

“Your Work and Mine,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
at the Universalist Unitarian Church of Haverhill
on January 10, 2010

I love those lines we just sang ¹ and the image they offer of people as instruments that can and ought to be tuned for praise; the assertion that we are people with voices that are made to be used; that we should rejoice that we have voices to raise.

Every two or three months I gather with other ministers in this district for our UU minister’s association chapter meeting. Usually fifty or sixty of us show up. We meet in small groups, we eat lunch together, and there’s some kind of program, but usually my favorite part is our worship--it’s good to go to church, to be in the congregation for a change. And we sing really well together; we sing out loud and strong, and I love that--I love being in a church with people who aren’t afraid to sing.

You can tell something about a congregation by how they sing together. Are they enthusiastic, or passive; committed, or holding back? Are they people who are glad they have voices to raise? How do you think we’re doing in this? Is there some room to grow?

Today, and for this month, I want to ask you a question. I want you to consider why you are here. What is your vocation, you calling? What do you intend to do “with your one wild and precious life”?² How are you called to be with your family and friends? What role will you play in this church, and in other organizations you belong to? How are you living out your life as a citizen, of the United States and of the world?

January is a good time for these questions. Next week we’ll celebrate the life of Martin Luther King, Jr., and ask, “What is his call to us in these days?” We’ve just begun a new year, and these winter days are a good time to step back, assess our lives, and ask ourselves, “Am I living the life I was born to live? What is the work that I have been given to do, and am I doing it? And if not, why not? What needs to change?”

Have I told you about my call? It came one night, about ten years ago, some months after I had decided to close my photography business. I wasn’t sure where I was going. I’d looked at divinity school, but the prospect of that much change scared me.

I was working with a spiritual director, and she introduced me to a prayer practice called the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises that she thought would help me to get in touch with my deeper longings and with what God had to say about all this. I created a

¹ “Let every instrument be tuned for praise, let all rejoice who have a voice to raise,” words by Fred Pratt Green from *When in Our Music*, #36 in *Singing the Living Tradition*.

² This is from Mary Oliver’s poem “The Summer Day.”

prayer place in a quiet corner of our house, and I'd go up there first thing in the morning, before anyone else was up, and at night, after they'd gone to bed, and sit, and try to listen. I'd try to quiet the chatter in my mind, I'd ask for clarity and direction. Sometimes I'd nod off to sleep.

One night I was feeling sleepy, not focused on anything, when all of a sudden I sensed something in my midst--a presence, an energy that woke me up and got my attention. I didn't literally hear a voice, but I sensed it, telling me that I was meant to go off to seminary. For weeks I had been anxious and confused about this, and in that moment I felt a sense of clarity and peace, and even excitement. I knew in my heart that this was what I wanted most, even though I didn't know why, or where it was going to lead.

After a few minutes I went downstairs, but wasn't ready to go to sleep. I knew I shouldn't, but I woke my wife Tracey up to tell her the news. To her credit, she took it calmly. She gave me some good advice: "Sit with this for a couple of days and see what happens." That's what I did, and my sense of clarity and resolve did not diminish. My experience might be more subtle than the classic thunderbolt kind of call, but I remember that night ten years ago like it was yesterday. It still sustains me and reminds me that there is something particular and real that I am meant to be doing, and that I need to keep listening for, and heeding, that call.

I share this with you today because I hope my story might be helpful to you in discerning your own call, and because it's true that preachers preach the sermons they themselves need to hear. I have to confess that lately I've been distracted from my call. Here's what I mean. In seminary I worked hard on discerning and articulating the kind of ministry I felt called to do. This continued during the three years I was the assistant minister in North Andover, which led me, in my third year there, to start looking for my own church to serve.

Just over two years ago, preparing information to share with church search committees, I tried to be as clear and honest as I could about who I was and what I was seeking. Our district executive had warned me, "Not all churches are good matches for all ministers, and vice versa." When I sat down to read your congregational record, the overview of who you were and what you were looking for, I was a little nervous. If you were seeking a minister who was primarily an administrator or organizer, or if you were a congregation that would be unhappy with a minister who likes to talk about God, then I wouldn't have applied here--it would not have been a good match for you or for me.

What I read was that you were looking for basically three things in a minister: one who cared about creating good and inspiring worship, who wanted to help people go deeper in the spiritual life, and who was a collaborative, and not a top-down, leader. That made me glad, and got me excited about the possibilities here, because that was what I was looking for too. Those things are near and dear to my call to the ministry.

And that's why things have gone so well in this first year and a half together. We are a good match! This is something I am glad about and grateful for all the time.

But--and there is a but--lately I've come to realize that I am not living out my call the way I should be. And maybe you aren't either. I am often too involved in details that others could be handling. I'm allowing myself to be distracted away from those three things you said you were looking for, and I was longing for--a focus on worship, on going deeper in the spiritual life, and being a collaborative leader. I need your help. Are we focusing on what really matters here, or getting distracted by other things? I'm not saying things are going badly--they're not--but I know I can't be the kind of minister you want and deserve if I spend too much time and energy doing things that aren't my job, and that aren't why you called me to be your minister.

So in the coming weeks and months I will be more clear about what is my responsibility and what is not. I'm going to practice and hopefully get better at saying no to some things, so I can say yes to those things I ought to. You may find this disappointing or annoying at times, and I trust you'll let me know if you do. And I'll appreciate that, knowing you can be honest and clear with me. And it will tell me that I am doing my job, and being true to my call, if I am disappointing you at least some of the time.

So enough about me. What about you? Have you thought lately about why you are here--both in the church and on this earth? Do you have a sense of what you are called to do with your life? Who you are called to be?

In my experience, we are particular people, born with inherent differences. Your heart's desire is not exactly the same as anyone else's--and your job is to grow into who you were born to be. This can take a long time. It's work best done with others, who can support you and hold you accountable. Who will be guides and companions, who can teach you how to open yourself to that still, small and persistent voice, so you can hear the call that is your own.

Our reading this morning, that prayer inspired by Oscar Romero, is one that I need to hear. I need to be reminded to step back and take the long view, to remember that it's not all up to me. I'm going to keep these words on my desk:

"This is what we are about: We plant seeds that one day will grow. We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise. We cannot do everything and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do something, and to do it very well."

What is that something that is calling to you right now? That thing which you can do, and do very well? It may be something that frightens you or that you initially resist; it may be something you don't understand or can't even explain, but, still, that calls to

you.³ It may be something that has been in you for a very long that is now coming into being, asking you to make it real.

When I first sensed my call to the ministry, my wife Tracey was naturally a little unnerved by how our life might change. One day she confessed to me, “You know, I didn’t marry a minister.” We had had lots of conversations about this--about our hopes and fears around these changes. A year or more after I went to seminary, one day she and I were taking a walk and I said, “Remember what you said about not marrying a minister? Well, I’ve come to realize that you did marry a minister. Only you didn’t know it at the time, and neither did I. I’m not trading in one life for another. I’m still the person you married. I’m just becoming more of who I was born to be.”

I feel so blessed to have been given this life. And I hope you feel blessed to be living the one that is yours. If you don’t--if there is in you a sense of dislocation or longing or lostness--take heart. That may be your soul telling you there are changes you need to make. It may be the initial stirrings of a new calling for you. What might you need to let go of, or say no to, in order to make room for, and say yes to, this new and vital thing?

I hope and pray this church will be a place where we support and encourage each other to become who we were meant to be, and to do the work we have been given to do. I hope we will more and more become a place where we share with one another what matters, what we are passionate about, what our spiritual lives and practices are about and what we give our hearts to. I hope we will be a people who sing out, a place where every instrument is tuned for praise, and where we rejoice, because we do have voices to raise and lives to live and good work to do.

We won’t all do the same thing. We will make mistakes and missteps and disappoint one another along the way. But if you listen for your calling, and try to follow where it leads; if you do your work and I do mine, then we will together be part of a great and glad and glorious song.

Amen.

³ Parker Palmer, in *Let Your Life Speak*, says vocation at its deepest level is “This is something I can’t not do, for reasons I’m unable to explain to anyone else and don’t fully understand myself but that are nevertheless compelling.”