

Deep Hunger and Deep Gladness

Rev. Lisa Doege

September 16, 2018

Nora UU Church, Hanska, MN

Once, in conversation with an acquaintance, I described how it was I came to be a Unitarian Universalist minister. I told him that with a school teacher mom and a social worker dad the chances of ending up in a helping profession were great. I told him I'd been raised in the church, and about the sermon I heard that first started me thinking, "I could do that." I told him that ministry is a combination of lots of things I love—reading and writing and study and ritual and working with people. I told him I'd considered other career paths, but somehow, from the age of fifteen on, my life moved steadily in this direction. "Oh," he replied, "you were called." Then wistfully he added, "I wish God would tell me what to do."

My questioner was not joking, and he made sure I understood that he was in earnest. He was someone who has no time or room in his life for religions. But feeling a bit lost and anchorless at the moment, unsure what to do with his life, he genuinely longed for some ultimate, unquestionable authority to weigh in on the matter. He wanted God to tell him what to do.

I don't think of it in those terms most of the time—that God told me to become a minister. I only know it was something it seems I had no choice about, once the idea came to me. In the words of Parker Palmer, I listened to what my life had to say, and it came to pass that the truths and values I *couldn't help but live by* shaped me for a life of ministry. With one exception, I actually don't know of anyone who has heard God or the Universe or the Spirit of Life telling them clearly what to do, though I know lots of people who say they were called to their life's work.

This morning's story, the backstory of how Santa came to have his 'job' (we might more accurately refer to his *vocation* or, in fact, *calling*). The chimney sweep job no one believed he'd done because he was too neat. The post office, the diner, the zoo, the circus. A propensity for working at the wrong time of day—or night—gaining weight, becoming observant and attracting loyal followers, having too much fun. And of course, the serendipitous presence of the elves at the circus. The first but not last delivery of toys in the darkest part of the winter, "when people need their spirits lifted the most."

It may be fanciful and a bit extreme, but that's kind of the way most of us find our role in life. No voice from on high telling us what to do. Just trial and error after trial and error, each experience teaching us one or two valuable, if unlikely, lessons or skills, until at last, if we're lucky and tenacious, we happened upon our vocation.

The one person I knew who stated clearly and emphatically that God had told him what to do with his life was a minister from another denomination. He and I were in the same Clinical Pastoral Education group at the University of Minnesota Hospital and Clinics years ago. This man insisted that he didn't really want to be a minister, but God wanted him to be a minister, so that was that. I had more than one argument with my colleague about that concept of calling. I argued that God, being God, must have many ways of telling us things, and surely a sense of joyful desire is a clearer sign of a call than is a reluctant sense of obligation. My colleague would have nothing of such a free and liberal interpretation of God's ways. Somehow God had told him what to do, and his own skills, talents, desire didn't factor in at all. Finally we had to give up the conversation. Our theological outlooks were so fundamentally different we couldn't communicate.

I didn't know it then, but I was arguing a well-known truism from Presbyterian minister, preacher, and author of numerous books, Frederick Buechner: *The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet*. This theology says that God, or the great Mystery of Life with a capital L, wants us to be glad, and that the needs of the world are so great and so varied, there is a place where our deep gladness and the world's deep hunger come together in a harmony of need and service. All we have to do is discover that place.

Of course, that's the challenge.

A Hasidic tale gets at the same point from slightly different angle. It tells us that in his old age Rabbi Zusya said, "In the coming world, they will not ask me, 'why were you not Moses?' They will ask me, 'why were you not Zusya?'" The point is, we are called to be who **we** are, not to be someone else, even someone as revered as Moses. Ultimately, we are no good to the world or to ourselves if we are not fully, wholly ourselves.

I've heard people compare the relative importance, or perhaps *value* is a better word, of monks in a monastery, and someone like Mother Teresa. Monasteries have their place, the argument usually goes, somewhat grudgingly, but more lives are saved by those who are engaged with the world. From the pragmatic, results-oriented perspective through which we are mostly trained to see the world, there is a great deal of sense to the siding with Mother Teresas over monks. But not everybody is a Mother Teresa (and even she was not without controversy). Not even every person of faith and goodwill is cut out for life among the destitute of Calcutta. Some are built for life in a monastery, a life of prayer or study or other contemplative work. Others are built for lives of direct service to the poor, the elderly, the young, the marginalized, the forgotten. And with rare exceptions, a person whose temperament suits them for one type of life would be a miserable failure in the other type of life.

Miserable because they are denying their true calling. A failure, no matter how productive they might seem, because when one's heart and soul are not behind one's actions, that lack is always seen or felt in the results of the action, however subtly. The skills and talents and basic way of being in the world that make one an excellent monk, or cloistered nun, would not necessarily serve one well in another setting, such as the streets of a *barrio* or *flavela* or the offices of social service agency or the front lines of an environmental justice battle such as the Standing Rock, or an urban justice battle such as Ferguson, Missouri or Minneapolis's 4th precinct.

Luckily, the hunger of the world is both vast and varied. There is need for both those who study and pray, and those who serve individuals and communities and causes directly. As the poem suggests, ask whether what you have done is your life. If you can answer yes, chances are the world, and not just you, is better off for it.

The man in today's second reading hadn't lived his life. The life he had lived may have been a fine one—but think what was it was missing! Hidden from him and the world all those years! A jaguar and yards of rainbow silk, beautiful and desperate! That's pretty intense stuff. What might his life, and the lives of his children, and others around him have been like, if only he knew he was a magician? Perhaps he never would have made his living at being a magician, but how much happier he might have been experimenting with tricks and conjuring acts. How might such joy, such vitality, such danger and magic transformed the way he performed his regular job, the way he interacted with his loved ones, the way he served the world? What deep hunger might he have satisfied by meeting it with his deep gladness as a magician?

What about you? Have you been living your life? It's a worthwhile question to ask of ourselves every now and then. Does my life need a course correction because the life I've been living isn't genuinely mine? Do I let my life speak? Before making decisions about career or how to spend my leisure time, or what volunteer opportunities to undertake, do I listen to hear what my life intends for me to do with it? Am I serving the world, not because I should or because good people do, not *because of those to whom much is given much will be expected*, but because I can't help doing so? Because my gladness is deep and rich and overflowing, and I've found just the hungry, thirsty spot in the world that needs such gladness? In the next world will I be asked why was I not Lisa?

Such self-examination may take time. It certainly won't be as simple as hearing God telling us what to do in simple declarative sentences. And it may take even more time, once we've identified our particular gladness, to find the matching hunger in the world. Like Santa we may find and reject or be rejected by a dozen different paths before we find the one, but the rewards for such work are great. To live one's own life, to act out

of gladness not obligation, is a powerful means of combating depression, bitterness, and exhaustion. Life so lived renews one and serves the world at the same time.

Church can be one place to do the work of identifying our gladness and matching it with the world's hunger. Here we can find the silence to listen deeply to our life. Here we can share our stories with others and learn from their journeys. Here we can provide some avenues of access to the world's hunger. Close to home, for those whose gladness is caring for the building and grounds, or running our sound system, or being leaders of the community, or singing in the choir. And farther afield, for those who want to partner with other churches, or head up our participation in CROP Walk, to name just a few. Here we can continually hold up the importance of listening to one's life and celebrate with folks as they become more and more skilled at living the lives they are called to live.

Churches, like individuals, are called to match their deep gladness with the world's deep hunger. Some churches live their lives authentically in service to children and youth. Others find their deep gladness in music and match it with the world's need for harmony and beauty. Still other churches find their calling in social justice work of one kind or another. Churches which will never be asked *why were you not yourself* listen to the collective life of the congregation telling them who they are, what their truths and values are, what standards they can't help but live by, and then shape their programs around the answers they hear.

I've been wondering lately if Nora Church might be going through a bit of an identity crisis. If we were asked, by God or a church-shopping visitor, if we're living our life (as a congregation), I'm not sure we could currently answer with a clear and resounding yes. I think the alignment between Nora's deep gladness and the world's deep hunger is a slightly off kilter. This happens from time to time in organizations, and in people, and isn't cause for panic.

In Nora's early years our founders' deep gladness in self-governance and embodying progressive, cooperative values, met the deep hunger of second and third generations of immigrant families seeking a place to worship in both their first and second languages, one that breathed the spirit of a new country into its honoring of familiar traditions. Later the annual Midsummer Festival evidenced the deep gladness much of our congregation finds in music and hospitality meeting the world's deep hunger for non-commercial, folk entertainment. From time to time Nora Church, under the leadership of several ministers and dozens of lay leaders, has met the world's hunger with a gladness for social justice in one form or another. Currently, our deep gladness in Nora's unique heritage of Unitarian Universalism with a Nordic twist continues to meet our wider community's deep hunger for foods that recall grandparents' kitchens, for the flavor of recipes many no longer know how to prepare, at our Smorgasbord.

But if our deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet only once a year for a meal—a feast, a labor-intensive feast so loved that people drive for miles to partake, but only once a year nevertheless—then can we truly claim to be living the life Nora is called to live?

I want to be clear. I don't believe Nora is far off the mark. I don't think we need much discernment or shifting around of priorities or ways of being church in order to find our deep congregational gladness in perfect alignment with one of the world's deep hungers. When I listen to the stories you tell and when I read the histories I hear themes: hospitality, entertainment, justice. And in my mind those themes merge into one meta-theme: welcome.

When the founders of Nora Church declared no restrictions on who could be buried in the cemetery, they were extending a welcome. When they invited Reverend Janson to be their minister even though he was Unitarian, not Lutheran, they extended a welcome. When Emil Gudmundson drove up to Redwood Falls to offer assistance to the reverse freedom riders who had been sent far from home under false pretenses, he extended a welcome. When you all produced Midsummer Festivals, you were extending a welcome. When Nora Church cooperated with New Ulm United Church of Christ on MLK Day programs and to feed the riders who commemorate those who hanged in Mankato in 1862, we were extending a welcome. Each October at Smorg, we extend a welcome. With the sign at the foot of our driveway—the one proclaiming, We're Glad You're Our Neighbors—we extend a welcome. Facebook reminded me this morning that several years ago today we even extended a welcome to a visitor who told us he had been sent by Jesus to warn me that I will find out at the white throne of God that my views about marriage equality (published in the St. James Plaindealer) are wrong. The Winter Solstice celebration Jeanie and I and a few others are planning is a welcome we are getting ready to extend to folks for whom the turning of the seasons and the scripture of the earth are holy.

Past, present, future, our welcome has been extended across faiths, across communities, across social divides, across racial divides. Our welcome has been extended for the community strengthening and soul healing powers of music. It has been extended for the body nurturing and tradition preserving powers of food. It has been extended for the possibility opening powers of conversation. It has been extended for the comfort and blessing of a burial in sacred ground. Our welcome has said, at different times and in different ways, "you are welcome here, on this hill, in this church." "You are welcome here in this county, in this state." "You are welcome to your life, as you choose to live it." "You are welcome as a child of the divine, full of worth and deserving of dignity in life and in death." In theological terms all this welcoming is called radical hospitality.

Even as Smorg 2018 approaches, I think we might be a bit uncertain about how and to whom we are called to extend our welcome. What shape our radical hospitality might take over the next few years. I don't know the answer. But I am certain that if we remember all our past welcoming—including the welcomes I haven't mentioned and perhaps don't know about—and if we try a few more on for size (like Santa), then all our experiences will come together in just the right focus, just the right welcome, to serve both our gladness and the world's hunger.

As a member of Nora Church—you'll have your own answer as an individual—as a member or friend of this church, where are you called? Who are you called to welcome? How and into what circle or community or state of being are you called to welcome neighbor, stranger, friend? If you have any clarity around the answers to those questions, let Jeanie know, or let me know. Our vote last May continued Nora Church along the way of engaging full-time professional ministry. God isn't going to tell us what to do in order to ratify that vote and bring forth the blessings of that decision. Only we, all of us together, can chart our path toward fruition.

“In the coming world, they will not ask me, ‘why were you not Moses?’ They will ask me, ‘why were you not Zusya?’” With grace and hard work and a willingness to listen deeply, may each of us alone and all of us together avoid the fate of being asked such a painfully poignant question.

Amen.