

Up to the Mountain

Two Rivers Unitarian Universalist
Worship Service - February 27, 2011
By Gretchen Haley

Story - A Hasidic Tale

Once, the great Hasidic leader, Zusya, came to his followers. His eyes were red with tears, and his face was pale with fear.

"Zusya, what's the matter? You look frightened!"

"The other day, I had a vision. In it, I learned the question that the angels will one day ask me about my life."

The followers were puzzled. "Zusya, you are pious. You are scholarly and humble. You have helped so many of us. What question about your life could be so terrifying that you would be frightened to answer it?"

Zusya turned his gaze to heaven. "I have learned that the angels will not ask me, 'Why weren't you Moses, leading your people out of slavery?'"

His followers persisted. "So, what will they ask you?"

"And I have learned," Zusya sighed, "that the angels will not ask me, 'Why weren't you Joshua, leading your people into the Promised Land?'"

One of his followers approached Zusya and placed his hands on Zusya's shoulders. Looking him in the eyes, the follower demanded, "But what will they ask you?"

"They will say to me, 'Zusya, there was only one thing that no power of heaven or earth could have prevented you from becoming.' They will say, 'Zusya, why weren't you Zusya?'"

"Why was I not Zusya?"¹

¹ This version is from Doug Lipman and can be found at:
http://www.hasidicstories.com/Stories/Other_Early_Rebbes/zusia.html

Song - Up to the Mountain - music and lyrics by Patty Griffin

I went up to the mountain
Because you asked me to
Up over the clouds
To where the sky was blue
I could see all around me
Everywhere
I could see all around me
Everywhere

Sometimes I feel like
I've never been nothing but tired
And I'll be walking
Till the day I expire
Sometimes I lay down
No more can I do
But then I go on again
Because you ask me to

Some days I look down
Afraid I will fall
And though the sun shines
I see nothing at all
Then I hear your sweet voice, oh
Oh, come and then go, come and then go
Telling me softly
You love me so

The peaceful valley
Just over the mountain
The peaceful valley
Few come to know
I may never get there
Ever in this lifetime
But sooner or later
It's there I will go
Sooner or later
It's there I will go

Poem - The Summer Day by Mary Oliver

Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean-
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down-
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

Sermon - Up to the Mountain

1. What am I going to do with my life...my real life?

I have been to more than a few Unitarian Universalist worship services that use this poem from Mary Oliver, especially services that center on this last line: *What will you do with your one wild and precious life?* It is a great question, a great Unitarian Universalist question, urging us to take our lives - the lives here and now - seriously, to do as our Transcendentalist forbearer Henry David Thoreau would have described: "To live deliberately, to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, and not when I came to die, discover that I had not lived."

There have been some great services. Well-crafted, passionate. And yet. At the end of these well-crafted services, I have to tell you, I am left with one big feeling: *so what?* So we agree, our life is wild and precious. So, we believe we are inheritors of an original blessing, an inherent worthiness and dignity. We get it. So, now what?

Allow me to digress. For most of my childhood, and all through high school, I swam competitively. Mostly freestyle- the 200 yard, and the 500 free. Mid-distance swims. If you aren't a swimmer, let me tell you about mid-distance. The thing about mid-distance is that you

basically sprint for what feels like forever, and then at the end, when you feel like you're dying, you sprint harder. You put your head down, stop breathing, and just go.

Don't think about what hurts, or how much further there is, or the fact that you want to give up. No, you've gotta push harder, at the exact place where you want to give up. It's exhausting, and it hurts like crazy, and yet, the amazing thing is, when you hit that last wall, you forget all that, all that almost-dying feeling, and instead just feel – grateful, proud, invincible. You forget, that is, until the next race, when you wonder all over again, if you'll ever hit that wall. Lately, I've been thinking about that. Or rather, I've been *feeling* like that, like that last 50 yards of a 500 yard swim.

I suppose it makes sense. I'm about to head into that last quarter of seminary, after nearly four years going at what has felt like a long, exhausting sprint, and yet I know it's time to push even harder. And it's not just me. My family, too - I swear, even Josef - who will be 3 in a few weeks - even he has this look like he's at the end of a long race, wondering how much further until we reach that wall. And together we do as Dory in Finding Nemo says - *just keep swimming*.

I'll concede I'm at an especially vivid moment of this kind of feeling - but I don't think it's all that rare for life to feel like this. Even in a slower pace, there are the relentless challenges we all face – life can just be too much! Even if you aren't finishing up the long road of seminary education, and Unitarian Universalist ministerial formation, life can often feel like a long sprint that asks you to push harder at exactly those moments when it feels like you'd be better off just giving up. Like it's all you can do to put your head down, stop breathing, and just get to the next wall.

See, I don't think Unitarian Universalists come to church to be told to take their lives more seriously. I think we walk in the door with this plastered on our foreheads, etched on our hearts. This is not news to us. The problem is, our real need, is in the living. I mean, Unitarian Universalists come in the door *already knowing this is our job*, and now, we sure could use some help figuring out what a meaningful life actually looks like. What it means for us to truly live the life that we are sent here to live: our own. What is that life? And we come to church because we need help actually turning our visions into reality. How to live our best lives on those days where we can barely figure out how to get the grocery shopping done, let alone suck the marrow out of anything. How to live it on days when our encounter with the natural world Mary Oliver muses so eloquently about comes down to figuring out how to get the grass stain out of our kids' new jeans. How to live it when our bodies betray us and suddenly we literally can't climb those mountains we'd like to climb. How to live it when the savings we thought we had gets washed away in the blink of an eye while unemployment rates rise, and rise, and rise.

What will you do with your one wild and precious life? Put your head down, and go. Don't breathe. Don't think. Just go. It's not a good answer. I know. But sometimes, it's the only one I've got.

2. Discerning your call

In seminary, this whole process of figuring out what you are to do with your one wild and precious life, we call that "discerning your call." In my first few weeks in seminary, this language of call nearly sent me packing. I was at a welcome luncheon for new students, at the President's house. The President invited everyone to share a little about themselves, and one enthusiastic student stood up to tell how he had been "called by God to do God's work, and although he wasn't sure where that path would lead, he put his life in God's hands."

I was like - *where am I?!*

Luckily, a few days later, I found a couple senior Unitarian Universalist students, sat them down, and asked them to help me understand this whole concept of "call." Did it require hearing the voice of God? Because if so, I was in trouble...My senior colleagues were reassuring: Understanding your call is just understanding why you are here. Your call is just the story of what brought you here. No matter what those things were, or where you believe you are headed, just being able to tell the truth of your story is important. That's call.

Not too many Unitarian Universalists claim a Moses/Burning Bush kind of moment when they talk about call, a sudden epiphany where we hear a clear voice. We tend to talk about a series of moments, a process that pulls us along with a kind of alluring love, sometimes tender, sometimes tough.

Of course, it's not just ministers who have a call. Our history has long affirmed that we *all* have a calling; we all have our unique and important place in the interdependent web, a unique and important story of who we have been and who we are becoming. It's there already, and it is yours. We all have the capacity to discover that place where, as theologian Fredrick Beuchner puts it, "where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet....In other words," he says, "if what makes you happy is going out and living it up and spending all your money on wine, women and song, the world doesn't need that. But on the other hand, if you give your life to good works - you go and work in a leper colony and it doesn't make you happy - the chances are you aren't doing it very well. Those for whom you were doing it will recognize this is not an act of love. People think: what makes me useful? What makes me religious? No, no, no. What makes you, in the deepest sense of the word, happy? That's what you should be doing, if the other part is also met - if it is something the world needs. That's what you should be doing." What makes you deeply happy? If it is something the world needs. There's your call.

Don't get trapped into thinking big. You don't need to find that place where you can be Mother Theresa. Just that place where you can serve the world with your own greatest joy.

Start small. Interpersonally. In the ecosystem of your own backyard. Or in your families. In your homes. The world is everywhere. And, don't get trapped into thinking – period. Your call is not about what you think. It's about what you love. It's not your one *smart* life. Or your *organized* life. It's your *wild* life. To get to your calling, you need to get in touch with the crazy impulses, the playful urges, the places that often make no sense, and yet you return there, again and again with joy and wonder. And most of all, don't get trapped thinking that discerning your life's call is a one-time event. There are always new and changing ways that your life is calling you, your true life, and listening for that voice is a life-long, ongoing process.

Last year I offered a series of one-on-one coaching sessions to my congregation under the title "What do I want to be when I grow up?" I was not surprised to find I had four people sign up, one just turning twenty, one in her thirties, one in his fifties, and one just about to turn seventy. They all had different reasons for working with me, and not all of them were related to crafting a career path. Though *all* were passionately engaged with the question of how to live a life that was just their own.

3. The Hope for Us

We are a people who want to do this. We really are. I haven't met a Unitarian Universalist yet who doesn't understand and take seriously the process of constructing a life that is worthy of their best gifts and deepest desires.

Which is why, this story of Rabbi Zusya really bugs me. It really bothers me. I mean here we have this great, pious man, a teacher of 18th century Hasidic Judaism, known for his simple ways and humble wisdom. And the story goes: Rabbi Zusya was pale with fear, tears streaming down his face. This wise man was afraid. As he approached his followers, they asked him: Teacher, *What question about your life could be so terrifying that even you would be frightened to answer it?*

He was terrified because although he could say how well he emulated great leaders of the past, how well he had followed the "right" path, he could not say for sure if he had been himself. And this, it turned out, was the really important task. Really, the only thing that mattered.

And this troubles me. Because if this great leader, this wise master who surely did not live as if he was in the last 25 yards of a 500 yard freestyle, who probably lived deliberately as Thoreau would have it, and deeply, and all of that. If *he* hasn't figured out how to live his best life, be his truest self, how to live out that most *compelling vision* Robert implored a few weeks ago is so critical...what hope is there for any of the rest of us?

Well, I wonder. I wonder what was happening that day that Zusya came to his followers, crying. They were shocked to see their great teacher crying, shaking with fear. And I

wonder, was this the first time they had seen him cry? The first time they had seen him vulnerable. Afraid. Starting with all the things he didn't know.

We aren't told for sure. But their surprise at finding him in tears, makes me think it was a rare if not first time occurrence. And this gives me a little guidance, and a little hope. If before this moment, Rabbi Zusya had always been sure, and strong, and wise in the presence of his community, then in his own way, he too had his head down, trying not to breathe. Focused on hitting that wall. But on this day, he decides to share his great fear. He looks up, looks around at his community, and right then, there's hope. My pastoral care professor at Iliff, Larry Graham, he likes to say: If you can share it, you can bear it.

Looking up into his community, bearing his vulnerability, he no longer has to face it alone. He's no longer isolated trying to figure out what it means to be Zusya, trying to stay true to his path in real-life. Things have changed. His willing vulnerability creates real presence around him. A real presence, different than the normal teacher-student community. A gathering around, a mutuality. A real presence that was perhaps not available to him before now. A presence that might make it possible that he *will* uncover his call, and actually live it out - in his real life. A presence that can remind him of the reason he started swimming in the first place. For as wise and pious of a man as Zusya may be, even he can't do it alone. And he definitely can't do it with his head down, holding his breath. To live our own lives, the lives that we are called to live, we can't do it alone. Perhaps paradoxically, to live our particularly personal lives requires the power of the collective. To discover and to live our call, we have to raise our heads, reveal our weariness, share our vulnerability, take a breath. To become ourselves, we need help.

4. Up to the Mountain (Look up!)

Patty Griffin wrote the song - "Up to the Mountain" in response to Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I've been to the mountaintop." His last speech, right before he was assassinated, in 1968. It's a stunning speech. Where he is just so clear, both about his call, his purpose, and the community that was holding him, keeping him going. He seems so at peace with the possibility that he may not live much longer. Which can feel - impossibly prescient.

But there's a story that's passed down, that happened about 12 years earlier, that I think helps make sense of how Dr. King could be so clear in his call. In early 1956, King had just been released from the Montgomery City jail, and he was feeling overwhelmed. Returning home, he thought he would finally have at least a night sleep, of peace before getting back to the fight. His wife, and his two-month-old daughter were already asleep. The phone rang, and when King picked it up, it was a violent, ugly death threat.

He was getting up to thirty or forty of these a day, so it wasn't unusual. But they were taking their toll. He was afraid. Trembling. Shaking with fear. As he tells it: "I felt myself

faltering. I was ready to give up.” He sat down at his kitchen table, and seriously pondered what he could do to slip away from the fight without appearing a coward. He thought of his family, his wife and daughter. As he says: “I felt myself growing in fear.” And so he put his head in his hands, and he began to pray. “I’m trying to do what’s right. I still think I’m right. I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But I must confess that I’m weak now. I’m faltering. I’m losing my courage. I am afraid. I’m at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I’ve come to the point where I can’t face it alone.” As he prayed in the kitchen, he heard a voice, saying, “Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And I will be with you.” And from that day on, he realized he was never alone. Never alone. He heard this sweet voice, of love. Calling to him. And he knew he was not alone. And so, he could go on.

We might not hear a single voice, but perhaps even better, we can all be, again and again, that voice of love for one another. A voice of love, a voice of reassurance, a voice of presence. Telling you softly, I love you so. We might not have that single moment that clarifies everything we’ve been trying to understand. But we can recall those who came before us - our spiritual and familial ancestors, and we can hear in our hearts, their call, of love, and reassurance. We love you. And we can hear the whispers of our children, and grand children, and great grandchildren, urging us on, to live lives of promise and intention, power and attention. To do what we can, to find the place where our own joy and the world’s needs overlap. I hear it. It is a voice of love.

So in those moments where your head is down, and you’re pushing yourself to sprint. Where you are afraid, and you think your only option is just to keep swimming and hope you get to the wall. Maybe instead, you can look up. Look up. And know that there will be someone there, to hear you, to receive you, to be with you. Calling you even. Look up, with your fear, or even with tears streaming down your face. Look up. Call out. Share your vulnerability, your fears. We all want to live deliberately. But we need help. Look up. You are not alone. Look up.

May it be so. Amen.