

Where Life Sends You

Readings: 'Where Life Sends You' by Theresa I. Soto
'Bad News about My Vocation' by Ron Koertge
'Famous' by Naomi Shihab Nye
'Hokusai Says' by Roger Keyes

When was the last time you looked at a pie chart? For those of you who don't know or don't remember, our AV folks can show us a pie chart now. This one shows the church's income by category – thank you for your pledges. Perhaps you saw a pie chart in this morning's paper, perhaps recently at work? Perhaps helping a child learning about charts and graphs understand how to read one?

And as you looked at pie chart did you think, 'I wonder who created the pie chart?' Probably not. I know I never thought about it. I have learned that the first known pie chart was published in 1801 in a book written by a Scottish man named William Playfair. The pie chart was then expanded upon and popularized by a person more familiar to most of us-- Florence Nightingale.

Many of things had to happen for Florence Nightingale to popularize the pie chart. Mainly, she had to find her vocation, that thing she was called to do, her yes from the Universe. Florence was born in 1820, into a wealthy English family. They were Unitarian by heritage but her parents had joined the Church of England for social reasons. She was born in the city she was named for, Florence, Italy. You have to feel for her sister who was born in Parthenope and was subsequently named after that place.

When she was 16, Florence had a mystical experience. She wasn't sure what to call it. In those days, upper class young ladies didn't have mystical experiences. She later described it as hearing God's voice and knowing she was called to serve as a nurse.¹ In those days, upper class young ladies weren't called to serve as nurses. Worried about what others would think, she didn't act on her calling, she didn't pursue her vocation. That led to years of torment. For sixteen years, she felt a call to nursing but didn't act on it. She thought about becoming a nun, as that seemed to be the only way women could live a life of service in her day. But she realized she couldn't believe what she needed to believe to become Catholic. So she waited. And she suffered—that particular kind of suffering that happens when our aspirations and our lives don't match. She traveled, she spent time with other fancy people, she turned down a few marriage proposals, knowing that she was not called to family life. She felt tortured by her desire to serve and the unacceptability of doing so to her family and class.

And then, sixteen years after being called, she acted. Her vocation, her call to be a nurse, became more powerful than not meeting the expectations that were placed on her by her family and society. She traveled to Germany, enrolled in a three-month nursing class and became a nurse. It's amazing to think that three months of training was all it took. She served in the Crimean War where she became famous for her compassion, dedication, and service. And she returned to England and founded the first secular nursing school. She was interested in public health and statistics. Her desire to keep death statistics by month led her to adapt the pie chart – popularizing that way of presenting data. Living her vocation meant founding nursing as a profession and exploring new ways of gathering and communicating information, including popularizing the pie chart—quite a set of accomplishments.

¹ Anderson, Alison A. 'Florence Nightingale: Constructing a Vocation.' *Anglican Theological Review*. 78, no. 3 (Summer 1996): 404-420, page 407

I am telling this story today, as we commission our religious education teachers to their particular service, because it teaches us about vocation. Presbyterian minister and writer Frederick Buechner defines vocation as the place “where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet,”² which I love. I also love the phrase from the poem by Unitarian Universalist minister Theresa Soto that we heard earlier, ‘the soft place where your talent can rest and your joy bubble up.’

Each of us gets a chance to answer what we will do with our life. The answer is vocation. Each of us has a vocation. We know that the ability to pursue a vocation is a privilege. If we are struggling to survive, asking what we are called to do can be beside the point. If you are focused on your survival, on your bodily hunger, or safety, you do not always have time to ponder the world's deep hunger. And yet, people whose existence is marked by struggle often find tremendous meaning and purpose.

Most of the time, vocation is conflated with work. If you're lucky, your vocation is how you earn your living. For me, as clergy, so much of my professional formation centered on my sense of call and vocation. What am I called to do? How does my gladness meet the world's hunger? I am expected to have a call story, the more spiritual pyrotechnics the better, about why I am a minister – it's a story I'm happy to tell, but it's also a strange dynamic that can get performative. I'm much more interested in why one continues to pursue a vocation when things get hard than why one starts on a particular path.

Vocation can be our job, but it doesn't have to be. Being called is not about income, but about meaning. I discovered a more expansive view of vocation as I prepared for marriage. My husband Brian was raised Catholic and it was important to him that our marriage count as a sacrament in the eyes of the Catholic Church. As a lifelong Unitarian Universalist, Catholic marriage preparation was a fascinating experience. Most of it was a strange visit to another culture – a culture so foreign that it prompted Brian to leave the Catholic church... but there was value there too.

One afternoon, we sat in an office in the Archdiocese building meeting with Deacon Jim, who guided us through the numerous hoops we had to jump through to get our marriage officially recognized. There was a lot of paperwork. But first, he asked us why we wanted to get married. There was only one right answer. Was it that we loved each other? That we wanted a ceremony to proclaim before family and friends the commitments we had already made to each other? No, for Deacon Jim – and I would guess a large segment of the Catholic Church, the reason to get married is because that is the vocation you are called to. You get married because that is the life that God called you to. That is a powerful idea. We are called to our relationships. Our love and our commitment can be one of the ways we meet the deep hunger of the world. If we are both lucky and dedicated, our families can be where our deep gladness meets the world's deep hunger.

As Unitarian Universalists, the idea of call can be tricky for us because we can get hung up on if someone is doing the calling and who that someone might be. That is not what matters when we talk about vocation. As Richard Gilbert, one of my ministerial colleagues has preached, “I have concluded how we name the source of our call should not be our primary concern. I am not worried about its theological geography, but its power and authenticity. Whether we believe the call comes from God or from the heart or if they are part and parcel of the same motion - I am convinced each of us is called. We have but to open our ears and hearts to hear and heed.”³

² Buechner, Frederick. *Wishful Thinking*. New York: HarperOne, 1973. p. 95

³ Gilbert, Richard “Called? By Whom? To What?” Service of the Living Tradition 2001. Retrieved from http://www.uua.org/documents/gilbertrichard/called_whom_what.pdf, pages 3-4.

We can be called to the work that fills our days, whether that is the work that gives us a paycheck or to equally important volunteer commitments. We can be called – or not – to relationships, to marriage or not, to parenthood – or not. And we know that even when we feel a call to a relationship, that isn't always how life unfolds. Some of us long for a committed relationship and it doesn't happen for us or doesn't happen in the way we long for. Some of us feel called to be parents and circumstances or biology thwart that call. That is real too. Call is not a promise or a guarantee, but a nudge pointing you in the direction that might lead to deep gladness. We don't always get to live our calls. Sometimes, we are like Florence Nightingale in the first part of her story, tormented for sixteen years with the particular disappointment of knowing who you are supposed to do, but not doing it. There is grief there, an ambiguous grief that can be hard to move through or mourn. Your minister is here for that.

Recently, my idea of vocation and call has expanded further. Life sends us not only to work, and to relationships, but to be our truest selves. Over the past five months, a group of People's people and folks from the Hearth and Grove Fellowship pagan community have gathered monthly to for a class on 'Transgender Inclusion in Congregations.' It has been a powerful class that has shifted my thinking – and feeling – in powerful ways as I learn more about gender and welcome. The class is video lectures by two trans UU religious professionals followed by group discussion. They are really good lectures. I commend them to you. There will be information in the October newsletter about how to access them. Most of the lectures work well as audio-only, so I listen and re-listen in the car or as I'm doing chores.

Anyway, in a lecture on Trans Experience and Spirituality, Rev. Mychal Slack spoke about his experience of call,

'One of the things that [comes up]... when folks are asking me to say more about my journey as a trans person [is that] there's this presumption that there are these specific things that you do to be a trans person. So we start going down these lists of things that I'm supposed to be doing to be a trans person, and I say to them, "I was called to be this person." Who I am right now is who I am called to be. I don't even know how or when that happened and I can't explain that, but I know that is true.'

Rev. Slack continues, 'And so I move toward that call every day in all the ways that I can and I think every person does that—Every trans person does that, moves toward that call in all the ways that they can, recognizing that what that looks like and means is gonna be different for everyone. But this... mapping our pathway involves not only how we understand ourselves, but also being surrounded by people who get us and who are gonna help us be accountable to be the people we are called to be in the world.'⁴

Call is about what we do, who we love, and also who we are. Our transgender siblings teach us that gender is something they are called to. They navigate gender and expectations as they figure out the person they were called to be. And we know that all of us, whether our internal sense of gender matches the gender we were assigned when we were born or not, are navigating the complicated expectations, roles, and assumptions that form a thorny tangle around gender in our culture.

Rev. Slack's words helped me think about my own gender in terms of call. What particular sort of gendered human and I called to be? How do I navigate cultural expectations and my own internal voice as a woman in the world? These have been powerful questions for me to sit with in recent weeks, a powerful new awareness of part of my life I haven't given much thought to.

⁴ Kapitan, Alex and Mychal Slack. 'Transgender Inclusion in Congregations Transcript: Session 4: Trans Experience and Spirituality.' Retrieved from <https://www.filepicker.io/api/file/oWBHTnR3qpCwIUPYjkAo>

I invite you all into this reflection with me. How you might be called to be in terms of gender? Have you heard a loud call telling you who you are meant to be? Have you been quietly, maybe even subconsciously listening to a whisper? Can you still yourself enough to listen to that voice within, that inner teacher. Can you say as Rev. Slack does, 'I was called to be this person?' If you can't, how might you need to change? How might the world need to change for you to confidently be the person you are called to be, for you to confidently live into your vocation.

White American philosopher and psychologist William James states 'When engaged in an activity of one's true vocation one hears an inner voice which says: "This is the real me."' ⁵ My hope, on this first Sunday of religious education for children and youth is that all of our teachers will have many opportunities to hear that inner voice say 'This is the real me.'

My hope is that our children will hear that voice say 'This is the real me' in their classes, because of what they learn and because of the loving community that our teachers create in each classroom.

I hope even more that our children and youth will gain the knowledge, wisdom, and confidence to lead lives where they say, 'This is the real me.' Over and over and over again. That our youth participating in sexuality education will gain the knowledge and discernment to choose the relationships and gender expression that they are called to. That our youth engaged with the coming of age curriculum will ask and answer big questions and come to understandings of what gives – and will give – their life meaning. That our children learning about the Unitarian Universalist tradition will be firmly rooted in our principles and values and equipped to find the place where their deep gladness meets the world's deep hunger.

These are my hopes for our children, but they are also my hopes for each of you, for all of us across our lifespans.

May you fill your days with work that makes you glad and meets the needs of the world.

May your relationships be life-giving.

May you know, as you live your life 'This is the real me.' And 'I was called to be this person.'

May it be so. May we make it so. Amen.

⁵ Quoted in Elias, John L. 'Reflections on the Vocation of a Religious Educator.' in *Religious Education: The Official Journal of the Religious Education Association*. 19 January 2011. pages 297-310.