

Sermon for Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Central Michigan

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Finding Your Calling

Joseph Campbell took an idea from the Hindu Upanishads, the sacred text of Hinduism: the idea that we should figure out what makes us joyful and fulfilled, and spend more time doing that thing. The idea is called Following Your Bliss. Here's what Campbell says about that:

If you follow your bliss, you put yourself on a kind of track that has been there all the while, waiting for you, and the life that you ought to be living is the one you are living. Wherever you are—if you are following your bliss, you are enjoying that refreshment, that life within you, all the time.¹

It would be misleading to think that “bliss” is a shallow form of happiness. Instead it involves dreaming big dreams. Following your bliss means knowing who you really are and daring to be that person.

I want to share the story of me finding my calling in life and following my bliss, and then I want to encourage you to find your calling in life to follow your bliss. Actually I have had three callings in life. The most recent time I felt a calling was five years ago, which was the call to ministry that has led me here.

At that time, five years ago, I was at a crossroads in my life—not just from one big life event but from several. I was in the midst of getting a divorce; my kids were growing up and going to college; and the new career I was trying to succeed in at that time, being a middle school principal, was not working out.

Self-help Book

I was 47 years old and having this crisis, a crisis of identity and purpose. It was a big moment of soul-searching for me. So what did I do? I went to the used book store and got a self-help book. This is the one I found: “I Could Do Anything If I Only Knew What It Was – how to discover what you really want and how to get it,” by Barbara Sher. I was really ready for the message in this book, and if I read a short passage from it, perhaps you can see why.

Change is not only likely, it's inevitable.

You get laid off...Or you retire...Or you're divorced or widowed or your spouse falls seriously ill. Maybe you've suddenly become a single parent...

This was never part of your plan, so like any general in the field, when the unexpected happens and the whole operation changes—you've got to regroup.

There are all sorts of situations that require total regrouping. Even unexpected good fortune is a big, unsettling change. My friend Barney got completely perplexed when he received a moderate-size inheritance. The money did make him rich, but suddenly he had a wide range of new options. “I don't know what to do or how to proceed!” he said. “Should I just travel like I always wanted to, and spend the money until it's gone? Or keep my job and finally buy a home? Or should I invest and quit work, and live—vey modestly—on the interest from the inheritance?...

If you think Barney's problem is the kind of problem you wish you had, take another look.

It is your problem.

If your life has suddenly changed, *you too have received an inheritance*. Your gift may look more like a disaster to you now, but think about your situation for a moment. Suddenly, you have been given a wide array of new choices—in effect, a second life.

And you now have the dilemma Barney had—you don't have the first idea of how to design your new life.²

Indeed, it felt like the author, Barbara Sher, was speaking to me in this book, and this message helped me to discover my calling to ministry five years ago. But, as I said, ministry is actually the third calling in my life. The first was teaching.

Teaching

Thirty years ago, my passion was clear: I wanted to be an English teacher. I was called to the high purpose of sharing the magic and power of ideas with all students. Sharing the gift of reading and writing, the appreciation of poetry, uncovering the gift of writing poetry that is hidden beneath layers of judgment and self-doubt. This was fulfilling work and I ended up doing it for ten years.

Fatherhood

My second calling in life followed directly from the first. After teaching for ten years, I moved from Massachusetts to Ohio for my wife's job. My kids were 4 and 2, and my choice was not to continue my teaching career, but to focus on parenting. I was a stay-at-home dad briefly, and then worked part-time in order to have time and flexibility for my kids. There is no higher purpose or calling in life than raising children: nurturing, loving, and supporting them. It's a profound joy and a profound responsibility. Of course, the responsibility and the joy don't go away when my children grow up, but it changes. That's why, as I said, my children leaving home and going to college five years ago was part of the circumstance that allowed my call to ministry to happen.

Ministry

My kids were growing up, I was getting a divorce, and my new career as a school principal wasn't working out. I had considered becoming a minister years earlier, but dismissed the idea. Even though I enjoyed being a lay leader in my UU fellowship and thought it would be fulfilling to go further, it just didn't make sense. Going to seminary full-time for three years, with all the costs involved, plus the challenge of finding a job as minister that might involved moving out of state—these reasons had stopped me from hearing a call to ministry earlier in my life, but now everything was wide open. It was a crossroads moment in my life, and I chose to follow my heart. It was not a rational decision.

One part of my call to ministry was realizing that being a principal wasn't going to use all of my gifts. Being a minister probably can! There is one more moment I want to share about my call to ministry, which helped solidify the decision. I was walking on a path by myself, and I imagined two parts of myself walking alongside me. On one side was Mr. Frantz, the principal. This was a role I was working to achieve at the time. On the other side I imagined Reverend Andrew, the UU minister. This was a role I was just beginning to imagine for myself. I realized in that moment that Mr. Frantz, the principal was someone I was trying hard to become; and that being Reverend Andrew, the minister, felt more like allowing myself to be more fully who I am. In that moment, Mr. Frantz gave permission for Reverend Andrew to come forth, and I let go of one goal in order to follow another path.

Invitation: Follow Your Bliss

The conclusion of my message this morning is to ask each of us to consider following our bliss. The good news is that doing so doesn't need to involve divorcing your spouse or quitting your job! It doesn't have to involve moving to a new state to become a minister.

Finding your calling in life and following your bliss can happen at any time of your life. For Tolby Busch, it's a great time to think about finding his calling. Graduating from high school and starting college is a great time to ask, *What makes me happy, and how can I spend more of my time doing that thing?* Those of us at any other age in life can ask ourselves the same thing—young, old, or in-between. And following your bliss need not be the thing that you do for a job. Many people have a job for money and have a passion in family life or volunteer work or something else.

What's the thing that you must do? The thing that fulfills you, the thing that's calling you. Is there a call that you've been resisting?

What would it look like for you to tell someone else, in a few words, "This is what I am all about in life. This is my purpose and my passion"?

As we heard from the song earlier this morning, Love Will Guide Us. The discernment of finding your calling and the courage to go through with that calling are more matters of the heart than the head.

And as we heard from the Rumi poem that I shared earlier, there will be trial and challenge in following your bliss. Like the chickpea boiling in the pot, he says, that is us going through difficult times, and the one who is cooking the chickpea says,

*... "boil nicely now,
and don't leap away from the one who makes the fire.
It's not because you are hateful to me that I boil you,
but so that you might gain flavor,
and become nutritious and mingle with essential spirit.
This affliction is not because you are despised.
When you were green and fresh,
you were drinking water in the garden;
that water-drinking was for the sake of this fire."³*

When we go through challenging times, we are sustained by the preparation we made before—just as the chick pea drank water to prepare for the boiling in the pot.

Before we end our time together today, let's take a moment to reflect and listen to the voice within. In this place made sacred by our presence, dare to tell yourself in the silence of your own mind: what is your calling, the thing you must do? In this quiet moment, dare to tell God, if you believe in God, or however that idea works for you—or to ask God for help in finding your calling. Maybe today you can tell yourself in the mirror what your calling is, what it means to follow your bliss. Maybe you can tell a trusted loved one. Maybe you can tell someone at coffee hour today after the service. It might be scary to do that. What would it look like to tell someone at coffee hour today? "This is what I am all about in life, what's important to me, how I am using my

precious and unique gifts in the world.” I hope that this community is a safe place where we can tell each other precious truths like that.

I have one more quotation to share today, and this one is by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross:

It is not the end of the physical body that should worry us. Rather our concern must be to live while we're alive - to release our inner selves from the spiritual death that comes with living behind a facade designed to conform to external definitions of who and what we are.

So my friends, let's not live a life that is spiritually dead, but let us rather dare to hear the call that call us to follow our bliss. And may this place and these companions support us and encourage us as we dare to do so.

May it be so.

¹ Joseph Campbell Foundation website:

² Barbara Sher, "I Could Do Anything If I Only Knew What It Was." Dell Publishing, New York, 1994. pp. 195-96.

³ Rumi, "Boil Nicely Now." Mathnawi III 4159-65. retrieved at

<https://mollypsalm.wordpress.com/2012/12/22/boil-nicely-now/>