

Questions to Ask Ourselves¹

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Desmond Tutu writes: “As an old man, I can say this again. Start where you are and realise you are not meant on your own to resolve all of these massive problems. My heart leaps with joy at discovering the number of people who say “we want to make a better world”. And you will be surprised at how it can get to be catching. Do what you can, where you can.”²

Today, in the season of setting goals and making resolutions, we reflect on questions to ask ourselves about what we might do to make a difference in our world.

Our readings today were Let the Artists Win by Bob Janis-Dillon³
and Commitment by Dorothy Day:

People say, what is the sense of our small effort.

They cannot see that we must lay one brick at a time, take one step at a time.

A pebble cast into a pond causes ripples that spread in all directions.

Each one of our thoughts, words, and deeds is like that.

No one has the right to sit down and feel hopeless.

There's too much work to do.

Sermon

Quaker educator and author Parker Palmer asks, “Is the life I am living, the same as the life that wants to live in me?” In his book, *Let Your Life Speak*, he recalls how in his early thirties, he began to wake up to questions about the path his life would take. Hearing the old Quaker advice, “let your life speak,” he imagined that it meant “Let the highest truths and values guide you. Live up to those demanding standards in everything you do.”

Because he had heroes at the time who seemed to be doing that, he thought it meant living a life like Martin Luther King, Jr. or Rosa Parks, or Mahatma Gandhi or Dorothy Day—a life of high purpose. I think we try to do that as Unitarian Universalists too. We identify our highest truths and values, and counsel each other to use them as our guides.

So, he says, “I lined up the loftiest ideals I could find and set out to achieve them.”⁴ He had been in a graduate program at Berkeley, but then decided that he should get involved in community organizing in the inner city. So he did that for two years, then got a position at Georgetown University helping students participate in the organizing. After a total of five years, he was totally burnt out. Here is what he says about it: “I was too thin-skinned to make a good community organizer—my vocational reach had exceeded my grasp. I had been driven more by the “oughts” of the urban crisis than by a sense of true self. Lacking insight into my own limits and potentials, I had allowed ego and ethics to lead me into a situation that my soul could not abide.”⁵

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2 Desmond Tutu posted these words on his Facebook wall, [December 20 at 2:48am](#)

3 <http://www.uua.org/worship/words/poetry/let-artists-win>

4 Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*, p. 3

5 *Ibid.*, p. 22.

I think about his words as we face a changed national environment. I have been asking myself and others, what does the change in our country mean for our personal activities and commitments? What does it mean for our congregation? Every day I receive dozens of emails asking me to sign this petition or donate to that organization working on behalf of immigrants, or women's reproductive health care, or the environment, and on and on. Invitations to March on Washington, or Boston, or Augusta. Invitations to lobby my senator or call my congressperson. I can feel overwhelmed by trying to make decisions on what to choose, what to ignore, what to do with the same amount of time in each day, in each week as I have always had.

How are we meant to respond to the current challenges in our world, to the pain and suffering we see? On the one hand, we can say simply—follow our values, care for the vulnerable, fight for justice. But Parker Palmer asks us to take a step back, to look more deeply at what we are being called to do. Palmer says, “Our deepest calling is to grow into our own authentic selfhood, whether or not it conforms to some image of who we *ought* to be... True vocation joins self and service, as Frederick Beuchner asserts when he defines vocation as 'the place where your deep gladness meets the world's deep need.'”⁶

So one question we might be asking ourselves is, What is our own deep gladness? What sparks in us a sense of joy, because it taps into the very essence of our gift, our personality, our being? Another way to think of this might be, What are we good at doing? For some of us, that might be art, or nursing, or kindergarten teaching... the multi-faceted talents celebrated in our first reading today. The influential African-American theologian, Howard Thurman, puts it, “Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.”

But is it really okay to pay attention to our own hearts, to our own deep gladness, to what makes us come alive? Shouldn't we be mobilizing, organizing and lobbying every day to support our values in a society where they are under attack? I think what Palmer and Beuchner and Thurman are reminding us is that we can't give what we don't have. Not that we can't learn new skills and rise to challenging occasions—but we can't sustain a commitment if it goes counter to our nature.

For example, some people might be very at home with organizing a protest rally—making phone calls, posting on social media, renting sound equipment, contacting the right speakers, giving a stirring speech, and so forth. Some one else might be very good at going door to door, talking to neighbors and strangers of all political persuasions, making a connection and bridging the divide. Someone else might be good at strategizing behind the scenes, mapping out goals and objectives, and a course of action to take to get there. Someone else might be very good at bringing coffee and cookies to the meeting, and making sure that each new person is welcomed and brought into the conversation, and leaves feeling a sense of connection and involvement. Even in organizing and mobilizing, we each bring our particular gifts to the table.

And by that same token, we each have limits. One of Palmer's main points is that he learned as much about understanding his calling from his limits as from his talents and gifts. He said, “Lacking insight into my own limits and potentials, I had allowed ego and ethics to lead me into a situation that my soul could not abide.”⁷

6 Ibid., p. 16

7 Ibid., p. 22.

He isn't referring to the external limits that society places on people because of our gender, or the color of our skin, or the country of our origin. Rather, he means the limits that arise from our personalities, from our natural way of being in the world, from who we are at our core. We are encouraged to be tender with our natural way of being in the world, and not ask our souls to bear what they cannot abide.

For example, if someone is a complete introvert, they would not best serve their soul by forcing themselves to go to a march or a meeting. Rather, they might be happier to write letters to the editor or to their congressperson. Another person might not be able to go door to door, talking to neighbors, but they are really good at tutoring asylum seekers one-on-one to help them learn to speak English more quickly and feel at home in this city. Our limits and our strengths are mirrors to each other. In our congregation's mission statement we say, we help our members to share their gifts to build a world of compassion, equality, and freedom. So we need to ask ourselves about our gifts and our limits.

I want to mention something about external limits. Parker Palmer admits that he holds a lot of privilege as an educated white male. Even to ask ourselves about “our soul's calling” assumes that we have the privilege to ponder the question. Many people work overtime in jobs that do nothing to provide gladness, and barely enough to support a home and food. Perhaps another important question to ask ourselves is about our areas of privilege or areas of marginalization. What we can offer the community is dependent upon our social location—and that goes both ways. As a woman, I would not be welcome to share a gift for leading worship in the Catholic community. This is an area of marginalization for me. On the other hand, as someone with a steady income, it would be inappropriate for me to try to teach people in poverty how to save their money. It would be intrusive and disrespectful.

“Letting our lives speak” includes understanding our position in a social fabric, the powers we hold and the challenges we face just by who our people are, where we live, the color of our skin. I am reminded of the advice given to budding writers—write what you know.

So we must ask, What are our gifts, what gives us joy, what are our limits, what is our location? “Is the life I am living, the same as the life that wants to live in me?” It is from this place of understanding our own essence that we can best respond to the great needs of our world.

For to be sure, there are great needs before us. In fact, that is another hurdle we face—sometimes we feel as if the problems we face are so big, that what we have to offer is too small to make a difference. One approach to this problem is offered by Israeli writer, Amos Oz. He says,

“Everyone of us has to choose confronting a big fire. Everyone of us has a teaspoon. Fill it with water and throw it in the fire. The teaspoon is very small and the fire is very large, but there are many of us and every one of us has a teaspoon. I do what I can as a teacher, as a writer, as a neighbor, as a citizen, to pour some water on the flames of hatred and incitement and fanaticism and bigotry and prejudice. I have words and I use words. My words are my teaspoon. This is what I can do. What can you do?”⁸

When each of us does our small part, something can change about the larger problems.

8 <https://www.facebook.com/92ndstreetY/videos/10154402971973884/?pnref=story>

Writer Charles Eisenstein goes even further. He addresses the underlying logic that permeates our society and our movements, that we need “big solutions to big problems.” This logic says, “whatever you do on a local level, you'd better make sure... it can go viral, because otherwise its impact will be trivial.”⁹ He says that “contained within this logic is an implicit hierarchy that values the contributions of some people more than others. It values the activities of people who have a big reach, a big platform, a loud voice, or the money or institutional power to affect thousands or millions of people.” And he finds this suspect in the movement for transformation because it is the same valuation as the dominant society's allocation of status and power.

He explores the theories of change that underly such logic—that “change happens only when a force is exerted on a mass.” But the problem with this logic is that “the ruling elites” of the world always have “more force-based power—more money, more guns, ...a bigger voice—than any activist organization ever could.” Yet, throughout history, there have been changes that happened in unexpected ways, from unexpected places. He says, “Reality often turns out to be the opposite of what the arithmetic of measurable impact would suggest. The most potent actions are often the ones done without forethought of publicity... Every act we take ripples out to affect the whole world...”

He goes on to reflect, “My indoctrination into the logic of bigness has exerted an insidious effect on my own life, causing me always to question whether I am doing enough. When I focus on the small, intimate realms of life, taking the hours to tend to a relationship, to beautify a space, perhaps, or to enter the timeless child's world with my youngest son, I am subject to an unease along the lines of, 'There is something more important I'm supposed to be doing.' The logic of bigness devalues the very heart of life.”

I thought about this logic of bigness quite a bit when I was trying to publish my book. I sent book proposals to several publishers, but got only rejections. One publisher was kind enough to give a reason. They said, your writing is good, but we don't know how to market this kind of book because you are not well-known, and there is no big hook to pull people in. I didn't have a big enough voice. But when I decided to self-publish the book, it grew from a sense that even a small voice must speak its truth, even a small bird has a song to sing. And so I named my publishing imprint Small Bird Press.¹⁰

If we are all interconnected, then our gifts and our limits are intertwined for the life of the whole—what each of us has to offer is unique and irreplaceable. In the world of which we dream, hierarchy has given way to the circle of community. Some of us will have the power to lobby, to protest, to rage against the destruction that can be caused by greed run amok. Others will have the power to grow gardens, to teach children to be kind, to dance and sing so that our spirits are replenished. We must live the life that wants to be lived in us, we must follow the lead of our hearts.

Parker Palmer speaks of a tool that helped him to get clarity about the path he must follow to be true to the lead of his heart. It is the Quaker practice of the Clearness Committee. A Clearness Committee is composed of a searcher, and several trusted friends whose task it is to sit with the searcher and ask questions. Not to give advice, not to fix or solve the problem. But to ask tender questions which the searcher can ponder and perhaps gain a new perspective and go deeper into the wisdom that lives inside each person's own soul.

9 “For Big Problems, Small Solutions,” *Utne Reader* Winter 2016, p. 40-45. From the forthcoming book, *Scaling Down*.

10 <https://findingourwayhome.blog/2016/12/13/small-bird-press/>

Palmer tells the story of calling on such a committee when he was considering the possibility of taking a position as president of a nearby college. People sat quietly with him, and asked questions about his hopes and dreams, about what this future might be for him. About halfway through the session, someone asked, “What would you like most about being president of this college?” Palmer began to list all of the things he might not like about the position, and the questioner gently repeated the question, “But what would you like most about being president of the college?” Finally, somewhat embarrassed, Palmer said, “What I would like most is seeing my picture in the paper with the word 'president' underneath it.”¹¹

Everyone remained quiet as he pondered this insight. And then someone said, “Do you think there might be an easier way to get your picture in the paper?” At that point, they all laughed, and Palmer too. He realized that all of his life there had been an expectation that he should become a university president, but it wasn't the true calling of his soul. He later went on to share his gifts with educators as a teacher from outside the institutional structures.

Tender questions can help us to uncover the leading of our hearts. Such questions can also apply to our life as a spiritual community. We can ask ourselves, what are our gifts as a congregation? What resources do we have to offer our larger community? What stirs our deep joy? What makes us come alive?

One of the resources we have as a congregation is a deep respect for the inner wisdom of each person. We also have compassionate listening circles, small groups in which much trust has been built up, in which people share the stories of their journey, and in which we might ask deep questions of each other. Our spiritual enrichment groups are not the same as clearness committees, but they might adapt if there was a need to do so. We value the journey of each person to find their soul's deep gladness.

The resources of our congregation include the gifts and talents of each of our members and friends, and the possibilities that emerge when we join our efforts into a common purpose. We have space and volunteer energy and we also have the freedom as a voluntary association to create our own mission, to speak our truths, to serve in a way we feel called to do so.

We can also ask, What is our location? What are our limits? We don't have to try to do it all, to fix problems that are bigger than we are. We may not be able to offer a place of sanctuary to every undocumented immigrant, but we might be able to help a few. We might be able to offer land for a community garden, and join with interfaith neighbors to speak in support of our Muslim colleagues. As a religious community, we might not have access to large sums of money, but we can speak about values and hopes.

These are just a few of my own thoughts in the quiet of my home. Our biggest resource is that we can ponder the questions together. When we open our hearts to live the life that wants to be lived in us, we can hear the wisdom deep inside, we can encourage each other and support each other. I am reminded of a very old story—a story from the 3rd century of the Christian church, when they were facing the persecutions of the Roman empire.

11 Palmer, Op.Cit., p. 44-46.

The emperor ordered the archdeacon Lawrence to give to him all the treasures of the church, and gave him three days to collect it. Lawrence quickly sold whatever they had and distributed it to the poor and widows, the sick and the orphans that the church had already been supporting. When he was summoned to the emperor after three days, he came into the great palace, stopped, and then gestured behind him where there were throngs of the sick and poor of the city following him. He told the emperor: “Here is our treasure.”

H. G. Wenzel, a Unitarian Universalist lay leader, once said, “Keepers of the dream will come again and again, from what humble places we do not know, to struggle against the crushing odds, leaving behind no worldly kingdom, but only a gleam in the dark hills to show how high we may climb. Already there have been many such heroes — women and men whose names we do not know, but whose words and deeds still light the path for us.”¹²

Closing Words

Our closing words are from Ibrahim Baba, who was a beloved teacher at Starr King School before he died last February:

“The things that you love in life, the things that bring you joy,
the things that bring you blessing, the things that bring you love:
go toward those things, live into those things, embrace those things.”
As we extinguish the flame of this chalice,
let each of us carry its light into every day of our lives.

¹² From *A Chosen Faith* by John A. Behrens and Forrest Church, p. 56.