

FINDING YOUR VOICE

A Service by Barbara W. ten Hove, *co-minister*
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Reading INTRO

When I taught my (January Intensive) course, “Creating Quality Worship in Congregations,” earlier this month at Meadville/Lombard Theological School in Chicago, I told my students one of the most important things they needed to learn about doing worship was to speak in their own voice. Yes, most of us who lead worship regularly have come to rely on the beautiful words written by poets and others. But as wonderful as these words are, when read by someone else they can come across as stale and impersonal.

Writing and speaking in your own voice is remarkably powerful. Here at Paint Branch we witness this weekly when our worship associates share with you the words they write for the Flaming Chalice Dedication and other elements of our liturgy. I believe we hear others’ words at a deep level because they are clearly authentic. Such authenticity inspires those of us listening to imagine that our voice, too, matters.

In Chicago, I created a short exercise to help my students understand this. I gave them a quick 20 minutes to write a short piece for worship based on a simple theme common to services. Without exception, they all approached the task with anxiety and were all absolutely sure their words were poorly written and would never stand up to the scrutiny of a congregation, much less me, their instructor. But I will let you be the judge of whether that was true.

Here are some of them, written as opening words for a music service. I have edited them slightly for length. The reading will end with the choir anthem, something such a music service would likely include.

Reading: From Students at Meadville/Lombard Theological School

“Come into this sacred community of seekers. Here let us engage the wonders, challenges and mystery of life. Music is a language that reflects all the facets of life and faith” (LMcD-H).

“Listen, listen to the sound of your self – the whisper of your breath, the pulsing of your blood. A song of grace resonates within you. Listen, listen to the sound of our gathering – the rustle of paper, the creaking of pews. We gather this morning to blend our singular songs into one transforming chorus. This is your invitation to rediscover the power of united voice and the beauty of harmony” (JH).

“It starts with the first rhythmic beating of our hearts. We hear it in the song of the birds, of the waves, of the wind. Let us gather our voices and fill this room” (KL).

“Burst forth in song! Let us come together in harmony, a choral cacophony of melody and meter. Feel the rhythm of your heart flow into the throbbing drumbeat of this religious community. Let the trickle of your quiet soul stream into the thunderous roar of a waterfall of spirit” (JL).

“The music of life is with us from first to last: In our first times, the heartbeat – as big as the world – that echoes through our home in the womb; the sounds and the songs that anchor us in time and place as we change and grow; In our ending times, the songs that loved ones sing to wish us well upon the journey. Throughout our human journey, we make music and music makes us, so come into this celebration of music and of life!” (NG).

Sermon: “Finding Your Voice”

Barbara W. ten Hove

As many of you know, I am in the process of completing a Doctor of Ministry through the seminary where I received my Masters of Divinity over twenty years ago, Meadville/Lombard in Chicago. For my final project, I have created a course in worship for students working to become UU ministers. I taught it for the first time earlier this month and it was, for me, a fabulous and deeply meaning-filled experience. I think my students liked it, too! They had much to learn and I had much to teach about the meaning and practice of worship. We had a lot of fun together.

What they learned in the class will help them in their ministries. I believe I gave them good tools to do the work. But the most important thing I had to teach them was this: real ministry at every level begins with authenticity. And truly authentic people learn how to speak in their own voice.

I’ve been thinking about this for at least a couple of years and it seemed important to teach these seminarians to trust themselves enough to write their own words for worship. The

reading (above) reflected the result of a short exercise I did at the beginning of my course. If your experience of their words here was anything like mine at the time, you were amazed. Even the words that one could argue were poorly written glow with life. Imagine hearing them spoken by the author. It was powerful.

For many years now at Paint Branch each Sunday our worship associates write their own Flaming Chalice Dedications, as well as intros to the Offering and other parts of the service. Because they do, they challenge themselves (far more than I challenge them, I think!) to speak from their own experience. And because they do, this congregation is blessed with multiple perspectives on all the things we choose to speak about in worship. The message is that this church speaks not in one voice but in many—and that all who speak have a gift to offer the gathered community, the gift of themselves.

This is, in my opinion, a deeply spiritual act. For generations, and in far too many cultures and religions, only those with power could speak. The voices of those considered weak or unworthy were not allowed to be heard, and sometimes were violently silenced, even. I can't help but think about this from my perspective as a woman in ministry. St. Paul told women to be quiet in church and for centuries Christians took this to mean that women could not lead worship or serve as ministers. The lack of female clergy still prevails in most faiths. But *our* religious forebears were willing to trust the voices of women and so, finally, our voices were heard. I will never take that for granted, and neither should you.

Just as this is true for women, it is also true for many people in our world who have been marginalized or oppressed. Often the first thing dictators do is take away the right to speak. I have been both moved and angered by the many stories of journalists across the globe who have been killed because they dared to tell the truth as they saw it. Just last week a Turkish writer (Hrant Dink) was gunned down in broad daylight outside his office because he believed it important to tell the story of his people, the Armenians in Turkey. And he is only one of many who have suffered or died because they found their voice and used it.

But it is not only people in public life who take risks to speak in their own voice. Often the act of finding one's voice is deeply personal and yet still risky. I know too many gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people who have told the truth about *their* lives only to be rejected by their loved ones. And yet I have never met a person who has regretted the decision to tell the truth about who they are. Finding your voice is empowering and positively life-changing. It is also deeply religious. I am more and more convinced that the purpose of faith and religion in our lives is to give us the tools to become fully who we are. And this process of finding our voice is *the* spiritual journey.

Our faith and religion, Unitarian Universalism, places a great responsibility on each of us to develop and sustain ourselves spiritually. Our principles teach that all people have worth and dignity and a right to follow a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. This means that each of us, no matter what, has value in this world. Thus our point of view is needed to make sense of it.

Many years ago, Greta Crosby, a ministerial colleague, wrote words that have resonated with me throughout my ministry. She wrote in a short meditation [found in *Tree & Jubilee*], “All of us together, all the eyes of all the creatures, are the eye of God. That is why we need each other, our many ways of seeing, that we may rejoice and see clearly and find the keys to more abundant life.”

Greta’s words became very real for me early in my ministry. Because my father was a UU minister and I was working as an Associate Minister alongside a male minister the same age as my father, I tried desperately in my first couple of years to be just like them. Both of them were very good ministers—and absolutely opposite in personality. When I tried to be like one, I offended the other. I grew tired trying to keep up, and felt like a failure.

My hard working mentor and my father both knew I was on the wrong track. And they both had wise words for me. I’ll never forget my father telling me in an elevator at our annual convention that all he wanted for me to be was “proud of him, and for him to be proud of me.” Later that same year, my mentor suggested that I get some help from yet another wise source. It was this man who told me to just “Get over yourself and do what you’re good at!”

In essence, they were all telling me to be myself and to speak in my own voice. When I preached a sermon that year about this struggle, I taught myself the first of many lessons I needed to learn. When I go deep into my own spirit, and listen with a loving mind to the spirits of others, something real and true emerges. I found my voice and it changed me forever.

If this had only happened to me, I would rejoice and be glad in it. But one of the wonderful things I have discovered in my many years as a minister is how my claiming my voice began to impact others to do the same. I don’t want to give the impression that I am some great role model who expects others to follow me. No, it’s not like that at all. Rather, I have noticed that when I tell the truth about my life to others, they seem far more willing to tell the truth of themselves to me. And as we begin to speak to each other about who we really are, then acceptance, understanding and even love grows.

I’ve chosen a song to share with you now that speaks directly to this, Joyce Poley’s *When Our Heart Is In a Holy Place* (StJ #1008):

CHORUS:

When our heart is in a holy place,
When our heart is in a holy place,
We are blessed with love and amazing grace,
When our heart is in a holy place.

VERSES:

When we trust the wisdom in each of us,
Ev'ry color, ev'ry creed and kind,
And we see our faces in each other's eyes,
Then our heart is in a holy place.

When we tell our story from deep inside,
And we listen with a loving mind,
And we hear our voices in each other's words,
Then our heart is in a holy place.

When we share the silence of sacred space,
And the God of our heart stirs within,
And we feel the power of each other's faith,
Then our heart is in a holy place.

When we tell our story from deep inside, and we listen with a loving mind, and we hear our voices in each other's words, then our heart is in a holy place.

This is my sermon in a nutshell. Finding your voice begins with listening—to the voice deep inside that is completely and utterly you. But such listening cannot stop there. For if we only listen to our own voice, than we can become self-centered, even selfish.

Our faith, Unitarian Universalism, has been called a religion for individualists. There is some truth to this if by individualist we mean people who seek to fully embody the truth that lies within them. But no religion can end with the individual. The word religion derives from an ancient source that means “to bind.” I believe that religion is something that binds us together.

So how do we—as people who do our best to trust the inner voice within—live a faith that is bound up in community? We do it by listening with a loving mind to other voices as well as

to our own. As Joyce Poley's song reminds us, we can and do "hear our voices in each other's words."

This way of listening lies at the heart of authentic connection. While it is certainly important that we honor and respect the deep differences that lie *between* people, ultimately I am convinced that as humans we are far more *alike* than we are different. Discovering and accepting difference is a crucial part of building loving communities. But difference does not have to separate us from each other. Instead, it can be a part of the ties that bind us in loving bonds to one another.

Recently I have been teaching a group of ten Paint Branchers a course called "Exploring the Spirit in Life." Each month this group has gathered to talk about things that really matter to us. I have been so moved at how our diversity has blessed the experience. This group is made up theists and atheists, activists and mystics, scientists and artists and everything in between. You'd think that we'd find very little common ground, but you'd be wrong.

Together, we have discovered that our differences do not separate us and that our similarities do not make us complacent. Because we have given each other room to tell our own stories and to speak in our own voice, we have created a bond that allows us to grow in each other's presence. I cannot tell you how much this group and its work have meant to me. They model to me what I believe is the best hope we have in this world to live in peace. We see each other in our own eyes. We hear each other in our own voice. We share the power of our faith through acceptance of the faith of the other.

It sounds so simple but it may be the hardest thing we have to do. It is so easy to block our ears and our minds and our hearts and listen only to what we want to hear. It is said that we are becoming an i-Pod nation, even an i-Pod world. Too many of us stick an earbud into our heads and play our own song, over and over again. To break out of this singular world is to take the risk that we won't agree with someone, won't understand someone, and may not even like them.

But such a risk is essential for the truly religious person. For if faith and religion are to mean anything, they must take us beyond ourselves to a larger reality. Some call that reality God, others a higher power, some simply call it community, or the interdependent web of existence. Known by whatever name, it calls us to step outside the small confines of our own experience and reach out to others in loving relationship.

Now this may seem contradictory, as I say, first, that we need to find our own voice and use it, not parrot the words of others. And then I say that we need to listen to the world beyond us, and hear the myriad voices of the other in a true attempt to understand.

But is this really a contradiction? Isn't it true that when we trust our own inner voice, and speak with love from a deep place of knowing, we become the kind of people who can do the same with others? And doesn't the act of listening and truly hearing another's pain—or joy, or struggle or triumph—invite us to go deep inside ourselves to find the truth of who we are even as we see the truth of the other? In my experience, these go hand in hand.

Our faith in ourselves does not need to shake our faith in others; rather it can and should deepen it. And the act of speaking our faith to others is deeply liberating and can move people to their core.

I began this sermon with quotes from the students of ministry I taught earlier this month. Let me end by telling you a bit more about them. In the course of working together for a week, studying and practicing the art of worship, something quite wonderful happened. Each of them became truly alive to the others. Because they were challenged throughout the course to tell their own story, they discovered that after only one week they knew each other at a level that surprised them.

We heard the atheist speak of the power of mystery. We watched the scientist dance. We listened to stories of alienation and began to build bridges across divides. We discovered that our differences enriched the experience incredibly and that we were not so separate from each other as we thought.

At our final worship service together, I asked each of them to tell the group something of their experience of the journey we had been on together during that week. Without exception, they spoke of growth and challenge and love and empowerment. And without exception, they all said how much it meant to them to find their voice.

I do not know if these students will become ministers. They may not know either. But in that moment they ministered to me. As a final blessing at our last service together, I went to each one in turn, looked them in the eye, spoke their name and offered them a blessing. To close my sermon today, I will offer this same blessing to all of you.

Dear Ones,

May you be blessed with love.

May your journey take you deep.

May you speak in your own voice.

And may you spread joy

Wherever you may go.

Amen.