

“FINDING YOUR BLISS: 2) HINDRANCES TO HEARING YOUR CALL”

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Call to Gather: from George Bernard Shaw

This is the true joy in life: Being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one, being a force of nature instead of a feverish, selfish little clod of ailments and grievances, complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy. I am of the opinion that my life belongs to the whole community and as long as I live, it is my privilege to do for it what I can...It is a sort of splendid torch which I have got hold of for the moment and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations.¹

Reading from *The Power of Myth* by Joseph Campbell with Bill Moyers
CAMPBELL: Have you ever read Sinclair Lewis' *Babbitt*?

MOYERS: Not in a long time.

CAMPBELL: Remember the last line? "I have never done the thing that I wanted to in all my life." That is a man who never followed his bliss. Well, I actually heard that line when I was teaching at Sarah Lawrence. Before I was married, I used to eat out in the restaurants of town for my lunch and dinners...One fine evening I was in my favorite restaurant there, and at the next table there was a father, a mother, and a scrawny boy about twelve years old. The father said to the boy, "Drink your tomato juice."

And the boy said, "I don't want to."

Then the father, with a louder voice, said, "Drink your tomato juice."

And the mother said, "Don't make him do what he doesn't want to do."

The father looked at her and said, "He can't go through life doing what he wants to do. If he does only what he wants to do, he'll be dead. Look at me. I've never done a thing I wanted to in all my life!"

And I thought, "My God, there's Babbitt incarnate!"

That's the man who never followed his bliss. You may have a success in life, but then just think of it—what kind of life was it? What good was it—you've never done the thing you wanted to do in all your life. I always tell my students,

¹ <http://www2.bc.edu/~anderso/st/gbs.html>.

go where your body and soul want to go. When you have the feeling, then stay with it, and don't let anyone throw you off.²

Sermon

I think that it's essential in our exploration of call to contemplate those things that get in the way of our hearing our call. These are the things that, in the words of last week's Call to Gather by Howard Thurman, make us feel like we're spending our "days on the ends of strings that somebody else pulls."³

So what gets in the way of fulfilling our call? Well, sadly there is a nearly endless list of hindrances. At the companion class to this series, in a very few minutes of brainstorming the class came up with nearly thirty hindrances. I was trying to write down their ideas and couldn't keep up. Once we assembled our list, then the class voted on which are the most significant hindrances. The top two hindrances (by a mile) were 1) the need to make a living and earn money and 2) self-doubt.⁴

After wading through this list and my own observations and experiences with hindrances, I've come up with my Top Nine List. This list is the focus of my sermon today. I invite you to reflect on whether these things hinder you in fulfilling your call. I'll start at the top of my list with the most important. I'll dwell on the top two because I think they are most crucial.

Number One on my list is the unfortunate reality that it is so easy to be out of touch with our true selves. As I shared last week, I believe that the source of our call is our soul—the core of our being that is at once both uniquely us and one with the divine. If we aren't in touch with our soul, then we won't be able to hear what it is calling us to do and be. It's like when your computer tells you: "No connection established." Too many of us get that error message from our souls. Here how Yogi Berra might put it: "If you don't know who you are, you might end up being somebody else."⁵ Or at the least you might feel like a puppet whose strings are constantly being pulled by others.

Of course, knowing yourself is one of the hardest quests in the world. There are so many layers to mine before we even begin to approach the core of our true selves. It can be far easier to climb a mountain or build a multi-million dollar business or run a marathon than it is to get to know ourselves.

And there is so much that can get in the way of knowing yourself—starting with these two biggies: denial and dishonesty. Undoubtedly in our quest for self-discovery we will come face-to-face with aspects of ourselves that, well, won't make us do want to do cartwheels of joy. In the face of these less than perfect aspects, denial and dishonesty become very tempting pathways.

² Joseph Campbell with Bill Moyers, *The Power of Myth* (New York: Doubleday, 1988), pp. 117-118.

³ http://thinkexist.com/quotation/community_cannot_for_long_feed_on_itself-it_can/209122.html.

⁴ The classes hindrances are, in order of votes received from most to least: making a living, self-doubt, fear of the unknown, fear of change, perfectionism, stress/depression, perceived family expectations, putting the needs of others first, grandiosity, procrastination, lack of imagination, too busy, lack of prioritizing, discouraging experiences, not wanting to leave safety/security, confusion because of too many choices, lack of urgency, lack of talent, lack of know-how, too realistic, fear of failure, spouse/partner's needs, crisis that derails, guilt, lack of resources/opportunities, giving up too soon, oppression, lack of connection.

⁵ Variation of Yogi Berra quote "If you don't know where you're going, you'll end up somewhere else." Found in Kathleen Brehony, *Living a Connected Life* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2003), p. 161.

Another enemy of getting to know yourself is busyness. Perpetual busyness is an amazingly effective way to avoid coming face-to-face with your true self, warts and all. If you're always on the go, if you're always plugged into the world electronically, if you never take a moment to rest or contemplate, then your soul will be a stranger residing within. We live in an age that has perfected busyness; I'd say this correlates directly with a diminishing degree of self-knowledge.

A final enemy of getting to know yourself is that doing so is something our culture neither values nor promotes. Think about the hottest thing in entertainment right now: reality TV. Reality TV masquerades as self-knowledge with all the dirty laundry and deepest secrets bared for the voyeuristic pleasure of viewers. But there's precious little real soul revealed. To me reality TV further confirms the disconnect between individual and soul that is so pervasive in our society.

Number Two in my Top Nine List of hindrances to hearing our call is allowing ourselves to be controlled by the expectations and norms of other people and society. This was the tragedy of George F. Babbitt in Sinclair Lewis' book. He never does the thing that he wants to in all his life because it isn't what he's supposed to do. For most of us his life he lives in total conformity with societal expectations and norms. When he briefly flirts with non-conformity, he shrivels in the face of disapproval from others. He quickly reverts to the familiar emptiness of his "normal" life. Fulfilling your individual call often requires you to live outside the box of societal norms and expectations. Fulfilling your individual call can be a profoundly counter-cultural act that exacts a huge price—a price that, like Babbitt, many of us are unwilling to pay.

A variation of this hindrance happens when people put their own deepest dreams on perennial hold because of parental pressure. This week in the companion class we watched *Dead Poets' Society*, a movie that powerfully depicts how terribly destructive this kind of parental pressure can be. The movie centers on an adolescent boy named Neil who feels a deep call to be an actor. The movie beautifully makes clear how acting is truly what Neil is meant to do. You can see him come alive on the stage. But his father has dramatically different plans for Neil: he wants him to go to Harvard and become a doctor. His dad sees acting as a trivial diversion from his goal for his son, so he forbids him even the pleasure of dabbling in acting. Neil feels trapped in his dad's vision for his life, completely powerless to claim his call. He concludes that living a life on the end of strings pulled by his father is not worth it. He takes his own life.

There is a similar story—thankfully without the tragic ending—in my own family. My grandfather mapped out my dad's life in a way similar to Neil's father. My grandfather's vision for my dad's life was that he would help run the family business. But just as Neil in his soul wasn't a doctor, my dad wasn't a businessman in his soul. He was a musician. By his early teen years he was already playing many of the Bach masterpieces for organ by heart. Unlike Neil, his dad allowed him to dabble in his passion, but it could never be more than a sidelight. So my dad felt like he lived on the end of strings pulled by his dad. He went into a career that didn't call him. He tried to fulfill his true calling on the side—for example, he directed the children's choir at our church. But it wasn't enough. Finally, not too many years after my grandfather died, my dad summoned the monumental courage to quit the family business and become a part-time junior high choir director. That blossomed into a full-time job as a music teacher. At last he was able to fulfill his call.

I want to lift up one other very significant variation of the hindrance of societal norms: oppression—the forces of racism, classism, sexism and all the other societal oppressions that put mammoth roadblocks in between oppressed people and their fulfillment of call. Oppression puts up barriers like poor quality education and a lack of employment opportunities. For every feel-good story of somebody who stands triumphant over the barriers of oppression, there are countless untold stories of people who tried with all their might but simply could not overcome the barriers.

Hindrance Number Three topped the class list: the need to make a living and earn money. Unfortunately many of our callings are not well compensated. And like my dad, sometimes we cannot adequately fulfill our call in the non-work portion of our lives. So we compromise or ignore our call in order to have enough money to pay for food, shelter, clothing, health care, transportation and all of the other necessities of life. Sometimes we compromise or ignore our call so that we can afford some of the non-essentials in life like travel. Done with eyes open and intentionality, this can be a reasonable choice. But without intentionality, we can become trapped on an unfulfilling path by our desire for acquisition.

Hindrance Number Four is the lure of comfort and security. Heeding our call often requires us to get out of our comfort zone and make changes. Sometimes it requires a dramatic leap of faith. Fear of change, fear of the unknown—these things keep many of us chained to the old and familiar in spite of feelings of dissatisfaction and emptiness. Surely this was true for George Babbitt, whose brief foray into the unconventional frightened him so much that he returned to his old life. Heeding your call requires courage. Stepping outside the box, risking your financial well-being—these are hard, dangerous things to do. They are not for the faint of heart. Fear keeps many of us securely locked inside the box of unfulfilled lives.

Hindrance Number Five is a lack of confidence and self-doubt. This scored high in the companion class' list. Many of us have an omnipresent, incredibly powerful internal voice that sometimes whispers and sometimes yells to us “You can't do that! What are you thinking?” Sometimes—as with my ambition to be a professional baseball player that I shared about last week—the voice may be right. But more often, I'd wager it isn't.

A very effective ally of a lack of confidence is perfectionism. The refrain “If we can't do it perfectly, then why bother?” keeps many of us from answering our call. But of course none of us can ever answer our call perfectly, not the most renowned baseball player, nor dancer, nor scientist, nor minister. Our deepest calls are inherently impossible to perfect. This is what beckons us forward. The sculptor Henry Moore concluded that the secret in life is to have a consuming task you cannot possibly do. For him, sculpting was such a calling.⁶

Hindrance Number Six is the opposite of lack of confidence. It's grandiosity. Many of us have the sense that we have to accomplish lofty, noteworthy things in life or else our lives are a complete waste. This is a conceit of youth that many of us don't manage to outgrow. The truth is that most of us don't have within us earth-shaking, world-changing calls. Most of our lives are not lived on a big stage with a grand purpose. For every Martin Luther King, Jr., Mohandas Gandhi and Susan B. Anthony, there are thousands and maybe millions who are called to make a much more modest impact on the

⁶ Donald Hall, *Life Work* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), p. 59.

world. But as I said last week, all of our little contributions together make the world a better place. As Meister Eckhard says, “The outward work will never be puny if the inward work is great.”⁷ There is nothing puny about a call that is lived, whether it’s curing the world of polio or cleaning up deer carcasses on county roads.

I’ve had to come to terms with this in my own life. I feel like my ministry is making a difference here. But the truth is that I am not likely to be in a future list of “Famous Unitarian Universalists.” I’m not likely to seek, let alone win the presidency of the Unitarian Universalist Association. Even if, as I hope and expect, the Fellowship is around a hundred or two hundred years from now, I will most likely not be remembered other than as a name on a list of ministers or a picture on a wall of ministers. Even in my role as family person, two hundred years from now I will likely be no more than a name on a family tree. I have concluded that all of this is okay. The truly heroic life is not necessarily the life of famous heroes. The truly heroic life is living the life we’re supposed to live. The truly heroic life is as simple and as hard as being ourselves.

Hindrance Number Seven on my list is lack of imagination. Given all the hindrances I’ve described and the twenty others on the class list (all of which still may be just the tip of the iceberg), it is clear to me that fulfilling your call takes enormous creativity and imagination. It is hardly ever a simple or easy thing, your path spill open ahead of you with everything laid out. Instead, we usually have to slowly meander our way to our true calling.

Hindrance Number Eight is impatience. The truth is that fulfilling our call routinely takes decades. It is an inherently messy business, with fits and starts, false steps, and plenty of improvisation along the way. Impatience is a real enemy. It can cause us to give up. It can lead us to flit from one possible call to the next, never giving the call adequate time to season and ripen to fullness.

And finally there’s Hindrance Number Nine which I added after a comment at the Saturday service. This hindrance is a talent you have that is NOT your call. This has enormous power to derail our call. Our own feelings of “I can do this!” and the reinforcing words of others—“You’re so good at that!”—can get and keep us totally off course from our true life dreams.

My emphatic conclusion is that hearing and fulfilling our call is a very challenging quest. It is so easy for the hindrances I’ve described and countless others to stop us from becoming our true selves. It is so easy to find ourselves on the wrong path. Joseph Campbell said that when this happens, we are in the wasteland described by T. S. Eliot in his poem by that name. The wasteland, Campbell said, is “a land where everybody is living an inauthentic life, doing as other people do, doing as you’re told, with no courage for your own life.”⁸

In his book *Fast Food Nation*, Eric Schlosser writes about one such wasteland that he encountered. As part of his research on the fast food industry, he accompanied a crew from a Little Caesars franchise in Colorado to one of Peter Lowe’s “Success” mega-events. The Little Caesars crew and about 18,000 other people cram into an arena to listen to one famous speaker after another tell them how to be successful in business and in life. Then, with the theme song from *Chariots of Fire* blaring, Peter Lowe wheels onto

⁷ Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat, *Spiritual Literacy: Reading the Sacred in Everyday Life* (New York: Scribner, 1996), p. 272.

⁸ Campbell, p. 196.

the stage Christopher Reeve (who incidentally became a Unitarian Universalist toward the end of his life). Schlosser recounts:

The crowd wildly applauds. Reeve's handsome face is framed by longish gray hair. A respirator tube extends from the back of his blue sweatshirt to a square box on his wheelchair. Reeve describes how it once felt to lie in a hospital bed at two o'clock in the morning, alone and unable to move and thinking that daylight would never come. His voice is clear and strong, but he needs to pause for breath after every few words. He thanks the crowd for its support and confesses that their warm response is one reason he appears at these events; it helps to keep his spirits up. He donates the speaking fees to groups that conduct spinal cord research.

"I've had to leave the physical world," Reeve says. A stillness falls upon the arena; the place is silent during every pause. "By the time I was twenty-four(...)I was making millions," he continues. "I was pretty pleased with myself...I was selfish and neglected my family...Since my accident, I've been realizing...that success means something quite different." Members of the audience start to weep. "I see people who achieve these conventional goals," he says in a mild, even tone. "*None of it matters.*"

His words cut through all the snake oil of the last few hours, calmly and with great precision. Everybody in the arena, no matter how greedy or eager for promotion, all eighteen thousand of them, know deep in their hearts that what Reeve has just said is true—too true. Their latest schemes, their plans to market and subdivide their way up, whatever the cost...vanish in an instant. Men and women up and down the aisles wipe away tears, touched not only by what this famous man has been through but also by a sudden awareness of something hollow about their own lives, something gnawing and unfulfilled.⁹

Joseph Campbell said there is a symbolic opposite of the wasteland: the Holy Grail. The Holy Grail represents "that which is attained by people who have lived their own lives." It symbolizes "an authentic life."¹⁰ For Christopher Reeve, it was his accident which unexpectedly, tragically and blessedly (all wrapped up in one) rescued him from the wasteland and got him on the path toward his Holy Grail. Yes, his accident killed him eventually, but it also gave him new life. I believe that before he died, he found his Holy Grail.

Next week, we will shift our attention to ways we can find our own Holy Grail.

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⁹ Eric Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation* (New York: Perennial, 2002), pp. 106-107.

¹⁰ Campbell, pp. 196-197.