

CALLED TO SERVE

A Sermon by Phyllis L. Hubbell and John Parker Manwell
The Paint Branch Unitarian Universalist Church
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JOHN: When I was a boy, I idolized my grandfather, for whom I am named. He was a country minister, by then retired. Family lore said that the most he ever made in a year was \$700 – sometimes paid in cash, and sometimes in firewood, or chickens.

He was a Congregation minister, but my parents had become Unitarians just before I was born. They were pillars of the church in Syracuse, and both wrote books with Sophia Fahs, the famous religious educator. So I was active, too. I did everything a young person can do in the church. I went to Rowe Camp and Star Island, where I also worked for several summers.

In college, I thought about ministry. I knew that ministers were supposed to have a calling. I had no idea what this meant. I didn't have the wit to talk with my grandfather about it. Though I felt a vague longing, I also felt some fear at the thought of counseling people. I wasn't ready to deal with anyone's emotions, even mine.

So I became a lawyer. No emotional issues there. But if I had watched any courtroom television shows, it might have occurred to me that I should have some fears about that, too. I was good at the intellectual work, but I hadn't the faintest resemblance to a pitbull, even without lipstick.

PHYLLIS: I think of him as more like our Sheltie, shaved for the summer.

JOHN: In hindsight, I didn't know myself. I knew what I could do, but not what I'd really love to do. It took me another thirty years to realize how much I would love ministry.

The seeds were planted by my grandfather, and by my experience growing up in the church. When I was about 12, my grandfather, who was a minister, gave me a silver pocket compass. On the lid that popped open were these words:

John Parker Manwell II

Seek truth. Walk in the true way.

These words puzzled me then, but I came to treasure them. I gave the compass to my own son when he turned 21. He too is named for my grandfather.

In college I took a religion class. I wrote a paper about Paul's letters to the church at Corinth. It got an A, and I showed it to my father. Unknown to me, he sent it on to my grandfather. Years later I learned that my grandfather had sent it back with a note saying, "John will make a fine minister." But by then I was a lawyer.

In hindsight, my grandfather's words on that compass and that almost forgotten paper on Paul now feel like his blessing.

In my mid-fifties, through a chain of experiences too complex to relate, I took part in a retreat. As we began, seated in a circle of 25 or 30 people, the leader asked, What is the greatest joy in your life right now? And what is the greatest sorrow? No one had ever asked me a question like that. We went around, and tears flowed freely, mine included.

Up to then, I had lived my life quite out of touch with my feelings. I'm sure that's why, in college, I drew back from ministry at the thought of pastoral counseling. I remember thinking that law would mean a nice safe desk between me and the other person. In hindsight, it also meant a nice safe distance between me and my own emotional life.

The road to this retreat experience had also been marked by other experiences that opened me to new dimensions in the life of the church. All Souls had taught me about the scholarly ministry, and the prophetic ministry, and the richness of a diverse congregation. But it was these later experiences that opened me to the world of the spirit. I came to understand that we need the journey inward, into the life of the spirit, if the journey outward into the world is not to end in burn-out. Together, these experiences simply electrified me. I quit my job and went to seminary. My life since then has been transformed. In ministry to people of different races, to gays and lesbians, bi and trans folk, to the Deaf, to the physically challenged, I've been stretched and my life has been enriched beyond measure. I don't think I'll ever run out of things I want to read about and preach about. And at 77, my love of just being with people is still growing. My central

metaphor for ministry is listening, and it's probably what I do best, especially in one on one settings.

In all these experiences, ministry has blessed my life, and given me so many chances to be a blessing to others. I wish the same for all of us.

PHYLLIS: My story is different, and yet not so different. I, too, grew up in a ministerial family. My father was a fundamentalist minister who left the church to become an atheist. My grandfather on my mother's side was a minister. My uncle was a minister. My great grandfather was a minister. And most of the women taught Sunday School. Perhaps it was preordained that I become one as well.

But my call was a long time coming. I was baptized at seven, confirmed at twelve, sang in the choir and considered myself a good Christian all those years. I even went to church in college though by then many of those difficult theological questions bothered me. None of my friends was schooled enough to introduce me to more liberal understandings of all the nature of God, prayer and miracles that might have eased my way to a more mature relationship with Christianity.

I became an agnostic, leaning heavily toward atheism. Finding myself twenty-six and not married, I took myself back to law school. I don't like to think of myself as a pitbull either, but I thrived on the Socratic method, challenging and being challenged. Still, I didn't need big bucks. I wanted to make a difference. I ended up working for the U.S. Department of Justice, in the Freedom of Information and Privacy Act Office. I felt like I was working in the public interest. The work was interesting. I liked and respected my supervisors and co-workers. But there was something missing. I wanted to make a difference in people's lives in a way that mattered. I started keeping my eye out for another job.

By this time, I was one of those many folks that consider themselves to be Unitarian Universalists but don't attend church. Well, actually, I was a Christmas and Easter UU. I liked our involvement in civil rights and the broad acceptance of people of many faiths. But I didn't find church very warm and friendly and it was too daunting to walk into the large hall at All Souls and try to talk to people.

But at 40, I met started to date a UU minister and I found myself fascinated with his job. I loved the variety of it. I had some theater background so preaching sounded like fun. I enjoyed a good theological discussion. I had a masters degree in education and I cared deeply about education. I cared about people so the

pastoral side was also attractive. Music, theater – great (if I'd known about the dance, it would have been even better).

I wasn't going to go back to school, but I decided to start going to church regularly.

I joined All Souls. I got on committees – three. I took a class. I began to think about religion. Then I got into a conversation that was to be a pivotal moment in my life.

Oddly enough for a Unitarian Universalist on the agnostic end of the spectrum, it came in a conversation with a Roman Catholic. Joe was, and is, a good friend of mine. He's religious in the good meaning of that word, compassionate, nondogmatic, welcoming, accepting, a person who embodies the soul and not the letter of religion. Joe began talking about prayer.

Now I know prayer has sometimes been what Barbara used to call a wounded word. Prayer was one of my own wounded words. But I trusted Joe so I just listened. He spoke of going through a hard time and turning to prayer, prayers that lasted an hour, prayers that were more listening than speaking, more telling than asking. Prayers that began "Help." Prayers that asked for strength and understanding.

I listened to Joe. And suddenly I had a vision of a kind of prayer that I could understand. I suddenly knew that if I would spend time listening to the voice within—the voice of conscience, the impulse to do good, the voice that maybe was what some called God – I would be changed. I would gain strength to be the kind of person I wanted to be. I also recognized that I'd heard this voice inside me ever since I was a kid. I had yearned to follow Dr. King, but I hadn't. I wanted to protest outside the South African Embassy, but I didn't. Now I realized that it didn't matter what I called the voice – Joe called it God, others would call it conscience – what was important was that if I cultivated this voice, I could come closer to making that voice, my voice.

Now I had something to preach. Now the call to ministry had grabbed me and would not let me go.

JOHN: Not many of us are called to ordained ministry. But plenty of people, in midlife, find themselves called into other forms of ministry: into social work, teaching or even the law; into peace and justice work, or the daily life of the

church. And some who have simply found themselves called to a new attitude toward how they do what they are already doing.

But other people often feel trapped in work that's not satisfying. Sometimes we don't even understand how our lives impact others. Rachel Remen, the pediatrician turned counselor to the cancer community, tells the story of Dieter.¹ In a retreat for people living with cancer, he spoke of his oncologist, who had been giving him chemotherapy each week. Afterwards, they would sit and talk for fifteen minutes. His doctor, he said, was the only person who truly understood what he was going through.

Then one day they decided it was no longer helping. Dieter asked if he could continue to come each week anyway, just to talk. The doctor said no. Without the chemotherapy, there is nothing I can do for you. And so Dieter decided to continue with the chemo, just so he could have these chances each week to talk with his doctor. "My doctor's love is as important to me as his chemotherapy," Dieter told the group, "but he does not know."

Remen tells her readers, though she felt she could not tell the group, that Dieter's oncologist was also one of her patients. "Week after week, from the depths of a chronic depression this physician would tell me that no one cared about him, he didn't matter to anyone, he was just another white coat in the hospital. . . . No one would notice if he vanished. . . ."

I want to tell you this morning that all of us matter, all of us affect other lives by what we do or do not do. All of us have the power to bless. This is so whether we are highly trained physicians, or seemingly helpless patients in a nursing home. All of us have the power to bless. "When we bless someone," Remen says, "we touch the unborn goodness in them and wish it well."

To feel called to serve is to feel called to bless: to do whatever it is that we feel called to do, with love. It is what we do with love that touches another's life, and nurtures the unborn goodness that is in every one of us, just waiting to be born.

It is our hope, our prayer, for all of us this morning that we may find our calling to serve, and to bless the world. May it be so.

¹Rachel Naomi Remen, Kitchen Table Wisdom: Stories That Heal (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996), pp. 63-65.