

**Words of Inspiration**  
**Unitarian Universalist Church of the Restoration**  
**October 9, 2011**  
**Rev. Kathryn Ellis**

**“Voice Still and Small”**

This morning, we sang hymn # 391, “Voice still and small, deep inside all, I hear you call singing . . .” Do you hear that still, small voice? Sometimes that voice, for me, has needed to get loud, insistent and repetitive before I let myself pay attention.

I have been sharing some of my own spiritual journey with you this fall, and this morning, I will continue with the story of my call to ministry and my own discernment process. Next week, we’ll have our first Story Sunday and hear a story about a community which loses its sense of purpose. The following week will be David Dubbeldam’s first opportunity to lead worship here at Restoration, and he will tell you about his ongoing discernment process. On November 13<sup>th</sup>, I’ll return to the topic of community discernment.

In my October newsletter column, I gave some definitions of discernment: “the ability to judge well,” and “perception with a view to obtaining spiritual direction and understanding.”<sup>i</sup> Discernment is associated with wisdom, perception and insight. Often discernment is used to describe the process of sorting out feelings, perceptions and ideas about the call to ministry or other vocations. For me, discernment is about paying attention to all kinds of perceptions including those that don’t seem to make any sense. I think for all of us there is a call (or there are calls) to be our own authentic self, to use our particular gifts in the world. Irish poet and spiritual teacher, John O’ Donohue put it this way:

We are sent into the world to live to the full everything that awakens in us and everything that comes toward us. . . . Irenaeus said, “The glory of God is the human person fully alive.” . . . The shape of each soul is different. There is a secret destiny for each person. When you endeavor to repeat what others have done or force yourself into a preset mold, you betray your individuality. We need to return to solitude within, to find again the dream that lies at the hearth of the soul.<sup>ii</sup> (pp. 123-125)

Still, life gets complicated and confusing sometimes as Emmy Lemmings’ story shows. Maybe some of you have felt like Alice in this quote from Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*:

*“Who are you? Said the Caterpillar . . . “I hardly know, Sir, just at present,” Alice replied rather shyly, “at least I know who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I must have changed several times since then.” Lewis Carroll – Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland.*

Discernment means staying in the presence and asking yourself questions. Steve Jobs reported that each morning of his life after he was seventeen years old, he asked himself, “If today were the last day of my life, would I want to do what I am about to do today?”<sup>iii</sup> I mention Steve Jobs not just because he died this week, but because the memorial stories about him led me to see that he was a man who practiced discernment.

“You’ve got to find what you love,” he told the Stanford graduates of 2005. “You have to trust in something – your gut, destiny, karma, whatever. This approach has never let me down and it has made all the difference in my life.”

He reminded himself daily that he would die so that he would pay attention to how he was living.

Remembering that I’ll be dead soon is the most important tool I’ve ever encountered to help me make big choices in life. Because almost everything – all external expectations, all pride, all fear of embarrassment or failure – these things just fall away in the face of death, leaving only what is truly important. Remembering that you are going to die is the best way that I know to avoid the trap of thinking that you have something to lose. You are already naked. There is no reason not to follow your heart. . . .

Your time is limited, so don’t waste it living someone else’s life. Don’t be trapped by dogma – which is living with the results of other people’s thinking. Don’t let the noise of others’ opinions drown out your own inner voice. and most important, have the courage to follow your heart and intuition. They somehow already know what you truly want to become.<sup>iv</sup>

Jobs paid attention to his own heart and intuition and to others. He became a leader. Confucian theory of leadership formation “rests on the idea that ‘if you want to be a leader, you have to be a real human being. You must recognize the true meaning of life before you can become a great leader. You must understand yourself first.’”<sup>v</sup>

Jobs was certainly an innovator. “As W. Brian Arthur, . . ., put it, “Every profound innovation is based on an inward-bound journey, ongoing to a deeper place where knowing comes to the surface.” In their book *Presence*, the authors, MIT professors, consultants and founders of the Society for Organizational Learning write:

The inward journey lies at the heart of all creativity . . . Many scientists and inventors, like artists and entrepreneurs, live in a paradoxical state of great confidence and profound humility – knowing that their choices and actions matter and feeling guided by forces beyond their making. . . .

(W)e began to appreciate presence as deep listening, of being open beyond one's preconceptions and historical ways of making sense. We came to see the importance of letting go of old identities and the need to control, and . . . making choices to serve the evolution of life. . . . we came to see all these aspects of presence as leading to a state of "letting come . . ." <sup>vi</sup>

Continual letting go keeps bringing us back to the here and now. Developing the capacity to let go allows us to be open to what is emerging . . . <sup>vii</sup>

Last Sunday afternoon, I gave the sermon for Rev. Libby Smith's installation service at the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Lower Bucks. Some of you know Libby; she was the chaplain of Unitarian Universalist House, and she has been a friend to this congregation. As part of the sermon, I gave Libby a kaleidoscope because one morning at a UU ministers' meeting, Libby exclaimed that she had found the perfect metaphor for her ministry: a kaleidoscope.

When you turn the kaleidoscope lens, the image, the colors shift and create new patterns. With each new pattern is a new focus. The idea of the kaleidoscope reminded Libby to focus on the ministry of this very moment, not the past ministry, and not the future ministry. She found this metaphor quite helpful and she expressed a little disappointment at our responses. We were interested, accepting but not excited.

Libby's reaction to us led me to think about this metaphor more deeply and the more I thought about it, the more I thought kaleidoscopes are a good metaphor for all our ministries, lay and ordained. Indeed, it can be a metaphor for life, for living in this very moment. It's a reminder to pay attention, to ask ourselves if we are living our own life.

As I thought about kaleidoscopes and ministry, I remembered a particular type of kaleidoscope and had to look up what it is called. It's a teleidoscope. I thought that it was the original kind of kaleidoscope, but it is not. The teleidoscope is a 20th century invention. It was invented by mathematician and gay rights activist, John Lyon Burnside. With his partner, Harry Hay, Burnside founded the Circle of Loving Companions in the San Francisco Bay area. A teleidoscope differs from a regular kaleidoscope in that it has no colored pieces of glass. Instead, it has clear glass and mirrors. The image shifts with external shifts: movement, color and change in the outer world, and the image shifts internally when you turn the lens so that the mirrors and glass form a new pattern. Internal shifts are intentional.

An external shift could be gradual if, for example, you focused on the colors of the sky at sunset. An external shift could be sudden if someone walked in front of you. An internal shift could also be gradual as you slowly turned the lens, or you could turn it suddenly to a completely new focus. And isn't that the way it is in life? Sometimes, life flows on with seemingly little change. Sometimes change is gradual, day to day, as children grow . . . . On other days, the phone rings or someone walks in, and the whole

picture changes at once. Your focus changes immediately. Ministry and life are full of change.

For me, it's about paying attention and discerning. It's so easy for me, for us, to distract ourselves and miss or ignore the moment. The teleidoscope can remind me, us, to focus on this very moment: on this person before me, on this project, on this prayer. It's a reminder to give ourselves the gift of presence. With that gift what might we see or hear?

O'Donohue writes of seeing and hearing:

Your senses link you intimately with the divine within you and around you. . . . To the loving eye, everything is real. This art of love is neither sentimental nor naïve. Such love is the greatest criterion of truth, celebration and reality. Kathleen Raine, a Scottish poet, says that unless you see a thing in the light of love, you do not see it at all. . . . To recognize how you see things can bring you self-knowledge and enable you to glimpse the wonderful treasures your life secretly holds.<sup>viii</sup>

With the sense of hearing, we listen to creation. . . . True listening brings us in touch even with that which is unsaid and unsayable. . . . When you listen with your soul, you come into rhythm and unity with the music of the universe. . . . There is a voice within you that no one, not even you has ever heard. Give yourself the opportunity of silence and begin to develop your listening in order to hear, deep within yourself, the music of your own spirit.<sup>ix</sup>

The authors of *Presence*, business consultants, talk about learning to see as the first step towards change, both changing one's self and changing the world. Effective social justice work comes from repeated inward work. One of these authors, Joseph Jaworski said, "We have to learn to see with the heart before we can see from the whole . . . the only change that will make a difference is the transformation of the human heart. For me, it's almost like learning to see with the heart."<sup>x</sup>

My own learning to see, paying attention to that still small voice was not early in life like Emmy Lemming and Steve Jobs. Speaking of Emmy, there is an important lesson about discerning and paying attention to the external in the lemming myth. It is a myth that lemmings commit mass suicide by hurling themselves off cliffs.

Lemmings do have wide cyclical variations in population. When the population density is too high, they begin mass migrations and accidental deaths sometimes occur when they reach unfamiliar territory. They may be pushed by the crowd over a ledge. They may drown in a river or a lake, but they are not suicidal. The 1958 Disney company film, *White Wilderness*, perpetuated that myth by supposedly showing lemming mass suicide, jumping off cliffs.

There were several problems with this filming. First, they filmed in Alberta, Canada which is not lemming habitat so they bought lemmings and brought them to the site.<sup>xi</sup> Secondly, the lemmings did not jump off the cliff but were launched using a turntable.<sup>xii</sup>

My call to ministry first came to me as an internal voice, a voice that I resisted and pushed away for a long time. It was in a Quaker meeting for worship that I heard within myself, “you should be a minister.” This voice didn’t feel like it was coming from me and I didn’t want it. It was several years after I had left the university. I had a successful private psychotherapy practice, and I was healthier. I had a lot of arguments with that voice. I told myself that I was already ministering as a psychotherapist and that all are called. I do believe that we are all called and that there are very many ways to minister in the world, to the world. I had not been a member of a Unitarian Universalist congregation long enough. It was too hard. My daughter was in college; how could I go back to school? How could I ask my family to sacrifice again?

The feeling did not go away. I once heard an analogy of the feeling of being called to the ministry. It’s like trying to hold a beach ball under water. You can get it under the water but it always pops back up. My arguments did not convince that still, small voice. I started to research the requirements for Unitarian Universalist ministry and seminary possibilities on the web. I had not yet said anything out loud to anyone else. For me, the inner voice must be grounded by feedback from the community. Community response is necessary to confirm the call. When I did speak it aloud, I found overwhelming community support. One person said, “Well, of course, you are becoming a minister.”

My husband was not initially happy with this new path, and his reaction helped me to continue to resist what I already knew inside. Even after I began seminary studies, I told myself that all this was just to enhance my psychotherapy work. It took several semesters before I surrendered to the voice that I said I should become a parish minister.

The Unitarian Universalist Ministerial Fellowship Committee asked me how I had changed through the ministerial formation process. I told them about a conversation with my husband. When I had just begun seminary and he was not yet accepting of this decision, I told him that I would still be the same person and that I would not change. I laughed when I told the committee that story because I feel changed and I know that I have changed. What has not changed is my love and commitment to my husband.

In his book *Falling Upward*, Richard Rohr described my experience:

In the second half of the spiritual life, you are not making choices as much as you are being guided, taught and led – which leads to “choiceless choices.” There are the things you cannot not do because of what you have become, things you do not need to do because they are just not yours to do, and things you absolutely must do because they are your destiny and your deepest desire.<sup>xiii</sup>

I was motivated to enter ministry by the feeling that I must do so. I must do so to live my life authentically and to serve as I am called to serve. I have been overwhelmed by the positive response that I have received in ministry. I feel blessed and affirmed, and I feel responsible to give back to the community.

I feel awake. I feel better able to use my whole self in ministry. I am much, much more often unafraid and have found a faith that no matter what happens, still all will be well. All will be well because there is a loving, comforting presence that responds. I have experienced surrender and gratitude. I try to discern ongoing call and although I resist, I intend to follow. I can be aware of Presence.

This is how it has been for me. How is it for you?

May you live in blessing.

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<sup>i</sup> *New Oxford American Dictionary*

<sup>ii</sup> O'Donohue, John. *Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2004, pp. 123-125.

<sup>iii</sup> Jobs, Steve. Commencement Address, June 12, 2005 @ <http://news.stanford.edu/news/2005/june15/jobs-0612505.html>

<sup>iv</sup> Jobs, Steve. Commencement Address, June 12, 2005 @ <http://news.stanford.edu/news/2005/june15/jobs-0612505.html>

<sup>v</sup> Senge, Peter, C. Otto Scharmer, Joseph Jaworski and Betty Sue Flowers. *Presence: An Exploration of Profound Change in People, Organizations, and Society*. New York: Doubleday, 2004, p.180.

<sup>vi</sup> Senge, Peter, C. Otto Scharmer, Joseph Jaworski and Betty Sue Flowers. *Presence: An Exploration of Profound Change in People, Organizations, and Society*. New York: Doubleday, 2004, pp. 13-14.

<sup>vii</sup> Senge, Peter, C. Otto Scharmer, Joseph Jaworski and Betty Sue Flowers. *Presence: An Exploration of Profound Change in People, Organizations, and Society*. New York: Doubleday, 2004, p. 96.

<sup>viii</sup> O'Donohue, John. *Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2004, pp. 58-65.

<sup>ix</sup> O'Donohue, John. *Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2004, pp. 70-72.

<sup>x</sup> Senge, Peter, C. Otto Scharmer, Joseph Jaworski and Betty Sue Flowers. *Presence: An Exploration of Profound Change in People, Organizations, and Society*. New York: Doubleday, 2004, p.p. 53-68.

<sup>xi</sup> <http://www.snopes.com/disney/films/lemmings.asp>

<sup>xii</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lemming#cite\\_note-12](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lemming#cite_note-12)

<sup>xiii</sup> Rohr, Richard. *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of the Soul*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011, p.166.