

## Call to Worship, Sunday February 10, 2008

A Call, A Vocation, A Calling:  
More than an invitation, less than a command  
A choice  
To Worship together  
To sit and stand and lift our voices  
Side by side  
With a goal of creating  
A sense of still and of completeness  
In our selves  
And in our lives together.

In life, our work,  
In much the same way,  
No matter what work we do:  
Building, serving, helping, organizing,  
Imagining, selling, soothing:

It is all a call  
To lift our voices and hands  
Together, with a goal of creating  
A world with that serves  
Our selves  
And  
Our lives together.

Come, let us work and worship  
Together

### Hay for the Horses

He had driven half the night  
From far down San Joaquin  
Through Mariposa, up the  
Dangerous Mountain roads,  
And pulled in at eight a.m.  
With his big truckload of hay  
    behind the barn.  
With winch and ropes and hooks  
We stacked the bales up clean  
To splintery redwood rafters  
High in the dark, flecks of alfalfa  
Whirling through shingle cracks of light,  
Itch of haydust in the  
    Sweaty shirt and shoes.

At lunchtime under the Black oak  
Out in the hot corral,  
--the old mare nosing lunchpails,  
Grasshoppers crackling in the weeds—  
“I’m sixty-eight” he said,  
“I first bucked hay when I was seventeen.  
I thought, that day I started,  
I sure would hate to do this all my life.  
And dammit, that’s just what  
I’ve gone and done.”

### A Journey

When he got up that morning everything was different:  
He enjoyed the bright spring day  
But he did not realize it exactly, he just enjoyed it.

And walking down the street to the railroad station  
Past magnolia trees with dying flowers like old socks  
It was a long time since he had breathed so simply.

Tears filled his eyes and it felt good  
But he held them back  
Because men didn’t walk around crying in that town.

Waiting on the platform at the station  
The fear came over him of something terrible about to happen:  
The train was late and he recited the alphabet to keep hold.

And in its time it came screeching in  
And as it went on making its usual stops,  
People coming and going, telephone poles passing,

He hid his head behind a newspaper  
No longer able to hold back the sobs, and willed his eyes  
To follow the rational weavings of the seat fabric.

He didn’t do anything violent as he had imagined.  
He cried for a long time, but when he finally quieted down  
A place in him that had been closed like a fist was opened.

And at the end of the ride he stood up and got off that train:  
And through the streets and in all the places he lived in later on  
He walked, himself at last, a man among men,  
With such radiance that everyone looked up and wondered.

Edward Field

## Know Your Place

Unity Church  
February 10, 2008

My father loved his work. Unfortunately the work he loved was not the way he made his living. The work he loved was buying and selling rare books. When young, like so many of us he wanted to be a poet. He wrote a master's thesis on a single line from Shelly. He reveled in the interplay of words. He loved the language so much that he wanted to make it his life. But his parents wouldn't have it. So he trained to be a lawyer but he managed to avoid the practice of law until the financial pressures of family life finally forced him to succumb. From then on he lived a bifurcated life. He spent his hours at the office wishing he were combing through the shelves at Michner's or at O'Gara's searching for the next hidden treasure, breathing in the smell of paper and old leather. He made the best of it. But even when I was a child I could see that he was unfulfilled.

I loved and admired my father. I've tried to honor his memory by attempting not to make the same mistakes he made. That may be too harsh. He was driven to study the law by his risk-averse parents and much later, forced to practice it in order to support his family. One never really knows enough about one's parent's marriage to judge it rightly. Suffice to say, I knew quite early on that I wanted to avoid having to choose between meaningful, satisfying work and the need to make a living. Looking back on more than thirty years in ministry I can say, with deepest gratitude, that I've not had to make that hard choice.

Like my father I love my work. But unlike my father I earn a living at the work I love. I want that privilege, that sense of true vocation, for everyone. It has its challenges. One does tend to work all the time. It's fashionable these days among our colleagues and in the schools where we're trained to distill the work down into skill sets and numbers of hours. We're taught self-care and warned against our workaholic tendencies. We're encouraged to take two full days off a week, to invest an hour preparing for every minute that we're in the pulpit and to learn the art of inaccessibility so as not to be dragged down by endless obligations. Though there's a germ of truth, or better, of necessity, in this professionalizing of the ministry on the whole its hogwash. This work is still a calling. It asks everything one has and then it asks for more. Sometimes I worry that Janne and I have too little life outside it. But I would never want to sacrifice the integrated life, which your largess allows.

I've begun with a little of my own story because I want you to know that I am well aware of the privilege of my calling. Far too few people make their living doing what they love. "I first bucked hay when I was seventeen. I thought, that day I started, I sure would hate to do this all my life. And dammit, that's just what I've gone and done." Now I could tell you to risk it all, reach for the stars. Don't you dare settle for just buckin hay. But life is not that simple. And almost any work can be worth doing if one is conscious of the treasures hidden there.

In the winter of 1970 I traveled to India as an American delegate to a conference sponsored by the Gandhi Peace Foundation. I was eighteen years old. (I'm younger than that now.) I was thoroughly steeped in the strong tea of left wing assumptions. The delegates came from all over the world. We were there to discuss, debate and vote on the following questions: Revolution- should it be violent or non-violent? The Gandhians wanted to know. I was young and radical. And though I had been raised with deep respect

for Gandhi and had seen the stunning power of non-violent action at work in the civil rights movement, it was 1970. Gandhi, and Martin and Malcolm and Bobby and John had all been shot dead. The Maoists had taken control of Bengal largely by force of arms and were redistributing the land. I wasn't so sure Gandhiji had been right. I thought in stark dualities back then, of black and white of us and them of rich and poor of yes especially of rich and poor.

The leaders of the conference had been close associates of Gandhi himself. For them the answer to the question they posed was a foregone conclusion. Non-violence was the only viable instrument for effective, positive change. Suffice to say I had my doubts and that my doubts were less than welcome. An English delegate and I resigned quite noisily, left the Gandhi's ashram at Sevagram where the conference was being held and made our way to Delhi in order to expose the reactionary Gandhian despots on All India radio. We actually did make it on to a talk show but instead of the earnest interview we had planned to offer, the host welcomed us as hippie folksingers from the West and asked us to sing "If I had a Hammer" in tribute to the close relationship between Gandhiji and the good Reverend Martin Luther King. We immediately complied. "It's the story of the love between my brothers and my sisters aaaall over this land."

Having burned our bridges and so unable to return to the conference, my friend Hugh and I decided to go by third class train from Delhi to Calcutta. It was there I first encountered what Kipling would have called "the unwashed masses." Hundreds of thousands of people living on the streets, some with no more than a sheet of cardboard to call home, no access to running water, no privacy, living hand to mouth. My politics led me to assume these people would be desperately unhappy. I had been taught that poverty leads inevitably to despair and that despair will always usher-in violence. It seemed to me to be the gospel truth until I went to India. On the streets of Calcutta I saw some of the poorest people on earth. Some of them did seem desperate. But others, no better off in things were clearly rich in soul. Smiles lit up their faces. Their eyes and the eyes of their children danced and sparkled reflecting a kaleidoscope of color, reds, and yellows, sapphire and saffron. Some of them were singing. Lord, I wondered, how could they sing? How could they not sing?

What is their work? What is the work of the poorest of the poor? How do they find joy in it? I'm not sure I have the right to say it. My shame at their state gets in the way. But I think that their work is not all that different from ours, not really; To take joy in the moment, to notice the beauty, to ease the suffering of others, to feed our families and ourselves as best we can, to avoid complicity with evil and when necessary even intervene.

I have to tell you I'm uncomfortable with the notion that happiness may not be tied to material wealth. Could it be that happiness is more a result of spiritual maturity or of higher consciousness than it is of economic security? It goes against the grain of western liberalism. But I believe there's hidden treasure in the laughter of the poor.

I'm well aware I'm treading on thin ice. Mahatma Gandhi went to his death believing in the sanctity of caste. Though he fought to his death for India's freedom he did not believe in upward mobility. Self-actualization for Gandhi was a spiritual awakening. It did not imply the right to choose one's direction or one's destiny. The challenge instead is to know your place and find peace there. We, who are so fond of change, so enamored of notions of social and personal progress may well need to slow down a bit and contemplate this troubling possibility.

I don't suggest we relinquish our long-held devotion to helping tear down barriers of prejudice that impede the aspirations of the many millions who still long to change their

lives. But I can't help but wonder whether finding joy and worth and meaning in whatever work we do provides a better base from which to change and grow than cultivated misery or worse yet, rage. Saul Alinsky, the father of modern community organizing taught that the way to motivate change is to find the wound, rub salt in it and organize around the rage. I've come to doubt the approach. Rage breeds rage.

I'm drawn instead to the work of John Kretzmann, John McKnight and their colleagues at the Neighborhood Innovations Network at Northwestern University. McKnight worked with Alinsky and recognizes both the strengths and the failings of Alinsky's approach. Instead of focusing on the wounds, and God knows there are wounds, the Neighborhood Innovations Network suggests an assets-based or, I prefer, a gifts-based approach. Don't begin with the pain. Look instead for the joy. Ask people, what makes you happy? What brings you satisfaction? What brings you joy? Help them think about it. And organize around the answers that they offer. Happiness inspires happiness. Satisfaction leads to satisfaction. Joy invites more joy.

Remember that man on the train? I imagine him commuting into Manhattan, down from Greenwich, or into the loop from Chicago's North Shore. The poet doesn't tell us much about him, only that, "*When he got up that morning everything was different.*" I pray for more mornings like that. I pray that you and I and everyone on earth will someday have a morning just like that, a morning when the world is suddenly revealed as a place so beautiful that one can't help but weep grieving for all the days and nights we've lost to dull routine, furious at our failure "to see and to revere," surrendering at last to the moment, finally finding the only work worth doing.

*"He didn't do anything violent as he had imagined.  
He cried for a long time, but when he finally quieted down  
A place in him that had been closed like a fist was opened.*

*And at the end of the ride he stood up and got off that train:  
And through the streets and in all the places he lived in later on  
He walked, himself at last, a man among men,  
With such radiance that everyone looked up and wondered."*

May that same radiance take hold of us as well, today, right now, this very morning.

Amen