

Rev. Betsy Mead Tabor
UU Fellowship of the Eastern Slopes
September 24, 2017

Listening helps discern the next right move.

That Calling Voice

It's happened twice in a week, probably not a coincidence. Checking in at the beginning of two meetings – one the UUFES Governing Board and the other a group of ministers – everyone in the circle described feeling too overwhelmed by anxiety to focus. The board meeting had started with a two-part question, “What is breaking your heart right now, and what gives you hope?” But rather than name issues or events, people spoke of a pervasive angst, like a dark cloud that obscures the way forward. Maybe you can relate.

World events these few weeks have not let up – 1200 people now dead in Southeast Asia's monsoon season, the devastation from hurricanes inconceivable in southern states and the islands, violence churning in St. Louis with another police acquittal, a deadly earthquake in Mexico. Not to mention the unnerving impact of crude threats by world leaders who hold nuclear codes.

How the heck can you hear God calling you with all this noise?

I'm sort of kidding. And sort of not. The world works in mysterious ways. Call it synchronicity, call it being attuned with the ground of being, call it the mystery of God, but when we find ourselves caught up in a time of transition or upset or indecision, now and then it happens that a door to well-being swings open, slow and easy, and the way forward becomes clear. By whatever name, we remember those grace-filled moments.

Not that this happens all the time. We also live through long periods of wandering in the desert of not knowing, hard times of wanting terribly to feel that we're on a good path, a path forward. Many of us know the silence of wishes and prayers and wonderings not being answered.

The world around us doesn't help much. Junot Diaz, author and professor of writing at MIT, talks about the effect of society today on our spiritual well-being. He draws the distinction between our personal inner life and society, what he calls “our public life.”

Our public life [he says] is like a deranged three-year-old, and I wouldn't want to offend deranged three-year-olds.

I mean look, we are not a culture that has built into our way of being, our way of thinking...contemplation, mourning, working through difficult contradictory emotions. That's not part of our society; and therefore, where society leaves off, we need to take up. Society mis-educates us. Society gives us a lot of prompts and a lot of encouragements to be reactive, emotionally reactive. In this, we have received tremendous tutelage. So the ability to do what our societies seem incapable and unwilling to do is important. *It's incumbent upon us to be reflective, to be complex, to be subtle, to be nuanced, to take our time in societies which are none of these things and which encourage none of these*

things, because after all, there is nothing...more critical than to be misaligned...with the emotional baseline of any mainstream society.¹

Given “the emotional baseline” of our culture, no wonder we have trouble concentrating. How crazy and scary that, while society (that “deranged three-year old”) stirs up our ability to think clearly, it also puts a premium on what we accomplish. What a setup. We’re expected to individuate and live with a clear sense of purpose...and meanwhile get through the day, the daunting practicality of daily life – bills to pay, groceries to buy, meals to make, bodies to keep healthy, kids to raise and love, parents to tend and love, friends to hold and love. A lot.

Still, what a beautiful concept to be called to a life purpose – an over-arching framework from which our decisions and actions flow. Truth be told, when the occasional seminary classmate would talk about their experience of being called, tapped on the shoulder by God, it was hard to relate. They say that God tapped Moses on the shoulder and called him to lead his people to the promised land. As the story goes, Moses said, “No, thanks” and offered up his brother to do the job, but God prevailed. Oh, to be called so clearly!

We *are* called, though, in mysterious ways – the poet hears “call” in random, in-between moments. Moments when life nudges us. Some of us may see that as the Universe having a plan for us. Others of us might believe that humans make our way guided by a combination of experience, conscience and grace.

While we may struggle to articulate our purpose, surely it is always taking shape. It evolves as we move through life, making our way *forward*. In what ways do you live your life “forward”?

20th century process theologian John Cobb wrote about a sense of continuum, of movement onward. He referred to it as “the call forward.” Our understandings rarely stay still – rather, they unfold and evolve. Process theology is a fancy term for that – the idea that everything’s on the move: humans, our cultures, our understandings...and that even the mystery of God itself (for those who think in those terms) is in a process of continuous change.

Living in California today, ninety-two years old, Cobb wrote about “the call forward” in the 60s,² a notion that life pulls us along to a nobler plane. Higher ground. Clearer understanding. The call forward inspires us to live up to what Lincoln called the better angels of our nature.

We might experience the call forward in the desire, often fleeting, to do better. Not out of guilt, not to live our life’s purpose, but simply to do the next thoughtful thing. Imagine, in the words of Rev. Davies’ call to worship today, if we always acted on the impulse that “goads [us] to the most thorough and responsible thinking of which [we’re] capable.”

Responding to the call forward is not easy, but when we’re on our game, attentive to who we believe ourselves to be, deep down, we know this call. *It’s our birthright*. To take the high road. To live our principles out there on our street corner. To be there for friend, family or stranger. To

¹ Juno Diaz, “Radical Hope is Our Best Weapon,” *On Being*, with Krista Tippett, 17 September 2017, <https://onbeing.org/programs/junot-diaz-radical-hope-is-our-best-weapon-sep2017/> (my italics)

² John Cobb, *God in the World*. 1969.

come away from our routines, stop checking the news and email, stop whatever it is we do to numb ourselves out or rev ourselves up – and instead put our energies into our hopes and ideals. Safe to say, few of us are at a loss to find places where we could engage more lovingly and thoughtfully.

Years ago, I once watched a congregation grapple with what to do during a tumultuous time of conflict. Amid a blustery meeting of intense emotion and accusations rose a voice with a simple question. “What,” said the speaker, “is our next right move? That’s all we have right now. We don’t need to solve everything, but what...what is our next right move?” Remarkably, the room grew quiet. It was that question, repeated many times over the coming weeks, that allowed that church to regain its sense of ground and forward movement. What is our next right move?

Instead of pressuring ourselves to find purpose, any one of us might do well to ask, “What is my next right move?” The young German poet, Rainer Maria Rilke, wrote of loving the questions: “Live the questions now,” he wrote. “Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.”³

At the gym, the physical therapist has many tricks that loosen us up, strengthen our muscles and help our bodies to heal. A while ago the guy who keeps my town moving and strong shared a nugget of wisdom. “You know what your best move is, right, Betsy?” I didn’t, suspecting he had another exercise in mind. He smiled. “Your best move is your next move!” He, of course, is talking about how movement helps our physical bodies stay active.

Today, as people of conscience, we’re talking about movement, too – forward movement that helps us to grow into our best selves. At all times, we are moving into the unknown. And since we can’t know what this afternoon will bring, we must ask ourselves how we want to live right now? What’s *our* next best move? It may well *be* our *next* move. How do we discern that? Where do we hear the call forward?

While Cobb, a Methodist minister, attributed the call forward to God, we can think of it broadly. We hear it in hope, in the sweep of time and the magnificence of the world. We may hear it at the end of a life well lived. We hear it in the young people we love. We even hear the call forward in crises, in extraordinary acts of selflessness and generosity. Whether we’ve had a tiff or a conflict with someone, or we’re meeting a health challenge or making a big decision, forward movement – change – often happens in micro-course-adjustments that we don’t notice.

To hear the call forward, we must listen. To listen, we must quiet down. Turn off our devices. Even back in the 1800s, Henry David Thoreau cautioned about today’s equivalent of email and Facebook: “In proportion as our inward life fails, [he wrote,] we go more constantly and desperately to the post office. You may depend on it, that poor fellow who walks away with the greatest number of letters, proud of his extensive correspondence, has not heart from himself this long while.”

³ Rainer Maria Rilke, “Live the Questions: Rilke on Embracing Uncertainty and Doubt as a Stabilizing Force,” brainpickings.org/2012/06/01/rilke-on-questions

Finding our way through today and into tomorrow calls us to honor our inner life, “to be reflective, [as Juno Diaz put it,] to be complex, to be subtle, to be nuanced.” Responding to the call forward requires traveling beyond what he calls “our public life.” Traveling to a place where we can hear. Traveling into stillness.

It’s a new day, a new week about to begin. For many, it’s the start of a new year. Let us take our questions about purpose high above the noisy reactivity of society, into the quiet spaciousness of possibility. Guided by what we know and what we believe, trusting in the unfolding, let us ask: What is the next right move? What takes us toward our best selves? What is our next best move? Together, let us listen and journey forward.

So may it be.