

# Many Are Called

*Association Sunday Sermon*

*for the Unitarian Universalists in Central Pennsylvania, October 12, 2009*

*Gini Courter, Moderator, Unitarian Universalist Association*

## **Reading: Callings by the Rev. Nancy Shaffer<sup>1</sup>:**

When you heard that voice and knew finally it called for you and what it was saying - where were you?  
Were you in the shower, wet and soapy, or chopping cabbage late for dinner?  
Were you planting radish seeds or seeking one lost sock?  
Maybe wiping handprints off a window or coaxing words into a sentence.  
Or coming upon a hyacinth or one last No.  
Where were you when you heard that ancient voice, and did Yes get born right then and did you weep?  
Had it called you since before you even were, and when you knew that, did your joy escape all holding?  
Where were you when you heard that calling voice, and how, in that moment, did you mark it?  
How, ever after, are you changed?  
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.

## **Sermon Reading: Summons by Robert Francis**

Keep me from going to sleep too soon  
Or if I go to sleep too soon  
Come wake me up. Come any hour  
Of night. Come whistling up the road.  
Stomp on the porch. Bang on the door.  
Make me get out of bed and come  
And let you in and light a light.  
Tell me the northern lights are on  
And make me look. Or tell me clouds  
Are doing something to the moon  
They never did before, and show me.  
See that I see. Talk to me till  
I'm half as wide awake as you  
And start to dress wondering why  
I ever went to bed at all.  
Tell me the walking is superb.  
Not only tell me but persuade me.  
you know I'm not too hard persuaded.

*[And the sermon begins.....]*

Better yet ----- don't let me sleep at all  
Hide my pajamas  
Fill and light the lantern  
Set a fire to warm our conversation

---

<sup>1</sup> from the UUA Meditation Manual *Instructions in Joy*

Take me to the countries that your heart inhabits  
Acquaint me with the patterns you are struggling to change.  
*Don't just tell me, show me.*  
Make sure that I see.  
Or tell me tales of the world that could yet be transformed by human caring.  
Remind me of myself,  
of a time of life half-forgotten,  
half-remembered,  
perhaps half-dreamed,  
when I saw the bleeding, battered world and  
in arrogance, or maybe in innocence,  
believed it was my life's work to change at least one small piece of it.

Talk to me until I am more awake than I have ever dared to be,  
and I pull on my coat and boots wondering why I ever wished to sleep.  
Don't just tell me the walking is superb, take my hand and lead me out the door.  
You know I'm not too hard persuaded.

Take my hand and pull me along, right into this this holy space,  
where we gather this morning in celebration of religion woven from many strands,  
tradition that proclaims the good news that **every single person** has inherent worth.  
Even me. Even you.

Every individual has worth and every individual can have a personal and direct relationship with the divine, not because they learn "the right prayer" or enact "the right ritual", or make the right confession but simply because they have a heart that beats, lungs that draw air, eyes that see, ears that hear, lips that can give witness – each person has worth and dignity simply because they **are**.  
Each human life connects, somehow, with yours and mine.

We know this. Sometimes we doubt, for a moment, or a year, or a decade, but still we know this. There is an entire world of people outside this hall. We could not ever hope to meet them all, and yet, we know that each person in that world has dignity, each person has worth.

We know that each person gathered inside this hall is also worthy. I know -- somehow, it gets harder to affirm **inside** the hall. He took too long getting ready, she didn't print the directions, he gave me a hard time yesterday, and I still haven't forgiven her for that congregational meeting in 2002.

The folks we know best are sometimes the hardest to love well. I get up some mornings, and look in the mirror, and if there's an argument against inherent worth, I'm sure I'm looking at her. Do you have days like that? You may not know that you are worthy, and I may not know that I am worthy. And yet we are. Every person in this room is a unique and wonderful blessing in the world. Even me. Even you. So let's go show them. Please take a moment and greet your neighbor as the unique and wonderful blessing that they are.

-----

Friends, we gather to celebrate a free faith that declares that every child, every youth, every woman, every man, can be saved not just once, but again and again and again. Salvation is ever present, and we are all saved. Even me. Even you. We gather this morning to worship, to open our hearts to wonder -- to the feel of your child's hand in yours, that look in the eye of the person you just greeted, to a memory summoned forth by a piece of music, to the feeling in our body as we sing and sway. We open our hearts so that something precious, something Holy can enter. We might call this connection, or community, or God, or Holy Spirit, or Love, but that doesn't matter. It is here because it is invited, because we dared to create a welcoming space.

We gather to celebrate a lived faith, an embodied faith, a faith that declares that there is a ministry for each and every one of us, every woman, man, youth, and child. If you thought this was going to be an easy sermon, a low-risk sermon, a sermon merely to entertain, think again, think broader, deeper, larger, because this morning, right here, right now, we are *all* called, called to wake up, summoned to the life religious and none of us, not one of us, will leave here asleep.

We are called out of bed,  
the summons comes whistling up the road,  
hiking boots meet porch steps,  
fist on door tentatively,  
then loudly, persistently.

Or we wander off to bed, we really meant to go to sleep, really we did,  
but we don't quite make it there.  
Something calls us to remain awake,  
to become alert,  
to stay up just a bit later.  
Day after day, night after night,  
All are called, we are called,  
and this calling leaves a mark, whether or not we answer the door.

For some, answering that call means a life poured out in service in our Unitarian Universalist ministry. These folks aren't ministers simply because they chose to be. They're not in it for the money, either. Ministry chose each of them for religious leadership, a call so resonant it could not be silenced...so strident it could not be denied. A call that forced them to find their Yes, a call that came to pound, pound, pound on the door before the sun rose and kept pounding until they answered. I am deeply grateful for our clergy, these fine women and men, called to minister to us in times of joy and times of sorrow, to comfort us when comfort is called for, to help us make sense of the unevenness, the tragedies of life, to never fail to be touched by human frailty and loss, to work very personally but always on behalf of what we **all** hold holy to bend our world toward justice. Dear God, Spirit of Life and Love, thank you for our ministers and their ministry of caring and comfort.

But ministry is so much more, for if ministers only comfort, then we become a comfortable people. If ministers only reassure, then we are so easily rocked, so easily gentled into complacent sleep. We hear boots on the porch, the knocking starts and we're yelling "Is someone going to answer the door?" We need to wake up. If ministers could do all the work needed to build a more just world, why, then, do you and I even *have* hearts and hands?

So we also ask our ministers to make us **uncomfortable**, so that we open our ears and hear that knock on the door and realize that it's ours to answer. Our ministers help us gather our power and take our ministries – all the ministries of our congregations -- out into the world. They encourage us to embody our faith, to dare to stand on the shoulders of the Universalists and Unitarians and Unitarian Universalists who built structures of love and justice that in more generous and gentle times were collectively called the "common good".

We ask our ministers to stand in the pulpit every Sunday and speak into the space made holy by our presence,

Sanctuaries for growth and wholeness,  
Temples where we are called to be our best, most courageous selves.

We ask our ministers to share their truths, raw truths, most audacious truths  
To call us to listen

beyond sermon title and description,  
beyond subject and verb, noun and pronoun,  
beyond past tense and present tense and  
future tense and all that stuff that makes us tense  
and then, to invite us to open our souls  
and expand the land where all our truths,  
all our understandings of Love,  
all our stories can bounce around together  
and create a joyous chaos where anything is possible, *especially change*.

We charge each other – ministers and the laity – to discard everything that is unfeeling or false or  
misdirecting and fill our congregations with so much honest engagement that whatever is not authentic  
lies panting for breath just outside the door, *lucky to have made it out alive*.

This is not an easy proposition, perhaps not even within our grasp, but so worth reaching for – Emerson's  
authentic religious community. This is what Unitarian Universalists lay people and ministers can create  
together:

Communities that invite us to pull up a chair or a piece of carpet, or sit on a beach, or in front of a  
campfire and tell our stories, share our lives,  
so that we remember that we are immersed **together** in the human condition,  
remember that this side of fear, we can find no rational basis to deny connection to each other, the many  
others, sisters, brothers, sons, daughters all.

Each of us is called. Each of us must find our Yes. Each of us has a ministry, our own piece of the world  
to make whole. All our ministries are worthy, and all are needed. The world is in desperate needs of  
every ministry that embodies our values.

*Where were you when you heard that ancient voice, and did Yes get born right then and did you weep?  
Had it called you since before you even were, and when you knew that, did your joy escape all holding?*

Perhaps you worry that you are not sufficient to the ministry you are called to. Do not worry – you will  
be. You are.

What is most precious is not how much we've learned from books.  
What is most precious is not where we work  
Or how much we earn

There is only one thing of great value you can give me  
Only one thing of great value I can give you  
We can tell each other the true stories of our lives

Not our political positions, or the things we say when we're trying to impress or threaten, or the  
statements of misdirection we utter so no one will know how we **really feel**. That ancient voice calls you  
to a far greater purpose.

**So dare to say this to each other:**

Speak truth to me so real that it calls me to listen authentically,  
makes me lean forward and listen deeply  
like a parched soul crawling toward water,  
plunging in face first then drinking,  
almost inhaling.

Make me listen – truly listen -- in a way that allows me to be quenched so deeply  
that I only realize I am weeping when I brush the wetness from my face.

Then listen to me in the same way, as I tell you my life,  
my truths,  
as I share the deepest yearnings of my soul.

**And then, let your souls speak these words:**

Remind me that there is privilege even in metaphor,  
and that I know precious little of being parched.  
Do not let me forget that no matter how perilous my condition,  
my life is what others long for when they dream of safety.  
Remind me that safety is not a universal condition,  
that too many stay awake,  
rigidly alert,  
listening for the faintest sound of footfalls,  
guarding their children.

Remind me that there are fathers and mothers whose only nighttime possession  
is a pitiful square of flooded earth  
where family members take turns keeping watch,  
and that has been allowed to be so even in this country,  
even in our lifetimes.

Remind me that fear of violence keeps many from sleep,  
that it is a privilege to choose the things that  
wake me early  
or keep me from sleep.

Do not ever let me forget that waking itself is a privilege.

**And then, souls speaking to souls, in community dream of this:**

Groups of the faithful that gather as they have always gathered, from history through today and onward  
Sunday after Sunday:

In hundreds and tens and threes and dozens and thousands and tens of thousands

In numbers that are all named "community".

Communities that gather to sing and tell and hear stories that remind us of the strength and solidarity we  
find together.

Communities that invite new stories by welcoming and embracing the people who lived them.

Communities of care where we can always find solace in the midst of grief.

Communities of challenge where we form ourselves so we can transform the world.

This is how we call each other, how we teach each other to listen and to hear. Religious communities  
bound together not with common belief, but with a promise – a promise -- to create and with our faithful  
presence maintain that holy space in which we can ask the questions that burn in each of our hearts:

**How do I embrace the holy?**

**How am I called to serve?**

**What am I ready to risk,**

**What am I ready to commit,**

**What do I value more than I value my own comfort?**

**What is knocking on my door – on our doors -- and how shall we answer?**

This is how ministries, and the courage to say Yes, are found. Let us listen to each other so deeply, love  
each other so boldly, that each of us can learn to run to the door as soon as we hear the whistle up the  
road, can dare to throw the door open, even before we hear the knock, and rush out on the porch  
barefoot and amazed and joyful.

*Where were you when you heard that calling voice, and how, in that moment, did you mark it?  
How, ever after, are you changed?  
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.*

**And finally, let us pray together:**

Holy spirit, human community, god:

The needs of humanity are vast, so vast that they numb us.

We hover so often on the edge of sleep, comforted by dreams of a world of peace where the work of justice, our work, has already been done.

We dream of a world with clean flowing waters and clear air where the work of environmental stewardship, our work, has already been done.

We dream, of a world where even the girl children can go to school, where no child goes to bed hungry, where each child is loved, a world where the work required to save the children, our work, has already been done.

And we want to stay in that dreamtime, remain at peace just a bit longer.

Remind us that the dark cover of night is not permanent

That light reveals a world unchanged from when we went to sleep

Do not allow us to flinch from the sure knowledge we are being summoned to our life's work, and must awaken.

Help us remember that as far as the eye can see, and beyond,  
we are all one family, one tribe.

May we see each other completely, hear each other fully

May we make choices that are bold, choices of meaning

May we learn to be both brave and humble warriors for our faith

May we be true companions to each other, full of patience and care and compassion, willing to speak and hear each other to courage.

"May we find in each other the strength to add to our strength so we may do the work that needs to be done."<sup>2</sup>

And now, fully awake, may we find that the world we call ourselves to create **together** is so much more than anything any of us ever dared to dream.

Amen.

*[Thus endeth the sermon....]*

---

<sup>2</sup> Starhawk