



## UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

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### “No Small Calling” a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson on September 30, 2012

For the past few months there's been a small piece of paper on my desk, with these words on it: “Sermon--no small calling. Talk to Kevin about this.” Kevin is Kevin Backman, who came to this church about three years ago. A lifelong UU, he knew something about how churches work, and he cared about making them work better. He had ideas about how we could do things better here, and he wasn't shy about sharing them, and he was willing to step in and roll up his sleeves and help.

One day last spring Kevin called me on the phone. I don't remember everything we talked about, but one thing he said was that he had this idea for a sermon he wanted me to preach. He said I should talk about us having “no small calling.” I wrote those words down, and said, “Let's get together and have a conversation about that.”

That conversation never happened. On June 17, Kevin died unexpectedly, in his sleep, likely from complications due to his diabetes. He was just 46 years old. Kevin certainly had his struggles in life. He wore his heart on his sleeve; he'd come up here to light a candle and find it hard to keep his voice from cracking. He could get wrapped up in his own problems; he could be his own worst enemy. And yet, he had vision and clarity about how we might live out our faith here. We'd asked him to be the clerk to the Board of Trustees, and he'd accepted, and was excited about that. I was hopeful about him becoming one of our leaders here. We needed him. More than that, he was one of the most loving and generous people you'll ever find. I miss him, and I know many of you miss him too.

Last Sunday my friend Kimberly and I talked about spiritual direction, a way to pay attention to your own life and what is stirring in your own heart, a way to hear your own calling. Whether you ever try spiritual direction or not, I hope that being in this church helps you to discern your vocation; helps you to be who you were born to be.

This, of course, is not “one size fits all.” We are different people with different vocations. Some of us are called to be active out in the world, some of us are more contemplative. Some of us are leaders and organizers; others of us are good at following and providing support. Some of us are outgoing, and others are quieter types. The point is, who you are, your particular self, is needed, here and in this world. I hope you are able to accept and embrace the particular life that is yours--your light and your shadow, your strengths and your weaknesses. I hope this church is helping

you with this. I hope you sense this community calling you, as that beautiful hymn by Joyce Poley says, “calling (you) to be more whole, to hear God’s music in (your) very soul.”

Kevin wanted me to talk to you about this, about having “no small calling.” I hear this on two levels. On an individual level, asking, are you doing your own work, are you in touch with what gives you life, are you becoming who you are meant to be? And I hear Kevin’s words asking us, as a community, who are we going to be? Who and what are we called to be in this place, at this time? Who and what are we planning to be, hoping to be, striving to be?

Churches have their own personality and culture. Like any congregation, ours is shaped by our history, by the traditions we come from, by the people who came before us, by the neighborhood and city we are part of, by this building, by you. This church has a warm and openhearted feel about it. For many, it’s a comfortable, even cozy, place to be. This church also has a reputation for reaching out to our neighbors and people in the wider community, especially when they are in need. We are hospitable here--we like to feed people, and we like to gather around a table with one another, we do potlucks really well!

Today I ask you to start reflecting on this, on who we are, and who we are becoming. I ask you to imagine who we might be. We need your perspective, from where you see things.

How you have ever been up in the balcony, in the choir loft up there? If you haven’t, go check it out sometime. You get a different view from up there. Getting up on the balcony is also a metaphor for seeing the big picture. It’s a perspective we need around here. We need more people who will see a wider and longer view.

When you’re here on Sunday for worship, you see an important and central aspect of this community. But it’s not the whole picture. If you come by on a weekday, especially in the morning, it’s a different scene. You’ll see people outside on Ashland Street, drinking coffee and talking, many of them smoking cigarettes. They’re clients of the drop-in center downstairs. On Tuesday and Wednesday there are even more people here, coming for food from the Open Hand Pantry.

I confess that sometimes I get tired of the noise, and the coffee cups and cigarette butts that get left behind. Sometimes I wish we were in a prettier part of town. But mostly I’m grateful that the needs of this city are right here outside our door, and in our building. That’s what a church is supposed to be. Not set apart, but in the middle of, caring and serving and doing something to leave the world better than we found it. I wonder about our neighborhood--how we might help to make it better.

We are already doing good things here--serving community meals to the hungry, being more public about our support for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and questioning people, seeking ways to work for justice in the wider world. Just the other day someone from Habitat for Humanity came to see me, hoping we might put together a team of people to help turn an old convent in Lawrence into affordable housing. I’m looking for ways to get my hands dirty helping others. How about you? Could that be part of our future--helping build homes here in Haverhill?

I know some congregations that split their offering every week with a deserving group in the community. Might that be something that we could do--give away half of what we collect every Sunday to those in need?

I'm asking you to start thinking about our vocation as a community. What is our calling? I have some ideas. And this year our board is focusing on this--on clarifying our mission and making sure our structures support our mission. But it's not up to me, or the church staff, or even the board to decide what our mission is. That is something we need to do together. Because a mission worthy of the name is larger than any of one or two of us. There is more wisdom and strength and inspiration in the whole community than in our individual parts. We need your perspective and your participation.

So I'm giving you some homework. I ask you to reflect on this congregation, and your place in it. Reflect on this church and our place in this city and in our world. What are your dreams? What do you hope to see us do? Don't be afraid of dreaming big! At this point don't worry if your ideas are practical or not. Sometime soon the board will host a town meeting, a gathering where you'll have the chance to share your ideas, your vision for this church. Out of these conversations we'll get a better sense of our vocation, who we are called to be in this time and place.

The Presbyterian minister Frederick Buechner says, "Vocation is the place where your deep gladness meets the world's deep need." What is the deep gladness of this congregation? And where does it meet the world's deep need?

Now tell me if I'm wrong, but my sense is that we are more likely to set our sights too low than to reach too high. I've noticed that in this church we tend to be reluctant to ask too much of one another. Have you noticed that? Do you think it's true? As we reflect on our shared vocation, I invite you to ponder this, and wonder, is it time for us to stretch and grow? Are we ready to lift up our hopes and dreams, and start working to make them real?

Our dear Kevin would tell us that ours should be no small calling. That we have greatness in us, and we need to see that, and act on it, in spite of our fears and frailties and failings. That we should have strength and courage for the living of these days. That we should be glad for the challenges and opportunities that await us' that we should choose to bless the world.

Last spring, after he agreed to be the clerk to the board, Kevin sent me and our board chair an invocation for the annual meeting, words written by the UU minister Heather Janules:

From the power of our memory and history,  
With high hopes for the days that lie ahead,  
We gather to craft the destiny we share with one another.  
We gather with faith in the practice of democracy,  
We gather with hearts and minds open  
to the wisdom of every voice among us.  
In our gathering,  
May we dream and design a bold future.

May we bring our best selves to this service,  
And may we dream these dreams  
and do this work  
with love.

And Kevin added, "Let the people say, Amen."

We didn't use those words at our annual meeting last June. I wish we had. But they are good to hear now, aren't they? They remind us of the good work that lies before us, and that each of us is part of that work, and that each of us has a part to play.

Kevin's death reminds us that we don't have all the time in the world. But we do have this day, and we have each other. What do you want to do with it?

May we be worthy of that dream Kevin had for us. May we be worthy of those who came before us, and of those who will come after us.

Ours is no small calling. Will you say that with me? Ours is no small calling! Ours is no small calling!

Let the people say, Amen.