

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, 405 Washington Ave. Albany, NY 12206

2.3.13 Sermon: “Spiritual Deepening in the Second Half of Life”

Presenter: Dave Munro

I had the good fortune to retire a few weeks ago after practicing law for 35 years. I worked primarily for the State of New York, in the fields of environmental and energy law. Earlier in my career I was a legal aid lawyer, providing legal representation to poor people. All in all, it was a satisfying career. But a few years ago- maybe more than a few years ago- lawyering had become more of a job than a true vocation. And so when I was able to retire I jumped at the chance.

So- now what?

Actually there were signs more than a decade ago that being an attorney was not my "calling," or at least not my highest calling. In fact experiences right here at FUUSA began to open me up to new possibilities. One **AHA** moment occurred in the Fall of 2000, when I was Chair of the Committee on Professional Ministry, whose work is to facilitate communication between the minister and the congregation.

Back then, our minister Rev. Sam Trumbore presented a list of his draft goals to the committee, seeking its feedback and guidance. Rev. Sam had put a lot of time and thought into this and really wanted to hear what the committee had to say. As we were engaged in this task, it occurred to me- indeed, it hit me in the face- that this was probably the most important work I was doing in my life at that time (aside from raising two teenagers with my wife Eileen!). More important than my "day job," because a dynamic, successful ministry can have such a positive impact on all of our lives. And I was playing a small role in enhancing that ministry. I was very proud to be involved in the work of that committee, and my commitment to FUUSA, and to our faith, has only grown since then.

It's probably no coincidence that the previous summer- the Summer of 2000- I had attended EAGLES- Eastern Great Lakes Leadership School. EAGLES is a weeklong program, designed to help people become more effective leaders in their congregations. I'm reminded of one of the covenant group topics we explored at EAGLES, pertaining to finding one's "calling." We considered the following questions:

"What are you called to do in life? What does it mean when you are 'called' to do something? Who or what is doing the calling? Do you need to know the answer to that question to experience being called? How do your strengths, talents, gifts, and growing edges relate to your sense of calling? Are you saying 'yes' or 'no' to your calling? What is the promise of saying 'yes'? Of saying 'no'? What is the cost of each?"

And then the ultimate question, which continues to resonate for me: **"What would you choose to do if you knew you would not fail?"**

So here I am, a dozen years later, wondering what my next calling is. So how do I approach this? Well, I'm a UU, and a lawyer, so of course I *read some books*. Several have had a profound impact on my thinking.

The first book is entitled Let Your Life Speak- Listening for the Voice of Vocation. The author is Parker Palmer, an educator and philosopher whose faith is grounded in the Quaker tradition. Palmer writes that he was in his early thirties when he began to wake up to questions about his vocation. He said that by all appearances, things were going well- he had graduated from a prestigious liberal arts college, attended Union Theological Seminary in NYC, and earned a PhD in sociology from Berkeley. But in Palmer's words, "the soul does not put much stock in appearances." He came across the old Quaker saying "let your life speak." In reflecting on his life up to that point, Palmer wrote that the results were [quote] "rarely admirable, often laughable, and sometimes grotesque.... I had simply found a 'noble' way to live a life that was *not my own*, a life spent imitating heroes instead of listening to my heart."

The book traces Palmer's vocational and spiritual journey, including the intense depression he experienced along the way. Palmer learns that true vocation is not a goal to be achieved but a gift to be received. Citing an old Jewish proverb, Palmer says that the question is not "Why were you not Moses?" but instead is "Why were you not what you could have been?" Palmer contends that each of us is born with a unique sacred soul. He says that biblical faith calls it the "image of God" in which we are all created, Christian mystic Thomas Merton calls it "true self," Quakers call it the "inner light," Humanists call it "identity" or "integrity." Zen Buddhism refers to this as "the face you had before you were born."

The next book I read was From Age-ing to Sage-ing- a Profound New Vision of Growing Older by Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi. His central premise is that extended longevity calls for extended consciousness. He proposes a process that enables older people to become spiritually radiant, physically vital, and socially responsible "elders of the tribe," emphasizing that all the world's major religions hold up models of realized elders.

Rabbi Schachter-Shalomi distinguishes between religious eldering and spiritual eldering. The former is sectarian, providing people with beliefs, practices, and rituals that often separate us from one another. Spiritual eldering, in contrast, calls for an inner search for the Ultimate, a self-directed journey that unites all people in a common quest, no matter what their affiliation. And the Rabbi urges us to begin cultivating a spiritual life in early middle age, so that when, in his words, "retirement detaches us from productive work in the marketplace, we ... still have a full-time vocation that gives our lives meaning: developing wisdom and making it available for the well-being of society."

Another book I read is entitled Falling Upward- A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life by Richard Rohr, a progressive Franciscan priest. Rohr says that the spiritual life has two stages. In the first half of life, we are devoted to establishing ourselves- we focus on making a career and on finding friends and a partner, and in doing so we craft our identity. Rohr says that spiritually, people in the first half of life are often drawn to order, and to religious routine.

Then, according to Rohr, many people experience a crisis that one simply cannot deal with using our "first half of life" skill sets. "Normally a job, fortune, or reputation has to be lost," writes Rohr, "a death has to be suffered, a disease has to be endured, or a house has to be flooded.. . The

flood doesn't just flood your house—it washes out your spiritual life. What you thought you knew about living the spiritual life no longer suffices for the life you are living."

If you welcome the second half of life, Rohr says that you learn to hear "a deeper voice of God" than you heard before. He writes that "It will sound an awful lot like the voice of soul, of your deepest self." And Rohr says that it is religion's job to teach us and guide us on this journey.

The final book is Learning to Fall- the Blessings of an Imperfect Life, by Phillip Simmons, a writer who was a contributing editor to the UU World magazine. Simmons, who died in his mid-forties ten years after being diagnosed with Lou Gehrig's disease, wrote this:

"I would rather, at least for now, find victory in the falling itself, in learning how to live fully, consciously in the presence of mystery. When we learn how to fall we learn to accept the vulnerability that is our human endowment, the cost of walking upright on the earth. . . . If we are falling toward death, let us also fall toward life."

So here are a few "truths" that I have gleaned from these books- truths for me. First, the task of the first half of life is to create a proper container for one's life (the ego), while the task of the second half of life is to find the actual contents that one's container is meant to hold and deliver- to discover one's authentic self. As Mary Oliver asks, "Tell me, what else should I have done? Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon? What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"

Another lesson for me is that for most of us, self-realization is not narcissistic behavior. Parker Palmer says that seeking to find True Self "is never a selfish act- it is simply good stewardship of the only gift I have, the gift I was put on earth to offer to others." Ultimately, true vocation joins self and service. Presbyterian theologian Frederick Buechner captures this well for me when he says this:

"There are all different kinds of voices calling you to all different kinds of work, and the problem is to find out which is the voice of God rather than of society, say, or the super-ego, or self-interest. By and large a good rule for finding out is this. The kind of work God usually calls you to is the kind of work (a) that you need most to do and (b) that the world most needs to have done. . . . this is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."

Yet another lesson is that the spiritual journey sometimes can be one into darkness. Parker Palmer says that the journey can take us inward and downward. And when dealing with one's fears, Phillip Simmons, referring to the story I opened the service with, said this:

"If spiritual growth is what you seek, don't ask for more strawberries, ask for more tigers. The threat of the tigers, the leap from the cliff, are what gives the strawberry its savour. They cannot be avoided, and the strawberry can't be avoided without them. No tigers, no sweetness. In falling we somehow gain what means most."

And finally, when one does come out at the other end, there is often great joy and fulfillment. Rohr explains this as follows: "Your life and delivery system are now one, whereas before, your

life and your occupation seemed like two different things. Your concern is not so much to *have what you love any more, but to love what you have - right now*. UU minister Forrest Church offered a similar message in his book Love and Death, written as he was dying of cancer: "Do what you can. Want what you have. Be who you are."

After a brief musical interlude, I'll talk about what Unitarian Universalism can offer us, and then I'll share where I think I am on my own spiritual journey.

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MUSICAL INTERLUDE

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Unitarian Universalism offers a number of opportunities for exploring one's spirituality in small groups, including small group ministry programs in our congregations; daily covenant groups at our leadership schools; and the Wellspring spiritual deepening program. I want to share a bit about my experience with Wellspring, which is now in its third year at FUUSA, because this program has played such an important role in my own spiritual journey.

UU minister Jen Crow, until recently the associate minister at Rochester Unitarian church, developed the Wellspring program. Rev. Crow said this in a sermon entitled Our Question Mark Faith: "For years Unitarian Universalists have looked outside of their churches for spiritual deepening, mistakenly assuming that our modern day tradition did not have anything to offer beyond pleasant interfaith gatherings whose primary goal was to offend no one." She continues: "Unitarian Universalism has much to offer to us to our world. Its rich Universalist heritage of faith, hope, and love paired with its Unitarian legacy of freedom, reason, and tolerance combine to build a powerful foundation and a life-giving, life-transforming faith for today. *A today in which we are all called to be theologians.*"

I participated in the "intro" Wellspring program at FUUSA a few years ago, and I am now participating in an advanced Wellspring program called "Deep Questions of the UU Life." There are now 5 separate curricula. Each program has the same five components: various readings; small group meetings twice a month; engaging in a daily spiritual practice; meeting once a month with a spiritual director; and putting faith into action.

Committing to engage in a daily spiritual practice and working with a spiritual director are at the heart of the Wellspring program. The Rev. Scott Alexander, who edited a book called Everyday Spiritual Practice, defines a daily spiritual practice as "any activity or attitude in which you can regularly and intentionally engage, and which *significantly deepens the quality of your relationship with the miracle of life, both within and beyond you.*" While most of us probably think of meditation or prayer, contributors to Rev. Alexander's book wrote about other daily practices such as yoga, sacred reading, exercise, gardening, quilting and many other daily activities.

Spiritual direction is foreign to most UUs. UU minister Jade Angelica, founder of the UU Spiritual Directors' Network, describes spiritual direction is a "journey into meaning, a journey into purpose, a journey into mystery." She continues: "People think it's all about your prayer life or what kind of spiritual practice you are doing. But in reality, since spirit permeates every area of our lives at every moment, spiritual direction is open to any aspect of your life."

Working with a spiritual director has been the most powerful aspect of Wellspring for me. The person I work with is a retired military officer, now a Catholic deacon serving as head chaplain at the Capital District Psychiatric Center. He has also just completed his studies in Analytical Psychology at the Carl Jung Institute in New York City. One often associates Jung with dreams, and with the unconscious. In his book Care of the Soul, Thomas Moore refers to dreams as "a person's own mythology and imagery...dreams are a royal road to the soul." And I have shared some very powerful dreams that I have had. Dreams that I knew were meaningful in some sense- they had a message for me- but my director really helped me to go deeper into their meaning. Dreams about crossing a long bridge- indicative of a period of transition- and of being caught in accidents on those bridges- telling me that I am somehow stuck in my life. A dream in which I am driving very fast while insects are flying into my face- indicating that I am struggling with a new way of seeing things. My spiritual director encourages me to both confront my own "tigers," and to make sure that I enjoy strawberries along the way. Much of the time I feel a real sense of awe- a feeling that I am collaborating with some mysterious force in the universe, a force that is guiding me- or at least partnering with me- in my journey, wherever it may take me.

And so where am I at this point of my life? What is calling me now? Well, for quite a while I've wanted to learn more about world religions. Seven or eight years ago, our son Jamie was studying in India, and our daughter Julie and I went to visit him. One day the three of us visited an outdoor Hindu temple in the city of Chennai. Thousands of people from all walks of life visited the temple, bringing flowers, spices, other items. We sat there transfixed for hours. What was it that these people were connecting to? And why for me did it feel like such sacred space?

More recently I've thought about the best way to study the major religions of the world. Given my background as a lawyer who likes to keep things at an intellectual level, I concluded- once again- that the answer would be in books, and maybe taking a course at some college. However, when talking to several folks about this- folks who are wiser than I am- they uniformly said "Dave, it's time to get out of your head and seek direct experience in religions." It was suggested that I look into the chaplaincy program at Albany Medical Center, formally called clinical pastoral education, or "CPE." And so I did.

Clinical Pastoral Education is interfaith professional education- for ministerial students, lay ministers, counselors, anyone who is interested. CPE brings students into supervised encounters with persons in crisis. Students develop a heightened awareness of both themselves as persons and of the needs of those to whom they minister. There are discussions which are designed to assist the student in understanding theological issues arising from experience. And in a setting such as Albany Medical Center, patients from virtually all of the world's religions seek counseling from student chaplains. A rich way, I think, to learn about different faiths!

While this type of experience is perhaps natural for some of us, I can assure you that it is very different than my life experiences to date. Signing up for a 9 month course in Clinical Pastoral Education is *way out* of my comfort zone! And yet something in me- in my gut, in my soul- tells me that this is my next step. Where it may lead, who knows, but I suspect that there will be both tigers and strawberries along the way.

And so, I encourage all of you to embark on a further spiritual journey. And a final plug for small group ministry, or the Wellspring program. While much of the work of spiritual deepening needs to be done alone, where one can't escape from oneself, it is also important to journey with others in community. In his book A Hidden Wholeness, one of the first books we read in the introductory Wellspring class, Parker Palmer explains that we need community for at least three reasons:

- the journey toward inner truth is too taxing to be made solo;
- the path is too deeply hidden to be traveled without company;
- and the destination is too daunting to be achieved alone- we need community to help us find the necessary courage.

I close by returning to the title of the first book I talked about- Let Your Life Speak.

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