

9 August 2009

First Unitarian Church of Des Moines

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A confession - or perhaps simply a disclosure: While in the midst of trying to write this sermon, I met with the strongest writers block that I have ever had to date. Over the last week or so, I have spent a lot of time staring at the computer screen with not a word coming forth. I'd switch to pen and paper - to no avail. I'd read to try to focus my thoughts. Nope. Eating didn't help, either (it was worth a shot, right?) Even taking a walk didn't clear anything up for me. I was blocked, frustrated, and a little scared that I wouldn't come up with anything before 10:00 am this morning.

To try to get the words flowing, I talked with several people, knowing that conversations tend to be creative and generative, and they were. Yet, when I returned to the writing - nothing came. Then my wife, Caroline, said something that perhaps made the difference. After a long conversation about what I wanted to talk about today, she thought that where I might be blocked was that my part of this story is not finished. This sermon, as it turns out, is not a reflection on something I have done and what I learned from the experience. Instead, I am in this story now. The questions I have are immediate and unresolved. My conclusions, then are not fully formed, because the narrative is not fully formed, and nowhere near its conclusion.

So with that in mind - I'll start by telling you about my friend, Steve.

Steve and I met as freshmen at the University of Illinois. We were both architecture majors. Together we weathered the rigors of the curriculum and we were both committed to become professional architects. While we started out on this track at the same time, Steve got there first. I took a couple of years off between undergraduate and graduate schools while Steve went straight through. By the time I was in Grad School, Steve had already been interning at a couple of firms in the Chicago area. He also got a head start on the licensing exams. So by the time I got around to the internship process, Steve had already attained the goal - the precious credential (holy grail?) - the license to call himself a professional architect. If memory serves, he was about 26 years old, and through hard work, perseverance, and determination, had reached the dream he had set out for himself years ago. What happened next is a matter of some speculation on my part - and the historical truth of it is more complicated than I may recall. But essentially, Steve, at 26, looked around and said, "Now What?"

In Steve's case, I think perhaps he saw then what I would later discover for myself - that for us, the process of becoming an architect was far more engaging than the reality of being one. Or perhaps he found that reaching his goal so quickly wasn't ultimately as satisfying as we had thought it would be, during those late-night discussions back in school. My realization of this disconnect between attaining my goal of becoming an architect and actually *being* an architect would come more than ten years after Steve's.

As many of you know, I am a stay-at-home dad. I took on that role nearly nine years ago, leaving full-time architectural practice to do so. However, for the first six or seven years of this, if you were to ask me what I "do" - I would have replied that I was an architect. My identity was almost entirely bound up in a vocational title. And why wouldn't it be? Didn't that title represent my own hard work, perseverance, and determination?

In his book, *Just Work*, Harvard political theorist Russell Muirhead points out how our identity is formed by our work. He writes:

“Along with family and religion, work remains one of the central activities constituting everyday life. Work is instrumental (we work to earn and spend), but work is rarely only that: it is also formative. Devoting the bulk of our waking hours to a particular activity over many years has an affect on who we are, whether we like it or not... What we do all day habituates and orients us in profound ways that over time impress a pattern on our emotional and intellectual life. Work might make us more compassionate or more stern, more decisive or more resentful, more deft or more argumentative. The way we spend the bulk of our waking energy can even come to inform our larger posture toward the world, depending on whether the work prods us to experience the world as hostile or alien, compliant or beneficent. This is why for many work cannot be merely another of life’s routines but is rather a key source of their identity.”¹

For me, it took some time, but the role of stay-at-home-dad did finally form at least enough of my identity that if today you were to ask me what I “do” I wouldn’t even mention architecture. I am a stay at home dad.

But even as that identity has formed, I have been sitting in a “Now What?” moment of my own for a couple of years. As I realized that as much as I enjoyed my previous vocation/identity as an architect, the job itself wasn’t exactly hard to give up. Nor has it been calling me back. My current job as a stay-at-home dad has a limited timeframe, given the propensity of children to grow up. So as I stand here wondering “Now What?” I have begun to consider what it is I really want to be in this world - what I want to do. If my job - my vocation is to form the key source of my identity, what do I want that identity to be? If I get the chance, right now, to determine who I want to be in the world, how do I go about figuring it out?

Jeanne DuPrau’s novel “The City of Ember” presents one possibility of choosing one’s vocation and ultimately one’s identity. In the story, DuPrau describes a small city that was constructed underground, and is lit entirely by an aging electrical system. No one knows what lies beyond the edges of their town, other than total and complete darkness. The citizens of Ember have lived there so long that their arrival in Ember, their true history - is unknown to them, they do not even know that they are “underground.” Not knowing what they do not know, they live out their lives just as they assume the citizens of Ember have always lived. The children are educated in school until the age of 12. Their last day of school is called “Assignment Day.” On this day, with great ceremony and aplomb, they each draw a slip of paper out of a bag of faded green cloth. Upon that slip of paper is their assigned job. The jobs include messenger, pipeworks laborer, electrician, or supply depot clerk - the choices in the bag are entirely based on the current need of the city. Each student will hold their randomly chosen job for at least three years, when they will then be evaluated. If they are good at their assigned job, they will keep it. If not, or there is a greater need elsewhere, they will be reassigned. ²

When I first read the story of Ember I thought, how strange that one’s job - ostensibly how each citizen of Ember would live out their lives - would be so randomly determined? Where is the consideration of one’s talents and dreams? Where is the introspection? Where is the freedom of choosing for one’s self? It occurs (at least for me) that if I am to find meaningful work - work

¹ Muirhead, Russell. *Just Work*. Harvard University Press. Cambridge. 2004. pp 26-29. [Excerpted in *Leading Lives That Matter: What We Should Do and Who We Should Be*. Mark R. Schwehn and Dorothy C. Bass, editors. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing. Grand Rapids (MI). 2006. pp188-191.]

² DuPrau, Jeanne. *The City of Ember*. Random House. New York. 2003

that is both instrumental and formative, randomly choosing a job out of a sack probably won't get me there.

A book titled *Leading Lives That Matter* edited by Mark Schwehn and Dorothy Bass provides at least some direction as to how I may discern a formative vocation. The book is a collection of essays, poetry, and stories from sources that vary from Aristotle to Ben Afflek. The collection addresses some of the questions that arise when we have these vocational "Now What" moments. Questions such as:

- Are some lives more significant than others?
- Must my job be the primary source of my identity?
- Is a balanced life possible and preferable to a life focused primarily on work?
- Should I follow my talents as I decide what to do to earn a living?
- Can I control what I shall do and become?
- To whom shall I listen?

These are the weighty questions that I have begun to grapple with. I read a bit, ponder the question for myself, then read a bit more. This is where I am comfortable. Thinking about the questions. Pondering the possible answers. Going deeper and deeper into my head. Somehow I have convinced myself that this process of finding vocation, of contemplating my current and possible future identity can best and only be done in isolation. Read. Study. Ponder. Think. Certainly I can come up with the answer. But in the end, the questions, nor any of the possible answers, nor any of my internal conversations have brought that much closer to an answer as to what I should "do." So if deep introspective contemplation doesn't get me there - what else is there?

Which brings me to our reading today. In the story about the high-wire artist we discover that the real reason he chooses his work is not the romance of the job, but rather to help and protect and be present for his family, those that he loves, in spite of, even because of their imperfections. He is there because that is where he sees himself most needed. Further, as he reluctantly admits, *they* are there to help and protect and be present for him for the same reason. In this simple story, Will Campbell shows us that a vocational calling is not simply an internal, personal matter. Instead, as Schwehn and Bass note, "our [vocational] callings are best negotiated in community with others, through a process that leads us to discern not only our own gifts but also our own needs and weaknesses, not only the rich potentials of the world, but also its poverty."³

What this teaches me is that I cannot discern my vocation entirely from within. What is necessary for me - is to seek out a community. A community that can help me discern not only my gifts, but also my needs and weaknesses. A community that can help me to envision all the rich potentials of the world as well as its poverty.

But - where does one find such a community?

For me, it started with simple conversations. For example, over the last year or two, people in my life - some who are sitting in this room right now - have been asking me a seemingly simple question: "Greg, have you ever considered being a minister?" Now, the first few times, I was dismissive. I considered it a compliment, but not a serious inquiry. "Me? A minister? I can't be a minister - I don't really like people that much!" But then, I would be asked again - in different

³ *Leading Lives That Matter: What We Should Do and Who We Should Be*. Mark R. Schwehn and Dorothy C. Bass, editors. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing. Grand Rapids (MI). 2006. p113.

circumstances, by different people, in different contexts, in different ways. I think for a while I was so stuck in my head - in my "Now What?" question, that I could not really hear the question.

Then, one day - I heard it. I mean I really *heard* it, I heard the possibility of my community helping me to envision all the rich potentials of the world, as well as its poverty. I heard the possibility of my community discerning my gifts, my needs, and maybe even my weaknesses. This was unexpected, disconcerting, and confusing. My first impulse was to run away from the very idea as quickly as I could.

However, once you discover those that are part of your larger family, those that love us and protect us despite of our imperfections - once you finally hear what they are asking of you - once you hear the invitation to engage in a conversation about who you are to be in the world - well, I'm not sure that you can just run away. At least I couldn't.

So over the last nine months or so, I have been exploring the question of whether being a Unitarian Universalist minister is what I am called to do. I am engaged in conversations with several active and retired ministers. I am talking with friends and family. I am visiting seminaries.

I have also spent time alone. I am reading a lot. I meditate a little. I even slip in a quiet prayer now and again. And when I get too much in my head, too lost in what Parker Palmer describes as "the labyrinth of the inner life," I go back out into my community and actively seek out those conversations that help me to discern.

You see, I have learned that it isn't one or the other - deep introspection or conversation in community. If I am to truly find the answers to my vocational questions, if I am to truly discern work that can not only be instrumental, but formative as well, I must seek those answers both within myself AND in the community of which I am a part.

Now as for Steve - remember Steve? Some of you may be wondering what ever happened to him. While he may not say it in this way, in his questioning "Now What?" he too discovered that as much as he enjoyed practicing architecture, it was not meaningful enough to him. And so he found himself engaged in similar conversations - both within himself, and in his community that ultimately led him to pursue a different vocation. So he left architectural practice, returned to school, earned a law degree, and now is an attorney in Chicago - a vocation that seems to fit, to make sense, and in some ways seems to be the obvious choice for him.

As I said when I began this morning, I am in this now. The narrative of this story is ongoing. And the narrative is a bit of a roller coaster. Some days I am excited about the possibility of ministry as a vocational calling. For reasons I have a difficult time articulating - this seems to fit, to make sense, and in some ways seems to be the obvious choice. On other days, well, the feeling is more akin to absolute terror. I remember when our first daughter was born, I had plenty of doubts about being a father. Those doubts pale in comparison as to the doubts I have now, as I consider ministry.

Notwithstanding those doubts, I have decided to follow this route to wherever it leads. To that end, I intend to enroll in seminary about one year from now. Furthermore, between now and then, I hope to engage in as many conversations as you all can stand to together discern our gifts and our needs and weaknesses - and to envision the rich potentials of our world, and its poverties. For it is within these conversations that we may all discover, or rediscover, our callings. May it be so.