

WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO WHEN YOU *REALLY* GROW UP, MOTHER?

Anne Frank was a precocious lovely young woman who changed the world through sharing her thoughts and feelings in her diary. Her life was ended far too soon. Her story is a lovely story, but it is not my story.

The admirable people in Marian Wright Edelman's poem; Martin Luther King, Jr., Maya Angelou, Fred Shuttlesworth, Franklin Roosevelt, Archbishop Tutu, Cesar Chavez, and all the others; were great people. They spent their lives in the service of others. They have wonderful stories, but it is not my story.

David Blanchard, the author of "Pilgrimage to Aisle 11, is a UU minister, who came out as a gay man after marriage and fathering two daughters. He was a very good minister, who did not answer the call to become a chaplain at the local megastore. His is an interesting and inspiring story, but it is not my story.

And then there is Jesus, who really changed the world. Whether he was the messy peasant presented in Patrick Murfin's poem, or the idealized subject of countless Sunday School lessons, or somewhere in between, he and his followers literally changed the world. His is a challenging story, an inspiring story that lives on after millennia; it is definitely NOT my story.

I've been thinking about this service for a long time. I knew that I wanted to challenge the mystique that often surrounds discussion of a *call*. I wanted to challenge it because it did not fit my lived experience. However, I did not know how to go about it.

When I finally sat down to write this, (I am an expert at procrastination) I planned the introduction I just spoke, and then suddenly began writing what turned out to be a poem. I have not had this happen before. I am going to share it with you, then go back to left brain mode of presentation.

"Life is Often Messy."

My story is messy. My call came late.

Some are called early,

Find their purpose and pursue it;

Others are enmeshed in living,

Rearing children, cooking meals,

**Attending PTA, leading Scout troops,
Earning sufficient money for their family,
Mowing lawns and planting gardens.**

**Then life changes, children grow into adults,
The culture shifts, opportunities open,
Possibilities emerge. Perhaps something happens,
Something stunning, something important,
Something tragic.**

**Learning to live in a different way
Requires rethinking, exploring options,
Demanding meaning beyond survival,
Mere living, only comfort.**

**Dare to go deeper, dare to demand
More of self and occupation and companions.
Dare to step out and accept the call.**

It is wonderful that some people are called to their purpose for being early and deeply. I celebrate their clarity of vision and dedication to fulfilling it.

Some, like Martin Luther King, Jr., are pushed into leadership at a young age. Some, like Franklin Roosevelt, inherit a tradition of service that molds them when quite young. Some, like Ghandi, experience life in such a way that they feel obligated to respond. Some, like Maya Angelou, are afflicted by others, therefor must grow stronger in order to survive.

Not all of us are called so young.

Often women are constrained by family obligations. Michelle Obama, who many feminists think ought to be pursuing her law career while First Lady of the land, chose to label her first priority as Mom in Chief.

She says she wants to make sure that her daughters can experience a loving and caring family life as close to normal as possible. She appears to be doing a good job of that. The African American columnist Eugene Robinson, wrote that tears came to his eyes as he saw the President, First Lady and their children exiting a famous white church last Sunday. It could not have happened in his childhood. And they provide a healthy family model for other people of color. Mrs. Obama chose to put her career on hold for the benefit of her family, and other families. Let us celebrate her choice, even as we recognize and celebrate those women who can both pursue a career or calling, and care for their families with love and dedication.

Many men are constrained by economic realities. They are faced with a need to support their families, and a lack of opportunity.

There is only one major employer in the region, and those who can obtain employment there, even in an era of Right to Work laws are lucky. Or, they may be an ethnicity that is historically oppressed, which results in even fewer opportunities for employment. The young man who feels a call toward artistic endeavors ends up in an assembly line. The older man who always wanted to learn about other cultures is trapped in a job that provides health insurance for his ailing child. Men also are not free to pursue an interest that might have become a calling.

Sometimes folks just muddle through as best they can. The reality is that most of the world's population struggles to live day to day. We still live in a world where children starve to death, and their parents are unable to protect them from violence.

Increasingly we live in a world where weather extremes that destroy crops and homes and infrastructure and lives also destroy hopes and dreams.

Maybe the call for these people IS to survive. Maybe the holiest thing they can do is to live another day and help their children do so. Maybe one of these children will become a Sojourner Truth or Nelson Mandela or Dorothy Day. Maybe survival against the odds is its own call and should be honored as such.

In comparison to those for whom survival is a call, most of us are privileged. Our children will not starve. We live in a land of fresh water and fertile fields. We are not without problems. We are the most gun loving population in the developed world, and the murder/suicide rate reflects this. Our lauded democracy is struggling to survive the money that international corporations pour into our political process. Yet we are far more privileged than most of the world.

Does this privilege come with responsibility? Does the freedom to move beyond survival bring with it the necessity to give back to the world in some way? I maintain that it does. Most of us received a good education. Some of us will carry outrageous debt until we

pay back our educational loans. Still, we have the education. We also have time, precious time that allows us to read, to reflect, to meditate upon the world outside our doors, and our inner world. We have the luxury of reflecting upon abstractions; why am I here, how did I get here, what is the meaning of life, and what is my role in it. This is the question we are addressing today—what is my role, my calling in this too brief sojourn upon our beautiful but ailing planet?

We are all called to engage with our world, with its waters and its lands, with its flora and its fauna. We are called to engage with our fellow humans. We are called to engage with life. Henry David Thoreau said: “I wish to learn what life has to teach, and not, when I come to die, discover that I have not lived.”

However, beyond that, beyond deliberately engaging with life and its complexities, how do we spend our time energy, and talents? How do we end our days not having merely visited the world, but engaged with it, and ideally left it better than we found it?

Let me suggest some steps that may provide a framework for hearing and accepting a call to a specific vocation or task. First, I believe we who are privileged do have a responsibility to give back to the world. Thus, accepting this responsibility is the first step.

Second, we can explore the possibilities available to us. It is no use yearning to be an artist if one has absolutely no talent in that direction. Thus, we need to assess our own talents and abilities. We need to think about the direction our education could or should take. Do we need a college education, or another, higher degree? What does our part of the world need? A good kindergarten teacher, or a crossing guard to help children? A software engineer to further develop the technology that is expanding our ability to communicate and to learn from all the libraries of the world? A musician who will bring joy to those who listen?

Listening to the voice within is the third step. What is it that your inmost self is saying? You may need to quiet the world around you to hear the answer. Turn off the technology, pause from the rush of living, meditate if that is possible for you. Listen to the “still, small voice within”. Does it mesh with the world’s needs?

Take some time for discernment. Are you ready to make a change? Are you ready to say, “This is what I want and need to do?” This fourth step is critical. Do not rush to say, “Yes, I have received a call to study nursing and serve those who are ill and in pain.” Take time for discernment.

Fifth and finally, if you are ready, accept the call and begin your preparation to carry it out.

This is, of course, not at all what I did, at least consciously. I bounced all over with my occupations. I was an Army Officer's Wife for 20 years. That was considered a full time occupation in the 1950's and 60's. I was a full time Mom. I led Girl Scout troops and made all the clothes for my children and myself. I did all the social and cultural things that Army Officer's Wives were supposed to do. I was a club president and once, disastrously, a treasurer. I helped start a Thrift Shop on an Army base that had none. I volunteered for the Red Cross. I was the very model of an Army Officer's Wife.

And then, fairly quickly, I was not an Army Officer's Wife any more. My children were growing up, and my world opening up. I worked at a TV station and was a secretary in a hospital. I made costumes for the regional theater, and partnered with another woman in a dressmaking establishment. I became a fabric artist.

It was about this time that my daughters began asking me, "So, Mom, what are you going to do when you REALLY grow up?"

Sometimes something happens and you know the world will never be the same for you. This happened to me, when tragedy struck, and more than once. This is when I began to ask the deep questions. This is when it became clear to me that if I was to live authentically, I must go ever deeper and listen to the voice within.

Now, I would not have named my decision to attend theological school a "call." Indeed, when I got there and heard other students talking blithely about their call to ministry, I was puzzled. My Unitarian Universalist congregation did not use such language.

However, I now understand that one need not see Jesus beckoning to you in a dream to be called. Angels need not appear in a vision. Trumpets need not sound. However, when you understand that "this" (whatever it is) is what you must do in your next stage of development—that is a call. When you know with every fiber of your being that you must work to bring justice to your corner of the world—that is a call. When you grasp that it is time to develop your talents and skills to enrich your community—that is a call.

I heard a call to ministry. And I answered it. And I was 54 years old at the time. I don't think the earlier parts of my life were wasted; I think they were more than just preparation; I think they had value in and of themselves. And I think I am not alone. I think there are many who must rear children, or support a family, and only after that task is completed do they have the luxury to explore, discern, and choose a new life, one that is devoted to a deep need to enrich the world.

The Rev. Barbara Pescan wrote a poem about receiving a call.

Calling

Mother Shaman—shake me

shake my bones, my certainties—

I am your fox tooth rattle—shake me.

Dance with me

pound my stretched skin

inside outside

make me ring and make me tremble

I am your round bound drum singing—lift me.

Blow through me

across my eye holes

in my ear folds

blow the truth down my dark hollows

I am your horn

Your ram's horn mouth, mother—breathe me.

Old mother, come. Ahh.

Old mother, come

dance me

shake me

sing me

whole.

God, or whatever answers that description, bless all those who answer a call, at whatever age and stage of life. And teach us to listen to that voice within that whispers and whispers, until it is all you can hear, and you must answer with action.

Shalom and Salaam. Blessed Be and Amen