



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“Heeding the Call”

© by **The Reverend Alison Wilbur Eskildsen**

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Centering Thoughts

*Is that what they call a vocation, what you do with joy
as if you had fire in your heart, the devil in your body? Josephine Baker*

*What does God want me to do? Be here or go there?...The answer was: God is not interested
in where you are or what you do...[God] is interested only in the quality and quantity
of the love you give. Nothing else. Nothing else. Mother Gavrilia, ‘The Ascetic of Love’*

*Before I can tell my life what I want to do with it, I must listen to my life telling me who I am.
Parker Palmer, ‘Let Your Life Speak’*

Sermon

When your phone rings, do you rush to answer it?

A college philosophy professor tried to liberate me from the curse of ringing phones. One day when I was meeting with him the phone rang. This was back in the Dark Ages, before answering machines, voicemail, or caller ID, and when phones rang as long as the caller didn’t hang up. Even so, Dr. Padgett ignored the ringing phone.

I interrupted our conversation to suggest I didn’t mind if he wanted to answer it. His response was, “Just because it rings doesn’t mean I must answer.”

Wow! Somehow he’d slain the monster residing in the phone who reaches out to get those who let it ring. The monster that hisses at me, saying ‘someone needs me’. Threatening that someone might never call back. Suggesting some great opportunity might be missed or some calamity will happen – if I don’t pick up the god damn ringing phone right now!

How times have changed. Those of you born since phone technologies were advanced likely have no idea that a ringing phone could produce such fear. Now callers leave messages and we decide whether to return the call or not. With the push of a button we can ‘Decline’ a call. What power! Goodbye, monsters!

I wish. When my phone rings I still feel an ogre reaching out, demanding I answer. A

lifetime without voicemail is hard to shake.

Phones aren't the source of calls. I believe every one of us receives calls from life, from God, from our inner conscience, or from our hopes and dreams—but, do we answer or do we decline these calls?

Imagine Moses on the mountain with a cell phone. If an unknown caller rang up his phone, would he have answered? What if the phone identified God as the caller? Would he have pressed the Decline button?

The Hebrew Bible tells us Moses did decline God's demand to become a leader and free his people from Egyptian enslavement. If he had a phone, he might have said God misdialed. Instead, Moses offered excuses. He claimed he wasn't worthy. He said he wasn't a very good speaker. But God wasn't buying any of it and Moses finally agreed. He accepted the responsibility while having no confidence that he could accomplish God's call for him. He accepted knowing he risked his own life in doing so.

In the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy by J.R.R. Tolkien, Bilbo Baggins and Gandalph the Wizard asked the young hobbit Frodo, to answer their call to return a powerful gold ring to the place it was forged and the fire that could destroy it. This clearly was a call to danger, a wide-eyed innocent asked to leave the comfort of his shire home to step out into a dangerous world filled with monsters and numerous terrors to save his world from the power of the ring. And carrying that ring, of being that savior, would change him in ways good and bad. Tolkien writes in *The Fellowship of the Ring*:

A great dread fell on [Frodo], as if he was awaiting the pronouncement of some doom that he had long foreseen and vainly hoped might after all never be spoken. An overwhelming longing to rest and remain at peace by Bilbo's side in Rivendell filled all his heart. At last with an effort he spoke, and wondered to hear his own words, as if some other will was using his small voice. "I will take the Ring," he said, "though I do not know the way." /

To heed the call, Frodo must risk entering the unknown. When we heed our calls, we also know not the way.

We may believe our calls could not be as momentous as freeing enslaved people or saving the world from evil, but they might. We might change only one person's life when we answer our calls, or we may change many. We'll never know if we don't heed our calls.

But we live in the real world, not that of religious myth or fiction. What are our calls?

Last Sunday I talked about our thirst or longing for something more in our lives. We long for more connections, more feeling, more meaning, more love, more commitment to our values, and just *more* than what meets the eye. We long for what lies beneath the material for something deeper, something that the language of spirituality and religion may better articulate. We long for what may be found in religious community. We long for what does not exist, but what we hope will. Our longing is a call to change.

For Moses, the call was for freedom and justice. For Frodo, the call was for good to triumph over evil. What are you called to change in your life or in the world? And are you heeding that call or are you pressing the decline button?

Might your longing indicate you are not very happy? If you're a student, are you studying for a degree that has lost its meaning for you, yet you stick with it, fearful of starting over? If you're working, are you working at an unfulfilling job, even if it pays well enough? Do you look at the clock each hour, waiting for escape from your modern enslavement? If you're retired, are you still looking for what will fulfill this stage of your life? What are your deepest desires and will you risk fulfilling them?

If you seek better relationships, deeper connections with others, are you doing anything to make it happen? Are you waiting for someone else to make a move because you're afraid of rejection or disappointment? Friendships and love both require risk-taking.

If you seek more feeling, more heart and spirit than head and logic, are you doing anything to make it happen? Do you fight back tears, ashamed of your emotions? Do you close yourself off from sharing what's really going on in your life? Do you refuse to feel something spiritual out of fear that you can't explain it?

If you seek more meaning in your life, have you examined why meaning is absent? Are you focused more on yourself than others? Ancient and modern sages teach that through serving others we gain more connections, more meaning, more purpose, more satisfaction, and yes, more happiness. Loving ourselves is not enough. Being called, longing for something more, is a call to get over ourselves and seek out ways to serve others.

Ministry is often referred to as a professional calling or vocation from God to serve the people and create the peaceable kingdom. In shared ministry we help create the beloved community, name it the Kingdom of God on Earth, if you like. My own calling comes from God if you wish, though I prefer to name it the Spirit of Love. Other careers are callings, such as health care, education, social service, civil service, and more are callings. Even the military. Even the garbage collectors. Their job is incredibly challenging, risky, and far from glamorous. Like Frodo, they face mountains of stinky monsters in their travels. And they save communities from disease and pollution; they restore beauty to the world by managing our discards.

A-vocations provide others with meaningful lives. The work that keeps bread on your table and clothes on your back may allow you to fulfill an unpaid calling. Many present here give their time, talent and treasure to causes they feel called to serve. On Thursday this past week, our own Lois Shenkel and Will Sheehan cooked a meal that other members served on Friday at Our Daily Bread. That's just one example of how you respond to callings.

You don't get paid for this work so you must be receiving some other value back. Shout out right now some of what you receive for your volunteerism, either here or out in the community? (*Wait for pop corn responses.*) As you give, you receive.

I think we accept these calls to serve others out of Love, Hope, Faith or Trust. If we had little love for ourselves or the world, we would be like another of Tolkien's characters, Golem.

Once the keeper of the ring, its power transformed him into a near-monster now focused only on re-acquiring his precious ring. Golem had no thought and no love for anything but his own need. But love *has* the power to call us out of self-interest. Love is our desire to be better, do better, and have greater good in the world. Love reminds us that we are alive, allows us to see the suffering in the world, and demands we work to change it.

Hope calls us with the power of courage and the belief that change is possible. Hope keeps us at our quests when we encounter obstacles and losses. Hope informs us that our longings may be met if we try hard enough, work long enough even when we're most discouraged. Frodo had hope that he would find a way, and so he set off.

Faith or Trust calls us with the power and confidence that what we do can make a difference and that it matters. Moses trusted that liberation was worth the risk.

Quaker author Parker Palmer says we must listen to how our lives are speaking to us. Life calls us on, calls us forward into a future of our choice, if we but heed the longing, the calling. What is your life saying to you? What might your God or inner voice be calling you to? What do you long for? Will you respond?

In this Fellowship of the Flaming Chalice, in this community of love and life, let your life speak. We will be beside you with love, with hope, and with faith. I know it to be so.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. What calls you to deeper engagement with or understanding of yourself, others, or perhaps God or the divine?
2. Share a time you felt you were not doing what you were called to do, or what seemed right to you. What did you do about it, and why?
3. Are you fulfilled by your daily activities? How might you give your life greater meaning?