

Levels of Call
Rev. Tony Lorenzen
Sunday, February 21, 2010
Pathways Church
Southlake, TX

Welcome again to our newest members. I hate to break this to you while you're still so new into your Pathways membership journey, but it's not all about you. You're going to find that although I will do my best to tend to you and pastor you, I've also got other people and other things on my plate. This is a strange gig I've got. I don't work here. I'm called to be here. I was called to be here by a vote of the congregation and I don't work here under a contract, but under a letter of agreement or more accurately in our congregational UU tradition, terms of call. Unless I do something criminal or grossly unethical, I am not terminated or fired in the traditional sense, but re-called by a vote of the congregation. This isn't a campaign sermon, but like many pastors in most congregations there are some folk around who consider me Satan

and others who sit me at the table with Jesus and Buddha and Mohamed and Vishu and the Goddess herself. None of these people are correct, although the folks who tell you I'm messy are spot on.

I bring this up this morning because welcoming new members is a good occasion to talk about our place in a religious community. What brings us here, why we stay, why we leave and what we do individually and together. You see, I am called to be here, but so are you - or you wouldn't be here. My relationship to the congregation is a bit more formalized, and I do have different responsibilities than you do, but I have responded to a deep invitation to be with you and you with me and all of us with each other - and not just for the happy, fun stuff, but also through the difficult stuff of life and congregational relationships. What is this thing named calling that draws us here?

My calling is a deep thing that words don't adequately express so you're going to have journey a bit with me on this and I'll do my best. There is something out there for me that I call God. I spoke

about it briefly last week. I like Forrest Church's definition. God is that which is beyond all and yet within each. It works for me. I've felt connected to this since I was boy. There is a constant standing invitation to investigate, communicate, explore, understand, translate, and interpret this "beyond all and within each." It is compelling. It's like a friend who keeps bugging you to go out on Friday night when you're too tired and just want to stay in and watch a movie, and yet he keeps sending you a text message and an email and calling you until you give in, because you know eventually he's going to come over in person and get you anyway. This is one part or level of call. Ultimately it is the widest and most encompassing. It's not quite correct to label it the most important, but it does tend to override the others at times because of its sweep and scope. It is this call, within this sphere that the impulse to seek justice resides. The desire to practice for virtue for its own sake is rooted in this call. The drive to understand myself and learn from my mistakes proceeds from motivation garnered because I hear this

call. Responding to this call sends me to therapy, to the spiritual director, to the gym, to continuing education classes, to help at the food pantry and move homeless people into permanent housing. Responding to this call sends me to the meditation cushion every morning and to walks in the woods and makes me write in my prayer journal even when I don't want to because I know I'm going to learn something about myself that I don't want to face. Responding to this call makes me smile when I smell the ocean or listen to Bruce Springsteen or watch my son grow up or just stop, and remember nothing is really all that important and yet everything is. This level or circle of call is both the most awe-inspiring, intimidating and yet easiest.

My calling is also to a Living Tradition called Unitarian Universalism and the particular incarnation (literally that means en-fleshment or embodiment) of that tradition in a congregation called Pathways Church. In relation to the first aspect of my calling this causes me both joy and sorrow, sometimes daily on a ride that

resembles a roller coaster. Being called to a particular religious tradition means being willing to be a guardian of that tradition and being willing to be the spokesperson for the tradition. I have no problem with this. Where this becomes difficult in my calling is when other people do. I have no quarrels here, however, this is what I signed up for. This is my calling. It can be painful at times. There are times when I am called to uphold the good of the congregation and the good of the community, lifting up community values and norms, calling people to covenant, reminding people of our DNA and our principles and purposes and asking questions such as where are we going and what is our mission? These are sometimes not popular questions. I'm okay with that. It's part of my calling, my role in the community to do this. Am I always successful at doing it well? Of course not, no one who shares my calling is, but I, like my colleagues, usually tend to get better at it as we go along, and in communities that are willing to hear our voice as prophetic, not as personal criticism.

A difficult aspect of this part of my calling is accepting that I am called to love and tend to an institution – an institution made up of individual, flesh and blood people with feelings and concerns and hopes and dreams and fears and anxieties, but an institution nonetheless. Sometimes this calling means having to give advice or make decisions that favor the good of the whole community even though this may make it seem that there is less care for or concern for my next level or circle of calling.

My third level or circle of call is the call to minister to individuals. Each person who is a member of this congregation, each person who is a part of the Living Tradition of Unitarian Universalism, indeed all the people I meet in my life from my family to the stranger on the Jericho Road are put in front of me, in my sense of calling, for a reason. Sometimes I miss what that reason is. Sometimes I get it right and serve well. Sometimes it's really difficult to figure out what the best response is or what a person needs, even when they ask, because even when someone asks, as

I've learned from experience, they don't know. One of the things I tend to in this aspect of my calling is look at how the other aspects of call are working for others.

So here we are. Called to be here together from our own particular deepest invitations in the particular institution of Pathways Church where we call to each other and the world. So...that's an easy recipe right? Just add three circles of call and stir until the community is level. Not so fast. These three levels of call aren't always equal. The messy part comes in discerning which level or circle of call needs priority at what time, when they need equal time and when they are intertwined.

We all have certain needs in a community, but if we all don't feel a sense of call to the community as a whole, to the institution of the community, we've got a, well as they say in the police dramas, we've got a situation. If we feel an overdeveloped sense of call to the institution, we may neglect the needs of individuals. If we constantly focus on feeding our sense of call to that which is greater

than all and within each, we may be losing perspective on larger issues, both in relationship to our community and the wider world as well as individual relationships.

Yesterday, I attended a workshop, where among some of the ideas I encountered were the concepts that we come to wholeness developmentally and that we come to wholeness not in isolation, but in environment. You can't be religious in isolation, you need a community because the root of the word religious means to bind together.

Just as individuals have a sense of call, so do communities. There is sense among us that we are called to do things together beyond the club where we see our friends on Sunday morning. Having been here a year and a half I get a sense that we are called to be a beacon for a different way to see the world and our place in it. There is a sense among us that we want to help others and be of service to the world. We are also called to do things a bit differently.

One of the reasons I felt called to Pathways was that Pathways

is not afraid to go outside the box, color outside the lines, and throw out old ways – it's innovative. Pathways didn't sit in pews and doesn't have an organ. Pathways rocks. Pathways sings and dances. There are lessons in this.

(PLAY DANCING GUY VIDEO -

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fW8amMCVAJQ>).

The interesting thing about this video is you don't see the people off camera. You don't see the folks out of the sight of the camera who were sitting on the grass saying, "Well, we don't do that dance here, we only Waltz. I am not dancing until they play a Waltz." You also don't see the person out of sight of the camera on the other side of the shot, grasping his croquet mallet to his chest, shouting, "This park is for playing croquet. It is not for dancing. If you're not playing croquet with me, I'm taking my croquet set and I'm going home."

Tragically, the dancers would have incorporated the Waltzers and the croquet player right into the party, don't you think? It

seems like that's what they were called to do. It seems like they were a pretty inclusive movement.

We are the Dancing Guy church and there are lots of dancing people among us. We are called to get up, get down and boogie. We are not called to sit still. There are lots of dancers here. The folks who made our Heart and Soul Auction happen, they dance. The Stewardship Committee, they dance. The Worship Network, they rock-n-roll. The Fun and Fellowship folks, they boogie. The Partners in Grime and Office Helpers, they get down. And they get other folks out on the floor.

There's always a reason not to dance. You don't have rhythm. You don't know the steps. The music's wrong. You'll look foolish. You've never danced before. Your friend isn't dancing. But there's always a reason to dance as well- it's fun, it's exercise, it's relational, sexy even, you meet new people, you get asked to dance or someone just starts jumping around.

All those people sitting on the grass, their time in the park was interrupted by the dance, yet they responded to the call, the invitation to join in. Spiritual Writer Henri Nouen says there's a call in every interruption:

“What if our interruptions are in fact our opportunities, challenges by which growth takes place? What if the events of our history are molding us as a sculptor molds clay and if it is only in careful obedience to these molding hands that we discover our real vocation and become mature people?”¹

And I would add mature communities. Communities that are unafraid to heed their call; unafraid to join in the dance. Unafraid to

"Sing like nobody's listening
to Love like you've never been hurt
to Dance like nobody's watching."

¹ Henri Nouen qtd in Never Call Them Jerks pg 119 by Arthur Paul Boers