

“FINDING YOUR BLISS: 1) AN INTRODUCTION TO CALL”

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Call to Gather: from Howard Thurman

Listen for the sound of the genuine in yourself. It is the only true guide you will ever have. And if you cannot hear it, you will, all of your life, spend your days on the ends of strings that somebody else pulls.¹

Reading from “Each Note” by Jelaluddin Rumi

God picks up the reed-flute world and blows,
Each note is a need coming through one of us,
a passion, a longing pain.

Remember the lips
where the wind-breath originated,
and let your note be clear.
Don't try to end it.
Be your note.
I'll show you how it's enough.

Go up on the roof at night
in this city of the soul.

Let *everyone* climb on their roofs
and sing their notes!

Sing loud!²

Sermon

The mythologist Joseph Campbell used “bliss” to describe the feeling we have when we find and heed our true calling in life. I hesitated to use “bliss” in the title of the sermon series: it is such a strong word that is often defined in a way that is not helpful in this context. My dictionary, for example, defines it as “perfect happiness.” Well, a person who finds her or his true calling is not necessarily forevermore perfectly happy. But even with life's inevitable bumps and jolts, such a person is likely to feel deeply contented and satisfied on the inside on a fairly consistent basis. There is likely to be an air of well-

¹ http://thinkexist.com/quotation/community_cannot_for_long_feed_on_itself-it_can/209122.html.

² Coleman Barks with John Moyne, translator, *The Essential Rumi*, (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), p. 103.

being about such a person regardless of what is going on around him or her. So bliss in this sense is not a giddy kind of happiness, and it certainly is not always Easy Street. It is not as one writer puts it “the kind of easy pleasure that comes from lounging around a pool sipping tropical drinks. Rather, it is the inner well-being that arises from doing something that you were born to do.”³ An inner well-being that arises from doing something that you were born to do—this is what I mean by “bliss.”

So your call is that thing or things that you are meant to do with your life. It is your purpose in life. It connects your gifts, talents and skills with your deepest values,⁴ your passions, and your life experiences. When you find and you heed your call in life, what you are doing on the outside matches who you truly are on the inside. You become your true self. Here’s how a dancer describes her feeling of call when she dances: “Everything lines up in my body and I feel a part of the greater mystery.”⁵ This is the type of feeling we can have when we follow our call.

Importantly, your call needs to take into account not just your strengths, but also your limitations. There are some things that each of us might love to do but which we truly are not equipped to do. I, for example, would dearly love to be a professional baseball player. Okay, given my age, it is more accurate to say that I would love to have *been* a professional baseball player. But this possibility was never very likely for me in spite of my love for the game: I have a terrible time hitting even a slow-pitched, huge softball let alone a fast-pitched, tiny baseball; I’m even worse at catching a batted ball; and I have a weak and inaccurate throwing arm. Aside from these liabilities, I’d have been a terrific ballplayer. So here’s the truth I sadly discovered: I simply wasn’t meant to be a ballplayer. No amount of work could change this. My experiences as a ballplayer in elementary school made this painfully clear: I was on a Charlie Brown-like team that failed to win a single game, and I was the back-up rightfielder (where of course the least talented kids play because no one can hit the ball there).

Now I would say that this was a limitation inherent within me. There are also limitations that are not inherent in us, limitations that are foisted upon us by others. For example: the idea that only a white male should be President of the United States. Or the terribly mistaken persistent assumption that African Americans can’t succeed as quarterbacks in football in the National Football League. Or generations earlier the related limitation drilled into African slaves that they had no talent to be anything but a slave. We are wise to ignore and resist these kinds of limitations as much as we possibly can. These examples are all quite different from my inherent inability to hit, catch or throw a baseball. There are also sometimes apparent limitations which seem inherent, but when we scratch below the surface, they disappear. So one of the challenges in considering our calls is discerning the source and true nature of our apparent limitations.

The word “call” (as well as its synonym “vocation”) comes from the Latin word *vocare*. The root of *vocare* is *vox*, or “voice.” The Latin root lifts up the auditory sense of call: it is something that you hear. When I think about my purpose in life, I prefer “call” to “mission” or “vision” because of call’s auditory nature. Finding your vision suggests that you need to look far ahead of where you are; finding your call requires you

³ Pythia Peay, “Who are you really?” *Utne*, Nov.-Dec. 2002, p. 61.

⁴ Jim Wallis, *God’s Politics* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), p. 363.

⁵ Peay, p. 61.

to be near to its source. Hearing requires proximity.⁶ I like this image, because I think our call is located very nearby: in our soul, where the essence of who we are resides. I believe the soul is the source of our call.

Each human soul is unique, and contains within it our unique calling. Like Emerson and Hinduism, I paradoxically also believe that there is a oneness that is the Divine at the core of each of our souls. Emerson typically called this the Oversoul. Sometimes he called it God. This is the unity that ultimately ties all of us—and all of existence—together. For me, then, there is a divine sense to call, too: our call comes from within us, but at the same time it also comes from something greater than us.

With the subject of call, we are in the realm of belief. Here's what else I believe about call.

I believe that when we fulfill our call, it isn't just good for us but is also good for the world. The theologian Frederick Buechner brilliantly defines call as “the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.”⁷ To be a true call, then, I think it has to meet the world's need in a big or more typically small. I would conclude that for Hitler, being a ruthless dictator and mastermind of genocide was not his true calling. Sure, he (tragically) had amazing talents to do this work, but his using these talents clearly did nothing—and this is a vast understatement—to build a better world.

I also believe that everybody has a call within themselves. Everybody has a unique contribution they could make to our world. Every single person, regardless of age, class, gender, religion, race, so-called abilities or disabilities, sexual orientation, and experiences. I would even say—and this is definitely a faith statement—that Hitler had within him a positive contribution he could have made to the world. Part of the cataclysmic tragedy of his life is that he never allowed this unique contribution to come out.

My belief that everybody has a unique contribution to make is one of the reasons I believe in equality: though we have vastly different gifts and abilities, each of us has something we can contribute. This same belief leads the psychologist James Hillman to conclude that “each child is a gifted child.”⁸ You can often see hints of a person's true calling in his or her childhood—like the pioneering Israeli prime minister Golda Meir, who as a fourth grader in the Milwaukee public schools organized a protest against the required purchase of school textbooks. She thought this was unfair to poorer children.⁹ Or Ella Fitzgerald, who as a sixteen-year-old was set to dance at an amateur talent competition at the Harlem Opera House, and then at the last minute changed her mind and sang instead. She won first place and gained clarity about her calling.¹⁰ Or the Nobel prize-winning geneticist Barbara McClintock, who at the age of five asked for and received a set of tools from her father. Unfortunately, he gave her a children's tool set. This wasn't what she had in mind at all; she let him know in no uncertain terms that she wanted real tools.¹¹ The noted violinist Yehudi Menuhin had a similar experience at his

⁶ I heard this view of call from Alice Mann, a consultant and author with the Alban Institute.

⁷ Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), p. 16.

⁸ James Hillman, *The Soul's Code: In Search of Character and Calling* (New York: Warner Books, 1996), p. 13.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

fourth birthday when a family friend gave him a child's violin. Menuhin burst into tears and threw it on the ground. He wanted a real violin; nothing else would suffice.¹²

Now these examples are all of people whose gifts were extraordinary. Most of us are more likely to have the ability to make a less dramatic contribution to the world. That's okay, because it takes both big and small contributions to make the world a healthy and whole place. Every contribution matters. Every call answered makes the world a better place.

I also believe that there are many contributions we each could potentially make, not just one. And I believe we can make our contributions in a very wide variety of ways: not just in paid work, but in our volunteering, in roles we take on (such as spouse, parent, or citizen), and in the passions we fulfill in our free-time. I know plenty of people who lead lives of satisfaction and fulfillment not because their paid work matches their call, but because they express their call in other ways such as volunteering. Part of the secret of fulfilling our call is finding creative ways to express it.

And I believe that the nature of our call is ever changing. As we pass through life's seasons and experience different things, our sense of call constantly evolves. What we feel called to do at the age of thirty will almost certainly look pretty different from our call at seventy.

I also believe we experience our calls in widely divergent ways. Some of us have an "Aha!" moment where our call bursts out of us with great clarity—like Ella Fitzgerald at the Harlem Opera House. More commonly, I think, we slowly grope our way toward our call, sometimes taking decades to see clearly or at least somewhat clearly. For most of us, a layer of fog tends to hang around and obscure our call for much of our lives. This is why rare moments of sunshine-like clarity can stand out so powerfully in our memories.

And finally, I believe we each have the power to heed or ignore our call. But ignoring it does not mean the call goes away. I think it hangs around in our soul, reminding us of its presence, sometimes loudly and sometimes quietly. We can spend our whole lifetime ignoring it, but on our deathbed the call will still be there, either buried deep or still clambering for our attention. Plato pictured our call as an invisible spirit companion, always there trying to guide us in the direction of becoming on the outside who we really are on the inside.¹³ We have the freedom to ignore this spirit companion, but not the power to make it go away.

So these are my beliefs about call. I know: it's a lot of words. Now I want to fill out the picture with four people I've encountered who in widely divergent ways seemed to have blissfully fulfilled their call.

The first was a forester in the U.P. A few years ago a friend of mine and I did a four-day hike along an obscure part of the North Country trail in upper Michigan. How obscure we didn't quite realize as we trudged along for the first few days. We didn't see any other hikers, but it was nearly the end of September and so not exactly the peak of the hiking season. Finally we came upon other human beings: two forest workers were tending to the trail. One had a souped-up weed whacker and was downing small brush that was obscuring the trail. The other was taking down bigger shrubs and small trees that were overgrowing the trail.

¹² Hillman, p. 17.

¹³ Hillman, p. 197; Peay, p. 60.

We were surprised how startled they seemed to be by our presence. They turned off their machines and seemed anxious to talk. We quickly found out why: the older one told us we were the first people they had encountered all season. It took a moment for this to sink in: they had been out there forty hours a week for five months, and hadn't seen anyone! We were on one of the most obscure trails in the continental United States!

We found out one of the foresters was a college student who was a seasonal employee. The other one was a veteran forest worker who had been tending this trail for years. He was responsible for 100 or 150 miles of trail. He spent each spring, summer and fall working the trail, slowly moving from west to east. It took several years to get through his whole segment. Then he'd start over: by that time nature pretty well undid the clearing he had done earlier.

I wondered: What is it like to spend a good chunk of your life maintaining a trail that hardly anyone ever uses? It was clear that this didn't really bother him. We could pick up in just a few minutes of conversation how much love and care and devotion he put into his work. He was passionate about maintaining the trail. And I concluded that he wasn't wasting his time at all. He was making this 100 or 150 mile corridor of the earth a better place. He had found the meeting place of his passion and a need of the world. He had found his call.

After we chatted for several minutes, my friend and I carried on with our hike. The foresters fired up their machines and went back to work.

My second picture of call comes from a long ago article in the *Post-Crescent*. I found it so striking that I cut it out and saved it. The article was about a man from Menasha named Glen Vanden Wyngaard. By day he was a machine operator. I don't know whether this job felt like a call to him. But it was clear that a side job he took on at night and on weekends did feel like a call. The side job? He drove the highways of Outagamie County and picked up the carcasses of deer that had been killed by cars. At great length the article described just what this work involved: "maggot-infested, stinking, rotting deer," "breathtaking, foul odors," "the sight of blackened deer underbellies." It explained how he did his work: when he spotted a carcass, he'd pull his pickup off the road. He'd drag the deer to the right spot behind his truck, and then he'd pull a wood ramp out of his truck, tie a rope around the deer's neck, and activate a winch that would drag the deer up into his truck. And yes: it was his truck, not the county's truck. At the end of each night of carcass patrol, he'd hose down the back of his truck and spray it with deodorant and disinfectant.

At first he found the job sickening, but then quickly grew to like it. "The quiet driving time at night is serene and gives him time to think," he said. He figured he'd keep doing the job as long as he could. The article made that point that his call was pretty specific: he shared that "people called him to pick up raccoons, dogs, cats and other assorted roadkill," but he was "strictly a deer man." In his own unique way, he cared for the county's highways with the same love and devotion with which the forester cared for the U.P. trail.¹⁴

My third picture is of a nurse who tended to my mom in an intensive care unit after my mom had brain surgery. This nurse was an amazing combination of compassion, skill, dedication, efficiency and grace. It's a combination that seems like it

¹⁴ Brian Louis, "Somebody's got to do it: A Menasha man moonlights by picking up roadkill," *Appleton Post-Crescent*, July 23, 1994, pp. B-1, B-3.

should be rare, yet in my experience so many nurses have the same powerful combination. As I sat next to Mom hour after hour, I had the opportunity to watch this nurse at work. She seemed to glide about the room, her every move smooth and calculated so as not to waste any precious time or energy. When we had a question, she stopped and engaged us. When we needed a dose of compassion, she gave it to us with great heart. When we needed her to go to bat for my mom with the docs, she did that, too. I felt like I was in the presence of a great artist, a master craftsperson. And what a difference her work made to my mom and to my family. She helped keep my mom alive; she helped keep the rest of us grounded in the midst of a very difficult situation.

The person in my fourth picture went about her work in the same way as the nurse, though in a very different setting. She was a bartender in a London pub. Like the nurse, she wasted no moves. She'd start to pull a Guinness (a long process when it's done right), and then go about other tasks like clearing and washing glasses only to return to the Guinness at just the exact moment the stout approached the top of the glass. She made it back to complete the pouring at just the right moment every single time! As she went about her tasks, she'd talk with folks without missing a beat. She remained absolutely unruffled regardless of the chaos in the packed pub. It seemed like she enjoyed her work, even as it kept her moving non-stop. Like the nurse, she was a master at her craft. Now I have to admit that not everything that goes on in a pub promotes the common good, but I believe that on the whole her work makes a positive contribution to the world.

In the words of Rumi's poem, all four of these people—the forester, the deer remover, the nurse and the bartender—sang their songs from the rooftop. They all heard and heeded the call from their souls. In doing so, they were each themselves. And this may be the most significant spiritual accomplishment of all: to be yourself. As the Hasidic rabbi Zusya said, "In the coming world, they'll ask me not 'Why were you not Moses?' but 'Why were you not Zusya.'"¹⁵

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¹⁵ Parker Palmer, "On Minding Your Call When No One Is Calling," *Weavings* XI(3), May/June 1996, p. 20.