



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Look to Your Dharma

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I found myself in a new stylist's chair this week for a little hair update. We chatted idly about the weather and the salon's history, election politics and television. Then, as it often does, the question of what I did for a living came up. I shared that I was a minister at a liberal church in Pasadena, I preach and teach and serve a community. I shared about my upbringing in the church, and how I felt called to ministry as a teenager. Returning the inquiry, I asked my stylist how she came to work at a salon. Although our occupations were different, both of us knew early on what we were supposed to do. She told me that as a child and teen she always enjoyed doing hair, her own and others. When it came time for her to make a choice about how her career would go, beauty school seemed the natural choice. As she balances having a small child and a relationship, the flexibility of her work is important to keeping her life on track.

I always treasure an opportunity to have conversations with people about what we do and why we do what we do. It is a great privilege to listen to people's fascinating and sometimes heartbreaking stories about their work. I remember one conversation in a cab with a Pakistani taxi driver, trained as a physician, working long and brutal hours in crowded, chaotic streets. With his prayer rug in the trunk, he pulled over periodically to face Mecca and fulfill his religious obligation to pray. He longed to do what he loved and was trained to do, but needed a job to pay the bills and support his extended family. Driving a taxi provided a path to financial independence, a sacrifice made willingly for the greater good of his family.

As for my own story, being a minister is a continual dance between a profession and a life calling. To be a minister is about a sense of inner responsibility to the role as it expresses itself through me, and the outer call to fulfill the call in the context of a particular role. This outer expression of call is grounded in a professional code of conduct of ministry and covenanted with you the congregation. A minister fulfills professional and personal responsibilities to their calling not as a monk or nun, but in the world. In our tradition, ministers have relationships, marry and have families, balancing the role of minister with parent, spouse, child and provider.

One of the responsibilities I take most seriously in my ministry is to explore the idea of what we do and why we do it within the context of our faith community. This is a lifelong question for each and every one of us, whether we are working or not, whether we have our dream job or are happily retired. The Latin word *vocare* means to name, or to summon. This is the root of the word vocation, a way of living centered in values or purpose. Vocation is a way of understanding the work of our life in relationship to service. Whether you are drawn to art or politics, science, film or stage, farming or teaching, dog walking or hair styling, vocation is a charge to mingle your gifts in service to a particular aspect of life with a particular community of people.

Stephen Cope is a yoga teacher in residence at Kripalu, a spiritual center in Western Massachusetts I frequented in my East Coast yogi life. Much like church, most people who pass

through Kripalu are seeking something in their lives: a major life change or transition. Most people come to Kripalu with a deep need to connect to their truest self through their work—a pathway to help them take action and make choices to change their lives, with the hope of more satisfaction and joy.

Sharing stories from his own journey and his work with Kripalu, Cope's newest book *The Great Work of Your Life* uses the Bhagavad Gita as a model for exploring these questions. Over 2000 years old, the Gita is a 700 verse scripture contained within the Mahabharata. A devotional text throughout the centuries, the Gita has been read by diverse religious luminaries including Christian mystic Thomas Merton and the patron saint of this congregation, Albert Einstein. It was amongst the few texts Henry David Thoreau took with him to Walden Pond. About the Gita, Mahatma Gandhi famously once said:

When doubts haunt me, when disappointments stare me in the face, and I see not one ray of hope on the horizon, I turn to Bhagavad-Gita and find a verse to comfort me; and I immediately begin to smile in the midst of overwhelming sorrow.

The Gita is written as a dialogue between Arjuna the warrior and Lord Krishna, his spiritual guide and charioteer. Arjuna struggles to fulfill his duty as a warrior, which is in conflict with his commitment to his friends, family and community. The work of warrior is a noble calling inherently full of risk, including the most serious risk of taking the lives of others. Arjuna enters into his call with much doubt and questioning. Krishna, his wise spiritual mentor, refuses to let him give up, and urges him to find purpose within the job he has been given.

"Look to your dharma!" Krishna says.

In the Hindu sacred stories collected in the *Bhagavad Gita*, the Sanskrit word "dharma" is translated as "moral law," "sacred duty," and "purpose or calling." Which meaning of dharma exactly is Krishna talking about?

Let's look at these three meanings of dharma a bit more carefully:

First—dharma as "moral law." Dharma is to be lived out ethically in relationship to moral law. The work to which we devote our lives must be tuned to both an inner and an outward sense of ethical commitment. In the Gita, Arjuna is given a series of tests as he wrestles with his call to battle as a warrior. With Krishna's assistance, he whittles down the principles by which the actions of his calling should be carried out:

"never harm a living thing"
"always do your duty"
"always fight for what is right"

To Arjuna's dismay, these principles were to be navigated in relationship to particular circumstances: no pure moral interpretation was possible.

For us, our liberal theology has its roots in the religious ethic of Christianity as well as enlightenment philosophy's interpretation of human reason and moral law. Searching beyond Christianity's ethic of "love thy neighbor as thyself," and the Golden Rule "Do unto others as you would have done to you," enlightenment thinkers sought a rational explanation for right action. Most notably, Immanuel Kant's 18th century duty ethics set out to understand both the internal and external dimensions of moral development. He probed the inner mechanisms by which human beings are motivated to do good.

For Kant, reason itself was based on the inner motivation of moral law, the very ground of human free will. The good within each and every human is the good will, which imbues each person with inherent worth and dignity. We can choose to act out of our own inclination—towards our own gain and gratification—or to act in accordance with the inner moral law, to which every person inherently can access. Kant called this process the categorical imperative, to be tested with the following frameworks:

1. "Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law."
2. "Act as though the maxim of your action were by your will to become a universal law of nature."
3. "Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end and never as a means only."

The categorical imperative is simple-- before taking an action or making a choice, consider the principle upon which you are acting, then generalize that principle. Does it still ring true? If the principle contradicts itself, then it loses its value for action. If the generalized principle makes sense, would you live in a society where it was universally applied?

One of the tests Kant used was called the "bad Samaritan" test. The maxim to test was "I may refuse to help another person in distress who cannot pay me even though I can do so at little cost to myself."

Generalized, the maxim would be interpreted as: "Anyone may refuse to help another person in distress who cannot pay even though it would cost little to help."

How would this be interpreted universally? This very situation came up in a news story on NPR earlier this week. Here's the story:

Stefan Jagsch is a local leader of Germany's far-right NPD party, who led a neo-Nazi march in January, where immigrants were assailed as "benefit-scrounging tourists," "invaders," and "lawless primates." Chancellor Angela Merkel has called the NPD "anti-democratic, xenophobic, anti-Semitic, and anti-constitutional."

Earlier this month, Jagsch was driving when he lost control of his car and crashed into a tree. The local fire brigade says that passengers in a mini-bus driving along the road saw his crumpled automobile and stopped. Two people got out of the bus and pulled Stefan from the wreckage of his car; they began to give him emergency first aid. An ambulance arrived, and took Stefan to the hospital.

Who were the strangers who stopped to help a man they didn't know? According to press reports, the people in the van were Syrian refugees. They left before police could arrive, perhaps because they did not want to tell authorities who they were, or how they had gotten into Germany. The head of the local NPD called the rescue of his party's candidate, "apparently a very good, humane act." But he didn't indicate that their humane act had changed his party's view of refugees."

Stefan Jagsch insisted this week on his Facebook page that he was unconscious when he was saved. He gave thanks to "all the people who were on the spot to help me," but didn't mention who they were, much less suggest that their kindness caused him to question his feelings about refugees.

What would Kant say? In Jagsch' case, even the life-saving aid he received did not altar his fundamental prejudice or his hateful rhetoric.

As people of faith, our task is to keep our principles front and center as we make choices about how the work we do impacts others. This is the essence of what the Buddhists call "right livelihood." Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh sums this up in this quote from *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching*.

To practice Right Livelihood, you have to find a way to earn your living without transgressing your ideals of love and compassion. The way you support yourself can be an expression of your deepest self, or it can be a source of suffering for you and others. Our vocation can nourish our understanding and compassion, or erode them. We should be awake to the consequences, far and near, of the way we earn our living.

Let's look at the second meaning of dharma. Dharma is also interpreted as "sacred duty." In the Bhagavad Gita, Arjuna's duty as a warrior was in conflict with his role as a family and community member. The dharma of "sacred duty" is different for every person. Many of us being a parent or caretaker of an aging parent or ailing spouse in need is how you fulfill your duty, a sacrifice you make at the expense of your own career ambitions or financial aspirations. For others, fulfilling your duty as provider in your family is a place where you sacrifice. You may work long hours and not have as much family time to be able to sustain your family's lifestyle. Perhaps, you are contemplating retirement to spend more time with family and letting go of the professional duties that gave your life great meaning. What are the duties you keep sacred when you look to your dharma? Have these changed throughout your life or stayed the same?

Finally, let's look at the role of dharma as "purpose or calling." This is our deepest yearning. Parker Palmer is a Quaker educator who writes about vocation in his popular book *Let Your Life Speak*. Palmer tells his own story of facing a period of depression and career burn out. He discovered Quaker spirituality, inspired by a phrase that would become the title of his book: "Let your life speak." Here are Palmer's words:

Vocation does not come from willfulness. It comes from listening. I must listen to my life and try to understand what it is truly about – quite apart from what I would like it to be about—or my life will never represent anything real in the world, no matter how earnest my intentions. Before I can tell my life what I want to do with it I must listen to my life telling me who I am.

Looking to our dharma is not about "being anything we want to be." It is being who we already are, a principled way to live into our deepest calling, in relationship to our ethical commitments and those we love. The Bhagavad Gita reminds us that "It is better to live your own destiny imperfectly than to live an imitation of somebody else's life with perfection."

So how do we as persons of faith balance the many meanings of dharma? Is it possible for us to truly live in alignment with our ethical principles, fulfill our family and community obligations, and pursue our own deepest sense of calling too? Throughout our lives, the key is to live our dharma in balance, being willing to compromise, to make sacrifices and to exercise patience. Like Arjuna's moral quandary on the battlefield, this is no easy feat, a constantly shifting and changing landscape throughout our lives. We need the support of a community, and a commitment to our principles to help us navigate. Looking to our dharma challenges us to juggle our own needs with the needs of others, and to temper our own inner inclinations with an outer ethical code.

So how will you look to your dharma today? Might you take an extra hour off of work this week to be with family or dedicate to service? Might you sign up for a new continuing education class to gain a new skill or develop a side business? Might you dedicate your dharma to another person—mentoring a younger or less experienced person who might need your help to navigate the path ahead? Or could you use an ethical reboot to your dharma, recommitting to those first principles of our faith and your field's moral standards?

In your quest for meaningful work and a sense of purpose, may you find in this incredible community of faith a wellspring of resources, and may the light of truth accompany you on your way.

Amen and blessed be.