

# Still Comes the Call

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On the Occasion of the Ordination of Rev. Dr. Michael James Tino  
To the Unitarian Universalist Ministry and His Installation  
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*Still comes the Call to who will hear!  
A listening spirit heard,  
And fain would go with message clear  
To be the living Word.*

How these words of William Channing Gannett stir the soul! And yet ...

I've always been a little reluctant to talk about the call to ministry. It seems so pretentious, on the one hand, or possibly delusional, on the other. The whole notion of being called to any vocation is so intimate, so personal, that it seems almost immodest to speak of it in public, perhaps even a violation of the rules of good taste in polite company. And then there's the ambiguity that once characterized my own sense of calling, which makes me shy, at best, and evasive, at worst.

If life was like a box chocolates for the fictional character Forrest Gump, then my experience of ministry has been something like a bowl of olives—an acquired taste, not something to be rushed in to but rather nibbled at for a time. So I have no melodramatic story about being called to ministry, no great epiphany or magic moment, no “burning kiss from God” as Francis Dávid described it. God didn't yell, “Come on down!” like some television game show announcer, nor were there any burning bushes or visions in the night. As a vocation, the ministry more or less snuck on me when I wasn't looking. I felt increasingly drawn to it, more than called. The closest thing I experienced to a call to ministry was that moment when, like the character Mike in the Broadway play *A Chorus Line*, whose sister had decided to skip dance class, I found myself saying out loud, “I can do that!”

Yet I have always had this urge, this burning desire, a deep hunger—to discover what is true, to do what is just, to help those around me, and to find meaning in all the vicissitudes of life. And I have yet to find another vocation better able to satisfy these

hungers than the ministry, even though it has taken me a very long time to admit that it is a calling.

Parker Palmer advises us, “Before you tell your life what you intend to do with it, listen for what it intends to do with you. Before you tell your life what truths and values you have decided to live up to, let your life tell you what truths you embody, what values you represent.”<sup>1</sup> He goes on to say, “Vocation does not mean a goal that I pursue. It means a calling that I hear. Before I can tell my life what I want to do with it, I must listen to my life telling me who I am. I must listen for the truths and values at the heart of my own identity, not the standards by which I *must* live—but the standards by which I cannot help but live if I am living my own life.”<sup>2</sup>

And so it is that, at our best, those of us who are ordained to the ministry arrive at this place because we have listened to life telling us who we truly are, and we have found no better way to practice the truths and values by which we cannot help but live than by serving the church through its ministry. For those of us who have made the ministry our life’s work, and for those who value the church as an institution for good, there is no greater cause for joy and celebration than the recognition that this call comes still to listening spirits who are prepared to take upon themselves the mantle of this vocation and go forth to proclaim clearly the life-enriching message of our living tradition, while embodying its values in their very lives.

*Ordain in him the seeker's mind  
Of eager, trusting youth,  
That hastens forth each morn to find  
Fresh manna-falls of truth.*

The deepest misunderstanding of liberal religion, in general, and of Unitarian Universalism, in particular, is found in the mistaken notion that, if you adhere to our way in religion, you can believe anything you want—that somehow beliefs don’t matter and truth is to be equated merely with taste. It is fair to say that, when compared with other religious traditions, Unitarian Universalism is characterized by a natural curiosity and a greater openness to new ideas and insights. But as Sophia Lyon Fahs observed:

It matters what we believe. Some beliefs are like walled gardens. They encourage exclusiveness, and the feeling of being especially privileged. Other beliefs are expansive and lead the way into wider and deeper sympathies. ... Some beliefs are divisive, separating the saved from the unsaved, friends from enemies. Other beliefs are bonds in universal [community], where sincere differences beautify the pattern. Some beliefs are like blinders,

shutting off the power to choose one's own direction. Other beliefs are like gateways opening wide vistas for exploration.<sup>3</sup>

In a nutshell, Unitarian Universalism is not simply a gathering of agnostics run amuck. No, our tradition calls us to be fearless searchers after the truth—to follow our sincere explorations wherever they may lead us, and then to integrate our findings and discern the pattern of meaning to be found in the whole. And so it is that we ground our faith, as nearly as possible, on the evidence we discover, including the evidence of the heart. A. Powell Davies called this “discipleship to advancing truth”—known and to be known.

Canons of scripture are easier but they are not our way. Even the most cherished sacred texts are subject to scrutiny and human judgment. Consequently, ours is of necessity a learned ministry and our congregations desire ministers who are insatiably curious, engaging in a lifelong quest for truth and meaning, hastening each morning to discover the new truths that the morning and the ancient truths it confirms.

*Ordain the constant heart to take  
The side of outcast Right,  
In duty's rocky fields to make  
His gardens of delight.*

A few weeks ago, while speaking to group of Minnesota Unitarian Universalists who are interested in producing videos on the history of their congregations, I suggested that one effective means to identify worthy stories would be for them to ask themselves, What events and personalities from our congregation's history might be deemed newsworthy? Or, when has our congregation been especially relevant to what was happening in the larger society? I then offered, off the top of my head, a quick list of events and issues from just the last half century, in order to get people thinking about the possibilities: the Vietnam war, the civil rights movement, feminism, reproductive choice, marriage equality, responses to fundamentalism, and so on. I avoided more distant eras because those who love history too often leap immediately to those times which seem relatively safe to talk about—far enough in the past that we can either forget the unpleasant bits or at least feel unthreatened by them, because they are so far removed from the present moment. Many of us would rather talk about the liberal religious response to racism a century ago than our work a decade ago – or what we've done to confront the continuing scourge of racism this past week.

So I shouldn't have been surprised when one gentleman put up his hand and observed that it was a mistake to suggest that adherence to liberal religion necessarily implied that one would be a political liberal, too. Now, I had not in fact suggested that,

but this individual was obviously feeling a little bruised by my list. I understood him to be saying that Unitarian Universalists are not monolithic in their political outlook—that they support more than one political party and maintain diverse views on public policy, an understanding that I was happy to concede. But looking back on my response, I find myself dissatisfied with it, for if the faith we profess has any substance at all, it will, in fact, condition our responses—both individually and collectively—to events and developments in the larger world.

It would be unseemly for the church to be partisan—our congregations are home to a diversity of political opinion and commitment—and yet the message of the liberal church is inherently political. This is because our faith demands congruence between our inner selves and our public commitments. If we truly affirm the worth and dignity of persons, then that affirmation will naturally lead us to support social policies that strive to overcome racism and oppression, among the other sins that continue to plague our society. If we truly affirm the use of the democratic process and the right of conscience, then that affirmation will lead us to support systems that enhance democratic governance and participation. And if we truly affirm the interdependent web of existence, then that affirmation will motivate us to seek to reverse environmental degradation and begin to treat the earth for the holy place that it is. I could go on but you get the point: our principles are not without consequences!

In 1846, the great Unitarian preacher Theodore Parker asked, “In the midst of all the wrongs and sins of our day, the crimes of men, society, and state, amid popular ignorance, pauperism, and war, and slavery, too—is the church to say nothing, do nothing?” Is Parker’s question any less relevant today? In striving to be prophetic, we honor that ministry which, with “constant heart ... takes the side of outcast right,” seeing among its responsibilities the charge of Isaiah “to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives [and] to comfort all who mourn.”

*Give him the eyes that pity men,  
The tones that stir and thrill,  
The broken heart to heal again,  
To brace the faltering will.*

Over the years, I’ve noticed that people sometimes fall asleep during my sermons, or during the various educational programs I’m called upon to offer. On those days when I’m especially full of myself, I might wonder how it is that they could be so uninterested or perhaps dull-witted that they would slip into a slumber just as I was reaching a crescendo. At such times, I may find myself vacillating between feelings of

annoyance and outright sanctimoniousness. Most times, however, I stand and stew about what it is that I must be doing wrong to have driven them to close their eyes and doze off. More than once, I've been a little relieved to see someone fall over in place, which has led to the discovery that they were ill—sometimes seriously so—which, while it may disrupt the service and bring a little medical drama to the day, a sort of localized, live version of *Gray's Anatomy*—it does let me off the hook, insofar as my preaching or teaching may be concerned. Even on the best days, I'm confident that it's not powerful enough to cause a stroke. But mostly, as I stand there watching parishioners slumber peacefully, I am inclined to obsess about my shortcomings as a minister—or as a person. Like anyone else, ministers can sometimes fall prey to the assumption, "it's all about me." The good news in this is actually that it shows, quite convincingly, how ministers are prone to same rich range of feelings that come to other human beings—arrogance and doubt, joy and sorrow, longing and despair. When we deal with those emotions creatively, we may just be led towards greater empathy and genuine concern for those we love.

Howard Thurman was another minister who occasionally put his parishioners to sleep on Sunday mornings. He once recalled that there was a woman in his first church who sat close enough to the front of the sanctuary for him to notice. Each and every Sunday she would fall asleep, sometime after the hymn before the offering or, on perkier days, after the doxology. The benediction was something of an alarm clock for this woman, so that, each Sunday, she managed to slip away from church without having been in the least disturbed by Thurman's preaching, which was, after all, still presumably in its developmental stages, this having been his first parish. After a while, Thurman paid a visit to this woman's home to call upon her husband, who didn't attend church because he was seriously ill. As he was leaving, the woman escorted the minister outside and said, "I know you wonder why I sleep every Sunday morning during your sermon. There are two reasons. The first is that it takes you so long to say what you want to say, and I simply give up; I find it too exhausting to listen to you. And the second is that I am so tired." Howard Thurman, who was both a great preacher and a loving pastor, listened carefully and paid attention to this woman's very difficult situation. Suddenly, it was no longer all about him. "Now that I have visited your home and seen the kind of turmoil in which you live six and a half or seven days a week," he said, "I feel that the greatest contribution the church can make to you is to provide a quiet place, once a week, in which you can sit down and go to sleep in peace."<sup>4</sup>

If it is the place of the church to awaken its members to the ways in which they might meet the pressing social needs of the age, through an active engagement with the world, it is also the place of the church to allow some of its members to slumber in peace. Effective ministers are not only prophets but also sympathetic pastors, and the

understanding heart should move us to make space for those in need of rest and respite, just as the constant heart moves us to challenge those who long to build a better world.

*Nor one alone: in all, O God,  
For nobler ministry  
On heights of life as yet untrod  
Awake the glad 'Send me!'*

There's an old joke about an Episcopal bishop who called a young deacon into his office to discuss the deacon's obvious unsuitability to his new vocation. Parishioners had evidently been drifting away from the church, unmoved by the deacon's preaching, unloved in the deacon's pastoral care, unconvinced of the deacon's call. Yet this young cleric protested. "God has called me to preach the gospel to all who will hear, to profess the teachings of our faith in the wider world." The bishop remained unmoved. "Well, then," he said, "it's very unfortunate that when God called you to preach, God apparently forgot to call anyone to listen!" Ouch!

In our tradition, the authentic call to ministry is validated by the religious community, for ministry is a shared enterprise and never a solo adventure. We minister in community, through community, and for the community, to the end that the needs of the world may be served and that which is holy glorified. In this, all callings merge when, with Frederick Buechner, we come to understand that vocation is "the place where [our] deep gladness meets the world's deep need." When fit candidates for the liberal ministry come forth, we gladly ordain them and send them out to bear witness to all that is holy and good about our faith, to pursue that nobler ministry for which we long.

The minister we have gathered to ordain and install on this day is one whose calling is unmistakable. He is one of the most capable institutionalists among us, blessed with superb gifts of organization, which leave me envious; a passionate advocate for social justice, inclusivity and right relationship; an earnest seeker after the truth and a compassionate caregiver.

We are here, then, to celebrate the call to ministry, in particular, but also to marvel at and appreciate all callings—the manifold vocations of humankind, which offer those who answer their life's call an opportunity to serve the greater good, the larger faith, and that commanding transcendent power which hallows our days. Still comes the call to who will hear ... for nobler ministry!

We celebrate also our shared call to be a community of memory and hope. For it is within and from the community of faith that we minister, a community of faith that

bears witness to the living tradition we share, which is, in the words of Mary Ann Evans (better known to us as novelist George Eliot), that abiding faith ...

*Taught by no priest, but by our beating hearts:  
Faith to each other, the fidelity  
Of those whose pulses leap with kindred fire  
Who in the flash of eyes, the clasp of hands,  
Nay in the silent bodily presence, feel  
The mystic stirrings of a common life  
That makes the many one.*

**First Reading:**  
**“Ordination” by William Channing Gannett**

Still comes the Call to who will hear!  
A listening spirit heard,  
And fain would go with message clear  
To be the living Word.  
O holy Voices, bid to-day  
All thought of self to cease, –  
In God alone his strength and stay,  
His gladness and his peace!

Ordain in him the seeker’s mind  
Of eager, trusting youth,  
That hastens forth each morn to find  
Fresh manna-falls of truth:  
Ordain the constant heart to take  
The side of outcast Right,  
In duty’s rocky fields to make  
His gardens of delight.

Give him the eyes that pity men,  
The tones that stir and thrill,  
The broken heart to heal again,  
To brace the faltering will;  
A vision of the Eternal Face,  
Where others’ sight grows dim:  
A prophet thruthing it in grace, – \*  
The Christ, ordain in him!

Nor one alone: in all, O God,  
For nobler ministry  
On heights of life as yet untrod,  
Awake the glad ‘Send me!’  
Use us for braver words and deeds,  
For toil with love ashine, –  
Our heart-beat timed to human needs,  
Our wills made one with thine!

\* Ephesians 4:15

From *The Thought of God*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Series (Beacon Press, 1918), 46-47.

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## Notes and References

<sup>1</sup> Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Palmer, 5.

<sup>3</sup> Sophia Lyon Fahs, *Today's Children and Yesterday's Heritage* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1952).

<sup>4</sup> Howard Thurman, "Concerning Prayer" in *The Growing Edge*, 35.