



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

No Hate Zone

Rev. Dr. Jim Nelson, Senior Minister
September 12, 2010

301 N. Orange Grove Blvd. Pasadena, CA 91103 (626) 449-3470 information@uuneighborhood.org

For whatever it's worth, I've found that my sermons often turn out better if I have to keep them to ten minutes. I chose the reading on American clergy burn-out not as a way to tell you I'm burned out, because I am most assuredly not burned out, but because I thought, surely ministry is not the only field of work with a burn-out trend, or the only one under pressure "to forsake one's highest calling." Today, on this Sunday before Labor Day, I offer a reflection on today's attitudes toward work and earning, and how likely we are to succeed at honoring our so-called 'calling.'

The word *vocation* has a Latin verb at its root, *vocare*, to call. This implies that ministers are not the only ones who receive a calling, some kind of sign of the path you would be wise to take in life. I remember throughout my training as a minister I would get that question an awful lot: what was *your* call to ministry, or more to the point: so, why do you want to be a minister?

I found the question awfully tiresome. I highly doubted that other vocations received the same scrutiny. "So, why do you want to be a lawyer? Why do you want to be a software developer?" Rather than guess at what people expected to hear I replied glibly, "It's a viable career option."

It turns out this response was absolutely correct; I'm grateful to be entering my 6th year of full-time employment as an ordained pastor. But enough about me, what about you? Do you remember a magical moment when you knew for certain what it was you were meant to do with your life? Did you receive a call? A call to teach perhaps, or a call to write, a call to be a leader in some way, a call to design, to create, a call to science?

Now I'm sure some of you think you did receive such a call, and I'm happy for you. But today I'm putting on my humanist hat and invite us to question this matter of call altogether. Because it's always struck me as a bit high-falutin', especially in light of the fact that, while all societies have work at their center, western society was the first to suggest that we should actually enjoy it.

It was not long after the Renaissance when practical activity began to be praised.¹ Many kinds of work became ennobling and could inform one's character. The trend coincided with the development of freer and more equal societies, that by the time the New World idealized itself as a non-hierarchical society, what an American does for a living became a distinguishing feature of one's identity. As you know, it is to this day, and how much money you make remains the default measuring stick of success. Has growing up to be rich and famous always been an American child's first dream? One cultural relic of the 1980's that glorified this dream was that silly show, *Lifestyles of the Rich & Famous*. When I looked it up on Wikipedia, I was surprised to learn the show ran for over ten years, ending in 1995.

They must have run out of rich people's mansions to display. Because goodness knows the vast majority of us are not rich and famous, but poor and nerdy. And in today's culturally flip-flopping world, being poor and nerdy isn't so bad. Allow me to explain.

Being rich and famous isn't so cool anymore. Look at Paris Hilton. If you're going to be rich and famous, you better be someone like Bill Gates, the man who single-handedly won revenge for all nerds. Nerdriness has been chic for some time now. What else could explain the rise of Michael Cera, geek star of *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World*? I theorize that the popularity of the nerd factor in our culture has a few roots. One goes back to Bill Gates, and the rise of the tech sector in our economy.

According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, "employment in computer systems design and related services is expected to increase by 45 percent, accounting for nearly one-fourth of all new jobs in this industry sector" between 2008

¹ *The Pleasures and Sorrows of Work* by Alain de Botton, p. 110.

and 18.² So to soldier on, the US economy actually needs more computer geeks.³ Another theory is the individuality factor. From the days of Walt Whitman, we have glorified expressive individualism, and the geek mystique is another rendition of how cool it is to be unique. Terminally unique, but I'll get to that.

My last theory links up with being poor, a much harder thing to sell as being cool. But as so many of us are in fact poor - especially newer generations compared to their forbears - there's been some cultural consensus to make that okay. No one wants to feel like a loser, but in this economy there are plenty of cool people who are losing, because there just isn't enough work. In America we have always been the society of *no class-consciousness* - that is, we are most comfortable identifying with the middle class, whether we are in fact above or below it, and even as it shrinks before our eyes. To let being poor and nerdy be okay is another layer of this class unconsciousness; perhaps it's becoming the new normal of the American way. Meanwhile, the 13,000 richest families in America have almost as much income as the 20 million poorest households; those 13,000 families have incomes 300 times that of average families.⁴

Regardless, being okay with poor is hard to sell, and anyone here who's feeling financially stressed knows it. One of my kernels of hope today comes from a Dolly Parton lyric, from her song, *Coat of Many Colors*. It's about her childhood, growing up in Appalachia, dirt poor. She recalls the era close to when many of these union songs were still being sung and had far more political and life-blood meaning than the more nostalgic tone they have today. The song is about a coat Dolly's mom makes for her from different colored rags, and how the kids at school made fun of her coat. But she sings,

*And I couldn't understand it
For I felt I was rich
And I told them of the love
My momma sewed in every stitch
And I told em all the story
Momma told me while she sewed
And how my coat of many colors
Was worth more than all their clothes*

*But they didn't understand it
And I tried to make them see
That one is only poor
Only if they choose to be*

I often wonder if part of what makes us feel poor at times, whether we really are or not, is that nagging feeling that, somehow, we missed our call. We were called, but we didn't pick up, we didn't listen. That if we had chosen a different career path, or if we'd followed that dream, we wouldn't be in this predicament, whether that predicament is being un- or underemployed, or feeling burned out and confused in a current position.

But I think what's closer to the truth, is that, *there is no call*. Even the career counselor you heard about in the third reading remarked to the writer "that the most common and unhelpful illusion plaguing those who came to see him was the idea that they ought somehow, in the normal course of events, to have intuited . . . what they should properly be doing with their lives. They were tormented by a residual notion of having through some error or stupidity on their part missed out on their true 'calling.'"

If there's no call, then there's only what we choose to do, to commit our hearts and souls to, whether if it's 'where we're supposed to be' or not. We choose those feelings of regret, or that wallowing in, 'I missed my chance.' *We choose to place so much of our identity in that image of what we do for a living, that we forget to live.* We choose to be poor in spirit when we obsess over what we don't have. But what can we *really* have?

² <http://www.bls.gov/oco/oco2003.htm>

³ Let it be noted, however, that the number one field of job growth will be in health care.

⁴ *Elsewhere, U.S.A.* by Dalton Conley, p. 11.

My message of hope today will try to use this metaphor of the Union. Far as I can tell, we don't really have Unions anymore. I'm sure some of them do good, but I've heard enough discouraging stories to be mighty confused about their contemporary function and worth. Back in the day, they did seem powerful and good. What do we *know* is powerful and good today?

Nerds can go wrong in their hyper-individualism if they don't join the crowd for what all human beings need: love and support. I don't know if I got a fancy call to ministry or not, but I know that I'm doing the right line of work because I have love and support backing up what I do. I get that from the community I serve, from my colleagues, and from my friends and family. That's as close to a 'Union' as I've got.

No matter if times get tough - whether it's burn-out or poverty, that's all we really have, and we've got to work hard to fight those feelings of alienation because they're real. We've got to be part of a 'Union,' the most reliable union we can find, filled with people who look out for you and sometimes help fight for you if necessary. And I venture to say that a union like that can be found in communities like this one, in communities that value caring more than competing, that encourage connecting over isolating.

I want to remind us of the traditional definition of nerdiness that will never be cool - that is, it's nerdy to not feel like you're part of something, it's nerdy to not know where your sources of support can come from. An example of this kind of nerd might be the character George Clooney played in *Up in the Air*, constantly traveling and communityless. Even he admitted at some point, "If you think about it, your favorite memories, the most important moments in your life... were you alone? Life's better with company." Being communityless is a hard way to go, and it's hard to change it, too. You have to put yourself out there, you have to take a leap of faith, and say, "love me!"

Like the ministers who feel they've lost their way due to the pressures of consumer society, it's easy to give in to our own fears associated with the pressures of a consumer society. It's easy to lose sight of who we really are, and who we really want to be. Here's an example of that pressure: I've heard over and over that the reason the economy is not recovering is because consumers aren't spending enough.

While it's true most of us don't feel we have the money to spend, I also like to think it's partly because we're just tired of it. We're waking up to the fact that we're not happy buying stuff all the time, that there are more important things in life, like good relationships and the freedom of simplicity. That to live within our means debt-free is a happier way to be.

But the fear-mongering is going to continue, in all kinds of ways. We've got to spend, we got to invest, we've got to pretend like this is all working when it isn't. At some point, we have to say, 'but you can't scare me. I'm sticking to what's real. I'm sticking to involvement in my community, and I'm sticking to simplicity, to a healthier environment. I'm sticking to spending my resources of time and treasure on something that can be shared, that isn't just for me. I'm sticking to doing my best and loving my best, and in this way, I will never, ever, be poor.'

It's when we stick to the union of love and support of each other that riches are found. Now that is a call I can believe in. In fact, I will take off my humanist hat now and say that I know that is God's call to everyone of us: to turn to our fellows and love them, especially when times are tougher for them than for us. It's a faint call, it's very quiet - it's awfully hard to hear over the din of commercials and images that distract us every day. But it's calling, and maybe, if we give ourselves the gift of unity, silence, and enough peace, we can hear it - and then we'll know exactly what we should do with ourselves.

My favorite book of all time has always been the *Grapes of Wrath*, by John Steinbeck. Nothing could describe this call of unity better than the famous speech by Jim Casey in chapter four:

"Before I knowed it, I was sayin' out loud, 'The hell with it! There ain't no sin and there ain't no virtue. There's just stuff people do. It's all part of the same thing.' . . . I says, 'What's this call, this sperit?' An' I says, 'It's love. I love people so much I'm fit to bust, sometimes.' . . . I figgered, 'Why do we got to hang it on God or Jesus? Maybe,' I figgered, 'maybe it's all men an' all women we love; maybe that's the Holy Sperit-the human sperit-the whole shebang. Maybe all men got

one big soul ever'body's a part of.' Now I sat there thinkin' it, an' all of a suddent-I knew it. I knew it so deep down that it was true, and I still know it."

Let's sing about how we all know it in our last hymn, Union Maid by Woody Guthrie. Please rise in body or in sperit . . .