

**First Unitarian Fellowship of Nanaimo**  
**September 21, 2008**  
**“Called to Life”**  
**Karen Fraser Gitlitz**

**Hymn #1008** *When our heart is in a holy place* by Joyce Poley

**Sermon: “Called to Life”**

What does it mean to have my heart in a holy place?

There are probably as many ways as there are people.

When I ask myself this question, I think about moments when I’ve really connected with someone or felt myself a part of the natural world – times when I’ve had a conversation with a good friend, or sat on the fence looking at the early morning mist. Moments that were complete in themselves, when everything that needed to be said was said, or when nothing needed to be said. When I let the walls around my heart melt, instead of trying to shore them up.

I can also find this holy-heart place in other ways, in my work life. (By ‘work’ I mean the effort I put into the tasks, projects and goals of my life, whether or not that effort receives a paycheque.)

I can think of times when my efforts have felt satisfying, when it seemed like I was in the right place because I was able to do what was needed. It’s the sense of fit that comes when I’m able to use my skills and abilities to help someone else or make something happen. Career counsellors call it a vocation, theologians describe it as a “calling.”

In the outreach work I was doing last spring, there was a moment when I finally felt like I was actually able to do my job. A woman came in with a concern. I floundered about a bit at first, but she cut in and told me what she really wanted, and suddenly, I found my place, and I was able to help her. One of my co-workers noticed how different the woman looked when she left: her whole appearance had changed. Good job, she said to me. And I thought to myself, Yes, it is a good job.

Callings or vocations not limited to jobs or even careers. Sometimes we use different words when talking about non-paid work. Maybe your passion or mission is found in volunteer work, or a hobby or a family role. What makes it a calling is how we feel about what we are doing AND how it connects us to other people or our planet. A calling has some purpose in the world.

In some religions, God or the Gods speak out loud so people can hear. Divine beings appear to individuals, holding conversations or beckoning us forward.

Some of us may be sceptical of God 'speaking' ... speaking is -- after all -- a decidedly human activity ... and some of us may be sceptical of anything out there that could speak to us.

I would suggest that the world speaks to us, and whether we experience it mystically as spirit or rationally or kinaesthetically (or all of the above) isn't as important as paying attention to what is being said. Of course it is important for each person to come to an understanding of what they think is happening -- but that isn't what I'm talking about today.

Listen to what Canadian poet Barbara Brown says:

O silent God  
Where is your voice?

I only hear the cries of  
The ones beaten  
The ones frightened  
The ones lonely  
The ones silenced

O silent God  
Perhaps you are not so silent<sup>1</sup>

Let's sidestep the question of how we describe who or what is calling us -- the world calls to us, people call to us, or Goddess calls to us. Let's focus on the call -- and how we respond to it.

Religious stories can seem to describe 'call' experiences in a way which makes them sound mystical and inward looking -- but when we look carefully at the accounts, callings are about doing the work that needs to be done: people want healing, people are concerned for their children, or their parents or their planet.

We each hear these calls in our own unique ways. Two people can be in the same place at the same time, and they will each respond differently, and have a different understanding of what needs to happen.

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<sup>1</sup>Excerpted from 'O Silent God' by Barbara Brown, published in *ReCreations: Religion and Spirituality in the Lives of Queer People*, edited by Catherine Lake (Toronto: Queer Press, 1999), p. 100.

This congregation's social responsibility committee, for example, has two active working groups right now, one focusing on the environment and the other on people at risk. These are broad categories of concern, and I suspect that many people would agree that these two areas are both important.

Let's try something: let's say you had to choose one area where you wanted to make a difference – the environment or people at risk. Which would **you** actually get involved in?

And having decided to focus on one area of concern – the environment or people at risk -- what activity would you want to do?

If we wrote them all down, I bet there would be a big list, and I suspect that each item would have a deeply personal reason for being on that list.

I find it is often a particular story or image that catches my attention – something I've read in the paper or seen in a movie, that somehow connects the story to my own experience. I feel my heart do a little flip and I know I absolutely **HAVE** to do something.

Several years ago, when the House of Commons had a committee touring this country to hear what people had to say about same sex marriage, I felt that pull. I heard about it and just knew in my whole being that I **HAD** to be there. So I got myself on the list and had my 120 seconds in front of the parliamentary committee. As it turned out, there were other people from my congregation there. I have no idea if the committee members remembered what I said but it did turn out to be important that I was there for some of the people in the audience – who needed someone to say what I said.

There was wisdom behind that insistent voice. Even though my actions arose out of my own concerns and experiences, there was a deeper wisdom that connected me to other people in that room.

What speaks to you in a voice that won't go away?

In the Jewish story of the prophet Samuel, God called many times before Samuel even knew who it was:

The child Samuel was asleep in the temple when he was called, and he woke up, answering "here I am". No response. He ran into the room where Old Eli was asleep, shouting 'here I am'. Eli – did I mention that Eli was old? – Eli said, I didn't call: go back and sleep.

Samuel went back into his room and fell back asleep (don't you wish it were that easy?).

But again Samuel heard the call, woke up and said, here I am, rushing into Eli's room. "Here I am, you called me."  
This second time, Eli said "I did not call you – my boy, return and sleep!"

But it happened a third time. And when Eli was awakened the third time, he put some thought into it. (I think we can assume that he was wide awake at this point.) When Samuel said "Here I am, you called me", Eli realized that something else was happening, and Samuel needed to be taught how to attend to that voice.<sup>2</sup>

Now I have not had an experience quite like that.

But I do find that I hear some voices better than others.

And when I ignore that 'voice' ... because I'm busy or something else seems more important ... it usually comes back and it gets stronger.

Samuel only had to wake Eli three times ... wow, I should be so lucky!

Sometimes I am so caught up in my picture of what I think should be happening, that I miss the call all together – I'm so fixed on my expectations or assumptions.

In our story about Caramba the cat who couldn't fly, Caramba struggled with who he was, who he thought he should be, and what some cats thought he should be able to do.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps there are things that everyone knows to be true of you ... are they true for you? Are there things you expect yourself to do, or think, or be? Are they true? Could there be more?

Caramba's cousins were not so interested in helping him figure all this out, but you may remember that his friend Portia was different. She stood up for him when he was teased and sat with him when he was sad. She gave him space to be alone he asked for it, she empathized with his distress when he was with her, and she noticed what he was good at – collecting caterpillars, telling stories and cooking cheese omelettes. She celebrated his uniqueness.

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<sup>2</sup> 1 Samuel 3:3-9 (adapted from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible)

<sup>3</sup> From the morning's Story for All Ages, *Caramba!* written and illustrated by Marie-Louise Gay (Toronto: Groundwood/House of Anansi, 2005).

Thank goodness for friends and companions, people who see the value in who we are, as we are now, even when we can't.

Finding our calling – though it may seem like an individual path – usually requires help from others. Caramba doesn't discover that he can swim until he gets deliberately – and mistakenly – let go of in mid air by his cousins. Left to his own devices he would have kept sinking into his sorrows and fears. And though it is Samuel who hears the “call” it is Eli who figures it out.

Often it takes an accident or courageous leap to find another, more authentic way of being.

When a friend of mine called to say that there was an outreach worker position available at her organization, I felt an immediate excitement, followed just as quickly by a stab of sheer terror. What if ... What if I fell? What if I failed?

The best advice I was given came from a mentor who is a fan of Eleanor Roosevelt: “You must do the thing you think you cannot do”

It isn't easy though. Many times I have weighed choices and been unable to untangle the complexity of my motivations.

So how do we know what is real? How do I know which urge to trust? (I am not so naïve as to believe that I should follow every urge or impulse.)

For me, I start with the physical: I feel it in the energy that seems to bubble up from some unknown source, my skin tingles – from both fear and excitement.

Sometimes it's a quality of mind: a sharpness, a proliferation of ideas that seem to come from out of thin air.

Sometimes it's also an experience that stands outside of my rational and physical bodies, that comes to my awareness as a sense of touching something larger and deeper, or a certain thickness of the air, or the sensation of air standing still and being cut away or peeled back so that everything is shiny and new.

It's about experience – how I feel when I'm doing something.

I also have people that I trust, friends like Portia, people who care about me, and will tell me what they see. Good friends and community members can see when we are happy, or unhappy, they can tell us that our face clouds over when our work is mentioned, or that it brightens up when our child comes in the door.

We need each other to help us know ourselves.

Awhile ago I preached a sermon in my home congregation. I was sitting with one of our elders having lunch afterward. She told me she thought the service had gone well – and she liked the sermon – this was high praise and I was very pleased. Then she looked me in the eye and asked “did you enjoy it” ... meaning, did I enjoy the work of putting it together, presenting it, and all the other bits and pieces of work that go around a service.

Yes, I said, almost automatically. And then in the silence that followed, I searched my heart more fully – yes, I said, I enjoyed it.

Good, she said, it is good for you.

It was a benediction.

And it was clear that she would not have said it was good for me if I hadn't enjoyed it.

It is not enough to have facility – the truth of a calling is in the experience, when the acts become their own reward. Whether you are devoted to ministry, or teaching, or being a parent or grandparent, callings are pursued for the belief in the value of the effort, and for the commitment to those who will benefit from the effort, but most importantly, they are their own gifts, giving back in unexpected ways.

There are two reasons I like to keep the religious language of “calling” for the experience that I am describing.

The first you will understand if you've ever bumped heads with someone who is passionate to do their work and get it off the ground. That deep-seated conviction isn't always easy to work with! The language of calling reminds us that something deep and important is happening.

The second reason is that in our free church tradition we place a high value on choices and commitments – we ask that those who would join us as members of our religious communities make a choice and a commitment. Similarly, following a calling requires a choice and a commitment. It isn't always easy to follow that promise – but that is the point: making the promise reminds us of our chosen path. We have bound ourselves to aim for those moments when “our heart is in a holy place.”

Next Sunday, when I am in Vancouver for my ordination, the congregation of the Unitarian church of Vancouver – in the form of its Vice-president – will ask me some questions.

First they will lay out the traditional tasks of our ministry: preaching, ministering to joys and sorrows, offering encouragement to spiritual growth, and working for justice.

Then they will ask me: am I ready?

If I say yes, they will charge me with certain responsibilities, one of which is to serve with my whole heart. That's what it's about.

I know that I will not be the best minister the world has ever seen, but I believe I am in the right place, and that congregation – which I know and trust – affirms my commitment.

I trust myself and them because I can look at the times I have felt most alive, when what is best in me was called out of me by particular events or occasions, and know that my feeling of aliveness is the best affirmation of all.

And now I wonder, what does this conjure up for you?

When in *your* life have *you* felt most alive?

What were you doing? Who were you doing it with? And what did you do in response?

UU minister and poet Nancy Shaffer says of that voice  
“Tell us, please, all you can about that voice.  
Teach us how to listen, how to hear.  
Teach us all you can of saying yes”

We need to share these stories with each other, to learn all we can of saying ‘yes’. I've told you a little bit about my “yes” ... I hope to hear about yours over the coming year.