The Outward Journey: Call and Gifts

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 Over the past three Sundays in September, we have journeyed through defining components of the Church of the Saviour and 8th Day. These are:

# the origin story of the Church of the Saviour;

# the centrality of the inward journey that is one's relationship with God/the Divine Oneness, with self, and with engagements with others;

# the critical need for life in a faith community to support the inward and outward journey.

Elizabeth O'Connor, in her conclusion to the Chapter 1, “The Inward Journey” in her book, *Journey Inward, Journey Outward*, wrote "… this is also a book about the outward journey and a church's struggle to contain both movements within its life." (Elizabeth O'Connor, *Journey Inward, Journey Outward*, p. 9)

So today we complete this series of teachings by engaging with the Outward Journey. We will focus primarily on the concept of CALL and GIFTS as essential to the outward journey which is fed by the inward journey and the life and support of community.

I do want to suggest that the outward journey is not just about a call to a world beyond church but also to the nurture of the life and growth of the faith community. Over the years, most of our mission groups have been summoned to the neighborhood and world beyond the church. That's good. That's being a good neighbor!

Gordon Cosby was aware of the struggle to integrate traditional disciplines of the spiritual life with compassionate engagement on *behalf of* and *with* a suffering world. So, specific community structures were needed to attend to the growth of the communal family: worship, pastoral care, administration and leadership, spiritual formation and education, communal and individual accountability, and holding the tensions of community.

Call

 Where did this concept come from? It is clearly there in the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament. For example: Abraham, Moses, Samuel, Elijah, Ruth, John the Baptist, Peter, Jesus, Mary, Martha, Paul, Lydia and many others.

But each call was different; each summons required an openness and a willingness to go inward and listen, and then respond, to risk and to invite others to join the call. And, let me share that a call may come, but eventually a *response* is needed. Jane Hirshfeld wrote a poem called “The Door”; she said, “what enters unstoppable gift, and yet there is the other, the **breath-space** held between any call and its answer … The rest note, unwritten, hinged between worlds, that precedes change and allows it.” So, here are some breaths in a story from scripture and then from my own call story.

From (1 Samuel 3:4-9)

One night as he was falling asleep, [the boy, Samuel] heard a voice calling out to him. He thought it was the priest Eli, so Samuel called back ‘Here am I.’ Eli was asleep so he did not respond. Samuel then ran to Eli, woke him and said, ‘Here am I for you have called me.’ But Eli said, I did not call. Lie down again. The call to Samuel comes two more times, and then Eli tells Samuel that God is the caller, and directs him to say, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”

And, Samuel moves forward into his eventual prophetic mission.

“Wouldn’t it be helpful if like Samuel, we could all hear a clarion call for how we can best serve God in our lives and then eagerly, quickly respond to that call?” It took some breath-spaces for Samuel to get a response from Eli and know the source of his call, God, and then he did respond.

Gordon Cosby said,

A genuine call for any individual or group is always going to be “impossible” because a genuine call is never something we are prepared to take on. It is never something that depends upon strength and stability. Instead, it stretches us beyond our imaginations. … All that is required is to bring the little bit we have — not the radiant, mature personality we do not yet possess, not the human capacity to fill every need. God simply asks us to offer what we have right now to start where we are.

Where I Was: My Call Story

I first walked into the Church of the Saviour at 2025 Massachusetts Avenue in February of 1968. I was still recovering from a ruptured disc in my lower back and from a sense of existential lowness and deep disappointment with the United States after a year living in South America. I was searching for a spiritual home, not just a place to show up every Sunday morning. I was warmly welcomed and embraced by a small group of women. That Sunday, Gordon preached on racism, and I decided to stay and explore. One of the first things I did was to take a class in the School of Christian Living, a doctrine class which strangely turned out to be a class in Christian vocation. The Church of the Saviour was “taking a deeper and longer look at the whole matter of Call as having to do with the transcendent, the being grasped by that which is greater than we are.” (SLSS, O’Connor, p. 24). The class was large and divided into smaller groups. My group leader was John Levering, the then-to-be first mayor of the planned city of Columbia, MD. His excitement and joy about this call on his life touched me. That’s what I yearned for. That’s what I started praying for, asking the Sprit for, wanting a directional sign.

Months later during the summer break for the School of Christian Living, I was listening to some music when a question pushed into my mind, “What have you done so far in your life that brought you joy?” I knew immediately: it was teaching. So, I found a way to return to graduate school to get the preparation and certification I needed to teach in a public school.

Little more than a year later, I was teaching 5th and 6th grades in Montgomery County Public Schools. One Sunday at worship in December of 1971, at the end of the service, Katie Bull issued a call for a new mission group, Literacy Action: The mission was to teach and to heal at the point of literacy in DC. She shared about tens of thousands of adults and young adults with very low and marginal literacy skills, basic reading and writing skills, and no high school diploma. How I thought, can this be? Adults who can’t read, who lack basic literacy skills? Why? How? This was stunning and heart-breaking. I didn’t respond that day to her, but several folks did. I didn’t respond for the next eighteen months. I had other commitments and didn’t want to leave my current mission group and had to complete the process for becoming a covenant member of the Church of the Saviour.

But what Katie had shared rattled me, and that rattle continued for the next eighteen months. Then in the summer of 1973, I spent time on personal retreats at Dayspring, trying to discern whether to respond to Katie’s call. I really wanted a big *sign*. One afternoon as I sat in the Yoke Room at Dayspring overlooking the field, a blinding, sun-lit image flooded my mind — the image of the Potter’s House City Center at 1750 Columbia Road. That was Literacy Action’s home base. I knew then that I had to respond, join the mission group and begin a new journey that would have a very steep learning curve over many years. And, it would be “impossible” if that meant not always having the strengths and gifts needed at any given moment. But I knew I would have to acquire those. And it would take inner resources for the long haul and the support of the faith community, of friends, of associates and colleagues. Joining the mission group would become a first step in a years-long personal outward journey until I retired in 2018. The mission group was a challenging and sacred space for me, but eventually it dissolved as folks moved away and Literacy Action became a community-based organization with a more communal board of directors and moved in some new directions.

Before moving on to GIFTS, I want to share some learnings and summary thoughts about CALL.

# Call, as Marjory Bankson shared in June, “begins with an awakening to our identity as a particular part of God’s good creation.”

# The call may be a clear summons, or it can develop incrementally. It might be a summons to a new mission or a summons to join an existing one.

# It will be some form of “work that we come to know is ours to do.” It may not be a paying or long-term job.

# That work will at times be joyous, hard, frustrating, tiring, heart-breaking, and we will need resources, both spiritual and tangible, for the longer haul. Community is one of those crucial resources as is knowledge of one’s gifts and strengths.

#  One call might lead to another one, different from or embedded in the original call.

#  We likely will learn a lot and need to be open-hearted as well as open to learning.

# Calls can change shape over time as one moves through different stages of life: “… adolescence and awakening; early adulthood and passion; middle years and growing commitment; older age and wisdom…” (John Philip Newell, *One Foot in Eden*, p. vvi)

# Discerning a call may be challenging; community discernment groups may be helpful in testing a call. Eighth Day can offer these, and also has a protocol for a gift-naming gathering.

# And, then, there may come a time to let go, to lay down one’s call, to celebrate and grieve knowing that — as Cruz shared three weeks ago — that call is ultimately about living life as part of one’s faith journey. It means that we choose each day to live a life connected to the Spirit and to the life and teachings of Jesus and to the call to love God, to love self, and to love our many neighbors. It is a life-pilgrimage with no set destination, but many nurturing, restful, reflection and stopping points.

There are many members of 8th Day and the other sister communities that have sounded calls and joined calls, offering their gifts, abilities, money and time to a mission.

The newly available brochure, Faith in Action, offers an informative walk through the concept of CALL and mission.

Gifts

When we talk about being true to ourselves, being the persons we are intended to be—we are talking about gifts. A primary purpose of the church is to help discover our gifts. (Elizabeth O’Connor, *Eighth Day of Creation* , pp. 14, 17)

Where does this concept of personal gifts and communal gifts come from? Like Call, it comes from the scriptures.

Romans 12:3-8 , one of our scriptures today and I Corinthians 12 are foundational scriptures.

For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgement, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body, we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

The varying gifts and strengths were to be discerned and used on behalf of the community and in its missions in particular, but also in the world beyond the church. In the letter to the Galatians (50-56 CE), Paul also shared the fruits, the qualities, that show forth the gifts of the community: love peace, joy, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, patience, and self-control.

In *Journey Inward, Journey Outward*, Elizabeth O’Connor wrote,

The mission-oriented evangelists have cried against the churches huddling in buildings. They, the huddled, do not need to be rescued from self-centeredness. They need to discover and nurture the talents in their people that will give them authentic missions.” (Elizabeth O’Connor, *Journey Inward Journey Outward*, p. 36)

So, here is a call to a community to nurture and evoke the gifts and talents of their members and to these members to engage in this process. Gordon said,

We are to let others know that God is for them and that they can “be”, they can do what they were meant to do … How do we do this? We (the community) begin … by exercising our own gifts.” (*Journey Inward Journey Outward*, p. 36-37)

in the community and in our larger lives.

We also help folks to identify and name their gifts and strengths and receive gracious affirmation of these gifts in the mission group or in another venue. The challenge then is for the individual to start using their gifts and for the community to nurture the person in exercising these gifts on behalf of God’s work in the world.

The Inward Outward Mission Group began a gift-naming process over the summer. We focused on four of the five members and have one more session to hold. One of the gifts of these sessions has been the summary of responses to each of the four people. At the top of the list, Kate, our moderator, included as an introductory sentence that pointed to the essence of each of the four members. With permission, I share these as an example of the richness of these persons’ gifts and the affirmation it provides to the individual member.

* May we all, individuals and institutions, live from our essence, the treasure within.
* Know that you are God’s Beloved and God holds you closely.
* Let us tend to the flame tenderly, not forgetting who we are and what we stand for.
* The most I can do is grieve for the sorrows of this fallen and sinful world that makes people unlovable and violent, acting with compassion knowing we all live under God’s grace.

We have … gifts God has given us [beyond just the personal], gifts from the past of language, story, sacrament, knowledge, art, music, the built environment, gifts from the present of people’s time, talents, money, commitment, prayer, goodwill, shalom — we have all of these. … How do we order these in the service of Jesus and in solidarity with God’s purposes of justice and love as central to our common life. (adapted from *Living By the Rule, The Rule of the Iona Community*, p. 15 by Kathy Galloway)

I want to end with a poem by Ranier Marie Rilke

 God speaks to each of us as God makes us,
 Then walks with us silently out of the night.
 These are the words we dimly hear:
 You, sent out beyond your recall,
 Go to the limits of your longing.
 Embody me.
 Flare up like a flame,
 and make big shadows I can move in.
 Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror.
 Just keep going. No feeling is final.
 Don’t let yourself lose me.
 Nearby is the country they call life.
 You will know it by its seriousness.
 Give me your hand.