



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK
Spirituality · Community · Justice

We Are All Called:
A Sermon for the Ordination of Karyn Bergmann Marsh
The Rev. Dr. J. Carl Gregg
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frederickuu.org

Karyn, what a joy it is to be here together for your ordination! This celebration has been long delayed because it was important to you to have an *in-person* option.

Don't get me wrong: there is much to be grateful for about the wonders of multi-platform programming—especially the inclusiveness and accessibility that Zoom and other technologies make possible. There are so many wonderful colleagues, friends, and family members contributing to this service who would not have been able to be present without an online option. But even after the past two years of practice, so many of us know **how hard it can be to pre-record ministry—to preach and teach and pray—when your only audience is the lens of a camera staring back at you.**

And as I have been reflecting on this day that has finally arrived—and on what a difference it can make to be together in the same room—a song has kept coming into my mind from the Quaker singer-songwriter David Lamotte titled, “In the Light.” It is about the power of performing live music in front of an audience. I want to invite all of you to listen to some of the lyrics, with a few I have changed slightly to apply more to ministry than to music.

As I read these words, I invite you to reflect on how we discern what we are called to say to one another and what we sometimes leave unsaid. The song goes like this:

So here I stand with this [microphone] in my hand
What was it that I came to say?

There was something about
some hope and
some dreams and
some fear
Some ideas for a better way
If I really feel like I trust you
Maybe we'll talk about the pain
Maybe you'll understand me
Maybe you won't walk away

You know I ain't no television
I'm watching you while you're watching me
I can tell when the [message] reaches you
Something changes and I can see
And it shines down on my soul, you know
And deep inside I feel
We're in this thing together
And we're touching something real

Karyn, in that spirit of responding to one another *in the moment*, you said that you wanted the theme of this ordination to be “We Are All Called.” Your intention is for this day to be about not only your ordination, but also, in your words, **“an ordination for us all to go forth and minister to a suffering world.”**

As with a musician changing a song or a set list in the moment in response to an audience, just so does a minister change the flow of a worship service or a plan for a congregational year in response to whatever change is emerging. Discernment about how *you*, how *I*, how *we* are always being called into shared ministry is like that. It's real, live, emergent, unpredictable, flowing. It's process, It's relational. It's growing, evolving, changing, adapting.

Karyn, you chose two beautiful readings that illuminate how we are continually called. The first reading, by “Orah Mountain Dreamer,” which Lora read, affirms that love has *always already* been calling us. There's nothing we need to do to earn the call

of love. Since love has always already been calling, part of our invitation and challenge is often to just slow down long enough to be able to hear that call.

I'll never forget the opening words shared at the beginning of my three-year spiritual direction training, which I completed more than a decade ago. The director of the program said, **"We're going to start slowly, so that later we can slow down."** That's counter-intuitive advice in our non-stop, 24/7, faster-and-more-is-always-better culture. "We're going to start slowly" so that later we might find we have cultivated the capacity to slow down for long enough to listen to how we are being called.

Karyn, you also chose the opening verses of 1 Samuel Chapter 3. What a powerful tale of overlooking a call, then finally slowing down long enough to really listen to it. I love that early detail in Verse 1, that, "In those days the word of [God] was rare; there were not many visions." If we read between the lines, that passage challenges us to ask: **were divine words and sacred visions truly rare or were most people simply not slowing down enough to listen?**

Along these lines, I would like to share with you two quotes that have been touchstones for me in discerning one important way that we are called. The first quote is from the Trappist monk Thomas Merton, who was both a *contemplative* cloistered in a monastery, and an *activist*, frequently corresponding and meeting with visitors who were on the front lines of creating social change. In his book, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, he wrote a passage that may be particularly provocative for us Unitarian Universalists and other social progressives committed to building a better world with peace, liberty, and justice, not merely for some—but for *all*.

According to Merton,

There is a pervasive form of modern violence to which the idealist...most easily succumbs: activism and over-work. The rush and pressure of modern life are a form, perhaps the most common form, of its innate violence. To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything is to succumb to violence. **The frenzy of the activist neutralizes [their]**

work.... because it kills the root of inner wisdom, which makes work fruitful. (86)

As we discern how we are called to build the better world we dream about—and how to turn our dreams into deeds—Merton cautions us that our admirable commitments to social justice can become disordered. As so many of us are learning through the work of Anti-racism, Anti-oppression, and Multiculturalism, “Intentions do not equal impact.” Despite our best intentions, we do not always have the *impact* and get the results we imagined. And Merton warns us that activism which is too frenzied and relentless (without breaks to reflect, reorient, and recharge) can ironically cause us to be less effective: “*The frenzy of the activist neutralizes [their] work.... because it kills the root of inner wisdom, which makes work fruitful.*”

The second quote that may serve us as we seek to discern our calls is from the book *Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community*:

Even when a need exists and we are well qualified to meet it, we are not necessarily called to respond to it. Something may seem logical for us to do, but that does not mean that we call[ed] to do it.... Simply because a task or undertaking is good to do, does it mean that we are called to do it or that we should continue doing it? **To be doing good can be the greatest obstacle to doing something even better.**

Hear that final line again: “*To be doing good can be the greatest obstacle to doing something even better.*”

As I learned in a class on the spiritual practice of discernment, a basic, foundational part of skillful discernment is learning to choose good over evil. Although, sadly, many world leaders today seem confused about the difference between good and evil, but we are called to discern clear distinctions between the temptations of hate, greed, and delusion on the one hand, and the lure and power of love, generosity, and wisdom on the other.

But what about the much more subtle distinction of **discerning the “best” next right action—over something merely “good” or “better.”** None of us can do everything we’d like to do. So how do we choose, in each moment, what is most authentically *mine* and *yours* and *ours* to do, over so many other worthy priorities?

Frederick Buechner brilliantly urged us to look for that place “**where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.**” Howard Thurman pushed the envelope even further when he said, “Don't ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive, and go do that, because **what the world needs is people who have come alive.**”

So, what are we called to do? And what is *not* ours to do? If, with Samuel and Oriah Mountain Dreamer, we are to give a full-throated, fully embodied, fully committed wise and compassionate “Yes!” to our calling, we must also be willing to say, “No” to where we are not called — if we are not to spread ourselves too thin, or find ourselves burned out by what Merton calls the *violence* of overwork.

On learning to say “No” to the grind of capitalism and White Supremacy Culture, I don't know of anyone speaking more powerfully and prophetically today than Tricia Hersey, known affectionately as “The Nap Bishop.” I've learned a lot from her Instagram feed ([instagram.com/thenapministry](https://www.instagram.com/thenapministry)), and I am looking forward to her book coming out this fall titled *Rest Is Resistance: A Manifesto*.

She is about a lot more than twenty-minute power naps to increase productivity; that's actually the opposite of her message. Hersey invites us to reflect deeply and subversively on rest as a genuinely alternative to 24/7, non-stop “grind culture” — the relentless demands undergirding what bell hooks called the “White Supremacist, Capitalist Patriarchy.” In Hersey's words: “**Grind culture wants us to keep going no matter what. I sit my ass down and daydream. The answer is NO.**”

Her emphasis on rest doesn't mean that she lacks resolve for changing the world. Rather, she challenges us to consider that resting will be a key component not only of the better world we hope one day to build, but also of what it will take to build that world. The peace activist A. J. Muste used to say that, “**There is no way to peace. Peace is the way.**” Similarly, the Nap Bishop might tell us that there is no other way to a world in which we are rested. *Rest is the way.*

Activists rightly remind us that another world *is* possible, but building a different world requires *systemic* change. And as Audre Lorde taught us, “**You can't dismantle the master's house using the master's tools.**” The Nap Bishop invites us to consider

that contemplative rest may be one of those tools that can be used to dismantle the master's house.

To limit myself to just one quote from a recent Hersey [interview](#), she says, “I realized I had been navigating decisions from a space of toxic urgency. I began to experiment with the radical notion of deliberately and forcefully slowing down. My rest practice became a place of solace, restoration, resistance, reparations and connection. **The refusal to *grind* thus became a political act.**”

As I move toward my conclusion, I would like to share with you one other discernment touchstone from the late Thich Nhat Hanh. One of the last books he published before his death is titled *Zen and the Art of Saving the Planet*.

Hanh coined the term Engaged Buddhism. He cared deeply about social justice and systemic change. So what might he tell us about how to approach issues as urgent as climate change, racial justice, wealth inequality, voting rights, and reproductive justice?

There are times when Thich Nhat Hanh would tell his students, “**Don’t just do something, sit there**” (vii). Along with Merton, Nhat Hanh knew that acting rashly and without wisdom and compassion can ironically end up undermining our work for justice. Sometimes we need to slow down, recenter, and recalibrate.

Other times, one of Nhat Hanh’s closest students reports that:

There were days when the action was so pressing he’d remind us, with a gentle smile and a glint in his eye that, “**There’s no need to eat lunch. The human body can survive several days without food.**” And there were yet other days when seeing us working so hard we’d forgotten to eat, **he quietly went into the kitchen himself to prepare us hot soup for dinner.** (viii)

Karyn, where are *you*—and, all of you who are listening, where are *we*—in that mix of being in the struggle and self-care these days, as summer approaches? Karyn, even on this, your ordination day, is it time to slow down and do some contemplating and recharging—or is it time to skip your next meal and take action? What is the next right action for you—and for us—to take at the intersection of wisdom and compassion?

How are we each called to answer the call of love, a call which also includes love and care for ourselves, for our own emotions, for our own bodies?

In the coming days and weeks, as we each individually and collectively continue to discern “*Where leads our call?*”, here is a blessing that I have adapted from one written by the leadership of the spiritual direction training program I mentioned earlier.

As we continue in this shared ministry of our living tradition:

May you enter ever more deeply into your humanity
that your heart may open more widely
to receive more and more love.

May we always continue to be stretched
that we may see, hear, and embrace
the new things emerging in our midst.

May our spirits continue to be drawn together
into this beloved community of
service and singing,
meditation and listening,
hospitality and learning,
compassion and justice.

And may we continue to freely choose to be ourselves —
fully alive, grateful, and connected —
that we may love and serve one another,
our families and communities,
the larger UU movement
and the world,
and even the universe itself.

I don't know what all may be coming in the days ahead, but I know I am grateful to be on this journey with all of you—and especially, today, with you, Karyn, our soon-to-be newest minister in our living tradition. In the coming days, may we act together in such a way that when our time comes, it will be said of us: “*They answered the call of love.*”