

**United First Parish Church in Quincy  
10/2/05 Service**

**Reading: Excerpt from Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation**

**By Parker Palmer, pp. 10-12**

**It is a strange gift, this birthright gift of self. Accepting it turns out to be even more demanding than attempting to become someone else! I have sometimes responded to that demand by ignoring the gift, or hiding it, or fleeing from it, or squandering it – and I think I am not alone. There is a Hasidic tale that reveals, with amazing brevity, both the universal tendency to want to be someone else and the ultimate importance of becoming one’s self: Rabbi Zusya, when he was an old man, said, “In the coming world, they will not ask me: ‘Why were you not Moses?’ They will ask me: ‘Why were you not Zusya?’”**

**If you doubt that we all arrive in this world with gifts and as a gift, pay attention to an infant or a very young child. A few years ago, my daughter and her newborn baby came to live with me for a while. Watching my granddaughter from her earliest days on earth, I was able, in my early fifties, to see something that had eluded me as a twenty-something parent: my granddaughter arrived in the world as *this* kind of person rather than *that*, or *that*, or *that*.**

**She did not show up as raw material to be shaped into whatever image the world might want her to take. She arrived with her own gifted form, with the shape of her own sacred soul. Biblical faith calls it the image of God in which we are all created. Thomas Merton calls it true self. Quakers call it the inner light, or “that of God” in every person. The humanist tradition calls it identity and integrity. No matter what you call it, it is a pearl of great price.**

**In those early days of my granddaughter’s life, I began observing the inclinations and proclivities that were planted in her at birth. I noticed, and I still notice, what she likes and dislikes, what she is drawn toward and repelled by, how she moves, what she does, what she says.**

**I am gathering my observations in a letter. When my granddaughter reaches her late teens or early twenties, I will make sure that my letter finds its way to her, with a preface something like this: “Here is a sketch of who you were from your earliest days in this world. It is not a definitive picture – only you can draw that. But it was sketched by a person who loves you very much. Perhaps these notes will help you do sooner something your grandfather did only later: remember who you were when you first arrived and reclaim the gift of true self.” [Intro Hymn#208, “Every Time I Feel The Spirit”]**

**Sermon: *As Seekers, ARE We a Community of Companions?***

**Good morning! I did give serious consideration to writing my first sermon on the theology and history of pulpit design. (pause) This IS an impressive pulpit, but my style and theology of sermons is actually a relational one of questions and mutual dialogue – rather than the sermon on the mount.**

**In fact, my sermon this morning originated as response to Sheldon’s sermon and question two weeks ago: “Is There No Rest For The Seekers?” Sheldon proposed that searching and questioning is at the heart of Unitarian Universalist faith. But then Sheldon went even more deeply and spoke of the “radical trust” such a faith requires – that our “rest” or “peace” “is to be found in our capacity to trust totally the larger reality of being in which we have our life.” In this place of “radical trust” and “rest,” Sheldon suggested, we find “wisdom,” “understanding,” and “transforming love” with our “community of companions on this journey.”**

**This is a deep and powerful message, but I found myself wondering, “*Are We A Community of Companions?*” Or put another way, do Unitarian Universalist *communities* foster an environment that cultivates this “radical trust,” “wisdom,” and “transforming love?” Do**

**we truly *encounter* one another as companions in a journey of spiritual depth? This is not an idle question. I believe our comfort and experience with such depth is key to sustaining, let alone building, our faith and our communities. It is also key to authentic social justice work and the type of interfaith dialogue necessary for building coalitions in the creation of a more just world.**

**A few experiences in the past couple of years began to crystallize these questions for me. In another Unitarian Universalist congregation, I observed an intern leading a summer service in which she asked people to share their deepest spiritual or religious experiences. Everyone in attendance agreed that they did not talk about such things in church – though they were surprised at how enriched they felt when they did so that morning. What do you make of that? No one in that congregation shared their spiritual life at an intimate level. And this was their NORMAL experience of church. Does this sound familiar in your experience of Unitarian Universalism?**

**Not too long after this, I ran an expressive art workshop for a small group retreat of different Unitarian Universalists. All of these people were longtime church members and good friends. One woman [I'll call her Martha] had lost her husband [I'll call him John] to very**

sudden death a year before the workshop. Martha said she was afraid to tell the group about her deepest spiritual experience because she did not want the group to think she was crazy. With encouragement, she was able to tell her story. One afternoon, Martha was sitting in her living room while John was in the kitchen. Suddenly, she heard a voice tell her, “Go tell John that you love him.” She was, of course, startled by this voice and responded back, “Now? You mean now?” And the voice said, “Yes, right now.” Well, she got up from the couch and went in to John and hugged him and told him that she loved him. Not too long after this, John died of a sudden aneurism in her arms at home. Martha told this story with vivid feeling and tears, and afterward she expressed how much *closer* she felt to her friends and to her community now that she could share this story.

Later, I found myself thinking about how many Unitarian Universalists said they withheld from sharing their personal religious experiences or did not have an opportunity in the church to do so. I wondered why this was so. Isn't this a significant business of the church? Isn't one of our seven Unitarian Universalist principles about encouragement to spiritual growth in one another? (You can actually find our principles listed in your hymnal right after the preface pages.)

I wonder if we still tend to think of religious education and exploration as only for children? Do we confine adult religious education to safe intellectual discussions or social justice projects? In [A Chosen Faith: An Introduction to Unitarian Universalism](#), Rev. Forrest Church describes our theological diversity as a “cathedral of the world” in which “one light shines through many windows.” Rev. John Buehrens, his co-writer and former president of our denomination, counterpointed: “Within the cathedral, no one seems to be talking to anyone else!”

I wonder if this has to do with the type of person who often gets drawn to Unitarian Universalism. Maybe we’re just a tad too uncomfortable with mystery – even though that’s first of our living tradition sources (you can find those on that same page in the hymnal). The very first of our living tradition sources reads: “Direct experience [repeat] of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces that create and uphold life.” Notice theologically that this living tradition source comes *first* – over and above those prophetic words and deeds; over and above our Jewish Christian heritage; even over and above reason and science. We often don’t pay attention to the

meaning of our living tradition sources – let alone think about why we might place “direct experience with transcending mystery and wonder” first and foremost. Do we perhaps hide a little in shame and keep our experiences with the mysterious to ourselves, fearful we may be judged or not understood by others? Does this cut us off from an *essential* experience of our humanity – our spiritual wellspring and source of renewal?

*I am* speaking from personal experience when I raise these questions, and I do relate to Martha’s fears. I was 28 years old before I set foot in a church of my own accord. My formal experience with church and religious education before that point was conflicted. My paternal grandmother was a staunch Roman Catholic, and my working class father utterly rejected any formal religion. His philosophy of life centered around progressive politics and Marxism – depending on his mood. My mother put me and my siblings into a Methodist Sunday school program as a compromise. However, this ended rather abruptly when I told the Sunday school teacher (obviously under my father’s strong influence) that I didn’t think I believed in God. Well, that didn’t go over so well, as you might imagine. I was done with Sunday school teachers and church after that and winded my way through agnosticism

**and atheism to essentially a humanist philosophical perspective in college entirely outside of any church. Do you see a Unitarian Universalist in formation here?**

**As an adult *my* deepest experience with mystery and transcendence came much later – in a hospital room in the midst of tragedy. As some of you know, I have run an urban youth program for many years through the Unitarian Universalist Urban Ministry. In this program was a beautiful young adolescent girl, ironically named Angel. Angel was incredibly smart and talented. She was a mover and shaker, determined to “represent,” as they say in ghetto lingo – to be a much needed role model in her community. I had known her since she was a very young child and watched her grow into this articulate, striking, beautiful young woman who was so popular that people encouraged her to write her autobiography and she had gone on a national trip and met then Vice President Al Gore. Well, Angel at age 16 made a bad decision one night to get in a car with a drunk driver and not to wear her seat belt. Racing at high speeds, the driver struck a tree and Angel went through the windshield.**

**As I stood in the hospital room later when she had fallen into a very deep coma from a brain aneurism, I remember holding her hand**

and touching her arm and trying to communicate to her how much I loved her and wanted her to recover. What I remember next is this very deep and intense warmth rising in my body and the feeling of something, some energy or something, pressing outward from me and seemingly into Angel. In the next moment, Angel moved! The nurse was shocked and exclaimed: “Angel must know you because that’s the first time she’s moved!” In the days and years following, Angel came to be recognized as a medical miracle. The doctors did not believe that she would ever recover, let alone walk or talk again. Today, while Angel will always be limited, she is walking and talking and very much carries her personality of leadership with other disabled young people.

As for me, I was confused and exhausted upon leaving the hospital that first day – and within a couple of days I fell sick with pneumonia. In my mind, the pneumonia was somehow linked to what had happened with Angel. For months afterward I did not talk about this experience with *anyone*. Eventually, I did talk with a female Unitarian Universalist minister who was comforting and encouraging – but still, I would never have dreamed of talking about it with anyone in my home congregation. I was scared by the experience, and, being a therapist by training, I did enough loops in my head about all the possible reasons why I had this

experience to explain away its mysterious aspects. But that didn't work, and I found myself with a need for religious language and religious education. The words "Spirit of Life" began to take on a concrete meaning attached to this experience. I have not lost my humanist and Buddhist religious perspective, nor do I walk around thinking I personally have special healing powers, but I do make much more significant room out of my direct experience for a transcending mystery and wonder. And that experience is one important source of renewal as I engage in social justice work or as I engage in a church community of seekers.

Horace Bushnell writes: "*We live ourselves into religious thinking more than we think our way into religious living.*"<sup>1</sup> [repeat] In my studies at Boston University last year, I researched worship practices in a Unitarian Universalist congregation. I found that members prioritized gaining a sense of community and also access to some experience of transcendence and inspiration.

I was particularly struck by one woman, a former Catholic, who emphasized she missed the opportunity to kneel during meditation and prayer in worship. Now, I found that to be really poignant. I do not

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<sup>1</sup> Bushnell is quoted by Richard Gilbert in his essay "Useable Truth" found in *Essex Conversations* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2001) 66. Emphases added.

necessarily feel the same way, but I was struck by the fact that she had sacrificed something so meaningful to her as a form of religious expression and source of renewal to remain as a member of this particular UU congregation. When I attempted to express her anonymous comment to her minister, I was met with a quick dismissive comment: “Oh well, it must be someone new to Unitarian Universalism who doesn’t really know us yet.” This minister was certain that *he* knew the limits of Unitarian Universalist religious expression. Well, why? Why couldn’t we make space in worship for someone to kneel if they wanted to? Couldn’t a natural response to the beauty and grandeur and mystery of existence be to want to kneel? Do we literally have to take a stand on certain forms of religious expression in worship? Are there costs to our sources of renewal when we compromise on our worship needs?

These are meditations and questions of *my* heart and mind. I look forward to getting to know yours over the coming two years in striving together as seekers and authentic companions on a spiritual journey. May we share together in our common desire to create a beloved and safe community for one another as well as for the larger world community. Amen.

**Our final hymn is #354, “We Laugh, We Cry,” verses 1, 2, and 4.  
Hymn #354, verses 1, 2, and 4. Please rise in body or in spirit as you are  
able.**

**Closing Words: Grey Hymnal Reading #420**

**We are here to abet creation and to witness to it,  
to notice each other’s beautiful face and complex nature  
so that creation need not play to an empty house.**

**By Annie Dillard**

**Let us join together in the words found in your order of service as we  
extinguish the chalice:**