

**Sermon:** *Listen to Your Life!* - Rev. Norm Horofker – First Delivered November 23, 2014

The theme for the services for the month of November has been Deep Listening. And the inspiration for this month's theme came from the idea that November is a month when we can sense. You can hear the approach of winter. This morning, for this last sermon in the series on deep listening, I propose that the most important listening we can do is to listen to our own lives and in the process come to know our own nature as something we have been given, rather than something we must create.

A rabbi named Zusya died and went to stand before the judgment seat of God. As he waited for God to appear, he grew nervous thinking about his life and how little he had done. He began to imagine that God was going to ask him, "Why weren't you more like Moses? - or why weren't you more like Solomon? - or why weren't you more like David?" But when God appeared, the rabbi was surprised. God simply asked, "Why weren't you fully Zusya?"

In preparing for this sermon I re-read material by three authors: Parker Palmer, a Quaker, who wrote the small but inspiring book "Let Your Life Speak" and Eknath Easwaran, a Hindu, wrote "Your Life is Your Message". The title is explained with this story: Once while Mahatma Gandhi's train was pulling slowly out of the station, a reporter ran up to him and asked for a message to take back to his people. Gandhi's reply was a hurried line scrawled on a scrap of paper: "My Life is my message." The third author that I will refer to this morning is Joseph Campbell, famous for his interpretation of mythology who made the phrase "Follow Your Bliss" a mantra for many in the 1980's.

These authors propose four common beliefs: The first is that the Universe offers us the challenge of making meaning. We are here for a finite time. Where we come from and where we are going to is a mystery but while we are here we must make our way through the challenges and around the obstacles that are placed in our way. You have heard me say often that we must stop searching for meaning and instead give meaning to our lives. Joseph Campbell put it this way: he wrote "Life has no meaning. Instead, each of us has meaning and we bring it to life. It is a waste to be asking the question when you are the answer."

The second common belief behind these writings, is that we are born with a nature, a personality, temperament, gifts, skills and limitations. We are not born as blank slates on which we, or our teachers, can write any future. It is false to suggest that we can become anything that we want to be. Actually I was a believer in the blank slate model of human capacities. I sought to become the person that I idealized. That belief changed for many reasons, one of them relates to having children of my own. We can learn a lot from listening to our children. My two daughters were absolutely born with different capacities and temperaments that have shaped their lives as much as any guidance that Janet or I could give them. This is not news to any parent, but yet we somehow often fail to look on ourselves, our own unique personalities with the same acceptance we have for those of our children.

And so we are born with gifts and limitations. We use, or squander these gifts, and sometimes overcome apparent limitation in the course of our life. It is the course of our life that reveals to us what those gifts and limitations are, the failures as much as the successes.

The third common belief among these authors is that the world needs your unique contribution. Some of us struggle to respond to the overwhelming challenges that the universe seems to be throwing at us. How does a single individual respond to a culture of war, a culture of greed, a culture of exploitive sexuality, a culture or

environmental degradation... I could go on. The great spiritual teachers of all religions say the same thing: you start with yourself. You may not change the culture but you may change your life and the lives of those close to you.

Eknath Easwaran has written: "People absorb something deep below the conscious level when they encounter a man or a woman who is at peace with themselves. When you are able to live with joy, giving your time and energy to improving the quality of life for those around you in your unique way, you are fulfilling your destiny and you are helping those around you to grow spiritually as well. This is not an easy path. Self-transformation is arduous work, especially at first; but each tiny change brings with it the joyful awareness that your life is gradually becoming a force for peaceful change."

Joseph Campbell was criticized by some who interpreted the phrase "following your bliss" as taking the easy path, or even as a form of hedonism. During his later years, Campbell is reported to have grumbled: "I should have said, 'Follow your *blisters*'".

I marvel at the determination and example of some members of this congregation in taking a public stand over and over again for change in our society be that in relation to issues of poverty, or environmental degradation or other social justice concerns. Such small tiny voices in a sea of apparent apathy. And then I read a report commissioned by the provincial government that recommends a tax on carbon emissions. I never saw that coming. But I believe it is the direct result of hundreds of thousands of individuals speaking up because it is in their nature.

It is like that song. "Once there was a silly old ram, thought he'd butt a hole in a dam, no one could make that ram scam, he kept butting that dam 'cause he had high hopes, he had high hopes, he had high apple pie in the sky hopes. We know how the song ends...oops there goes a million kilowatt dam! It was in the ram's nature to persevere!

The fourth belief shared by these authors is that you will find harmony and peace in your life when you act upon your gifts while recognizing your limitations. Failure to act upon your gifts will ensure that you fall short of your potential and not recognizing your own limitations will result in failure, or worse yet, frustrating years spent struggling to become what you were never capable of becoming. It is often our ego that drives us to override our nature. We want so much to be like someone else, someone who we admire for their achievements. But their achievements are the result of their unique nature and temperament. We have our own paths to follow.

Joseph Campbell has written. "If you do follow your bliss you put yourself on a kind of track that has been there all the while, waiting for you, and the life that you ought to be living is the one you are living. Follow your bliss and don't be afraid, and doors will open where you didn't know they were going to be." He also wrote: "If you can see your path laid out in front of you step by step, you know it's not your path. Your own path you make with every step you take. That's why it's your path."

This is not to say that you should not push the envelope and take on tasks that you know will be difficult and challenging. In the process of doing so you will discover that you have capabilities that you didn't know you had. You will also discover that you have definite limitations. This is how we learn what our gifts and limitations are. Paying attention to our successes and failures in life is what I mean when I speak of Listening to Our Lives.

I am aware that what I have said so far this morning may be of interest to some of you but may also sound completely impractical or disconnected from the experience of life for others. When we are struggling with seemingly intractable problems in our lives, when we listen to our lives and all we hear is a cry for help for

release from a long series of problems, stresses, personal, professional, financial and medical crisis, how then shall we live?

In his short book, *Let your life Speak*, Parker J. Palmer devotes a chapter to two episodes of clinical depression in his life. He is careful not to suggest that he can fix anyone's problems. On the contrary he writes that the most helpful person in his life at the time was a friend who could stand on the margins of his depression and not try to fix it but just be there at the edge of the misery and mystery.

Palmer confesses that he has no explanation for why one person chooses to end their life rather than continue in deep depression – he himself considered the option – while another slowly recovers. Palmer's recovery began when he found a counsellor who understood what was happening to him as he needed to understand it – as a spiritual journey. For Palmer, listening to one's life when in a state of depression, meant moving into a field of forces that seems alien but is in fact one's deepest self. It meant waiting watching listening suffering and gathering whatever self-knowledge one can – and then making choices based on that knowledge.

Speaking for myself, I have lived a blessed life that has never included deep depression. But there was a time in my life when I seemed about to fail at the thing that I had set my heart on. I was a workaholic and nothing was more important to me at the time than success in my career. When that success seemed threatened, I blamed my boss for all my problems. Fortunately I decided to meet with a psychologist who in a matter of a few sessions was able to help me to realize that my problems were not with my boss, but with the fact that I was trying to do something that was opposed to my nature. In my case my nature had been distorted by the effects of alcohol abuse within my family. I was able to listen to my life in an entirely new way and to see how my failure was connected to the fact that I was oblivious to my own limitations. Over many years, armed with a much better and clearer understanding of who I was and what my strengths and limitations were, I began to enjoy my life and my work in ways that I had never anticipated.

There is an extension of this idea of listening to your life and recognizing and appreciating your strengths and limitations that has a direct connection to who we are as Unitarian Universalists. This beloved community is made up of a beautiful bouquet of unique individuals. Each of us was born with different gifts, and different limitations.

If you have need of one idea to take away with you this morning try the following: We each come into this world with empowering gifts and frustrating limitations. These are a part of our inner nature and temperament. Each of us is striving to be happy and to live in harmony with who we are as individuals.

Ours is a faith that values the inherent worth and dignity of each individual. May we bring this insight to life in our lives by truly recognizing and celebrating and promoting the diversity of the human spirit without feeling the need to make another, or ourselves, conform to some ideal.

May it be so  
Amen.