

## Choosing a Path

*A Sermon by the Rev. Molly Housh Gordon  
Delivered at the UU Church of Columbia  
September 23, 2012*

What *can* you do with a BA in English? Well at the very least, you can choose great books for your friends and family! Several years ago, my English major husband gave me a wonderful collection of short stories by people of faith, of various religious traditions. My favorite story in the collection was called “The Pure in Heart” by Peggy Payne. It begins like this:

“The Rev. Swain Hammond’s church, in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, is Presbyterian. It is fairly conventional, though influenced, certainly, by the university community. Swain is happy here. Westside church suits him. It is a good choice for – as he has become – a man of rational, ethical orientation. But it is clearly not the best place to hold the pastorate if you’re the sort who’s inclined to hear the actual voice of God. Up until recently, this would not have been a problem for Swain. But about eight weeks ago, the situation changed. At that time, Swain did indeed hear God.”

The story goes on to describe Swain’s experience - a visceral, soul-shaking experience. The voice of God vibrates through his whole body, awakens his being, leaves him feeling conviction and confusion in equal parts. He is entirely sure of what he has just heard, and entirely afraid of what people will think!

And here in the story is the moment of decision. Does he tell his congregation? Should he testify? Eventually he does. He cannot hold it in. He cannot be authentic to himself without reporting his deep conviction.

And of course, in this very proper church, in this very academic town people are shocked and dismayed. The board recommends counseling. The congregation takes a vote. Thankfully, by a slim margin they find him to be of sound mind and spirit, and the ordeal ends. The only one changed is Swain. He is awakened, and he cannot go back.

When I entered Divinity School in 2007, I was unsure what path I was traveling, though fairly sure it was a journey of a thousand miles, or more.

At the beginning, I actually thought it was likely that I would become a theologian and an academic. Even though I had already felt a tug toward the ministry, academia would be so much easier to fit into my narrative of myself – deep thinker, academic overachiever, prestige chaser.

This was the narrative of what I thought I should be. Of *who* I thought I should be. So I signed up for my impressive classes reading Kant and Hegel and learning German translation. And I started working on “making relationships” with important

professors, which really meant trying to ingratiate myself to them with clever comments in class and general flattery.

I found myself feeling stressed, and competitive. Sometimes I found myself feeling inadequate and uninspired.

And then, one day amid all of this, I had an experience of awakening. And I must testify.

I was sitting in class painfully racking my brain to come up with an intelligent critique of some fine point of an obscure theologian, when suddenly I felt something ... a visceral realization bubbling up from deep within, a still small voice of authentic self cutting through the noise, saying, "This is not me."

Were you worried I was going to say I heard God?

I didn't. Though don't think I haven't wished I could. Things would be so much easier if every fork in the road was marked clearly with a burning bush and a resonant voice saying "this way, not that one!"

But no. What I did was run smack up against my self - the striving self who was attracted to the prestige of academia rather than the work of an academic; the self who needed balance between the world of ideas and practice; the self who stood at a fork and had to choose a path to walk.

I didn't want to teach, I realized. And while I loved reading philosophy and theology, I read it as a practitioner, not a scholarly critic. Attempting to do otherwise did nothing but frustrate me. I wanted to build upon, not deconstruct as was fashionable in my academic circles.

And I didn't really want to spend my days researching. I wanted to spend them reading poetry and writing prayers. I wanted to sit and hear people's stories and dream up visions of how things could be. That was how I felt most creative, connected, and alive.

That was the moment I stopped pretending to myself and my teachers and my family that I was going to be a professor. It was when my call to ministry congealed.

It didn't matter who I thought I *should* be. Being anything other than my gifted, flawed, and authentic self was doing violence to me and to the world around me, leaving me feeling frustrated and dissatisfied and limiting what I knew I had to give.

To decide the path I would walk, I couldn't look to my family's expectations, or to my scholar friend and her particularly enviable talents, or to my own perceptions of what society would deem successful.

I had to be countercultural. Centered in my own faith and values.

I had to look to myself. To find the life that was longing to be lived in me. The message that was mine and mine alone to speak.

And before I get too far, I must assert that this path is not one of radical individualism. It is the path by which we transform ourselves and through us our world. Our Stories of Faith speakers have shown us this month the way being in touch our individual and personal vocations actually bring us more fully into community. When we hear from someone in the depth of their authentic self, we are invited to join them there, in a communion of spirit that takes us all deeper, together. It is because our individual selves are interdependent and entwined that we have the responsibility to understand ourselves at our core.

And one of the themes that I have seen in our stories of faith this month is that a true sense of vocation and understanding is not something our speakers have found outside themselves. To truly make a change or choose a new path, each of our speakers, and each of us, have had to look deep within, to the values and longings that mark our most authentic self-hood.

This is true of spiritual paths and vocational paths. It is true of the myriad decisions we must make throughout our lives - relationship decisions, parenting decisions, decisions about how we live and how we die. We must discern for ourselves. We must decide from our center.

Discern means to distinguish between, or to separate by sifting. This sifting most often refers to sorting out the options - all the different paths we might follow. But I think we must also distinguish between external and internal impulse. We must sift through the competing influences in our lives in order to locate the still small voice inside each of us that is our core, our health and wholeness, our true self with all its limits and all its gifts. It is from there that we must decide.

Parker Palmer writes movingly about vocation in his book *Let Your Life Speak*, and he reminds us that discernment of vocation is not a goal to achieve, but rather a gift to be received. It is the fulfillment of the selfhood we are all born with. "It is a strange gift," he says, "this birthright gift of self. Accepting it turns out to be even more demanding than attempting to become someone else!"

Learning and accepting who we are and acting from that center is the work of a lifetime. We are never finished, never complete. We decide on an authentic path, and then inevitably we are changed by it and find ourselves re-assessing, re-centering, and deciding once more.

It has seemed to me that I go through an intensive period of self-examination and self-doubt at least every couple of years, and usually it is horribly painful. And much as I might wish otherwise, every time, I grow.

So I was intrigued to learn from a friend studying spiritual direction about a widely used method of discernment that seeks to make habitual and intentional the process of self-examination. It must be less painful that way, right? When we can do it pre-emptively, of our own accord.

This method is Ignatian Spirituality. And it is often referred to as “a spirituality of decision-making,” and was founded on the experience of the 16th century Catholic saint Ignatius of Loyola.

St. Ignatius believed that decision-making must be rooted in self-awareness, and recommended twice daily “examen” or examination, a guided method of prayerfully reviewing the events of the day, examining every moment in order to awaken one's inner sensitivity, to recognize one's *own* actions, desires, and spiritual state.

The goal of this exercise is to locate the places where we feel challenged and to interpret those places as an invitation to growth and to change, or at least to deeper reflection and self-understanding. Can you imagine doing that every day? It seems growth would be inevitable. Ignatius believed that through this careful and regular self-examination we could find and acknowledge our own blind spots and know ourselves more truly.

Note, that the goal of this self-examination was never personal perfection, but always clear-eyed self-knowledge. Perfection is neither a part of our job nor a goal of personal growth.

In Ignatian practice, discernment is rooted in the belief that humans are always being invited and drawn into the fullness of life, always lured by possibility toward greater flourishing. Discernment for Ignatius is a meditative pondering or mulling over the choices a person wishes to consider. It is focused on intuition, rather than rational thought – the point is to reach a state of centered clarity of heart and orient ourselves to the direction where our spirit has already begun to move.

According to this system, we can gain clarity of heart by recognizing and acknowledging our ever-changing feelings of consolation and desolation.

Feelings of consolation are those that give rise to life, love, peace, joy, creativity, and communion. These signal a life-giving path, and they are harmonious with the Spirit, even when painful. Feelings of consolation don't always mean that we are at ease or comfortable, but that we are moving in the right direction, toward abundance and fulfillment.

The flip side of this coin is desolation. Feelings of desolation give rise to confusion, alienation, and discord. When we feel desolation, we know that we have moved or been moved down a path that is not our own. Not truly. But there is wisdom there, and time on the wrong path is never wasted when we are willing to learn about

ourselves from its struggle.

In this room, there are people experiencing periods of consolation and others in the middle of some desolation. Perhaps some of us stand at the precipice between, seeking the moment or act that will tip us at last into the world of consolation and flourishing. None of us are alone in this.

The challenge is to understand that both are necessary in the abundance of life. Dark and light must both move through our lives for either to have meaning. As Parker Palmer writes, a way closing helps direct our path just as much as way opening. Every time we stumble far away from ourselves into the land of desolation, we learn more about who we truly are.

My call to ministry was formed as much by the darkness of discontent with one path as by the light of possibility drawing me towards another. Light and dark both brought us each to where we now stand.

This is something we understand particularly during this time of autumnal equinox, as the light balances on the edge of infinite possibility for a short time before beginning its tip over into the darkness of winter. That in every season, a new way of being may reveal itself, a path of wholeness and authenticity may emerge that will lead us to the life we have imagined. The life that is longing to live in us.

The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. Let us step forward together with confidence, until each and all have found the life that is longing to live in us.

May it be so.