



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“Nudged Forward,”
a sermon given by Betsy Mead Tabor
on September 27, 2015

Your congregation’s studying “Vocation and Calling” this month, right? So is everyone all set, having found your life’s purpose? Have y’all gotten the call? I’m in the right church, yes?

I’m joking! And certainly not about you, but about the pressure humans put on ourselves to find our purpose. There’s no loftier goal. But how to do it? Frederick Buechner suggests that we’re called to the place where our deep gladness meets the world’s deep hunger. “Called.” “Deep gladness.” Inspiring words...and so elusive.

Our culture puts a premium on purpose, but being “called” can feel like a set-up. A tall order when bills need to be paid or when the daily struggle is so great that it’s hard to get out of bed in the morning. Some of us spend years putting one foot in front of the other, just doing the next sensible thing. It feels far from having a higher purpose. Some of us work jobs that are just jobs. Others find satisfaction, yet wrestle with self-doubt and inadequacy. Who hasn’t wondered, “Who am I kidding, thinking I could do a good job in this role, at this work, in this relationship, parenting my children?”

And so the concept of “call” feels a bit grand, out of scale with our ordinary lives. When someone tells us about their call, when God’s tapped them on the shoulder or spoken to them, we might feel frustrated, cynical or downright jealous. “Hey, why don’t I get called?”

But we are called. We’re called forward all the time. Our circumstances, our likes and dislikes, our moods nudge us forward. People we admire nudge us forward. So do those we find difficult. Time calls us forward, not only to tomorrow, but deeper into our understandings too.

A fortunate young mother can afford to leave a good job to raise her children. Time passes. Deep in family responsibilities, she loses sight of the smart, gung ho identity she once had. Motherhood’s changed the way she sees herself, changed her goals. Now what? She bumps along, touches down into depression. Meanwhile, her husband wants the kids to have a religious foundation, not her thing. Unexpectedly, she finds meaning at the funky church downtown, where the readings are poems and the sermons go deep. Nudged into the spiritual realm, she weeps Sunday mornings, gladly. We are called forward.

A sick man at the end of a long life still rants about politics. A right-wing conservative, he sends daily George Will’s editorials to his liberal children and friends. But the morning his daughter

awakens him with the stunning news that Bush has in fact won the presidency, he turns away from her. “It really doesn’t matter anymore,” he says. Overnight, he has moved on. Politics behind him now, he lives out his remaining days focused on family, the dog and dear friends. He whispers, “Thank you, thank you,” until there are no more words. No longer compelled by the issues of the day, he’s nudged to another plane. We are called forward.

Both the young woman and the old man are called to the next chapter, beyond the ordinary, toward something deeper. Theologian John Cobb named this sense of continuum, of movement to another realm, “the call forward.” (Not to be confused with call-forwarding on the phone!) “The call forward.” The minute I read those words in school, I loved them, because our theology—how we make sense of things—always seems to be moving, evolving. At the time, we were studying “process theology,” a really dry term for a really exciting concept....

Process theology is the idea that everything’s on the move: we, our cultures, our understandings—even the mystery of God itself, for those who think in those terms—are in a process of continuous change. Meet three process theologians....

One of the first and most famous, Alfred North Whitehead said, in the 1920s and 30s, that every experience we have changes us. You and I today, together this hour, are changed by it. Changed moment by moment by what we hear and notice and think and feel. As we take in each input, our self—our soul—is constantly recalibrating, so that continually we are made new. Process theology.

The second is Henry Nelson Wieman. In the 70s, he had a wonderful way of seeing every interaction as transformative, as moving humanity forward. He called it “the creative event,” whereby every conversation—every sharing of language and points of view—produces a brand new conversation that’s more nuanced because of the interaction. As each person then shares that new conversation, the creative event happens again, and the world of ideas and creativity keeps growing and advancing exponentially. Process theology.

Your church’s theme of “call” this month immediately brought to mind the third theologian, John Cobb. Today ninety years old in California, he wrote in 1969 about “the call forward.”¹ A beautiful concept, that we are called forward all the time. As we heard in the poem Joanna recited, the call forward is like “a thread you follow. It goes among /things that change....it is hard...to see [but] While you hold it you can’t get lost.” Always there, it keeps us moving. Pulls us along. To a nobler plane. Higher ground. Clearer understanding. It inspires us to live up to what Abraham Lincoln called the better angels of our nature.

Do you recognize the call forward? The fleeting desire to do better in the moment? Not out of guilt, not to live our life’s purpose, but simply to do the next thoughtful thing? Imagine, in the words of our reading, if we always acted on the impulse that “goads [us] to the most thorough and responsible thinking of which [we’re] capable”! It’s not the easy thing, but when we’re on our game, attentive to who, deep down, we believe ourselves to be, we know this call. It’s our birthright to take the high road. To be there for friend, family or stranger. To come away from our

¹ John Cobb, *God in the World*. 1969.

routines, stop checking Facebook and email, stop whatever it is we do to numb ourselves out and instead put our energies into our hopes and ideals. Safe to say that few of us are at a loss to find places where we could engage more lovingly and thoughtfully.

Like the thread, the call forward is 24/7. “It goes among/things that change. But it doesn’t change.” Holding onto that thread can us move out of the spot we’re in. Pull us through a rough patch. Take us out into the pure, fresh air of something better.

We can wait for it, but our Unitarian Universalist faith is about acting on the call forward. Our founders were movers and shakers. Challenging the status quo, they created a new church. Explored theology. Made a difference in the world. Today we continue to engage in making sense of things, from our understanding of the holy and of human goodness to standing up for justice.

We’re in good company. In the company of Jews observing Yom Kippur last week. Surely responding to the call forward, they reflected deeply on what they might have done better this past year. We’re in the company of the millions of Muslim pilgrims who’ll come to Mecca this fall to pray and strengthen their faith. And we’re in the good company of Pope Francis—the smiling, humble holy man who calls the world forward with the joy he takes in loving and dignifying all who cross his path.

So where do we hear the call forward? While Cobb, a Methodist minister, attributed it to God, we can think of it broadly. We hear it in hope, the sweep of time and the magnificence of the world. We hear it in crises. With a grim diagnosis, surgeon and transfer station worker alike go home to spend what time is left with the kids. After a close call or medical test that turns out fine, we rethink what’s important to us. Suffering a loss or a betrayal, we see the future with new eyes and start living with more intention. We hear the call forward when we see our bad habits clearly, realize what’s keeping us away from loving one another, and finally do something about it.

Last week, I was called forward by a politician, of all people. A challenging call, as it moved me out of my comfort zone. It’s primary season in New Hampshire, where I live, and invitations arrive weekly to see the candidates up close. A friend had coaxed me to a rally. Though I had no interest in the candidate (whose name doesn’t matter), to my surprise the message resonated, ... until the challenge at the end. “Go out,” we were told, “and spread the word...not to people you already know are sympathetic to your views, but beyond your comfort level to people whose views differ from your own.” A noble idea, but how would that happen?

Didn’t an email arrive that day from an elderly friend in California, deep on the other side of the political aisle! First contact in years! Recalling my voter status as an Independent, she asked for my thoughts. We couldn’t see the world more differently! Spurred on by the candidate’s challenge, I’ve been trying, and we’re engaged in a tentative email conversation. It’s a little scary. She’s a dear friend, and I don’t want to put her off. She’s being careful with me, too. We’re both working to keep judgment at bay and listen with an open heart. This uncharted territory feels alive with possibility. What “creative event” might emerge? All we can do is give it our best effort.

What about you? Where in your life might you entertain a call forward? What situation, or relationship or story is causing your brow to wrinkle in thought? Tomorrow’s Monday. A new day.

New week. Perhaps a new beginning. What would a call forward look like for you this week? What would it be like to act on a generous impulse this week? What words might please someone, maybe close a distance? Where in your life might you tiptoe toward higher ground?

May we stand at the helm of our lives alert to a nudge forward. May we have what it takes to act on it. May the call forward help us be the person we know ourselves to be. So may it be.