

# “A People So Bold”

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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

## **Meditation Words**

words of Frederick Buechner

“The place [Life] calls you to is where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”

“Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery it is.  
In the boredom and pain of it no less than in the excitement and gladness:  
touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it  
because in the last analysis all moments are key moments,  
and life itself is grace.”

## **Reading**

from Parker Palmer’s *A Hidden Wholeness*.

There was a time when farmers on the [Prairies], at the first sign of a blizzard, would run a rope from the back door out to the barn. They all knew stories of people who had wandered off and been frozen to death, having lost sight of home while still in their own backyards. Today we live in a blizzard of another sort. It swirls around us as economic injustice, ecological ruin, physical and spiritual violence, and their inevitable outcome, war. It swirls within us as fear and frenzy, greed and deceit

We all know stories of people who have wandered off into the madness and been separated from their own souls, losing their moral bearings and even their mortal lives; they make headlines because they take so many innocents down with them.

The lost ones come from every walk of life: clergy and corporate executives, politicians and people on the street, celebrities and schoolchildren... Some of us fear that we, or those we love, will become lost in the storm. Some are lost at this moment, and are trying to find the way home. Some are lost without [even] knowing it. ...But my own experience of the blizzard, which includes getting lost in it more than I like to admit, tells me that however we deny it or forget it, however lost we feel in the whiteout, still we dwell in the soul’s backyard, with chance after chance to regain our own bearings. We can still tie a rope from the back door out to the barn, and survive the blizzard without losing our hope or our way.

## Sermon: “A People So Bold”

“The place [Life] calls you to  
is where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”<sup>1</sup>

Deep gladness and deep hunger.  
The two don’t seem to go together so well.  
Hunger doesn’t usually give us much to be glad about.

And, yet, it is where they meet,  
where they intersect, Buechner says,  
that we find our life’s calling,  
the purpose of our days upon this good green earth.

Do you know the coordinates for that location in your life?  
Could you find that place on a map—  
that sweet spot between what brings you joy and what breaks your heart?

And, if you found it, would you know what to do?  
Would you know what needs to be done, what must be done?  
Would you know what is uniquely yours to do—  
because that sacred spot, and the responsibility for it, belongs to you?

It’s a powerful thing whenever we can give  
an emphatic “yes!” to such questions.

It’s a beautiful thing whenever we see someone living out that “yes.”

Earlier this week, I attended the opening reception  
for a new exhibit at the Gardiner Museum titled  
“Transformation by Fire: Women Overcoming Violence through Clay.”

I was at the opening as a guest of my friend, Kathy,  
who took part in a program a few years ago  
that brings together women who’ve experienced violence in their lives.

Over fifteen weeks, these women, while shaping clay,  
revisit and rework the stories of violence that have shaped their lives.

They create sculptures—some of them wrenching, all of them stunning—  
which speak to the healing underway in their lives.

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*, 1973, p. 95.

It is daunting work, a step in the lifelong journey  
to make meaning from trauma.

I was so moved and inspired by the courage of these women,  
not only for engaging art as a tool for healing,  
but for making their private pain public  
by putting their sculptures on display.

And I was so proud of Susan Low-Beer,  
the professional artist and sculptor  
and devoted member of this congregation,  
who founded this program ten years ago  
with art therapist Suzanne Thomson.

The exhibit, which is free to the public,  
includes a wonderful array of Susan's pieces, as well.

It probably won't surprise you to hear me say, as her minister,  
that my pride in Susan was being able to bear witness  
to her ministry in the world.

I'm not sure she'd ever thought of it that way until I mentioned it,  
but a ministry it is, a powerful calling built at that place  
where her deep gladness and the world's deep hunger  
meet to make a meaningful difference.

Susan's story of calling is but one of the many  
lived out by our members in ways both big and small.

Each Sunday, in reciting our Covenant,  
we renew our intention "to serve life."

Day in and day out, across this great city and beyond,  
we serve Life whenever we dedicate our gifts—  
our time, our energy, our money and our skills—  
to building up a better world.

How much more effective might we be, though,  
if we came to understand our efforts not merely  
as a bit of volunteer work or random acts of kindness,  
but instead as the path to fulfilling our life's true purpose,  
as the way we seek to carry out our calling in this world?

At the end of last month I was in Florida  
with 450 other UU ministers for a week of continuing education.

Over several days, the group, in the course I was taking,  
wrestled with the question of our calling as Unitarian Universalists—  
of how we might better articulate and live out our purpose.

From one minister and his congregation  
have come three simple words that have stuck with me:  
Listen! Open! Serve!<sup>2</sup>

In that congregation,  
in what began as an effort to craft their own mission statement,  
they seem to have hit upon language to explain for us all the mission of our faith:  
“listening to our deepest selves, opening to life’s gifts,  
and serving needs greater than our own.”

Listen. Open. Serve.

Wordsmith that I sometimes am,  
I’ve been trying to improve upon these words for two weeks.

I’ve gotten nowhere.

The truth is, the more I live with them, the more I like them—  
the more they speak to me, not only of our *purpose* as Unitarians,  
but as the very *process*, by which we live out our faith.  
The path of spiritual development that we follow.  
Listen! Open! Serve!

Listen to our deepest selves,  
open to life’s gifts, and serve needs greater than our own.

*Listen to our deepest selves:*  
whether we call it conscience,  
the voice of God, that “still, small voice,” or the beating of our own heart,  
the first step is to listen, to be awake to that inner voice  
that reminds us of our deepest values and our highest aspirations.

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<sup>2</sup> Deepest thanks to the Rev. Scott Tayler and the First Unitarian Congregation of Rochester, New York for their leadership in our movement on the question of our greater purpose.

*Open to Life's gifts.*

The second step is, after listening to our depths,  
to open our hearts and minds to the gifts of this world,  
to the gifts of grace that abound—  
the things which we don't "earn, expect, or deserve"  
but come to us in the grand bargain of being alive.

*Serve needs greater than our own.*

This third step is where our deep gladness—  
inspired by that guiding voice and built upon life's gifts—  
meets the world's hunger.

This is where we encounter our calling,  
where we live into our purpose,  
where we serve Life.

Listen! Open! Serve!

One night, sitting in my hotel room, I took the 1400 words  
of our own Mission and Vision statements  
and began boiling them down to their essence.

In the end, listen, open, serve  
spoke to me more clearly than anything else  
to describe how we, here in Toronto, in this congregation,  
are striving to live out our identity as Unitarians.

We've been given permission to use these words and make them our own,  
or adapt them if we need something different.

Though I'm excited about wordsmithing together in the months ahead  
to refine our congregation's purpose,  
it feels that these words hold a lot of promise as we get started.

So, I invite you to try them on for size for a while  
to see if they just might fit.

To see what life might look like if you—if we—  
were, with intention, to listen, open, and serve.

This is an invitation I am extending, a request I am making,  
because it's never been more important that we have a crystal clear understanding  
of who we are and who we aspire to be.

In a matter of months, our Building for the Future Task Force is going to ask that we make a monumental decision—a decision about whether we rebuild this building or sell our property and create a new home for First some place else.

Both options are as terrifying as they are thrilling.

And both options are not the kind of thing you do without a solid sense of your own identity.

I believe we are getting there.

I felt tremendous resonance in your response to the sermon I gave last month about our stepping up to a greater calling than we have had thus far—to be a beacon of love and justice in Toronto and a house of peace and understanding for all her people.

If we are to build such a Temple to the Spirit of Life, a Unitarian cathedral to serve as this city's conscience, we must, I believe, decide the where, and how, and why of it—and we must decide soon.

Though I am deeply committed to remaining neutral through to the final decision about our congregation's next home, you must already know that am not in any way neutral about our calling.

So, I want to wade in and share my heart on the questions of the where, the how, and the why.

*Where.*

To become the congregation I hear you yearning to be will require that we embrace risk as never before. The future of religion will not go to the timid.

That is why I believe, whether we live on here at 175 or relocate to another site within a few kilometers, we must lay the cornerstone at the site of our clear calling—at that place where our deep gladness meets the deep hunger of the world.

I'm not talking geography here.  
I'm speaking of the calling we have  
to bring the hope-filled message of this faith to a hurting world.

The foundation of our next home  
must rest upon a sure and certain purpose.

*How.*

I hope I've conveyed in many ways through the years  
my belief that *how is more important than what.*

How we build our next home—both literally and figuratively—  
will tell the true story of the faith that we profess.

If we profess to be loving, rational, and tolerant,  
but end up cranky, crazed, and judgmental  
we will be building only a house of cards.

Faith will be the building blocks in whatever comes next for us.  
Faith in ourselves, faith in each other, and faith in our future.

We are going to have to dig deep.  
Not only, with all likelihood, into our pockets,  
but even more into our hearts.

Life is going to ask us over and over again  
to actually put this faith that we profess into practice.

We have to be prepared for the long haul.

That said, I hope not to be a very old man by the time this work is done.  
I'm not getting any younger, and, well, how do I say this...,  
neither are any of you.

And, yet, what I believe we are building won't be finished  
on the day we cut the ribbon and cross the threshold.

What we are building is a project that is bigger than us all,  
just as it should be.

We are being called to plant trees,  
the shade of which we ourselves may never enjoy.

Still, if we were to summon the courage to be bold,  
we might not have to wait as long as we might imagine  
to see our dreams coming into being.

Finally, a word about *why*.

Which brings me back to hunger.

There is a hunger at the heart of this city—  
a yearning of people seeking to live lives of meaning and purpose  
but with growing uncertainty of how to do so.

The answers offered up by both traditional religion and secular society  
are not satisfying that hunger in the ways they once did.

In this shallow, shrill consumer culture around us,  
our lives are becoming ever-more atomized, as people lose sight  
of the sacred bonds that bind us to each other and to all of life.

Even in this age of social media, people are increasingly disconnected—  
from their neighbours and themselves.

So often people are separated from the heart of who they are,  
detached from their deepest values,  
alienated from any sense of their life's highest purpose.

Our city is not unlike that barnyard.  
There are people lost in the storm all about us—  
on the streetcar and on the street corner,  
at the bank and at The Bay,  
at that favourite Thai restaurant around the corner,  
and here on a Sunday morning.

If we're honest, we're all out there in the storm from time to time.

Lost and afraid.  
Depressed or in despair.  
Furious at the state of the world  
and angry at the halting pace of progress.

That's why that rope is so vitally important.  
That lifeline in the storm.



That thread that reminds us of the sacred bonds that tie us to everything.

The tether that brings us back to our best and truest selves,  
that reminds us that we are—in spite of it all—  
people of hope and courage and commitment,  
determined to build a better world.

Our calling is to be that rope, to be that loving lifeline,  
suspended between our deep gladness and the world's deep hunger,  
leading people home.

In the *Gospel of Thomas*, a collection of sayings of Jesus  
that were likely compiled before any of the gospels were written,  
is a line that both guides and haunts me.

Jesus said, “If you bring forth what is within you,  
what you bring forth will save you.  
If you do not bring forth what is within you,  
what you do not bring forth will destroy you.”<sup>3</sup>

Friends, may we bring forth what is within us.

May we listen, open, and serve,  
that we might rise to our calling  
and celebrate the great gift of Life itself.

Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> *The Gospel of Thomas*, Saying #70.