

Commitment and Call

Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Phoenix

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Ring-ring! Hello, this is Margret. . . Who did you say is calling? OK, who is this really?? So calm down already -- OK, so you say you are God, I'll just go along with that. . . . What, you say you really prefer being called Spirit of Life? Who knew. So all right Spirit, what can I do for you? . . . You want me to do what?? When?? Where? Are you kidding?? . . . All right, I will think it over and get back to you. Yes, I promise. And thanks for the offer, I guess -- bye!

So, I guess that would be what they call, a “call.” My experience of a call is that it can be subtle or obvious, sudden or gradual, but it is always compelling -- sort of like, say, the sound of the can opener is to your cat. A call creates a nearly irresistible draw to move in a direction, to turn toward a goal, to step forward to meet a challenge, to do something you might never have imagined doing, to become someone it might never have occurred to you to become.

And once you begin the journey, everything around you seems to support your moving in that direction, so that what once seemed impossible begins to seem nearly inevitable. As Joseph Campbell said, “There is a track just waiting for each of us, and once on it, doors will open that were not open before and would not open for anyone else. . . . That step, the heroic first step of the journey, is . . . over the edge of your boundaries, and often it must be taken before you know that you will be supported.”

The call can come from any direction. That galvanizing moment, that awakening, in which you discover the purpose of your life, or your next steps, or the thing you must do even though it seems quite unreasonable, and the track opens before you. The call holds within it your response to the questions, “Who am I; what am I? What am I to do? Where am I going? How am I to serve?” It is a story you may have heard from others, or it may be your own story. When you least expect it, there it is. I have gathered up stories from many people over the years: He was reading Thoreau. She was reading a book on social change. He was sitting quietly in the third row from the back on the left hand side of the sanctuary. She was walking across the dance floor at a bar. He was in the bleachers watching his son’s soccer game. She was watching a tennis match on television.

She was – I was -- seated in a pew just to the left of the center aisle in a congregation I was visiting. And there it is. The thought, the voice, that unmistakable yet indefinable summons. The CALL: “this is what you are to do” – or sometimes just, “I can do this!” And off you go, pulled into a vortex that begs for, and yet defies, explanation. You have found your vocation, your calling, your place to serve -- or perhaps your place to serve has found you.

Of course, it is not always sudden. Sometimes it is a quiet internal urging that grows in power over years or decades. Sometimes friends or mentors or guides see our potential and suggest we might consider a new life direction. For some the summons shows up early in life, and for others it emerges only after long service in other careers. Some people respond right away, others resist for decades. One person knows they will be a pilot -- or a veterinarian, or a minister -- by the time they are six years old, and that commitment never changes. They find their vocation early.

For others, we may have already established our professional identity, as a hairdresser, doctor, lawyer, nurse, professor, engineer, teacher, computer expert – and then at some point in our lives, with little warning, we find ourselves at a sharp turn in the path, making our way into a new vocation. Or if not a new career, we find ourselves at the threshold of a new commitment, a new challenge, a new way to bring our gifts into the service of something we believe in. We have been called into our lives, we have been called perhaps to serve, perhaps to follow, perhaps to lead.

Today this congregation takes a big step into beginning the process that will result in another sort of call, calling a settled minister to serve this historic congregation. The search is a long and deliberate undertaking that will come to completion just about a year from now. The step you take today, if you are a member of the congregation, is to vote on the members of the Ministerial Search Committee who will orchestrate that process on behalf of the congregation. This is an important act of the democratic process, an act of commitment and engagement with the future of this congregation.

One of the terms we often hear around a congregation is “ministry.” Ministry is about carrying out a purpose, whether it be the purpose of an individual life or the purpose of an institution, a government or a congregation. Many nations call their administrative offices of government “ministries,” like the Ministry of Education or the Ministry of Social Services - and their highest administrative officer is called the Prime Minister. You can even hear the word “minister” in the words “ad-minister” and ad-ministr-ation”

So the one we call the minister of a congregation is not just the person who preaches on Sunday morning, but the person who is called -- both called in their individual life path and called into relationship by the congregation -- to lead the activities of the congregation. In the policy governance system with which this congregation operates there is a distinction between the work of *Governance* and the work of *Ministry*. *Governance* is the leadership work of the Board of Trustees, setting the vision and direction and establishing the policies for the congregation.

Ministry is the leadership work of the minister, paid staff and congregation members, designing and implementing the programs that move the congregation toward that vision and direction. And it is true, even as a congregation has history, heritage and tradition, that same congregation must move to be alive, and ministry is all about motion, life and energy.

Many of the members of this congregation are part of what I have come to call ministry teams, doing work to which they are called by the urgings of their hearts. A ministry team in this congregation can be a fluid and creative team in which people are drawn together based on their passion and love for the activities in which they are engaged, where they work together for common goals over time, they listen carefully and deeply to each other, build on each others’ ideas, ask good questions, take some risks and learn to take advantage of their shared strengths and collaborative potential.

Service on the Ministerial Search Committee is truly a ministry, work into which the members feel called and to which they make a commitment. There is certainly a commitment of time -- weekly meetings for an entire year, extra time working on surveys and conducting conversations with the congregation, analysis and writing and reading and questioning and sorting and sifting and deciding. But there is also a commitment of attention, as the most important thing the search committee must do is to understand the congregation: its parts and its totality; its history, its culture, where it has been, where it is going, and most importantly, the potential and possibility into which it wants to move as it enters the dance with new ministerial leadership. The Search Committee must be both diverse and highly collaborative; both connected with each other and open to information and input from the congregation; both grounded in history and committed to the future.

Their ministry is compelling, and I know that each of the nominees on whom you vote today thought long and hard before making that commitment, knowing that this is work to which they feel called. Voting for the Search Committee is a declaration of whom you trust, whom you believe will do that job best on behalf of the congregation. An excellent ministry team, and an excellent Ministerial Search Committee, is well described by this story about how wild geese fly, a story that is often used to describe how we might serve in the leadership into which we are called: The Story Of Wild Geese:

When you see Geese ... flying along in the "V" formation, you might be interested in knowing what science has discovered about why they fly that way.

It has been learned that as each bird flaps its wings, it creates uplift for the bird immediately following. By flying in a "V" formation, the whole flock adds at least 71 percent greater flying range than if each bird flew on its own. Quite similar to people who are part of a team and share a common direction, and who get where they are going quicker and easier, because they are traveling on the trust of one another and lift each other up along the way.

Whenever a Goose falls out of formation, it suddenly feels the drag and resistance of trying to go it alone, and quickly gets back into formation to take advantage of the power of the flock. If we have as much sense as a Goose, we will stay in formation and share information with those who are headed the same way that we are going.

When the lead Goose gets tired, they rotate back in the wing and another Goose takes over. It pays to share leadership and take turns doing hard jobs.

The Geese honk from behind to encourage those up front to keep their speed. Words of support and inspiration help energize those on the front line, helping them to keep pace in spite of the day-to-day pressures and fatigue. It is important that our honking be encouraging. Otherwise it's just, well, honking!

Finally, when a Goose gets sick or is wounded by a gunshot and falls out, two other Geese fall out of the formation and follow the injured one down to help and protect them. They stay with the fallen goose until either the injured goose is able to fly or until it has died, and then they launch out with another formation to catch up with their group. When one of us is down, it's up to the others to stand by us in our time of trouble. If we have the sense of a Goose, we will stand by each other when things get rough. We will stay in formation with those headed where we want to go.

The next time you see a formation of Geese, remember their message, that, "it is indeed a reward, a challenge and a privilege to be a contributing member of a team."

As we awaken to the possibilities of ministry in our lives, as we live into our own vision of the ministry to which we are called, may we learn to emulate the wild geese, collaborating, listening to each other, honking our encouragement, and knowing always the joy of service and the privilege of being part of this beloved community.

Sources:

Sawyer, Keith (2008-03-04). *Group Genius: The Creative Power of Collaboration* (Kindle Location 345). Basic Books. Kindle Edition.

The Story of Wild Geese (author unknown) retrieved from http://www.oocities.org/lf_loriflower/1/geese.html