

"The Call"

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Unity Church-Unitarian

Worship Leader: Janne Eller-Isaacs
Worship Associate: Dick Buggs

Reading:

It doesn't interest me what you do for a living.
I want to know what you ache for,
and if you dare to dream of meeting your heart's longing.

It doesn't interest me how old you are.
I want to know if you will risk looking like a fool for love,
for your dreams, for the adventure of being alive.

It doesn't interest me what planets are squaring your moon.
I want to know if you have touched the center of your sorrow.
If you have been opened by life's betrayals,
Or have become shriveled and closed from fear of further pain.

I want to know if you can sit with pain, mine or your own,
without moving to hide it or fade it or fix it.

I want to know if you can be with joy, mine or your own.
If you can dance with wildness and let the ecstasy fill you
to the tips of your fingers and toes
without cautioning us to be careful, be realistic,
or remember the limitations of being human.

I want to know if you can live with failure, yours and mine,
and still stand on the edge of a lake
and shout to the silver of the full moon, "Yes!"

It doesn't interest me where you live or how much money you have.
I want to know if you can get up after a night of grief and despair,
weary and bruised to the bone,
and do what needs to be done.

It doesn't interest me where or what or with whom you have studied.
I want to know what sustains you from the inside when all else falls away.

Sermon: "The Call" – Janne Eller-Isaacs

We all know it can be difficult to be a religious liberal in today's world. It can be especially difficult to be a Unitarian Universalist. People have either never heard of us, suspect that we are some brainwashing cult or that we are that religion that has no boundaries. When asked about our religious home, we are always faced with a choice. Tell the truth and prepare for a potentially long explanation or say something noncommittal in the hopes that the conversation moves on to some simpler topic. I know that when attempting to explain our non-creedal faith that many of us become, in the words of beloved minister Arthur Foote, "religiously tongue-tied." It can be difficult to explain our open faith when people are so used to hearing explanations that are full of certainty.

During the summer a colleague of mine heard someone describe Unitarian Universalism as a religion that welcomes Christians, Jews, Agnostics, Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, Atheists and even a German Shepherd or two. The person was trying to be funny, of course. But his comments point to an unwarranted assumption: that anyone can be a Unitarian Universalist and we don't really stand for anything. Oh, but we do.

I'm happy to say that we have a number of folks visiting us this morning. The reasons for this are many and varied: people in new communities look for a new congregational home, others decide that fall is a good time to change churches or denominations. Still others respond to some deep persistent call to be more intentional about their participation in a religious community or they are here hoping to deepen the commitment to be more actively spiritual in their daily lives.

For those of you who are visitors or are new among us, I want you to know that in these pews you will find people from every point in the religious continuum. Though you won't find a German shepherd here on a Sunday morning, you will find a commitment to an inclusive broad embrace. We choose to worship here because we want to participate in a theologically diverse and open community. We are here because we dream of our congregation reflecting the diversity of our larger metropolitan community. A vital and essential ingredient to *our* spiritual practice of living in community is embracing the unity of the diversity here. The practice of living in an intentionally diverse community isn't always easy; in fact, it can get a little messy some times. But participating in a diverse religious community is what we want. It is what some of us need. We won't settle for anything else. We are determined to walk in fellowship with people with whom we do not always agree.

For those of you who are new here, don't be fooled. You can't believe anything you want here. We *do* seek to welcome all people who yearn for the Beloved Community, but the paths we offer carry their own demands. Roy Phillips, former minister of this church, began each service with the words, "We are here to seek the highest."

We are here to seek the highest, called to align ourselves to religious principles and understandings that support our efforts in daily living in this one precious life that we may not feel that we deserve, but is ours nonetheless. We are here to seek the highest: to wrestle with our own self defeating, self destructive impulses, to be faithful to our highest ideals and to treat others with an open heart and mind. We are here to seek the highest, knowing that we can not fully comprehend or name what that highest is.

The Book of Ecclesiastes states, "God has set eternity in the hearts of humans, yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end." So, in all humility, we are here to seek the highest, knowing we can't fully ever know or completely comprehend this elusive mystery that we seek. Even with this uncertainty and ambiguity we follow the call that resonates deeply within us, traveling without compass and chart. We move toward the mystery. In the words of Karl Rahner,

"Mystery is something with which we are always familiar, something that we love, even when we are terrified by it or perhaps even annoyed and angered and want to be done with it...what is more self evident than the silent question that goes beyond everything which has already been mastered and controlled...? In the ultimate depths of being we know nothing more surely than that our knowledge is only a small island in a vast sea that has not been traveled. Hence the deepest question for us humans is this. Which do we love more, the small island of our so-called knowledge or the sea of infinite mystery?"

Most every Sunday that I deliver the minister's prayer, I mention the different paths that we each walk to seek the highest in our lives. I do so because the freedom in our journey toward the highest is at the heart of our faith and not one to take lightly. Freedom of conscience, of thought and the encouragement to question and doubt all contribute to this foundational cornerstone of our historic faith.

Scientists are discovering that the religious impulse may actually be hardwired, but its expression can be as varied as we are. Two church consultants, Robert Norton and Richard Southern, were intrigued by this notion and set out to explore the expression the religious impulse can take. In their book *Soultypes*, they suggest that there are four basic observable "soul types" that characterize our personalities and seek to explain the paths we walk to seek the highest. They call these four types heart-centered, soul-centered, mind-centered and strength-centered. Discerning which type

or approach resonates with you may help you seek the highest more intentionally and effectively and help you determine the most sustaining practice for you.

Heart-centered spirituality is primarily expressed through gratitude. According to Norton and Southern heart-centered people place priority on feelings, emotions, personal renewal and transformation. This type hungers for joyful experiences in religion. They find blessings in every day living, look for the goodness in others and in the world. They see life as a gift and the beauty in life restores their balance. Gratitude realigns them with the universe.

My friend Elizabeth was dying of cancer in her late 20s but each day she found things to be grateful for. One day I went to visit her and she whispered to me that she thought that day might be her last. She said, "All I want is to be outside one last time. I want to see the beauty of the hills. I want to smell the eucalyptus, feel the moisture in the air." Later that morning, her brother drove her slowly through the hills, with all the windows down. She kept her head out the window as long as her strength would allow, inhaling deep breaths of the sacred air. Her heart was filled with gratitude for the short life she had been given, never surrendering her spirit to the disease. She loved her life. Restored by this drive, her energy came back for a few days. The night after the drive, she even danced with her sister to music she loved.

Norton and Southern refer to the second type as soul-centered spirits. They are defined as interior personalities. They are intuitive, contemplative. They view life as a sacred journey. They are mystics. They create quiet corners of retreat for themselves and others. They tend to be attracted to meditation, centering prayer or solitary pursuits like walking labyrinths. Eastern and western practices often meet in this type of spirituality.

In certain Buddhist sects, the call to meditation begins by the waking of the bell to call practitioners to meditation. The bell, they believe, doesn't do an adequate job of calling the people unless it is respectfully woken up. Slowly, softly, they ring the bell, calling all to meditation. I think of these soul-centered spirits like the bell, nurtured slowly and intentionally through centering practice.

The mind-centered soul is the third type described by Norton and Southern. These people prefer orderly thought and intellectual exploration of life's meaning. Knowledge, complex ideas nourish these types. They expect and thrive on intellectual substance from spiritual exploration. They are interested in the meaning and intent of sacred writings and literature. They like to study world religions and find challenging discourse a necessary ingredient to a healthy religious community. Sound familiar?

For this type I think of the folks in Afterthoughts. I also think about the hostess of a dinner party we attended last night. We had barely sat down before she began grilling us on the theologian Paul Tillich's meaning of the Ground of Being. Here was a mind-centered hostess whose mind had wrestled with this concept for months and she was ready to discuss it further!

The fourth type identified is the strength-centered spirit. This type sees life as the opportunity to create a better society, to serve others. It is motivated by a strong sense of idealism. Formal belief systems are less important to this type and direct action through support, advocacy on an issue can be one of its expressions, though compassion for others might also be an outlet for this spirituality. Walking the talk with integrity is extremely important to this type of spirituality to flourish. Here, I think of our activists and the work of our many community outreach teams.

Given the differences of these paths, it's remarkable that we can achieve the diversity we have here! But whatever your soul happens to be, we hope you find opportunities to grow your soul here, to bring your passions and your faith here to share. There is no right way to be in this place, no one way to view things. Unitarian Universalism is a 500-year-old way of practicing a life of the spirit. It is based on freedom, reason, tolerance and love. We believe that this broad embrace is wide enough for all souls to grow here, for goodness and mercy to thrive here. There is permission and encouragement here, but our precious freedom also comes with responsibility and commitment.

The weary world is in such need of our broad embrace, in such need of our saving messages of hope and respect. Whatever spiritual path calls you and enlivens your soul, we have good news to share. Our open faith can be a balm for wounded and battered souls, but only if they actually know about us.

Many people from the private sector are working diligently to fill the vacuum left by our government's response to Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath. The trauma response team set up by the UUA is in the areas where people have sought refuge. They are there primarily to support those who are working directly with folks in need.

One of our colleagues told this story of the ministry of our colleague Steve Crump who serves the Shreveport congregation. Steve was at one of the shelters and saw a woman weeping. He went by and gently asked if she wanted to talk. She did. It turns out that she and her family had been served their recent meals by an evangelical relief effort. They had been led in prayer at every meal. But in addition to the prayer, they had been told that the damage they endured was due to their own sinfulness. She wept as she told him that she was accounting for all the sins she had committed in her life that was the cause of all this misery her family had suffered. Steve spent time consoling her, showing her through word and action that another religious view of tragedy was possible. This disaster was not her fault. If Steve was able to persuade her of this truth, then one person was saved from the grips of guilt-wrenching religious abuse. How many others, how many others however were not so lucky?

I don't know about you, but I'm an atheist to that anthropomorphic, punishing God. That God is too small an image to sustain the lives of mystery-embracing people. Don't we punish ourselves enough for our sins? Do we really have to project this defeating, demeaning tenacity at which we are all experts onto the holy?

We want an image of the sacred that may not be completely knowable, but we are courageous enough to begin the journey over the sea without charts, knowing that we will recognize the mountains of freedom when we see them.

Do we have a powerful and life enhancing truth to give to the world? What would it mean if more people could see the world a little more expansively and openly? May we be powerful guardians of the mystery that lies at the heart of unity and may we live in ways that make the principle of connection and unity in our diversity an ever-present reality in our lives.

May it be so.