

*“Call and Inspiration”, Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda, 04 June 2017*  
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Call and Inspiration. First, let us consider Inspiration.

Long ago and far away, about eighty years ago, there was a man on a boat steaming up river. His name was Schweitzer. Albert Schweitzer—musician and minister, author and theologian, medical missionary. For two years he had been struggling to write a book on ethics. For two years he had been seeking out the link connecting his thoughts on ethics. For weeks and weeks he had reached for the one right word that would underpin his thought on ethics, as his ship made her way from Europe to Africa.

For three whole days he had chugged up the river to Lambarene, surrounded by people he did not know, who did not speak his language. For three whole days he had gazed out upon that river, watching the hippos sport in the water. And after three whole days—SUDDENLY—he had his answer: “Reverence for life”.

When the student is ready, the teacher appears.

My *Oxford Concise Dictionary* tells me that our words for inspiration come from Old French and the Latin: Inspire—to breath in, to inhale, to breathe air—or thought, or feeling, and that we use this word “inspiration” especially when we speak of a mysterious agency, unknown, divine, or supernatural. We speak of animating or infusing feeling into a person, as to inspire—to create. Inspiration—a drawing in of breath, or of divine influence, perhaps from scripture, or elsewhere. We speak of a sudden, happy idea as inspiration, such as Schweitzer’s “sudden” awareness of that touchstone phrase, “Reverence for life”—the words that gave foundational coherence to his work on ethics.

We could think of inspiration in terms of the creative breath of a holy spirit—the breath that hovers over the waters of the void as in the first chapter of Genesis, in Hebrew Scripture. We could think of inspiration in terms of light—in the beginning was the word—and the word was life and light and the light shone in the darkness, as in the first chapter of the Gospel of John. Or we could think in terms of darkness, the nourishing darkness of gestation, pregnant with life.

We could think of inspiration as playfulness and creation, as when Wisdom tells us she was present with the holy at the creation of the world, Proverbs Chapter Eight. Or as when a light bulb goes on over the head of a cartoon character in the funny papers. When I think of inspiration, it is this creative play I think of, the making of something new, or at least new to me, coming out of what was always there, but in some new context or combination, like a bucket of cool clear water drawn up from a deep dark well.

Even as the wind can scatter seed on ground that is barren and stony, or ground that is prepared for new growth, just so the universe can send out lots of light bulbs, but we do our own part to make ready a place for that light to shine. Schweitzer prepared the ground for two years, before the hippos gave him his light bulb.

I serve as a minister—an interim minister. On occasion, I am asked to lead a workshop on preaching. On occasion I am asked, where does the inspiration come from, for a sermon? The preachers of the Reformation might have told you that they sought their inspiration from Scripture, or the Holy Spirit. The Greek poet Homer might have told you that he invited inspiration from the Muses, that they breathed through him, that he was only a vehicle for the story. The Roman poet Lucretius called on the divine Venus to inspire *De Rerum Natura, Concerning the Nature of Things*. His friend, the poet Virgil, was unusual in beginning his great epic poem, the *Aeneid*, with *Arma virumque cano..... I sing arms and the man.....*

To me, it seems there is never a shortage of possibilities for inspiration—look at a calendar, look at a newspaper, look out the window, look inside your own heart and mind. Look at your neighbour. Listen to your neighbour. What are we hungry to hear? And where is hope, in this? Where are we going with this? What draws us? What new thing hungers to be born in us? What purpose? What do you sing? What sings in and through you?

Sometimes folks tell me they expect their minister to inspire them.

When the student is ready, the teacher appears.

And now, on to Call, a special sort of inspiration. Congregations call ministers to serve them. Ministers are called to their profession, they feel called to the ministry, to do ministry, to be a minister. In some biographies I read of ministers experiencing an actual call, an inner voice literally calling them to serve. We speak of ministers feeling a calling or a vocation. From the Latin, *vocare*, to call, as in voice. Latin could also use *apello*, to name. Appellation. We know it in the French, comment vous appelez-vous? Je m'appelle ..... I call myself by this name..... Call.

A job is a way to pay the bills. And a fine thing it is, to be able to pay the bills and put food on the table and a roof over head. A career is a path towards better and more meaningful work, over an extended period of time. And a fine thing that is, too. A vocation or calling is work that is important to an individual's life, and a vital part of their identity, something they give their life to, over a very long time. Call. From the Old Norse, *kalla*—to summon loudly.

We have the biblical accounts of Moses being called to prophecy by the great I am, and answering—Here I am, Lord. And Isaiah's call, Isaiah Chapter Six, with its vision of the holy enthroned, and the six-winged seraphim, and the cleansing of unclean lips with hot coals. Whom shall I send? Send me.

Many are called but few are chosen (Mathew 22). The call to ministry is the beginning of a long period of discernment. From the call to ministry, to the call to serve a specific congregation, might take seven years. Or seventeen. Or a lifetime.

From time to time a person will seek me out and mention that they had considered becoming a minister. I tell them what I was told: if there is anything else you can do, do that. Ministry is what you do when you just can't not do it any more. The call to ministry will devour your life. Are you ready for that? For some of us, our calling is to minister to ourselves alone, and let those who will, minister to the congregations.

I have read the autobiographies of many ministers, and many have related the story of their call, sometimes even a literal call, a voice distinctly heard within head and heart and mind and spirit—a summons that cannot be denied. And then follows a time of discernment, a time of preparation, to determine what sort of summons has been uttered to what sort of service.

In about a year's time, Olinda will prepare to invite a Candidate, to call a candidate. I invite you to be mindful that the folks who seek to serve you, to be called by you, have discerned a call to service to the universe and all they hold holy. They are prepared to give their lives to it. Each will have had a different experience of that call. Each has a story. There is nothing, really nothing, they would rather do.

Whether they serve here in Olinda, or elsewhere, whether they serve in ministry or in another profession, like a worker-priest in the days of Dorothy Day and the hungry 1930's, or as a community ministry doing harm-reduction in the downtown Vancouver East End, ministry is more than a job, or even a career. It's about what one gives their life to, in ministry or elsewhere.

You might ask them about that. And you might think about what your calling is. Is there something you are so compelled to do with your life, that you just can't not do it anymore? Was there a choice made that set you on that path, whether to serve a profession, or your family, or your home, a service that frames your sense of self and meaning in your life?

Service. Ministry literally means to serve. From the Latin. Have you seen this in others? Have you heard something calling, like the wild birds, but you can't quite make it out yet? Listen closely. Be ready to hear it when it's time. When the student is ready the teacher appears.

I would like to leave you with this thought. I believe our lives are a continual circle of action and reflection, of experience and understanding, a circle of inspiration and the fruits of endeavour. I believe the day to day foundations of our lives invite that spark of sudden insight that builds upon the coherence of a life lived. I believe that the choices we make each day invite the creative, fruitful fulfilling future and hope, of what may yet be. I believe our own lives are the most compelling testimony for the values and ideals we hold dear, and what we sense as holy, and what we dream may be.

Your life may serve as inspiration to any and all you meet. You will never know. So be ready. Live your faith. Light the world.

May it be so.

## Bibliography

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