen other ways, including by simply remaining a committed lay leader. For after all, churches do not exist because of ministers. Churches exist because of their members, leaders, and volunteers. And at their best, churches call all of us to rise into our gifts, to put them into service for our good and the greater good, so that we might grow in the consciousness that helps the world toward wholeness.

Being called is about the meaning we shape in our lives. And if you think you are too old, that it is too late for you – know that it's never too late. For all of us are called, in one way and another, by one thing and another, throughout our lives.

I think of a woman I know who spent her working life as a chemist. In retirement, she has become an art quilter, dyeing her own fabrics according to her own scientific recipes. Her quilts reveal that she is called to push the boundaries of color, texture and line with a precision and abandon that delight the eye.

I think of Becky Steffes, a member of our church, who is more clearly called than almost anyone I know to activism. Becky might not think of herself this way, but it seems her passion for social justice and will to work for justice rise from deep within her very soul.

I think of my own father, who, at age 78, has found delight in tutoring adult English as a Second Language students. His work life was spent as a power engineer for a huge utility company – in retirement, he empowers others to gain skills that will help them succeed in life.

How are you called? When you look back over your life, what do you see that has given you cause to reach for another day? Where is your joy in life? And how can this church help you rise into your truest meaning and purpose, help you use fully and well the gifts with which you bless the world?

Some of us know the answers – because somehow we've always known. Some of us don't know but are marvelously open to the possibilities.

Some of us believe we will never know a deeper meaning in our lives. Some of us are searching, or are wondering how to search.

Some of us have dived deep into ourselves, and drawn our answers carefully up from those depths.

But all of us are called. Called to service, to compassion, called to something more important than we know.

As individuals and as a church, may we have the courage to listen to our lives and find what makes us come alive! May the sound of the genuine be our true guide. And may we be a clearness committee for each other, honest and supportive as we walk the path toward wholeness.

For this is our task, as men and women, as people of faith; our task as a religious community – to listen, and to answer the call.

Amen.