

## Being Called: a Vocation or Busy Signal

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(somehow stress Nat'l Coming Out Day and if needed, use vision story from 100 stories bk)

Nothing remains but this...a great blue heron rising away asking who shall I send? Send me. // This month's transformational theme is Vocation – calling. I grew up thinking only clergy received a call – from God. Often in churches, when this subject is discussed the story of Samuel is told...a boy who heard God's voice calling him in the night and finally Samuel is told by the high priest to respond by saying "speak, for your servant listening." I no longer think only clergy hear a call. In fact, I believe every one in this room has been called – for some called by your God, for some called by a greater sense of purpose and meaning, some are called to serve the world while others are called to serve, right here, in this community. We are all called to mature spiritually, to broaden our compassion, to be and act from our better self. The challenge is to first be able to hear the call and then the hard decision comes – to act upon it...or not.

How do you hear the call? Some stories, like the one of Samuel from the Hebrew scriptures, heard a voice calling his name. Guided by a wise priest, he answers the call – tells the caller to go ahead, he is listening. Others hear a voice but instead of listening – they run. Again in the Hebrew scriptures, the story of Jonah comes to mind. "Now the word of the Lord came unto Jonah...saying Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city and cry against it; for their wickedness is come up before me. – pretty straight forward, pretty direct. The third verse though says, But Jonah rose up to flee unto Tarshish presence the presence of the Lord, and went down to Joppa; and he found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid the fare and went down into it – to get away from the presence of the Lord." Now I have to wonder why he thought he could flee from the presence of the divine – but that's another sermon. Story goes – he heard a direct call and ran. I must admit, I felt a little like Jonah; you see, I've always felt called to professional ministry but for many reasons, my first career was that of an English teacher; good work, important and yet not satisfying to my soul. When I finally found my way into the Hobart Unitarian Church and began to actively participate in that community, the call to ministry welled up from within again. So what do I do but move to California. And again, after I found my home congregation in Berkeley and began to participate as an active lay leader, the call came back louder. I'm just glad I was swallowed by a great fish in San Francisco Bay. Finally, I answered the call to professional ministry and it has been the best "Yes" I have ever uttered. But calls don't stop there; as we mature and grow in understanding, wisdom, compassion – I have found the call to only deepen and broaden.

Hearing the call – finally, rather than run from it, took some action on my part. I began to pay attention to what my heart and my gut were telling me. You see, I did good

work with agencies and organizations whose missions were meaningful. And still, my soul was restless in a way that is hard to describe yet certainly felt. To hear my call, I had to be willing to be attentive, to pay attention and to slow down. Spend some time in reflection...find the courage to begin imagining possibilities if I were to say 'yes.' And I began to talk with trusted colleagues and friends who listened to my protests, my doubts, my fears and my hopes. They journeyed with me into a new place of being and supported me when I felt too overwhelmed by it all to continue. This is what my church community did for me – this is what this congregation can do for you; if you are willing.

Not every call is from the voice of the Divine but every yes we utter has the potential to change our lives. The Reverend James Reeb answered a different kind of call. In the early 1960s he was a successful parish minister at All Souls UU Church in Washington, D.C., he enjoyed working in the parish and yet there was something missing for him. He saw a need greater than what the church was able to do...or at least was doing at the time. As he worked in the church, he felt called to something more...to take the work beyond the church walls. He struggled with the question of "what was the proper role of the church as an institution in society."<sup>1</sup> What happens when an institution, founded on serving humankind, reaching out to aid another, becomes instead, "lost in the problems of self-maintenance and dedicated to its own perpetuation."<sup>2</sup> He left All Souls and began working in the community, retaining his title of Reverend. Today, we would call him a community minister. He was mightily disturbed by the racist and vicious actions in the south toward African Americans. Citizens of this country were violently attacked for trying to register to vote...to put into practice a constitutional right.

It was in March 1965 when the call came. The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. put out an urgent plea for clergy to join him in Selma, Alabama. Telegrams were sent out asking them "to take part in the Tuesday march." (Bearing the Cross, page 399). King wrote, "In the vicious maltreatment of defenseless citizens of Selma, where old women and young children were gassed and clubbed at random, we have witnessed an eruption of the disease of racism which seeks to destroy all America. ...No American is without responsibility and it is fitting that all Americans help to bear the burden...Clergy of all faiths" should join the march. There had been a previous march on Sunday; they were marching from Selma to Montgomery to hand over a petition to the governor demanding the right to register to vote. That Sunday march ended in bloodshed. The Monday headlines depicted the violence of the march. James Reeb wanted to go to Selma – he understood the risks. He had seen the violence, not just to African Americans but to any who aided their cause. Reeb had wife and four children...and yet he could not stay away. James Reeb, Clark Olsen and others answered the call in King's telegram and were in Selma to participate in the Tuesday march. Reeb, Olsen and Miller "were attached outside a whites-only restaurant; James Reeb was fatally injured."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> No Greater Love, the James Reeb Story, by Duncan Howlett, page 148.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, page 149.

<sup>3</sup> UU World, May/June 2001 issue, page 23.

I believe that each one of us is called to action – called into service for the greater good. For each of us there is a voice that calls us to our better selves – that asks us to extend beyond our comfort level and reach out to another. And with each call there is some fear, some risk and a sureness that comes with saying yes, with answering that call. And for me, there is the question that quietly persists: how relevant is this church? I wonder with Reeb, how do we prevent our purpose for existence from becoming lost amid the details and problems of self-maintenance? And have we Unitarian Universalists become a taillight rather than a headlight in the mist of the social evil around us? Am I, as a minister, remaining silent and safe behind stained glass windows while the rest of the web of existence suffers?

I think one of the ways we become more than a self-maintaining institution is to keep our mission before us at all times. We do have a mission, you know. Our mission is to help transform people's lives so that they can go out and help heal the world. We need this mission to keep us focused. This mission becomes our touchstone for decision making. The first question we ask before offering another program, another class, another service is, does it fit within our mission; how will this (class, program, service) help transform people's lives so they can help heal the world?

Working with, living and practicing this mission allows us to continue building the beloved community. We gather together in small groups for ministry, not just for committee meetings. We listen to the stories of our lives and widen our circles to include one more. We minister to each other in caring support and learn how to support others beyond our walls. We begin to care deeply about our neighbors – not because we want them to join us, but because they are our neighbors; and every week we meet more and more of our neighbors and learn that they live beyond the limits of Hillcrest. They live in downtown San Diego, in the Barrio Logan area, in Chula Vista, in Tijuana...they are our neighbors.

I think we become a headlight by taking a stand and acting on it. You know, sometimes, in our effort to be inclusive, reasonable and respectful, we tend to study an issue more than act on it. "Mrs. Ruth Batson, head of the Education Committee of the Boston branch of the NAACP told [James Reeb]...that he might be less cautious in his program, less detailed in his preparation and instead get on with the work in hand."<sup>4</sup> Yes, we need time for study and reflection. We need to educate ourselves on the issues and to think through some of the consequences of our actions – and we need to act – from that spiritual place that says this is an issue to us because of justice, coming from compassion and our faith. And here's an action that's coming up for us.

There is healing needed. Even this coming Friday there will be a call for action and some will participate. You see, this Friday there's a group coming to San Diego that is led by a man named Fred Phelps. He and his group routinely picket funerals of soldiers returning from the war because he believes were in this war as a punishment from God because of America's tolerance of homosexuality. It's one thing to have beliefs and we

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<sup>4</sup> Howlett, page 187.

even have in this country the freedom of speech. And, that freedom is curbed when the exercise of free speech goes into the category of hate speech, which leads to hate actions/crimes against another person because of who they are. We are a welcoming faith – we speak out for inclusion, for compassion and tolerance and celebrate diversity in all its manifestations. And though we do not want to add to the show they Fred Phelps and his group will try to have, with their shouting antics and hateful speech, we will respond. You see, Fred Phelps and his group are targeting San Diego high schools because they have a gay/straight alliance. We will be there too – not to engage with them, not to debate or fight back; that's useless and only adds to the show the media hopes to catch for the evening news. We will respond with a peaceful, silent vigil with signs that proclaim that God Loves Everyone; that We Stand on the Side of Love, that we believe in loving our neighbor as ourselves; we will offer a different perspective from our faith tradition. And some of you will stand vigil with us. This work, heeding this call is something we have to do because our mission of healing ourselves and going out to the world is more than just words we quote. We want to live it into action.

And there are other ways of answering a call – because service is needed. We have blessed lay ministers (formerly known as Lay Pastoral Care Associates). They have answered a call to serve this community. They have felt a longing to reach out to others and offer themselves to you to help in living out the mission of this congregation. They have put themselves forward to accompany folks on their journey – especially when the journey has become a challenge, or lonely or difficult. Our ultimate mission is to aid in the healing that individuals are doing so that they can give back to the larger world. My personal goal for this Lay Minister program is that whenever you have spoken to one of our lay ministers, be it after the service or in a one-on-one setting, the ultimate goal is that you will feel touched by ministry. In a congregation this large, these dear folks are extensions of the professional ministry and are here to serve because they said yes to the call.

And how do I, a minister, not retreat in safety and silence behind stained glass windows? How do I not add to the institution that worries more about its existence than its mission? For me it begins with a spiritual practice that grounds me in the truth that I am not alone. We have a rich heritage of ancestors who dedicated their lives to something bigger than themselves – working for justice and peace in this world, in this lifetime. I read their words and find hope and encouragement. I place myself in loving relationships that promise to hold me accountable – that my words and my actions do not contradict one another and I strive to remember that I am a member of a large family – the human family. So that no person is alien to my compassion. I seek balance in all things so that I am not too fatigued to continue the work or to overwhelmed to enjoy the successes along with way.

Not every answer to every call requires bloodshed or results in death – or even a life-changing career but every answer does require a responsive heart. It requires a willingness to reach out – to be in service to others and to live/practice daily our mission. Have you been hearing a call – or are you too busy in the doing, in the educating and planning; in the list making and advertising...have you chosen to pay attention and take a risk to say yes?

Do you hear oh my friend , in the place where you stand, all the dreams all the dares all the sighs all the prayers...they are yours, mine and theirs, do you hear? Do you hear that voice calling? In those quiet moments, in the in-between times, do you hear the holy, do you hear Life calling out to you? How will you respond? May the ears of our ears awake! Amen and blessed be.