

“What Will You Do With Your Gifts?”

A Sermon by
Rev. Frieda Gillespie

It is the beginning of Fall, a time of ripening of fruit and of leaves and a time of changing and changeable weather. Trees will be the flamboyant stars of the season to come when they start to change color. Trees generously give up their fruit and their leaves not to serve human beings or birds or other animals, but because it is part of what allows the tree to go on living and growing. The production of fruit is the natural result of having drawn from the soil the water and minerals to fully realize this stage of its yearly cycle. Trees don't look around to see what other trees think of their productivity. Trees don't work to be better or prettier than other trees. Trees don't get stuck in some work that doesn't feed them, that doesn't produce their own fruit. A peach tree doesn't try to produce pecans because it thinks pecan trees are cooler. However, when we change the subject of these sentences to 'people' it's a different story. I'm going to tell you a little bit about my journey into Unitarian Universalist ministry and why I think it might be useful to others of you to think about your life in terms of a 'calling' and perhaps in even terms of a tree.

This is the first of a series of five sermons reflecting on five spiritual practices of Spiritual Leadership.

At the age of 45 I finally found something, a vocation or calling that feels completely like my own. When I first got the idea that I might want to be a Unitarian Universalist minister, it seemed like a job tailor made for me. I love to speak in public, I love to teach, I love counseling, I love reading and studying a broad range of ideas but especially themes related to human nature and spiritual growth, I love writing, I love community and being in a leadership role has come naturally to me throughout my life. When I began to realize that ministry contains some of all of those, I was hooked. Any one

of them might have been enough, but to have them all in one profession is heaven. I came to the decision to pursue ministry while listening to a sermon, much like this one, given by an intern minister at the church I had attended in Texas. I hadn't been in a Unitarian Universalist church in my adult life before although I was raised Unitarian Universalist and attended church until I graduated from high school. Stepping into that church as an adult and singing the doxology that I would have thought I'd forgotten was like slipping on a favorite lost glove and feeling again how perfectly it fit and how easy it was to move my fingers within it. Unitarian Universalism is my home. It is the structure within which I can best be myself and adventure out into more.

The intern that preached that day asked the congregation "What will you do with your gifts?" That question has reverberated through my heart and mind ever since. It had not occurred to me that I had any obligation to myself to identify or use my gifts. 'Gifts' was a word that applied to other people who knew from a young age what they could do and wanted to do with their life. I subscribed to the dutiful one foot in front of the other way of life and complaining seemed to be my main gift. Once I took that question really to heart there was no getting rid of it. I had to acknowledge finally that the things I loved to do were the things I ought to do and needed to do. And now there is no going back.

As I look back on my life and how I ended up here I see how the things I thought were important, accomplishments, degrees, accolades were only sidelines to the real heart of my life's direction. In business I struggled to achieve acceptance and often felt that I was out of place in spite of my accomplishments, promotions and salary. But what seemed to keep me off balance in the business world were the very aspects of my nature that led me to ministry. I needed to communicate in a way that was uplifting and encouraging to the people I worked with. I wanted people to be valued for their uniqueness and gifts rather than their contribution to the bottom

line. I wanted our customers to have what they asked for. I wanted business to be an integral part of supporting those in need and the environment. Needless to say I was out of tune with my management quite often.

It takes far more courage it seems to me to acknowledge our gifts and creative desires than it does to undervalue ourselves or sacrifice ourselves for some artificial sense of duty. By artificial I mean something that, while it might be good in itself, does not really belong to us, is not part of our true nature. Attention for doing this.

Playing it safe, keeping to what's familiar and comfortable isn't safe either. Something within us needs expression and our comfort requires that we stifle that voice, buffer it with empty pleasures or pursue the shadow of what we want in lots of activities anything that will keep that urge to fulfill ourselves mute. This creates a tension within us that is very difficult to live with. Illness, stress and depression are often the symptoms of this fearful place.

I don't know if the great scholar Joseph Campbell coined the phrase "Follow your Bliss", but it is his advice to all students.

Sometimes I've thought of life as though I was holding onto a crust of bread on one side of a door. To enter I would have to give up the crust. On the other side of the door is offered a lavish unending buffet. But it takes a leap of faith or a strong enough desire to be free from misery to walk through. In my case, it has also taken being shown a path that I wouldn't have considered on my own. You might say, I got a whiff of the feast.

Some would say that life is not like that at all - not a lush banquet but more like the jelly beans from the Harry Potter stories, Bertie Botts Every Flavored Beans - you take a chance and you might get strawberry flavored or ear wax. But it seems to me that when we have reached enough into our essence, we can take the ear wax

with a lot less suffering and more understanding of life. As a Rabbi once said "it's what you do other than complaining that matters."

Bill Moyers in an interview asked Joseph Campbell "Do you ever have the sense of... being helped by hidden hands?" And Campbell replied, "All the time. It is miraculous. I even have a superstition that has grown on me as a result of invisible hands coming all the time - namely, that 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. When you can see that, you begin to meet people who are in your field of bliss, and they open doors to you. I say, follow your bliss and don't be afraid, and doors will open where you didn't know they were going to be."

I have to wonder though whether all of those black sheep years didn't work to strengthen and prepare me for the leap of faith that led me to quit my job and start seminary. I wasn't able to start until I had left behind the things that had been my safety nets and began, not perfectly at all, but gradually to find my resources within myself. And this is where the trees come in. How good it is and how necessary for us to ripen into our lives or as some people say 'grow into our own skin'. How does this occur?

The first question might be, why does it need to occur? Why don't we live as the trees and other living creatures do, completely in harmony with their potential almost from the get go?

I like the answer Jungian Analyst and author, James Hillman, gives to this question in his wonderful book, "The Soul's Code: In Search of Character and Calling". His theory, he calls the Acorn Theory is that there is a calling in everyone, an acorn ready to become an oak, an image that wants to be manifested. No parental influence, no compensation theory can explain its urging on our psyche. It needs above all else to be recognized and appreciated by us.

A calling then is not reserved for ministers, but for every single human being. There is an expression, direction, a creative urge in each that is unique and longs to be revealed in full. In order for our calling to be manifested in a fulfilling way in our lives however, Hillman says we must "grow down". He describes it in this way:

"The Platonic myth of growing down...says the soul descends in four modes--via the body, the parents, place, and circumstances. These four ways can be instructions for completing the image you brought with you on arrival. First your body: Growing down means going with the sag of gravity that accompanies aging... Second, admitting yourself to be one among your people and a member of the family tree, including its twisted and rotten branches. Third, living in a place that suits your soul and that ties you down with duties and customs. Last, giving back what circumstances gave you by means of gestures that declare your full attachment to the world."

It may strike you that these ways of growing down sound closer to duty and obligation rather than unique personal expression and of course they are. Many people try to build their lives around duty to family and community without ever discovering themselves. Their direction comes solely from outside themselves. When we do this we suffer, no matter how appreciative others are of what we offer. If as we give of ourselves to our family and community, our church, we also pay attention to our own inner direction, this connection to others creates avenues for expression that feed our soul every bit as much as they give to others.

If we are not able to grow down into our calling, we can spin out of control unable to find either fulfillment or connection with others.

Hillman gives us a clearer view of this in his description of the parallel lives of Judy Garland and Josephine Baker. Both were

enormously talented women; Garland as a deeply soulful singer and Baker a passionate, free-spirited dancer. They both had troubled childhoods. Both women drank heavily, were sexually promiscuous and both were in love with performing. Garland's gift was also her undoing. Just think of Judy singing "Over the Rainbow" as you hear this description by Hillman "...nostalgia, sadness, silence, and a yearning imagination are the stuff of Judy Garland's songs, her voice and phrasing, her body language, her face and eyes. No wonder her performances reached the common heart as no others did. Garland stands among the few who could never fully grow down because it was her acorn...to be the representative of exile and longing."

Garland longed for a quiet home and family that remained for her, over the rainbow. Her actual life was infused with erratic behavior, drugs, alcohol and a tragic death.

Baker however is a different story. She was sold into virtual slavery as a child within her own family and suffered racism and poverty until she emigrated to Paris as a young woman. There, she found a home where she was accepted as a woman, an artist, and a humanitarian. Early in her life she began to use her fame as dancer in growing down. She worked for the French resistance during WWII, she saved Jews from the roundups, and she came back to the U.S. to march for civil rights with Martin Luther King, Jr. At the end of her life she started a home for eleven orphaned children from all over the world. She spent the last years of her life working to raise money to keep this home together. A few days before she died, she gave her last performance. Hillman says "The 30 minute ovation Josephine Baker received in Paris that final week was both for what led her to dance and for her long and slow history of growing down into this world of 'social evils'."

These larger than life personalities are really not so different from

you and I they just play within a larger sphere of influence. We have the very same work to do. And, although no one outside of our close families, co-workers and friends may know about it, our work is every bit as important.

No matter how hard we try to adjust the to an ill-fitting suit of duty we put on or how intoxicating our calling is, without finding a way to love our lives, our families, our communities, without finding our place in the world, we drift unfulfilled, tired, ill, and unhappy. The good news in this is that we can trust our deepest desires and let them lead us to places we might at first feel are impossible. But if we can hold on, and let our gifts unfold as they will, we can find ways in which they can be used to create a joyful life and connections with others that feed us in a way that nothing else can.

A church above all else should be a place where individuals of all ages can discern their calling. It can be a safe place to begin to develop a gift. And it can be a vital place of belonging where you are tied down with duties and customs as Hillman says, for the purpose of keeping you close to your own soul's calling. It can be all of this if you let it. If you take the step of offering your gifts.

I close with these elegant words from Howard Thurman and a question:

Thurman said: "Do not ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive. For what the world needs is more people who have come alive."

What will you do with your gifts? Amen.