

First Unitarian Church

September 2, 2018

September marks the beginning of the program year in our congregation, a time when many church groups start up or re-gather after slowing down for the summer. Last week was Connections Sunday, with lots of groups out recruiting new members in the church courtyard. If you missed it, don't worry, there's another one next week. We always hold Connections Sundays the week before and the week after Labor Day.

This month also marks the beginning of a yearlong experiment with theological themes. Each month we'll take up a new theological concept, and look at it from different angles, explore it further, and connect it to events in our lives or world, in these Sunday services.

It's a way for us to get to more depth than we do when we spend only one service on a spiritual topic, and it's a chance to connect these themes to our religious heritage, to this time tested tradition of ours, this big heart, big tent faith.

Exploring theological themes on Sundays also gives us a chance to continue that exploration at other times, through small group conversations. The themes we explore are part of a subscription, in which we receive supporting materials. Many small group leaders have already signed up through the church office to receive a packet of theme-related chalice lightings, readings, and discussion topics they can choose from as we encourage and support each other in spiritual growth.

There's a new theme every month, so we'll explore twelve this year. There is also a theme for the whole year. This year's overarching theme is the phrase, "Let your life speak."

Let your life speak. It's an old Quaker saying. It's also the title of a book by the teacher and activist Parker Palmer, about developing a sense of vocation. Vocation is the theological theme for September. Our reading this morning was an excerpt from the book.

I'm going to reread the first part of that excerpt now, so we can start to tease apart his message, and maybe, also, poke it with a stick, or stir it up, because anything worth taking seriously is worth challenging as it challenges us.

Speaking of vocation, Palmer writes:

Our deepest calling is to grow into our own authentic self-hood, whether or not it conforms to some image of who we ought to be. As we do so, we will not only find the joy that every human being seeks— we will also find our path of authentic service in the world. True vocation joins self and service, as Frederick Buechner asserts when he defines vocation as "the place where your deep gladness meets the world's deep need."

Buechner's definition starts with the self and moves toward the needs of the world: it begins, wisely, where vocation begins--not in what the world needs (which is every-thing), but in the nature of the human self, in what brings the self joy, the deep joy of knowing that we are here on earth to be the gifts that God created.ⁱ

Palmer is a Quaker, and weaves his understanding of the ultimate, the source of being that he calls God, into his writing. The myriad ideas the word God may refer to are interesting to explore, but that's not what today is about. So I want to set that thought over here, and we'll pick it back up another time.

Vocation is more about alignment than about religious beliefs. It is a spiritual issue, because it has to do with the invisible part of life. What we call the depth aspect of being. But it has nothing to do with creeds. It's about what we each learn directly from our life, rather than from any particular guidebook about life.

In Palmer's case, life seemed to involve a lot of wrong turns.

As a young adult, he assumes he'll become a Naval Aviator and then take up a career in advertising— prestigious careers that follow in the footsteps of family friends. But after college, that doesn't feel right. So he goes to Union Theological Seminary, intending to be a minister instead. It comes as a great shock to him, he says, when God speaks to him there “in the form of mediocre grades and massive misery.” Palmer gets the message- he won't be a minister.

Next he goes on to spend several years earning a Ph.D. in Sociology. He doesn't like that either. He feels drawn to teaching, and enjoys teaching for two years during his doctoral program.... but it's the 1960s and everyone including Palmer is blasting the hypocrisy and power dynamics of big institutions.

So he leaves academia, and goes to work as a community organizer in Washington D.C. Two years later, Georgetown offers him a tenure track position and he takes it. It seems perfect—he gets to teach, and Georgetown is paying him to continue being involved in the community too. But community organizing is rough, and Palmer's skin is thin. So next he takes a yearlong sabbatical at a Quaker retreat center. And after that year, his right path unfolds. He becomes the center's director.

Palmer explains that he's not telling his story so that others follow in his footsteps. Rather, what he wants to impart is the kind of learning he did along the way. He learned about accepting his shadow side, about failure and vulnerability, and about authenticity. He had a harrowing experience with depression, which in his case also ended up being a teacher. And yet... the specifics of his story reflect a level of privilege that can make it a little challenging to digest.

Only about one third of Americans have a bachelor's degree. While it's common for those who do go to college to switch majors at some point, it's not so common for that exploring to lead through a master's, and it's even less common to get a PhD. Only about two percent of Americans complete a PhD or other doctorate.

Most people can't afford that much academic wandering—if they could even gain acceptance into those kinds of academic programs. And then, once gainfully employed, if indeed full time employment is the goal, or even feasible... a year long sabbatical??

When we find ourselves in a state of misalignment, unhappy with work or with the person we are projecting to the world, most of us are not able to drop everything and step out of the lives we have created and that have formed around us, for a yearlong retreat.

Occasionally I've heard someone say that "can't" is a mindset. That we have the capacity to be more radical than we think. But not everyone pays the same price, or finds doors easily opened.

At one point, Palmer tells the story of Rosa Parks. After reflecting on the courage she demonstrated by refusing to sit in the back of the bus, he concludes, "The punishment imposed on us for claiming true self can never be worse than the punishment we impose on ourselves by failing to make that claim."

I wish he had left the word "never" out—I don't think any of us is qualified to make that assessment about other peoples' lives, and I especially don't think someone like Palmer—who is a white, economically secure, educated, cis-gendered man (cis gendered meaning he is not transgender), in a heterosexual marriage— I especially don't think someone with that set of identity markers is qualified to make that judgment about people who face risks and barriers he has not experienced.

"I still wasn't happy with my doctorate, so after a little work I decided to go on retreat for a year" sounds pretty privileged, pretty upper class, pretty out of touch with working two jobs to put food on the table and still not having health insurance. Or being unable to work. Or being able to work and needing a job, but being turned down—or even worse, simply ignored—everywhere you apply. Or being incarcerated.

So, to be honest, even though lots of people I respect are admirers of his work, the first time I read Palmer, over a decade ago, was also the last time. Until now.

When his work popped up again, this time as a recommended resource for the theme of vocation, I decided to take another look. Because every life, in its own way, is a sacred text. And because although Palmer's path was rather cushy, the spiritual sense of vocation is about something deeper.

At one point, Palmer describes working on a serious sociological study when he was a graduate student. The kind of work where students put in hours behind the scenes, working with the data that will build out the study's results. Palmer and his lab partner were dismissive of the whole thing. They were careless in their work, and made rude remarks about the department and the study itself. It didn't take long for him to be fired, which came as a humiliating shock. Later he was able to realize that he had only behaved that way—belittling the work—because deep down he was

afraid he was not adequate enough to be a sociologist. And, he was right. That was not the career for him. He wasn't good at it.

Ok, again, it takes a certain level of arrogance and privilege to behave like that and then feel shocked when you're fired. But... I can relate to the notion of acting like a jerk toward others in order to avoid confronting a hard truth about one's self. Can't you?

Feelings are such shape-shifters. Fear can turn into judgment or self-loathing. Grief can turn into anger. Shame can turn into pushing others away. To become spiritually wise, we have to learn to look deeply into feelings, and into ourselves. To understand what is going on, so we understand what is needed.

That process of self-reflection, growth, and self-acceptance is what forms the heart of Palmer's words. It's soul work.

"Our deepest calling is to grow into our own authentic self-hood," he says. "True vocation joins self and service." I'm going to come back to the service part. For now, if vocation is what happens when authentic self meets service, then vocation begins with asking: Who am I? What is my nature?

We don't come into this world without personalities, you know. Certain things attract us, while others repel. I came into this world already sizing things up. My great grandmother noticed it right away. When she held me as a newborn, in her Appalachian Kentucky speech she said, "When this one starts talkin' she's gon' have a lot to say." Look at that.

I was skeptical and I loved language and stories and people—I would converse with people of any age. I had a strong will—what felt like clarity of purpose to me— and I took charge.

What traits arrived with you into this world? Who are you? What is your nature?

Whatever it is, it's neither bad nor good—though other people may praise or condemn your traits. They just are. They are who you are. How they show up between you and the world depends on the context and on your self-awareness.

Those traits will also be at the heart of your vocation, of the ways your self joins with service. They will express themselves in whatever you do.

Where we get into trouble is when we try to force ourselves into a mold that does not fit. In Palmer's case, that looked like trying to become a sociologist, minister, or ad man, when what he needed to do was teach.

When we try to mold ourselves into an image others project on us, Palmer calls that living life from the outside in, rather than the inside out. Living life from the outside in, rather than the inside out.

It doesn't have to involve the work we do. We may also suppress our authentic selves and put forward a different image if we are gay and want others to believe we are straight, or if we are atheists, but make confession of faith in order to fit in or not lose our parents' love. We may do those things out of a very real need for safety, love, and community. But it is very heavy, and lonely, as our real selves long to be free.

In other cases, we may succumb to pressure from our own egos—which want us to receive admiration and approval. Or we may experience entrenched social pressures, like racism, sexism, and trans-phobia, which exert tremendous force to shape us and our lives in ways that may not be aligned with our authentic self.

One thing Palmer discovered is that whatever is at the heart of your vocation—whatever your true nature and gifts are— will manifest in whatever you do.

In my teens and twenties, I cleaned houses to make ends meet. One of the people I did housekeeping for was Lola, a ninety-four year old woman with a gentle spirit. Hummingbirds loved her. She paid me to plant her garden, which I did not know how to do, so she walked me through each step. She was patient. She was patient when I didn't know which plants were weeds. She was patient when she asked me to cook for her, and she found my cooking too weird to eat.

When I took my son, who was three at the time, to visit her, he gently took Lola's loose, wrinkly upper arm into his chubby little hand and asked, "Why do you have so much skin?" She told him, in her knowing, kindly, way, "It's because I'm going back into the earth soon."

That was fine with him. He had spent lots of time in our garden, which we had because Lola had taught me how. Although he had cried the first time he saw me pull the spent tomato plants out of the ground one October, he was consoled when I told him they would become part of the earth for the new garden in spring.

Lola's answer connected.

Not long after, I took my son to see my grandmother—*his* great grandmother—whom he greeted with "When are you going back into the earth?"

What a look she shot me!

Lola had made peace with herself, with her gifts and her shortcomings. She had an authenticity you could feel in her presence.

I think of her when I read the poem by May Sarton called *Now I Become Myself*.ⁱⁱ It begins:

Now I become myself. It's taken

Time, many years and places;

I have been dissolved and shaken,

Worn other people's faces...

The deepest vocational question is Who am I? What is my nature? The will express itself in whatever you do.

I can't remember what kind of professional or paid work Lola had done in her life. I think at one point she had worked at a school for troubled girls. But she brought her self to the experience of having a housekeeper—one who her family had hired to keep an eye on her as much as to keep the house clean—and she turned it into an act of service on her part, teaching me and my son about gardening and about old age. Vocation joins self and service.

One more thing about Lola: she was going blind. She could see shapes well enough to get the gist of whatever she was looking at, but she could no longer make out the details.

After Lola told me this, the next time I came to clean her house, I wore bright red lipstick. So she could see me smile. My smile made her smile. I started wearing that red lipstick everywhere. I still wear it to this day.

Lola joined self and service in her interactions with me. And I'm certain that being curious and receptive about her gifts—and, yes, wearing red lipstick to clean her house—were examples of my nature, the heart of my vocation, showing up in my work as a housekeeper.

“Service” may mean finding ways to let your authentic self-shine through work that feels constraining, or does not inspire you—or perhaps in the service *industry*. That reminds me of that quote often attributed to Abraham Lincoln, “Whatever you are be a good one.” Whatever you are, be a good you.

“Service” is also something we do as a volunteer at church or elsewhere, or we may be in relationship with others in a way that is an act of service—as Lola was. Combining authentic self with service may be our main gig, or it may a precious thing on the side, a place or relationship or kind of task through which we can express our true selves, a precious thing that may be like an oasis if the cost of being true to ourselves in the rest of our life still feels too high.

There are so many ways we can join our self with service, so many ways to express vocation.

There is also more than one way to interpret the phrase “let your life speak.” As we close, I want to circle back to that. One interpretation is “let your life speak” on your behalf. What you do with your life says more than what you say with your mouth. There is truth to that. But it can also a little intimidating- it sounds like pressure to live an exemplary life. There are days when, if my life could actually speak, I'm afraid it might mumble something about cheesy carbohydrates and a nap.

Another way to understand the phrase, though, is “Let your life speak... to you.” As in be attentive to it. After all, it is a sacred text.

One of our religious sources in Unitarian Universalism, besides written texts of the world’s religions, is direct experience. “Direct experience of transcending mystery and wonder.” Our lives are filled with transcendence, mystery, and wonder. Not always in that order, but always sacred.

When we put those two understandings together, then I think we’ve got it.

Let your life speak to you, and you will be at peace in letting it speak for you.

ⁱ Palmer. *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*. John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2009.

ⁱⁱ <https://allpoetry.com/Now-I-Become-Myself>