On Calling

Sermon by Tess Baumberger
Unity Church of North Easton
Delivered Sunday, October 9th, 2011

Note: This sermon was part of a multimedia worship service that included images of a sculpture in downtown Philadelphia called “Freedom” by Zenos Frudakis

Earlier in this service, two lay leaders told you about last summer’s Unitarian Universalist General Assembly. They shared their perspectives on what is new in our religion that they would like to bring back to Unity Church. I would like to tell you what’s new with Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association. Right now, we are engaged in a nation-wide program called, “Whose Are We?” In 2010, leaders trained two ministers from each local chapter to help the rest of us talk, among ourselves, about our calling to the ministry and how it changes over time. My chapter started that conversation at our retreat in May, and will continue it at our fall retreat later this month.

It is hard to talk, even with other ministers, about one’s calling to this work. Although our vocation is public, our calling can feel very private, individual, personal. Each minister responds to the Whose Are We? questions in different ways. As private as it may feel, as part of the program, we are encouraged to share our reflections on our callings with our congregations. So here are mine. As I speak from my own experience, I invite you to think about your own sense of calling in life, in your work, or elsewhere. You may find some points of connection, or your own story may be very different.

Context of Calling

The first question at the retreat last spring was, “What was the context of your original call. When and how did your calling first come to you?” I felt my call in my
bones as a girl. Sitting and kneeling in mass I felt called to stand at the altar and in the pulpit. This was confusing because women could not (and still can not) be priests. As I grew older I felt hurt, frustrated, even angered by these contradictory messages- on the one hand a clear sense of calling, on the other no way pursue that calling.

When I left the church in college, my sense of calling went underground. In marked contrast to my very physical sense of calling, I made the very intellectual, neck-up decision to become a professor, studying how children learn language, and teaching at a university. During graduate school I married, and became pregnant while researching my doctoral dissertation.

By the time my son was born, it was clear that being a professor was not the best fit for me. I loved playing with the babies I studied. I loved teaching. I loved mentoring students, helping them discover their gifts and launch their careers. But although the rest of the work was interesting, it did not make much of a difference in people’s lives. I longed for work that fit me better and that had more meaning.

When my son was a few months old I discovered Unitarian Universalism and felt like I was home, at last. I know many of you had that same feeling when you first found your way into one of our churches. Maybe it was this one. My sense of calling reawakened, growing stronger as I became more involved in my church.

When my son was two years old, my marriage started falling apart. I took a self-assessment class at a local career center to try to decide what I wanted to do about work life. All the tests of personality, interests and strengths, pointed to ministry. I resisted. Like the biblical character Jonah, the belly of the whale seemed like a better option.
Then came the question, during that career center class, “If you could do anything, and money was not an issue, what would you do?” The answer was clear, “I would go to seminary and become a minister.” Scary. So was the divorce, which came when my son was three years old. Still in the whale’s belly, I taught at a community college, worked furiously on my dissertation, and learned how to be a single mom.

The clincher came when my minister (the Rev. Roger Dennis Jones) asked me to preach. I had stood in the pulpit with my son on my hip making announcements, no big deal. However, when I stood in it to preach, it was like everything shifted and fell into place. I could see clearly, “This is what I was born to do.” Scary, but also good. Powerful.

At that point, my sense of “calling” was an intense physical sensation. I felt pulled toward the ministry from right around my belly button. It was literally a gut feeling. It grew so strong, I could no longer resist it. I finished my doctoral dissertation two weeks before starting seminary at Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, California.

By the way, I let go of my earlier anger and hurt at my childhood church ten years ago, when a priest friend apologized on behalf of the church (unofficially) for its failure to recognize my calling. Letting go of resentment, I felt freed.

Earlier this week I saw images of this sculpture called “Freedom.” My calling to the ministry has felt like this, moving from feeling entrapped to feeling more and more freed to do the sort of ministry that is most uniquely mine.
Tensions in Ministry

That answers the first question at the retreat, about how my calling came to me, and also how I came to answer that call. The second question was, “What are some of the tensions you find in your ministry?” There seem to be many tensions in ministry, from the very personal to those shared by all church leaders, lay people and professionals. I will move from the more personal to those that we share.

The Challenge of Becoming Whole

One personal tension in ministry, shared by others in the helping professions, is that sometimes the people we serve unknowingly say or do things that touch on unresolved, painful issues in us. I know this is happening when my reaction is out of keeping with the incident. I have become trapped in the past rather than living in the present. This means I need to work through the original issue to de-fuse it so that I no longer react that way, because that issue is getting in the way of my ministry. This process of healing myself has made me increasingly free to be my best self as a minister and as a person. Part of my calling is to grow, to become more whole.

Of course, ministers often say or do things that touch sensitive unhealed, unresolved issues in those we serve. I know that I have done this. I can see how painful it is, and hope that I, or some other healing person, can help those sensitive souls resolve those old hurts. I pray that you experience the joy of becoming increasingly free to be your best, most whole self as a person and as a leader.

Public persona and private life

Another tension for most ministers is between public persona and private life. Ministry is not just a job, it’s a role, and that can be a bit muddling at first. Plus, people always want to hear about your personal life. Ralph Waldo Emerson said the preacher must draw on his or her own life, passed through the fire of thought. But there must be balance. No minister should make it all about him or
her self. We are here to serve, and the church needs to be the focus.

Balancing mind, heart, soul, and body Ministry calls me to balance head and heart, body and spirit. The years I spent living in my head make it easy for me to retreat to my intellect. It feels safe up there. Living and leading from my heart feels much more risky, and vulnerable. Unitarian Universalists want it all – their minds challenged, their hearts satisfied, and their spirits fed. Our worship needs to engage these three and our bodies as well, through moving, singing, embracing, touching in safe ways, and connecting.

Leading and following Church leaders in general need to find the right balance between leading and following. At times we need to listen to what people want and provide that for them. Overdoing that results in weak leadership, as you lose yourself in trying to do what others want. At times we need to be who we are as leaders. If we have been chosen or elected to leadership, people chose or elected us to do just that, to lead from who we are. Again, balancing leading and following is important.

Policy and permission (or stability and change) Another tension in church life is between policy and permission, stasis and change. Policies can be good things, providing safety and structure. Taken to the extreme, they become rigid and often are based on fear. If we require anyone with a new idea follow a rigid process, we can end up squelching helpful innovation. Rigid policies and procedures can be frustrating, and prevent the church from moving quickly to take advantage of opportunities that arise.

The other end of the spectrum is always giving permission, saying “yes” to every innovation. The downside is that this can feel very chaotic and unsafe, and you can lose the value of lessons learned. Like any tension in leadership, what works best is a happy medium, managing the stress of change, which is inevitable.
Words and silence  In worship and in pastoral care I and lay leaders who share those ministries feel the tension between the desire to speak and the desire for silence in places too full for words. Only the heart can speak, at times. At times, only the spirit can listen. There is a tension in holding up the fabric of a world woven fine of both joy and woe, and naming that intricate fabric as beautiful.

What is and what could be  In ministry there is a tension between being in the world as it is and being for the world as it could be. These tensions in my ministry and in church leadership have called me to move, to grow, to evolve. A body without muscle tension cannot stand, much less move. There is movement in ministry, and so another question is, “What is your sense of calling right now?”

Current Callings

Personally, I feel called to continue becoming more whole and more free, and to help you do that to the best of my ability. I feel called to learn, and help you learn, how to live with fear and pain, without letting them control us. I feel called to live from love, with love, and for love. I feel called to cultivate joy in myself, and here at Unity Church.

I feel called to let go of all I cannot control and even much of what I can control, and to invite you to do the same. I feel called to call you find the best possible balance you can between stability and innovation, between policy and permission. What if we said “yes” more often, while finding ways to manage the anxiety that comes from that sort of empowering leadership?

I feel called to help you nourish and deepen your connections to one another, because I know that you long for those connections.

What if you shared your senses of calling with one another?

What if we helped one another discern our particular gifts, develop them, and then use them, freeing our selves to better service?

What treasures might we discover?
I feel called to call you to serve the wider community, to become like a city on a hill. A city built on a hill, scripture says, “cannot be hidden.” From it you can see far, to the horizons, to what could be. A city on a hill is vulnerable, yes, but it is also visible. Its lights act as beacons to those tossed upon the sea, or languishing in some deep valley. We need to light the harbor, clear the paths so those souls can find their way safely to us, so we can welcome them home.

What would happen if we made Unity Church a city on a hill, vulnerable but visible, with lights clearly shining, with paths well marked for all trying to find their way home to us? I believe that if we respond to that calling with joy and in wholeness, we will experience a growing sense of freedom – freedom from any painful strictures of the past, freedom to live happily and more fully in the present, and freedom to move gladly into the future. So may it be. Amen and Blessed Be.
Thank you for growing our faith in one another and our way in religion. We are better together!

We ask you to make a tax deductible gift of $20 or more. Checks should be made out to the UUA with Association Sunday 2011 and your congregation’s name on the memo line; they may be put in the offering today or mailed to the Unitarian Universalist Association, as laid out in your order of service.

On behalf of all the religious professionals, ministers, musicians, and religious educators who will benefit from your generosity, I would like to say “Thank You!”

*Hymn #318  "We Would Be One"

*Closing Circle and Benediction
It is the tradition of this congregation to end our services in a closing circle. As you are comfortable, please join hands around the sanctuary. As you leave, please pick up your nametag next door in the Chaffin Room.

I do not pray for your safety,
for often safety is the way of no risk and no growth,
the way of slow stagnation.
I pray you rather courage that is poise before all realities.
I pray you humor born of humility,
and the grace to be honest with your own foibles.
I pray you confidence in your own worth,
a worthiness not betrayed by failings or by success.

I pray you gratitude for life's great blessing.
And most of all I pray you a passionate yearning:
for justice
for love
for joy.

*Extinguishing the Chalice and Closing Song

Postlude