



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“What Are We Called to Do?”
a sermon given by Dawn Fortune
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In seminary, I am surrounded by people who have been called to ministry in a variety of ways. I have friends who are in training to be ministers in a number of faith traditions, from evangelical Christians to Reformed Judaism, and from the pulpit to the classroom.

It is not surprising then, that we seem to spend a lot of time talking about this thing called “call.” What’s yours? When did you get it? What does it look like to you? I have heard as many stories about call as I have met people, and each is as unique as the individual describing it. Some describe their call to ministry as a slow-moving awakening of purpose, a gradual understanding of what they are meant to do with their lives. Others describe a transformative spiritual experience, being touched by the divine. I’ll tell you about my call experience in a moment.

But first some background. In order to know why my call experience was what it was, I need to let you know a little bit about me first. I was born just down the river in Newburyport, at the Anna Jacques Hospital, in the summer of 1965. I was baptized at Saint Louis DeGonzague Catholic Church in the south end, where I also made my first communion.

I received that sacrament in the requisite white frilly dress, clutching the pink plastic beaded rosary (the boys got blue), and thinking holy thoughts about the sacrament and unholy thoughts about the itchy white tights and uncomfortable patent-leather shoes. My grandmother was the guardian of my soul, making sure that I received all of the necessary sacraments before I graduated high school.

I believed the tenets of my Roman Catholic faith until I got into college and began to face some of the serious, scary questions that I had been privileged to not have to answer earlier. Suddenly issues about reproductive choice became important, as did questions about sex and relationships, and when I came out as a lesbian, it was at the height of the HIV/AIDS pandemic and the fiercest animosity between the church and the queer community. I knew where I was not welcome, and once I left, I found it much easier to look with a critical eye – indeed, a very critical eye – upon many of the tenets that I had accepted as a matter of faith before.

Years later, I was taking a humanities class that required as a homework assignment that I attend a church that was not of my faith tradition. I had heard things about those Unitarian Universalist folks, that they were liberal and all, so I took a deep breath and went inside to check it out. The UU church in Waterville, Maine is a white clapboard affair with a clock and bell tower and a stained glass window with a picture of Jesus and some sheep. It looked frighteningly traditional to me, and I was braced for the worst as I sat in the hard wooden pew.

Imagine my surprise when I flipped through the hymnal. Readings by Lao-Tse? Marge Piercy? A hymn by Holly Near?! My mind reeled. This could NOT be church, I thought. It made no sense. I don't remember what the sermon was about that day, but I remember going home and crying. It was all too much. I had never been in church and heard the message that I was ok. I had never been in a church that affirmed me as a human being, as a woman, as a queer person, as a person with left-of-left-of-even-more-left-than-that-leaning politics. It was more than a month before I could go back. And then another month. And then a couple weeks. And then it was summer and you all did what?! Really? You close for the summer? This was the craziest church I'd ever seen. In September, I came back with everyone else, and stayed.

But that's not about my call. That's just how I got in the building.

Many years later, I started preaching. Mostly I was raising money for a political campaign, but what I was doing was preaching. I told stories to an assembled crowd of people who were interested in the topic, I made them laugh, I made them cry, and I did my best to make them write big checks. I had some success, and when the campaign headquarters got a call looking for someone to come preach on marriage equality at a UU church, well, a few fingers pointed at me.

Now keep in mind, that although I was a UU, I considered myself a mostly-lapsed UU. I wasn't attending a church, and was living in a very secular world, where I polished and treasured a moderately scandalous reputation. The thought of me in a pulpit was, and remains, to a number of my friends, more than a little amusing. But I went and I preached and I did a fair job. I was beating a political drum. I signed up the volunteers I needed, and I went home.

People started suggesting that I might make a good minister or preacher over the course of the campaign, but I brushed off such ideas as ridiculous. I was a radical sex educator, a political hack and a writer with strong opinions and a big mouth. I could not see myself in a ministerial role, working with boards and committees, being polite to people I thought really needed a sound thumping, verbal or otherwise. It just didn't seem reality-based. I was not, as we say in seminary, "a non-anxious presence."

A month or two later, I did join a church, and in a perfect storm of life experiences over the course of a couple weeks, I became single, started some deep spiritual reflection, joined the church and got a job after more than a year of unemployment. One Sunday morning during this time, I was sitting in my new church home. In the pulpit was our new Director of Religious Education and Lifespan Curriculum, a man of Irish Catholic extraction from eastern Massachusetts. He told us the story that morning of how he came to enter ministry, how he ended up in seminary, and how he experienced his call to serve in our church.

As he spoke, the most amazing thing happened. The sun moved gradually across the sanctuary to where I was sitting. It enveloped me in light and warmth, I felt something I can only describe to this day as a physical presence pressing down on me, but not in an unpleasant way, and words came to my mind unbidden. I hope you will forgive my language, but the words that came to me were "well shit. I'm going to be a minister. I have to go to seminary." I figure the profanity was the divine's way of letting me know that this message was specifically for my blue-collar self and not the polite young man to my right. Unable to move, I sat and cried through the rest of the service.

Now I know that this kind of experience is not typical of what we expect in Unitarian Universalist churches, but there it is. It is what happened to me. To tell the story in any other words would be inauthentic to my experience and dishonest to you.

What I have learned about my call is that it is the thing that takes over. My call is the thing that will rearrange my priorities. Studying is my priority now.

Call is the thing that I describe as a seed knowing which way to grow when planted in the dark earth. My call is like that – all else is becoming less and less relevant, as I know that what I am supposed to do is push skyward, somehow trusting that the color and shape of the blossom will make itself known when I have grown enough.

Historically, we have understood call to be something similar to my experience – a lightning bolt from out of the sky. The risen Jesus appears to Saul on the road to Damascus and knocks him blind from his horse; Jesus tells the brothers Simon Peter and Andrew to “come follow me and I will make you fishers of men.” We tend to think of call as involving hair shirts, suffering, sacrifice, and discomfort.

I think it is dangerous thinking to believe that a call must mean some sort of brilliant, vaguely unbalanced passion for a thing that causes a person to give up all their earthly belongings and take off into the wilderness to pursue it. That version leaves a lot of us out of the running. Saint Francis of Assisi heard a call from god, renounced his title and wealth, took off all his clothes and walked into the wilderness naked to live on grains and honey that nature provided. Not all of us can do that. Some would argue that not all of us should even try. But I think we are all called to do the work of the divine.

Our Unitarian Universalist faith calls us to action in a unique way. We are called to uphold our principles, based upon their own moral value. In our non-creedal, non-doctrinal faith, we do not have the threat of eternal damnation as a motivator. As Universalists, we do not have to worry about being separated from the love of the divine. By definition, we believe in universal salvation. There is no threat of punishment to compel us to right behavior and right relations with the world around us.

We draw our living tradition from Jewish and Christian teachings, but we do not respond well to demands for strict adherence to edicts from long ago. Our Humanist sensitivities require us to pass things through a lens of reason to see if they are relevant and appropriate in our present world. Tradition is good, but it had better have some science to back it up or we resist it. We believe in transcendence and the power of the divine, but we believe in reason, too. In the words of Ronald Reagan, “trust, but verify.”

Our Unitarian Universalist Principles call on us to do lots of things: To affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of all people, to act with justice and compassion in human relations, to accept one another and encourage spiritual growth, to search for truth and meaning, to use the democratic process, to work for peace and liberty and justice and to respect the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

That's no small order. Christians and Jews have the Ten Commandments. You'd think seven principles would not be as challenging as something as very authoritative as The Ten Commandments, but I think our principles call on us to be as vigorous in our moral behavior as those edicts from the Hebrew Bible.

It is not easy to uphold all of our principles every day. We live in a world that makes it singularly inconvenient to practice these principles on a daily basis. Respect for the interdependent web of all existence is jeopardized every time we get coffee at the drive-through, either by the Styrofoam cup with distinctive pink and orange letters or by the mere fact that we're sitting in our idling automobile, spewing greenhouse gasses into the atmosphere.

My adherence to the first principle is sorely tested when I see some of the recent political debates and the things people there have said. Inherent worth and dignity of all people? Really? Yes, really. All of them.

This is not a religion for the faint of heart or conviction. There is nothing wishy-washy about believing that there is inherent worth and dignity in people who behave in hurtful ways.

Let me phrase it this way: What is it we do that serves love, justice, grace, and peace?

When we serve on a committee that helps raise money for a shelter for victims of domestic violence, are we not doing god's work? When we volunteer to help with a church committee, are we not doing the work of the divine? When we speak up when someone tells a racist or sexist or homophobic joke, are we not doing the work of the divine? All of these things are examples of things we do that are part of living in right relationship with each other and the world around us. Is that not what our principles call us to do? To live in right relationship with each other and the world? Is this not where, as Rumi said, we "return to the root of the root" of our own selves?

Sometimes I think we don't give ourselves enough credit. I think we do what we can, wish we could do more, get frustrated that we are not perfect, and treat ourselves badly as a result. I think it would do us no harm to be as compassionate with ourselves as we are inclined to be with each other. We are called to justice, and freedom, and peace, yes. But we are called to compassion, too. And humanity. And we are human.

I want to challenge you this week. I want us to be mindful of our behavior. What we do, what we say, how we act. Let us notice what of our behavior and words serves what we are called to do. Let us be mindful of the good in ourselves and in others. Let us think, too, directly and with consideration, about what our personal calling might be. How do our personal calls mesh with what the covenants of our faith call us to do and be?

We are all called. In one way or another, we all have a call. To service, to justice, to compassion, to peace, to love, to each other, to ourselves. Let us each answer that call as we are able. Blessed be. Amen.