

WHO WE ARE IN THE WORLD: Called to Service  
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Once upon a time, I was asked to be on a wordsmithing committee. Apparently, someone had noticed that I can be fanatical about the precise use of language. Our task was to take the many suggestions bourn on yellow sticky notes and weave them into a coherent mission statement for our high school. I give the Principal lots of points; she was trying to turn the Titanic and lead in the creation of a new culture within that Toronto collegiate. So five of us gathered in her office and began the thankless task of writing by committee. And here I made my fatal mistake when I suggested that schools and teachers might be said “to serve” our students and the community. “Serve? As in being a servant! Are you kidding Meredith. I thought you were a feminist ... so how could you use that word?” And she went on: “And a Christian feminist to boot. You know all too well how women have been put down by years of church teachings about servant ministries!” Needless to say the word “serve” did not appear in the school’s mission statement. And I was always sad about that.

That IS a “once upon a time” story ... almost twenty years ago, but it immediately came to mind when I was given a Sunday in March to preach about identity as how we are in the world. For I still see that word as critical to our self understanding. Mohammed Ali is cited as the source of a great quote: “Service to others is the rent you pay for your room here on earth”. This morning, and every Sunday we affirm that. In our chalice lighting we ask that the light may inspire us.... to serve the spirit of freedom. And then we make our covenant with this beloved community.... to serve the family of humanity.

When you go to explore the uses and meanings of a word, you can certainly find blind alleyways, usage that isn’t what you had in mind ... like serving a tennis ball or volleyball ... like service stations, remember them? ... like “Hi, I’m Joey and I’ll be serving you tonight”. “To serve” runs the risk of being weakened as an idea when there’s such a batch of ubiquitous uses. It runs a much more serious risk, however, in other usage that threaten to hollow out its core meanings; when we have “service providers” and “the service industry”, I fear that commodification and monetization have taken over, and the heart and soul of the word are lost in commercial transactions.

Another story. About service, being served, and a person who served. This one is more recent, my month of January 2017. The story begins with Bell Telephone and Clara Hughes and the Let’s Talk About It campaign. Let’s Talk About Mental Illness. Mental illness is part of my life. I have struggled with ongoing and repeated bouts of clinical depression since adolescence. And that makes for a lot of therapy and a lot of meds. By last year we had hit a wall and we reached out to the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, CAM-H as it’s known, in Toronto. You’ll have a sense of how big that wall was when we quite readily accepted being part of a study that required daily treatment for four weeks. So, we moved to Toronto for January, to a friend’s uninhabited apartment and we drove the Don Valley every midmorning to Queen Street West for a treatment that only took three or four minutes. It’s called rTMS, Repetitive Transcranial Magnetic Stimulation, and it aims to create new neural pathways in my brain. Let’s Talk About Mental Illness. Let’s talk about being really deeply frightened and at the same time hopeful and excited. Let’s Talk About Mental Illness. Let’s talk about those who serve and those who are ill. In the Temerty Clinic for Brain Stimulation, Nadia is one of the technicians. Younger than my own kids, she was petite and pretty ... she was responsible for administering the daily treatment. Certainly, she had technical skills; she knew how to set up and operate the machine that sent twenty fast pulses into the right side of my head and twenty clusters of spaced pulses into my left side. But oh my, she was so much more than a technician. She served me, my frightened hopeful self, in so many ways, gently carefully moving my hair to set up the machine’s pulsating cups, ... a practical necessity but done with such respectful soothing movements that I could feel myself settle in for the start of the zapping. She checked on my reactions to the pulsing; ... again, she had to but she did so with calm reassurance that gave me space to see how my reactions were changing. And each day she’d thank me, or share a story or inquire about my stories in an open receptive way that built up a relationship of trust. She truly accompanied me through those twenty treatments, affirmed my fears and hesitations, met them with compassion, and served me, the patient, in a multitude of ways. I will be forever grateful.. for her care and for what she taught me about being of service.

If your search term is “to serve” then tennis courts and restaurants are part of your results. However, to search “being of service” is a whole other story. And what I found interesting was that

whether I read a blog by an Emergency Physician, a workshop by a self-help guru, or an examination of Ignatian Spiritual Exercises by a Jesuit, there are commonalities and shared assumptions about being of service.

In all of them, there are fundamental notions about identity, that discovering who we are in the world is a process of finding self by losing ego. Gandhi has said "The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others". Then, too, with respect to identity, those oh-so-different writers all point to the alignments between values and being of service. We serve in whatever ways we choose because the values there are congruent with ours and sustain the beliefs and characteristics that we name as our identities. And a third common thread with respect to identity is the notion that being of service is very often a communal or corporate activity. A Unitarian professor at Princeton Divinity School, James Luther Adams, created a riff on a biblical phrase and said instead "By their groups shall ye know them". Think of how each of us could probably stand where I am, scan the congregation and say "Right, he's been up to his eyes in Peterborough Dialogues" and "She's worked for years in the Indigenous Working Group", "They're both in Resonance", and "They've been working with two different refugee support groups". We are who we are in the world by virtue of how we live out the call to serve.

Is there a bit of a hiccup with my use of the word "call" there? Too traditional a word? A bit too churchy? The Jesuit I read spoke easily of the loving acceptance of God's love for us as the impetus towards acts of service. And Eckhart Tolle speaks of acts of service as a flowing of energy from the Source through you to those whose being forms a web of existence with your own. Oh, how hard we struggle to describe that which initiates acts of self-giving.

It becomes a bit easier when we actually look at those activities and see what characterizes acts of service. David Fleming wrote: "to be available is to serve, to follow is to serve, to believe and to trust are to serve, to accompany is to serve, to listen is to serve, to be compassionate is to serve. To serve is always to share what we have been given. That is why serving always follows upon loving .... Because lovers share their gifts."

Sharing those gifts we've been given in acts of service is both a way of life and a philosophical position of Unitarian Universalism. To affirm the inherent dignity and worth of every individual is to affirm their giftedness and value, their ability to serve and their deserving of being served. To believe that justice and equity are requisite in human relations is to establish a very high benchmark to guide decisions about where and how to serve. To encourage spiritual growth and the search for truth and meaning is to offer opportunity to all to explore values and perspectives that will undergird and direct a life of service. To respect the interdependent web of all existence is to link us one to another to another and beyond in opening up ever expanding circles of service.

How wonderful and how completely apt that in our worship this morning we have twice made that commitment to a life of service in our chalice lighting and in our covenant. And then, recognizing that the source of that way of life is both within and beyond us, we sing and move and invoke the Spirit of Life. We name our hearts and hands as companions of the Spirit's movement. And we ask for the Spirit's presence in our lives to animate and sustain the ways we seek to serve. Speak it with me, please ... "Spirit of Life, come to me, come to me." May it be so. Amen.