

Answering the Call

(Version 2a)

A Sunday service led by the
Reverend Michael Walker, Interim Minister

Presented on March 12 2017, at the
Unitarian Church of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania

WELCOME

Dear friends, some who are new, some who are not, you are welcome here – one and all. We are a welcoming community which honors the inherent worth of all people, regardless of age, ethnicity, gender, orientation, socio-economic class, or other attributes that only serve to divide our society. Here, we welcome you as you are, and are glad you came to be with us today. You may have been coming here for years, even decades; or you may have been coming here for just a few weeks; or, this might even be your first time here, ever. Regardless of how long you have been here, we have one thing to say to you all: **Welcome Home!** Please take a few moments now to greet your neighbors.

CALL TO WORSHIP (by Rev. Michael Walker)

Some mystics speak of a still, small voice,

Whispering in one's ear, conjuring images

Of a future and speaking of a call to action...

A calling for one's life. Your life.

And, when one hears the call, what then?

Do we answer it? Do we seek to understand it?

Do we follow where it shall lead?

What is our responsibility to this voice?

It is to light our way as we seek answers

To such questions, that we light our chalice this morning.

May it ever be so and blessed be you all!

JOYS AND SORROWS (Market Street)

During our time of Silent Joys and Sorrows, we acknowledge those things we hold in hearts, whether they be joyful or sad. If you wish to mark some joy or sorrow in your personal life, you're invited to come and choose a disc from the heart-basket; hold it, admire it, imagine your joy or sorrow coming to reside in this symbol.

Of course, these can mean whatever you want them to, but we picked out the colors based on the sky. Joys might be blue for clear skies or yellow for sunny skies, while the dark stones can symbolize your sorrows, as an overcast or stormy sky. If you have a joy or sorrow you wish to acknowledge, please come forward.

MEDITATION

Being a caring community, we *celebrate* the joys and *share* the sorrows, whether we have told others about them or hold onto them in silence. We do so, so that our friends do not carry these alone. You are now invited into a moment of silence and meditation, as we hold these joys and these sorrows in our hearts and minds. We will bring our meditation to a conclusion by joining in singing a Musical Meditation, Hymn # _____, _____ (name) in the (grey/teal) hymnal.

[Silence]

Thank you. Blessed be.

OFFERING

This congregation offers a liberal spiritual home to seekers from all walks of life. We are proud of the work we do in the community, the classes we offer for children and adults, for the care and concern provided by this community and its staff, and for these two beautiful campuses that have each become a spiritual home for so many.

If you are here for the first time, we invite you to let the offering basket pass you by, because you are our honored guest. And if you have made this your spiritual home, we thank you for your continuing generosity.

Every month, we also collect donations during the Offering to support a worthy cause. This month, our Share-the-Plate Recipient is _____.

If you are writing a check, please specify on the Memo line whether this is for your Pledge, an offering to UCH, or for the Share-the-Plate recipient.

Thank you, all, for your generosity. This morning's offering will now be received.

Answering the Call

Reverend Michael Walker

Today, we explore the concepts of *vocation* and *calling*, the great mission of our lives in service to the greater good, something beyond one's own self-interest. To begin, let's recognize a remarkable and very public calling that led one person to work tirelessly for social justice, a calling heard and heeded by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He once wrote:¹

If a man is called to be a street sweeper, he should sweep streets even as Michelangelo

¹ <http://www.thekingcenter.org/blog/mlk-quote-week-all-labor-uplifts-humanity-has-dignity-and-importance-and-should-be-undertaken>

painted, or Beethoven composed music, or Shakespeare composed poetry. He should sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will pause and say, 'Here lived a great street sweeper who did his job well.'

No work is insignificant. All labor that uplifts humanity has dignity and importance and should be undertaken with painstaking excellence.

Sometimes, when I discuss the vocations of historical figures, as exemplars for our own work, I'm aware that their examples may seem overwhelming. When we speak of social justice, and mention Dr. King or Gandhi or Mother Teresa, it's as if we are speaking of giants who do more than we could ever imagine accomplishing ourselves. And yet, Dr. King implies that we should each

follow our own callings with all the passion and care that we can muster. One need not be a giant to make a difference in the world.

Let's define some terms, before going on: *calling* and *vocation*. One dictionary says that *vocation* is “a strong desire to spend your life doing a certain kind of work (such as religious work)” or “the work that a person does or should be doing.” Whereas a *calling* is defined as “a strong urge toward a particular way of life or career; a vocation.” I realize now that I and my friends and colleagues in ministry bandy these words around, frequently. From the moment one first considers the idea of going to seminary, everyone we speak to asks us to articulate our faith, express our calling, and define

our vocation.

With that said, I must add that I believe a calling to some path in life can be heard and answered by anyone. The idea that I intend to convey today is that we each have a calling in life, and that one of the most important things that each of us can do individually is to undergo a process of discernment so that we fully understand our own callings.

Discernment can take many forms, and be a different process for each of you. The process for one person may look radically different than the process for another. But in all cases, these processes have some common elements. Discernment is, in large part, a deep and honest self-evaluation. Even as I say this, I'm aware that some shy away from deep self-reflection, for a host

of reasons. But what if we took a risk; what if we opened up our darkest closets and looked at what we have stored away and forgotten about ourselves? An honest discernment process also likely takes into account input from other people in our lives. Whatever voice of a calling that we are in discernment about is often considered side-by-side with competing voices.

Let's say that you have a feeling, a profound urge, you're nurturing a passion, or hearing a voice calling you to become ... a *graphic designer*, for example. One part of your process is to look at yourself and evaluate whether you truly have what it takes to do that job. Not that you are fully formed and ready to begin work, but rather that you have within you the ability and drive to *become* ready to do that work. Another part of your

process is to explore with others if this path is right for you. In this particular example, others may include family members, and art teachers, and anyone else who's opinion you value. And, finally, one has to consider what else is happening in your life that may hinder you from this calling. Many times, I've heard from a young parent who has a dream they wish to pursue, but feel that they need to wait until their children are older. This is very common.

So far, we've been speaking about vocation in terms of careers, and that is indeed the most common usage of the term. There is likely someone here, and others you know in your lives, who have some higher calling to which they have put their time and energy, not as a career, but as a matter of great importance to which

they wish to dedicate their lives. An example might be a person who has been so personally affected by some major issue affecting society at large, that they have decided to create a nonprofit of some sort to help address that issue. Does that sound like someone you know?

My point is that vocation is not about money. It's not about making *a* living, it is about *simply* living... with authenticity. In other words, being true to ourselves and our callings, and in doing so, being of service to others.

In considering calling, I've been inspired by the work of Gregg Levoy, in his book, Callings: Finding and

Following an Authentic Life. He wrote:²

Our powers of discernment — of clarity — are routinely clouded and informed by all manner of impulses, hankerings, emotions, ulterior motives, and intuitions that may, in fact, be fear. Discerning means separating, so before we attempt to separate the true from the false, the ripe from the unripe, the gold from the fool's gold, first we do a bit of hunting and gathering, drawing together those raw materials and listening to the various voices within us, that are sure to have an opinion on anything as important, as interesting, as a calling.

² Levoy, Gregg. *Callings: Finding and Following and Authentic Life*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 1997. pp. 35-37.

For instance, if you are contemplating whether to start up a new venture and you find money on the sidewalk, is that a sign that you're supposed to proceed, that your enterprise is now divinely sanctioned, or just that someone dropped a bunch of change on the street in pulling car keys from her pocket? How would you even begin to guess without submitting this little shred of evidence to the skeptic and the wishful thinker in you, the head and the heart, the higher self, the lower self and the middle self? [...] [Have] you consulted the voices of fear and faith, the voices of time and death, and the voice of anyone who would be directly affected by such a decision?

That's an interesting turn of phrase that Levoy uses: *consulting voices of fear and faith; consulting voices of time and death*. Let's be honest, the hardest part about choosing to pursue one's calling is always **fear**. Fear of taking a risk, fear of failing, fear of not being able to pay the mortgage, or for some, perhaps even fear for one's life.

It seems that was the case with Martin Luther King, with his calling to lead people to a promised land in which social justice was our highest value. And yet, for this laudable goal, he received many death threats and was finally silenced by assassination. This is a sacrifice we should not forget, but even so, we all realize that most of our callings don't carry quite that level of risk. And yet, pursuing a calling contains some sort of risk about

which any of us may feel some level of fear. It's what we do with that, that matters. Dr. King did not allow himself to be paralyzed by fear, nor should we.

So, when listening to the voice of our calling, we also listen to a voice of fear, and we must learn to find our path in between the two. Another voice that the author of the previous reading raises is the *voice of faith*, which is always a slippery quality at best. Do you have faith in your *Self*, and faith in the importance of your work? Do you have faith in your ability to do something that is going to help others? And if you don't have faith, can you find it?

And finally, the author advised us to consult *voices of time and death*. That seems rather ominous. But there may be someone sitting here who is on the other side of

their calling – someone who spent their life's work following their path, and realize that they have already accomplished some good in the world. That person may be thinking time runs short for them, but they are to be commended for the work they have already accomplished. But this is a very real factor, even for someone younger. When we consider some new calling in our lives, when we spend time in self-reflection and conversation with others, we need to consider if we indeed have the time left in our lives to accomplish our goals. And, if time is limited, what are we waiting for?

About discernment, Levoy continued on to say:³

In searching for the veracity of a calling, the

³ Ibid., pp. 36-37.

meaning of a sign, the answer to the question of readiness, we can't overlook a full accounting of facts and feelings just because we resent the inconvenience of the truth. Discernment is stringy, hard work. It's also fallible.

So, yes, discernment is important. Finding a fulfilling calling in your life, to give your life some meaning, is important. And, yes, it is also true that our processes of discernment are fallible. We might make a mistake. We might need to re-think what we had planned. I have an example from my own life...

Some years ago, I was burned-out working in the field of nursing and tired of environment of the military, so I left both at the same time and embarked on a new career. I had been in discernment and was still midway

through that process, to be honest. I look back and can see that now. I had come to the conclusion, back then, that I needed to follow a more spiritual and creative path than nursing allowed. I thought that opening an art gallery that catered to spiritually-themed art might be just what I was searching for. Again, I was really only midway through my discernment process, had not really thought my plan through, had not researched the business plan fully enough. I went bankrupt in that venture. As I sat in my gallery, oftentimes alone, I had much time to think. I began to see that I was surrounded by *creativity* and *spirituality*, but I keenly felt the absence of *community*. I needed *community*, as well as *spirituality* and *creativity*. I needed to find a new *calling* that had all three. While working in my gallery, as well as

volunteering at retreats (which I had been doing for some years), I finally realized my future path.

I closed my gallery and started seminary. I then further refined my discernment process through the not-so-gentle prodding of my peers and professors, and took much time to look deeply within myself to find my true path. It has been quite a ride!

For many UUs, the most important responsibility we have to society is to work for social justice. Dr. King wrote something else I wish to share with you, from his speech called “Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence.” Although he spoke of a calling to end war, I think this sentiment might apply to many callings. He said:

On the one hand we are called to play the good Samaritan on life's roadside; but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life's highway. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it is not haphazard and superficial. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.

I believe that he describes a calling that just about anyone could follow, should they hear the voice of that calling themselves. And that is to look at the institutions of our society that are responsible for poverty. Likewise, some ancient teacher once talked about the difference in giving

a hungry person a fish, or teaching them how to go fishing – in one way they could eat now and be hungry again soon, and in the other way they could feed themselves and their families indefinitely.

These are the thoughts that I would like to leave you with today. Are you currently pursuing your calling in life? Are you one that has already done so, achieved some measure of success at it, and are now done? Or are you one who is currently in search of a new calling, a new path of life to follow? If you are such a one, what shall be your process to determine whether or not that is the right path for you? Can you take the magnifying glass and examine your internal Self – and do so with objectivity and honesty? Are you willing to ask others to hold up the mirror so you can see yourself and your

calling, just as they do?

Today, I've asked many questions. Answering those questions, allowing each of us to answer one's *call* and finding out ways to carry out our callings comes after a long process of discernment. The road is paved with doubt and fear, and yet you each have it within you to walk this path, guided by the vision of what good you can do in the world.

May it ever be so and blessed be you all!

BENEDICTION (by Rev. Michael Walker)

*Answering a call can be a daunting, even scary,
proposition. We may do so together, not alone.
For that is the benefit of being in community with each
other, being in relationship...
We need not try to discern our paths a
lone. I can hold up your mirror and you can hold up
mine.

Listen for that still, small voice. And, when you are
ready, shout the words of that voice from the rooftops.
Let your vision be seen. Let your life speak for you.

Be not afraid, because you are not alone.*

*Walk your path. And may it bring you back here again,
that we may hear how it has been for you.*

May it ever be so and blessed be you all!
