

## **Hearing Voices in the Silence**

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“Few people receive big calls,” Gregg Levoy writes, “in visions of flaming chariots and burning bushes. Most of the calls we receive and ignore are the proverbial still, small voices that the biblical prophets heard, the daily calls to pay attention to our intuitions, to be authentic, to live by our own moral codes of honor.

Our lives are measured out in coffee spoons, wrote T.S. Eliot; they are measured out not in the grand sweeps but in the small gestures. The great breakthroughs in our lives generally happen only as a result of the accumulation of innumerable small steps and minor accomplishments. We’re called to reach out to someone, to pick up an odd book on the library shelf, to sign up for a class even though we’re convinced we don’t have the time or money, to go to our desks each day, to turn left instead of right. These are the fire drills for our bigger calls.”

So often people ask ministers, “What is your calling?” or if they don’t explicitly ask, they at least assume one has a road to Damascus story to tell. Believe it or not this is true even of Unitarian Universalists

whose understanding of the source of that call may be up for debate. We assume that a calling in life is a big bang of sorts. In point of fact those “big bang” calls happen very infrequently compared to the numerous smaller tugs at our mind and heart that happen every day.

I think the difference between following one of these minor calls or not, is a result of how open we are to life. The more open we are the more likely it is that we will act on one of these small tugs moving us in a new and possibly scary direction. And who knows? Perhaps what seems like a small tug of the heart could wind up being a full blown call to our higher selves.

When I was in my final year of seminary I decided to study for the Doctor of Ministry degree at Meadville Lombard. The abbreviation for the Doctor of Ministry is “D. Min.”. It brings whole new meaning to that line in the Bible that says that Jesus when from house to house casting out “D. Min”s! Part of what this decision included was writing a thesis proposal during the first semester of the year and submitting it to the faculty for approval. I decided to write a thesis focused on Buddhism from a theological perspective, and so I was assigned the brand new theology professor on the faculty as my primary advisor. She was, and is, a highly respected theologian and scholar, and I was overjoyed to be able to work with her—at first. I later discovered that she was the first Unitarian Universalist theologian to have been trained as a Marine drill Sergeant. Ok, she hadn’t but it felt like it. Dutifully I

would write my pages, meet with her, and redo them all over again. Occasionally I would get a nod or a wink in the right direction but these were few and far between. Once I left her office after a particularly grueling interview, a fist full of rewrites in my hand, we made an appointment to see each other in two weeks. As I was leaving her office she admonished me to, “Not get too much sleep for the next few weeks.”

While I didn't particularly mind doing this work, what I started to notice as time went by was that the rewrites I would do were supportive of her research and not really what I was interested in. Soon I had lost all control of this project in an attempt to please her. This was a recipe for disaster, and I had a sense of impending doom as the semester drew to a close. I presented my proposal to the faculty, rather half-heartedly since most of it was in my advisor's area of interest and not my own. In the weeks leading up to Christmas I got the news, my proposal had been rejected. A semester's worth of work down the drain. It is fair to say that that was the low point of my academic career.

I was offered another chance. I could submit a second proposal just before everyone went off to Christmas break. To do that, however, would mean that I would have to submit it by Monday—I would have a weekend to do a semester's worth of work. Dejected, I agreed to these terms since I had no choice. I remember that Sunday morning I was slow to awaken. I was in that haze between sleep and full consciousness. As I was emerging from sleep, I had one of those

moments where everything fell into place. My entire thesis proposal simply appeared before my mind in the course of a couple of minutes. Wham, there it was. I felt like the monk in the old story who spent years meditating with seemingly no progress. He entered an intense retreat and spent hours in meditation and still he was spiritually dry. Finally his master gave him a stick of incense and a knife. He told him to light the incense and meditate for one hour, and if he did not experience enlightenment, then he should kill himself rather than waste the rest of his life. Given that motivation, the monk was successful. It seems all I needed was a short period of time, two days, and the threat of failure, and enlightenment in the form of a new and creative idea, came to me as well.

I spent the next six months fleshing out on paper what occurred to me that morning, and the thesis sailed through. As a postscript to this story, you will notice that I have not revealed this professor's name, in part because it might be familiar to some, and also because we are now friends. She and I are members in the same ministerial study group, and over the years we have developed a rather cordial friendship. I guess all of those pins poked into all of those voodoo dolls over the years really paid off.

In the years since, I have thought a lot about that experience I had that Sunday morning waking up. What was that burst of creative energy that happened to me right at the moment it was needed? I am sure that

psychologists could explain it in purely scientific terms. I had been under pressure for months and given the tight deadline I was getting in my own way, mentally speaking. When you relax a little bit, some people report this happening in the bathtub for example, all of a sudden something in the mind unwinds and starts putting pieces of the puzzle together. If you are one who goes in for religious poetry and symbolism one could say that it was a vision or a call from the divine. Perhaps it was inspiration from Manjushri the Bodhisattva of Wisdom. Whatever you wish to call it, I believe that there is in all of us a deeply creative and imaginative spirit that too often we keep locked up. I suspect we are afraid of it for some reason. We are afraid of being called into some uncomfortable places in life, and so we only let this creative part of our souls out in the most dire circumstances. Or at least that is true for some of us. The artists among us have perhaps figured out a way to channel this into a productive outlet.

Elijah gets his call from God in what the Bible calls “the sound of sheer silence” or what the King James Version poetically dubbed “the still small voice.” This past week marked the end of the High Holy days in Judaism, and it is our tradition to honor the occasion with a return to the Old Testament. The story of Elijah at the cave is probably my favorite story in the Old Testament. Both back then and now we ask the question “Where is God?” God is not in the fire or in the rock splitting wind. All of the big dramatic set pieces that you can imagine coming

from a Cecil B. DeMille movie are not where God is. Instead God is found in the silence. The Quakers often point to this story to support their practice of meeting in silence and speaking when they feel the call move within them. Although I love ritual, there is something very appealing and very authentic about that.

Elijah too is under some pressure. Instead of a knife and a stick of incense though, he has all of Ahab and Jezebel's army on his tail trying to kill him. I especially like the part when he sees and hears the angel in that haze of awakening. In the end, God gives Elijah reassurance, "Even though the people in power are out to get you, rest assured that you are my prophet and you are on the right side." It is so good to get that message sometimes isn't it? The theologian Fredrick Beuckner defined the call as the moment when your deep passion meets the world's deep need. To respond to a call, either big or small, is to have faith that somewhere out there in the world there is a deep need that your greatest dream and desire can fulfill. But hearing and living out that call can take a lifetime.

It seems to me that a calling goes both ways. There is the tug at the heart, which may or may not be a sign from God or some other force in the universe, which leads you in a new and creative direction. But there is also the call out to God; out to that creative force in the universe because of difficult circumstances. What do you call out to? What do you go to for refuge, as the Buddhists would say? It may be God or

something supernatural. It might be a close friend or family member. It might even be a favorite book. I find that when I feel a little fuzzy on what it is that I believe or what my life is all about, that a quick reread of “Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind” by Shunryu Suzuki seems to set things aright. That is not to say that that particular book will work for everyone, but it is a call the soul sends out looking for meaning and purpose. Where do you send out your call? What have you heard back?

Thus there is a flip side to Beukner’s definition of a call as your deep passion meeting the world’s deep need. That makes a call sound like a peak experience, and perhaps it is. But when we find ourselves calling out, in both large and small ways, it is not always in happy times. Not infrequently, it is precisely in these moments of pain and suffering that we gain the most spiritual insight and clarity into ourselves. That was certainly my experience in coming to understand the suffering of writing my doctoral thesis. It is not usually a silver lining one looks forward too, but I figure if you are going to go through some difficult experience, why not come out of it with some new insight or understanding?

The chemist Ilya Prigogine takes this a step further. By any chance has anyone here ever heard of Ilya Prigogine? Ah, preaching to a room full of chemists! He won the Nobel Prize in chemistry in 1977 for his theory of “dissipative structures.” Now I don’t know much about chemistry, after all I just told you that my area is theology and religion.

I did alright in science when I was younger, but there are many more of you who are expert in this than I am. But what I do know is that a dissipative structure is, “A thermodynamically open system which is operating out of, and often far from, thermodynamic equilibrium in an environment with which it exchanges energy and matter and is characterized by the spontaneous appearance of symmetry breaking (anisotropy) and the formation of complex, sometimes chaotic, structures where interacting particles exhibit long range correlations.” See they don’t just hand out those D. Mins at Meadville Lombard! All I can say is that Wikipedia is a beautiful thing.

Basically Prigogine’s theory states that friction is a fundamental part of nature. Particles and molecules are constantly banging around in really chaotic structures, think of a hurricane for example. And yet a hurricane is not mere chaos; it has arms which expand out and rotate, and an eye that forms. A structure spontaneously appears in one of the most chaotic and uncontrollable environments imaginable. Or take for example mountains. You see mountains all the time if you travel in central and western Pennsylvania. We think of them as stable, and unmovable. And yet mountains come about when tectonic plates on the earth’s crust floating around, smash into each other. A new structure emerges out of chaos. Some even theorize that life itself is the emergence of a structure out of the chaos of amino acids and proteins. Thus anything that is isolated from friction, prevented from being

disturbed, becomes stagnant and dies. We need a little grit in the oyster to form a pearl. When our life seems chaotic it may in fact be the birth pangs of some new form of growth, some new part of ourselves that we did not know was within us gets dislodged and is allowed to emerge from its cage. No one likes disorder and chaos in their lives. But perhaps there is something quietly calling to us in those moments waiting for our response.

How will you respond to that call that comes in the still small voice once the mountains are shattered and the fires have calmed down? How do we even quiet ourselves to hear the still small voice in the first place? It all comes back again to spiritual practice. By doing something, physically doing something, on a regular basis that puts you in a state of mind that is calm and open to life, then eventually you will gain that sensitivity. As Levoy relates in our reading this morning, some portions of the data that comes to your sense from the world will take on greater significance and meaning. I am not guaranteeing that one day you will see a burning bush and be asked by some disembodied voice to remove your shoes. But being open to the small calls that emerge out the still small voice can make you more receptive just in case one of those really big calls comes along. And perhaps you will find that it is leading you to your hearts deepest passion. You will find there deep creativity and joy; your own personal Eden. And then just perhaps we

can engage that dialogue with the Holy that Lavoy envisions. To call and to be called. That is the crux of the spiritual life we seek.

May all those who hear life calling them, find the strength and courage to chase after what they hear. May we all be open to the creativity that inspiration may bring to us at any moment. And may we not shy away from crying out in our own moments of sorrow and pain. For it may just be that our calling out is a call to another to respond. Amen Blessed Be.