

Pews, Comfortable and Otherwise

Rev. Shawn Newton
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
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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.

To this day, I'm not certain what the right answer was.

The question was: “Do you hear voices?”

I said, “no,” but, truth be told,
I'm not exactly sure if that was right, either.

All of this unfolded for me a decade ago,
as part of the battery of psychological tests
any candidate for ministry in our tradition must go through.

“Do you hear voices?”

How exactly is an aspiring Unitarian Universalist minister
supposed to answer that question?

On the obvious level, this being a test of psychological health,
you could safely assume the question—
asked in a variety of ways, incidentally—
was devised to suss out whether a person lives with schizophrenia.

But this test took place at a testing site
where future religious leaders of all varieties are vetted.

Was there, then, supposed to be something more to this question?

Something a UU might more carefully consider
before giving an adamant “no”?!

I wondered whether this was a question really meant

to ask about our calling to ministry,
perhaps to gauge our ability to hear the voice of God,
or at least a voice other than our own?

As I recall, there was a range of possible answers you could give,
by filling in one of the little circles.

The options were: Never, A few times in the distant past,
Occasionally, and Frequently.

I darkened the dot for “Never,”
but, like a typical UU, what I really wanted
was a chance to offer an explanation in the form of an extended essay.
There were qualifications and caveats to be made!

Obviously enough, my meager answer must have been deemed sufficient.

But, I’ve never really gotten over missing out on the chance
to explain myself, to make clear that while I don’t hear voices *per se*,
I do, still, hear something—and that I think we all do—or can—
if and when we tune our ears to hear.

Now, I’ll admit it, right up front, that ministers have it easy,
or at least easier than most, when it comes to talking about hearing voices.

We have well-established language to talk about what we hear.

We can safely speak of that first stirring
that draws us toward ministry as hearing a call, as receiving a call.

In fact, we are expected to talk about our call—a lot, and in articulate ways.

On the path to ordination, we are required to write several essays on it,
and answer questions about it before a panel of people sitting in judgment
of whether we really do show evidence of having heard a call.

This is one of the few professions in which saying you hear voices
could be deemed, at least by some, as a qualification for the job.

That said, I know full well how utterly bizarre all of this talk
of voices, calls, and calling must sound to the uninitiated.

I'm guessing it probably sounds
as though someone rings you up from the heavens
and gives you a secret set of magic marching orders.

Which reminds me of the story I heard about a guy,
who as a child walked past a charismatic church during a funeral service,
where there was a great deal of very enthusiastic singing going on inside.

As he peeked beyond the open door to see what was happening,
the young boy spotted the deceased, there for all to see in an open casket.

One of the ushers seeing the boy standing alone,
invited him in and walked him down to the casket,
assuming he had come to pay his last respects.

He had never seen a dead person before,
so it was a bit of a shock for the boy.

But what confused him most
was that the man in the casket had a telephone in his hand.

When the usher saw the bafflement on the boy's face,
he beamed, and with complete sincerity said:
"God called, and he answered!"

...I'm told it's a true story, and that, apparently,
telephones in caskets were quite popular
back in the 1930s in certain religious circles.

Now, that's not, of course, how it typically works for us,
but how nice and easy it would be if our life's call
came simply by telephone, wouldn't it?

Instead, to hear life's calling in our lives
requires listening in a very different way.

I believe we discover our sense of call
by simply paying attention to our lives,
by listening to what goes on within us and beyond us.

By looking to our strengths
and honing whatever skills we may have.

By looking to our vulnerabilities
and deciding what work is better left to others.

By looking into our own being, to listen for what moves us,
what makes us mad and what inspires us,
what overwhelms us with despair, and what floods our hearts with hope.

By looking to the reality in which we find ourselves, in the here and now,
and seeking to find a way to contribute from who we are
to a good greater than our own.

But, I believe our calling—or better our callings, in the plural—
can never be truly found, once and for all.

They are, instead, something we must discover over and over again
in the details of our daily living.

This applies as much to us as a congregation as it does to us as individuals.

For 168 years, this congregation has wrestled
—as it should—with its call.

Through the generations that call has been found and lost,
embraced and abandoned, fulfilled and forgotten.

And it has been renewed again and again,
when the call of freedom and justice at this congregation's core
has grown too small or irrelevant to be of use to its times.

I believe we are at another moment of renewal,
at a critical threshold when we must discern,
with all of the faith we have within us,
what this congregation needs not only for our present day,
but for the years and decades to come.

We have reached a moment in the life of First Unitarian,
when we must discern whether our call and our vision
are sufficient to the needs of our city today, here and now,

as well as to a future we can barely see, let alone understand.

I fear that our dreams may have already grown too small,
and that our current understanding of our calling as a congregation
needs to be reimagined.

It has been almost fifty years since Pierre Berton,
the giant personality of Canadian history and media,
wrote his highly controversial book, *The Comfortable Pew*.

His book gave a withering critique of Canada's churches,
which he found severely wanting.

He maintained that they were locked in their ways
on a unswerving journey into irrelevance,
having become too comfortable with the status quo
and being unwilling to engage the changing reality
of the times in which they lived.

Today there are people who look to Berton as a prophet who foretold
the steady decline of traditional Christian churches in this country.

There are others who credit him with sparking a reformation
within the shrinking remnants of the establishment churches,
prompting them to a deeper and more dedicated practice of their faith—
an earnest quest to return to relevance once again,
even if their declining numbers today
are no longer the pertinent measure of their success.

I will leave it to the scholars to sort out Berton's legacy for the others.

What interests me, and, frankly, haunts me, is Berton's enduring point
about the almost irresistible seductions of the comfortable pew.

How easy it is for a congregation to focus on itself and lose its sense
of being something more than a club for the like-minded.

How easy it is to stop listening to the needs of the world around us
and let our true calling get lost in the shuffle of our self-concern.

And how hard it is, to take up that calling over and over again,

to renew it, to struggle with it, to let it into our hearts and to let it change us, that we might remain relevant for yet another day, a day that is ever dawning.

We are, blessedly, I believe, more adaptive than most.

Together, we are in the midst of enlivening this congregation with renewed purpose.

We are currently considering bold plans for our future—a future that will almost certainly require either completely rebuilding this building or moving elsewhere.

This afternoon, we are launching our new Theme Groups.

At the close of the service, we will send forth the leaders of these groups, to guide us on an adventure of deepening our awareness and understanding of both ourselves and each other.

In the year ahead, these groups will be doing the hard spiritual work of asking what it means to live engaged lives—lives of integrity, purpose, and joy.

Alongside all of this, we are developing a Healthy Congregation Team to help us manage conflict and change in ways that reflect our dedication to respect the inherent worth and dignity of all.

We are delving more deeply into considering what it would mean for us to grow and welcome greater diversity amongst us.

We are exploring, as you'll hear in the weeks and months ahead, what it would mean for us to deepen our financial commitment to allow First to be more than the congregation that simply scrapes by, but a religious community that thrives, that changes people's lives, and helps to transform this city to truly be Toronto the Good, where our values of justice and equity and dignity guide our common civic life.

I wish I could tell you exactly where all of this is going. Where First will be in five years or ten or fifty. I cannot do that, because I do not know.

What I can tell you is that if we faithfully engage in listening for our call, tremendous things will come about.

I say that because I've been recently reminded that that hunger and yearning is there.

When we started building the structure to support theme-based ministry last winter, I took a leap in hoping that we might have as many as fifty people get involved in the programme.

I thought we might have five or six small groups.

This was in line with the percentage of member involvement seen in the congregations that have had the greatest success with this approach to doing ministry.

I owe you an apology. I severely underestimated you. And I promise I will never do it again.

At last count, between the people who've registered and those who'll be involved with the themes in other ways, there are now more than two hundred people who are engaged with theme-based ministry.

We now have eighteen groups, including an online Skype group, hosted by our own Robbie Brydon, who's living in Uganda.

This congregation is coming alive, returning to make another of the moments in our storied history when what we do here makes a meaningful impact beyond these walls.

The most important way that we will do this is by hearing and heeding our own call, and then uniting with others to work in common cause.

Let us then open our ears to hear voices we've never heard.
Voices, still and small.
Voices, bold and big.
Voices within and voices we've never entertained.

Let us listen, like we never have before,

and let us hope, with all of our might,
to always have the most uncomfortable pews in town.

So may it ever be.

Amen.