

"CARVING YOUR LIFE" – A sermon delivered by Rev. Laura L. Mancuso at Live Oak Unitarian Universalist Congregation, Goleta, California on May 18, 2008

Thank you to the Worship Committee and Rev. Erika for inviting me to preach at Live Oak today. It feels great to be back! As Barb mentioned, I recently graduated from an interfaith seminary. People often ask me, "How long did it take you to become a minister?" I'm not sure how to answer that question.

I studied for two years at The Chaplaincy Institute for Arts & Interfaith Ministries in Berkeley California, beginning in January 2006. Before that, I spent a year as a student at a Unitarian Universalist seminary in Chicago called Meadville Lombard, which many of you are familiar with. My calling occurred before that, on New Year's Day 2002. Is that when I started my preparation? With the benefit of hindsight, I could say that I was being prepared – although I didn't know it at the time – when I fell ill in the mid 90s, which forced me to drastically alter my life priorities. Was that the beginning? It's hard to say! Perhaps it took a lifetime.

But I know for sure that a lot of things had to be taken away from me in order to get me to commit to this path.

That's what I want to talk about today. Because while my calling was to ordained ministry, there are many types of sacred callings: the calling to bring a child into this world; the calling to adopt a child who needs a home; the calling to care for elderly relatives; the calling to lead others as a grass roots organizer; to lead organizations as a manager or business owner; the calling to teach; the calling to write, or sing or make art... there are countless examples of spiritual paths.

And something I've noticed about spiritual paths is that they rarely follow a straight line. Committing to the path typically involves enduring hardships, hardships which may lead us to question whether we are even on the right path at all. Let me share a few examples from my own life.

Before I got sick, I had an exciting career as a national consultant. I was a specialist on the Americans with Disabilities Act and how it applied to workers with psychiatric disabilities and their employers.

I was very passionate about it. I used to joke that, "Anywhere two or more are gathered" in the name of this topic, I would drop everything and jump on the next plane. I traveled to 20 states in a little over 3 years, and spoke to 8,000 people. I enjoyed my fifteen minutes of fame. I was quoted in the *New York Times*, *Time Magazine*, and testified before the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. I was very busy doing things that were unquestionably helpful and constructive. So it never occurred to me that I might be doing harm...to myself.

In fact, my life was out of balance, and my body was falling apart. I was accumulating medical diagnoses. Fibromyalgia. Chronic fatigue syndrome. Seasonal affective disorder. I started noticing that I needed days of rest after every trip.

I went to many doctors, looking for quick fixes so I could keep up my important work. They treated my conditions one at a time, no one ever taking in the big picture of my life.

By the time I got to a clinic in Los Angeles that assessed my health holistically, I learned that I had had untreated thyroid disease for many years. And they could not measure any estrogen in my body. That was quite a problem for a 36 year old woman. The doctor said she could not imagine how I was standing upright, let alone working as I did. I had been ignoring the signals from my body for a very long time.

I started seeing an endocrinologist in Santa Barbara, still assuming she had some quick fix that would cure me. Instead, what she had was an ultimatum: you can either continue with your current lifestyle or you can recover. And recovery is gonna take years. She ordered me to stop traveling altogether.

Needless to say, I resisted this message. Month after month, I returned to her office, asking for a cure. And month after month, she offered the same ultimatum.

My ego was so wrapped up in my career that it never occurred to me that there were plenty of other people who could carry on this work.

Ultimately, my body's demands became louder and louder, until I had little choice but to relent. I cancelled all of the keynote speeches I was scheduled

to give, and pulled out of a lawsuit on which I was serving as an expert witness -- defending a person with major depression who had lost his job -- even though we had yet to go to trial. I was certain my reputation would be ruined forever.

And once I started resting, I experienced the full brunt of the fatigue that I had been disregarding for so long. I got worse before I got better. On some days, I was so fatigued that going to the mailbox was all I could muster...and then I had to rest afterwards.

It felt only like loss at the time. But once I started to accept the new priorities that my life had handed me, amazing things started to happen.

For example, the very first morning I was at home due to a cancelled trip, I awoke to a crystal clear winter day. I went outside and saw a very rare sight: the tops of the dark green Santa Barbara foothills were covered in pure white snow. It was fleeting, and breathtakingly beautiful, and I would have missed it entirely if I had been out of town.

My life necessarily slowed down. My focus shifted to my home, my health, and only local concerns. I was extremely grateful to be able to work part-time from home as a consultant to the County Mental Health Department. I took walks around the neighborhood, took up birdwatching, and returned to journal writing, which I had not done in years.

Very gradually, my health improved, and it continues to get better year by year, even now. And although I will always describe myself as "in recovery" from Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, it no longer interferes with my life as it once did. I am healthier and happier and more resilient now. I exercise regularly and travel often, albeit more slowly than other people. I have my life back. And I have come to view my newfound ability to listen to my body's signals as a gift, one that will help me in my developing practice of hands-on energy healing.

In hindsight, I can see that it was a good thing that my life was redirected by illness, although I would not have said that at the time.

I also did not know at the time that I was being prepared for an even larger set of challenges....a very difficult phase for which it was essential that I have a more centered, more contemplative life.

As some of you know, I lost three family members in a row. My father died in 2001. My mother died in 2002. And then my sister, at age 44, died in 2003. Then my beloved German Shepherd Dog came to the end of her life 15 months later.

I don't know what would have become of me if I were still consulting when all of these losses hit. Surely some changes would have been foisted upon me. But I do know for sure that my calling was revealed to me as a direct result of attending to my family members' illnesses and deaths with an open heart. Regardless of what was going on, I just kept showing up -- physically, emotionally, spiritually – and a whole new world was revealed to me.

At the time of my father's death, I received, so to speak, a poem in his voice, expressing fully and eloquently his love for, and his regrets about, his relationship with each family member. It came to me while I was doing some journal writing. I wrote it down and read it to him at his bedside on the night before he died. And I promised him I would share it with my mother and three siblings. I was certain they would think I had lost my mind. But instead, one of them said, simply, "I wish Dad had been this articulate while he was alive – we might have gotten along better."

It just so happened that I was the one sitting with my mother in her hospital room in Chicago when her doctor came to tell her that she would die within a few days of kidney failure. She accepted this news with unbelievable grace. And then it was up to me to share it with my brothers and sister. Mom died peacefully the next day.

And then, through a strange set of circumstances, I was the lone family member attending to my sister and a few dozen of her friends as she took her last breath in Los Angeles, concluding 48 hours of prayer at her bedside that was nothing short of transformative.

In his landmark book entitled, *Callings: Finding and Following An Authentic Life*, Gregg Levoy asserts that, "Callings keep surfacing until we deal with them." I have also found that they keep getting LOUDER until we deal with them.

These experiences were devastating, as pieces of my life were being ripped away from me. But they were also life-giving.

After each loss, I took several months off from my part-time work and deepened my contemplative practices. I set aside time each morning for prayer, introspection, and exploration of the inner terrain of my mind and heart. I sought out music and poetry that reflected how I felt inside, and listened to it over and over. One of my favorite passages from this time, by Rainer Maria Rilke, goes like this:

*What is the deepest loss that you have suffered?  
If drinking is bitter, change yourself to wine.<sup>1</sup>*

Rather than fighting these losses, as I had done when I got sick five years earlier, I sought to merge with the feelings of loss...and there I found wholeness.

These experiences affirmed for me the urgency of my budding interest in going to seminary. People started asking me, out of the blue, if I was already a minister.

I finally relented and enrolled as a seminary student.

The program I entered at Meadville enabled me to live in Goleta and continue to be an active member of Live Oak for 11 months of the year. Classroom time was compressed into the month of January. Classes met for 40 hours per week, four weeks in a row, in Chicago. Needless to say, being still in recovery, I was worried about the intensity of this schedule. As an accommodation, my faculty advisor suggested that I register for an innovative class, called "Arts & Aesthetics in Ministry" during my fourth and final week. About half of our classroom time would be spent in contemplative practice, and the other half doing stone-carving. I was more than a little intimidated by this, as I had never done any carving, and certainly did not consider myself an artist. But he convinced me that anyone could do it, and I knew I would be grateful for the change of pace by the end of the month so I registered for the course.

The instructors had us spend several hours in close physical proximity to our raw stones before ever picking up a file or chisel. They encouraged us to visualize the finished product as it existed inside the stone, waiting to be freed by our careful removal of the material that encased it.

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<sup>1</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, *Silent Friend of Many Distances*. Translated by Stephen Mitchell.

They explained the concept of “negative space.” Now that was a hard one for me. Let me try to explain it to you. One artist defines the term this way:

*“Positive space” in artwork is the space that is filled with something, such as lines, designs, color, or shapes.*

*“Negative space” is empty or void space, space around an object or form, also called white space.<sup>2</sup>*

And another artist, comments on the importance of negative space in webpage design:

*White space is an important layout technique often overlooked by the inexperienced designer. While some artists concentrate heavily on what to put in, they can overlook what to leave out. .... Without an adequate amount of white space, text would be unreadable, graphics would lose their emphasis, and there would be no balance between the elements on a page.<sup>3</sup>*

Interesting advice for art...and for designing a life.

Everything I had previously created involved ADDING something to beautify it...like adding thread to fabric in embroidery, or applying paint to paper. The notion of taking something away in order to improve it was very foreign to me. But my stone was an insistent teacher! Over and over again, I got to the point that my carving was starting to take shape, only to find that I just needed to build it up a little over here or there...and then realizing, of course, that was impossible. The only way to recover from such a situation is to start over with the remaining material, making the entire piece smaller. As you can guess, my carving got quite small until I learned that lesson for good.

In the end, it turned out fine, and I was astonished that other people could actually recognize what it was: the head of an eagle emerging from the stone. I brought my carving to show you today...

This carving represents so much to me. It represents rebirth; it represents motion, getting unstuck; it represents what can be accomplished if we are

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<sup>2</sup> Source, Dr. Robert Berdan. See

[http://photoinf.com/General/Robert\\_Berdan/Composition\\_and\\_the\\_Elements\\_of\\_Visual\\_Design.htm](http://photoinf.com/General/Robert_Berdan/Composition_and_the_Elements_of_Visual_Design.htm)

<sup>3</sup> Source: Grantastic Designs, Chicago, IL. See <http://www.grantasticdesigns.com/whitespace.html>

willing to go slowly, look deeply within, let go of what is unnecessary; experience losses fully, even to carve up our lives intentionally. It can't happen if we're in a hurry. The "still small voice" within is a whisper, not a roar, and it can easily be drowned out by noise if our lives are too busy.

I'm quite certain that I would have missed my calling entirely if I were still overly busy "doing good". Further, I'm certain that I would be less effective today in my work as a spiritual counselor if I had not experienced these losses.

One of our homework assignments during the Arts & Aesthetics class was to do journal writing in response to 3 questions:

What do you need to embrace?

What do you need to risk?

What do you need to release?

Although we are naturally more attracted to the first question, the other two are equally as important. Again: What do you need to embrace? What do you need to risk? What do you need to release?

The Bhagavad-Gita, one of the ancient texts of Hinduism, says,

*A true yogi, having attained spiritual maturity,  
meets the inevitable good and bad of life with an even mind;  
and remains serene  
in the face of heat and cold,  
pleasure and pain,  
honor and disgrace.<sup>4</sup>*

Well, I haven't personally evolved that far! But I do understand the ideal.

I believe that spiritual practices give people the strength to deal with whatever happens to them in life, good or bad, and still make meaning from it. I believe that's why people return here to Live Oak week after week, because it's a place where we can feel whole, no matter what joys we are bringing or what losses we have suffered.

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<sup>4</sup> Paraphrase of Chapter 13, verses 7 and 9.

Sometimes things that are dear to you are ripped away. It hurts at the time. But eventually, if we are open to it, we might also find some meaning in the experience.

We need to spend time willingly in the empty space, in the void, and not fill our lives up with busy-ness, even if it's all for a good cause.

We need not fear the emptiness, we need not fill the void... for some delicious surprises await us in the abyss.

I'd like to close today with a poem by the 14<sup>th</sup> century Sufi poet, Rumi. It's called "The Guest House." As you listen to his words, I encourage you to reflect on the callings that are whispering to you today in your own life.

*"This being human is a guest house.  
Every morning is a new arrival.  
A joy, a depression, a meanness,  
some momentary awareness comes  
as an unexpected visitor.  
Welcome and entertain them all!  
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,  
who violently sweep your house  
empty of its furniture,  
still, treat each guest honorably.  
He may be clearing you out  
for some new delight.  
The dark thought, the shame, the malice,  
meet them at the door laughing,  
and invite them in.  
Be grateful for whoever comes,  
because each has been sent  
as a guide from beyond."*<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> "The Guest House" by Rumi (1207-1273), translated by Coleman Barks.