

Whispers and Murmurs
part 2 of a 2-part sermon series
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*"The most critical discernment skill, M. Scott Peck insists, is being able to distinguish between the sound of integrity and the sound of its absence."
~ Gregg Levoy, in Callings*

Sung Meditation by John Corrado

*Voice still and small, deep inside all, I hear you call, singing.
In storm and rain, sorrow and pain, still we'll remain singing.
Calming my fears, quenching my tears, through all the years, singing.*

Sermon

A flood came and a man had to climb onto the roof of his house, praying to God for safety. As the waters rose, a neighbor in a rowboat appeared and told him to get in. "No," replied the man on the roof, "I have faith that God will save me." Then a Maine Game Warden appeared in a speedboat. "Climb in!" shouted the game warden. "No, thanks," replied the man on the roof, "God's going to save me." A helicopter appeared and the pilot shouted that he would lower a rope to the man on the roof. "No," insisted the man on the roof, "I have faith that God will save me." Eventually the man drowned and went to heaven, where he asked God why She hadn't helped him.

"I sent a neighbor, the Maine Warden Service, and helicopter," said God. "What more do you want?"

Friends, I believe that we're receiving help all the time (whether we've asked for it or not). We receive nudges and taps on the shoulder and beckoning and guidance *all the time* — and really, some of it's golden! It may not feel like you're sitting on the roof, needing rescue, and that's great — but why wait for an emergency to pay attention? We need the wisdom that comes toward us, or wells up within us, because it's life-giving. And... much of the time, we can't recognize this help for what it is, because it's drowned out by internal static and external noise.



Two weeks ago, my sermon was about "bolts from the blue." I told the true story of a transformative spiritual revelation, a religious awakening, that occurred on the periphery of our UU world to a minister named Carlton Pearson. The story was an example of how and why it's such a gift that liberal religion views revelation as not sealed: we believe that revelation and truth and new layers of meaning are continuous. As I explained, this statement of faith — that more truth is always unfolding, and we are "in

constant dialogue with whatever is calling us”¹ — is one of the things that distinguishes liberal religion from the conservative and ultra-conservative.

If you heard or read that sermon, you couldn’t be blamed for thinking that revelation and truth and calling are always grand gestures, as though the Universe were pulling a needle across a vinyl record or sweeping in to save us in a huge, dramatic gesture. Today I’m arguing a different point: that revelation and truth are far more likely to arrive as whispers and murmurs, gentle tugs, and the smallest signs and wonders.

Bottom line: like many people of a progressive faith, we who are UU are open to the influence of life, the cosmos, the Holy, or whatever term you prefer to describe That Which Is Wiser Than You.

There’s a particular theology at work here: a theology of *immanence*. It says that the wisdom and love that animate all life is *inside* of each of us, “closer than breathing, closer than choosing – closer than consciousness itself,” in the words of Father Thomas Keating.² The Holy – the “omniscient inner voice” – is knitted into the very cells of our body.

There are humanist interpretations to this theology of immanence. In his book *Callings*, Gregg Levoy³ tells this story:

Once, during the question-and-answer period at the end of a lecture given by M. Scott Peck, author of *The Road Less Traveled*, I stood up and asked how, in struggling with an important personal decision, I would know I was doing the right thing. Dr. Peck said the question is the single most common one he is asked and that “there is no such formula. The unconscious is always one step ahead of the conscious mind—the one that *knows* things—so it’s impossible to know for sure. But if you’re willing to sit with ambiguity, to accept uncertainty and contradictory meanings, then your unconscious will always be a step ahead of the unconscious mine in the right direction. You’ll therefore do the right thing, although you won’t know it at the time.”

It’s not that our destinies are mapped out, or that there’s a puppeteer God who inserts her own plans into our free will. It’s not about the supernatural. It’s about the fact that we human beings are radio towers for wisdom. I didn’t say “knowledge,” as in “information.” I said “wisdom.”

¹ Levoy.

² In *Simply Pray* by Erik Wikstrom, p. 29.

³ Full title: *Callings: Finding and Following an Authentic Life*, p. 37.

The difference between the two? Knowledge is the fact that tomato is a fruit. Wisdom is not putting tomato in a fruit salad.⁴ Anyone can take in data and know something.

On one hand, we humans are signal towers for *wisdom* — and that’s a good thing, because (on the other hand) we also get lost pretty frequently. We get overwhelmed, indecisive, ambivalent. We get confused about what to do, or whom to trust. People pressure us to make decisions; we second-guess our choices and our right or agency to make them. The road gets cloudy; our footsteps grow hesitant. It takes a lot of practice, and sometimes luck, to recognize wisdom.

I don’t know about you, but when I feel confused or overwhelmed, I lose the ability to make good decisions and recognize truth, or wisdom. There’s too much static. The more my need for clarity approaches desperation, sometimes, the more noise I hear. What I mean is this: I frequently remind my yoga students that when they sit still on their mats and start breathing, they’ll hear dozens of voices — all *kinds* of chatter — nattering at them. We all carry those voices inside of us: bossy, critical, judgmental, harried, and sometimes downright mean. It’s noise.

And therein lies the hazard of feeling confused or overwhelmed: the danger of getting lost isn’t the *feeling confused*. The hazard is getting separated from wisdom, or the integrity of the unconscious, or our tether to the Holy. The danger is listening to all of the noise that flies at us, and letting ourselves be guided by the voices that, frankly, need to take a flying leap into a frozen pond.

There’s a way out, or a way forward, and it’s this simple: learning how to invite forward, out of the noise, the wisest, bravest, and most loving voices. Whether you believe that voice is God speaking in you, or your über-wise unconscious, the most effective way to hear it is through a regular spiritual practice.



A *spiritual practice* is a habit in our lives that centers us, opens our attention more fully, and nurtures our connections to something larger than ourselves. A genuine spiritual practice — not just a form of pampering ourselves, or relaxing — entails attention, intention, and repetition.⁵

What you practice grows stronger — always and eventually. What you practice grows stronger, making the connections stronger between us and That Which Is Wiser Than Us.

⁴ Attributed to British journalist Miles Kington. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Miles_Kington

⁵ Thank you, <http://uucsj.org/study-guide/spiritual-practice-and-social-justice/>

For many years, I've been following a spiritual practice taught by yoga teacher Erich Schiffmann: a practice of mindful listening. "There is a whole other language involved in listening inwardly for communication from the universe," says Schiffmann.⁶

It is not always dependent on words. Instead it involves feelings, impulses to action, and meanings... You may not actually hear a voice. You may instead simply experience Knowing. You will know what to do without having figured it out...

Those are big promises, but the method that Erich Schiffmann provides are simple, straightforward, and profound. I offer it to you as one way (among many) that you can make room for revelation and be open to the influence of the wisest, bravest, most loving voices available:

☼ When you face decisions throughout the day, don't make the decision by yourself. Pause and ask, "What do I need to do now?"

I love the way Erich Schiffmann used to describe this: it's like instead of searching your computer's hard drive for information, you turn to Google. (We all know that Google can get things wrong. The analogy stands.)

What do I need to do? What do I need to know?

Now, Erich Schiffmann and I prefer to ask this question a bit differently: *I want to do what You would have me do. What would You have me do?* For me, the 2nd person — the "you" address — makes it clear that I'm involving something larger than myself, beyond my limited perspective.

Another spiritual leader (whose name I've forgotten) expands on this by suggesting a pair of questions: "What would You have me do?" and "Will you help me do just that?"

☼ If something's bothering you, or if [something] in your life...needs resolution or clarification, ask, "What is it I need to know?," or "Is there anything I need to know right now?," or even "What would You have me do in this situation?"

☼ Begin your day, even before you get out of bed, by saying silently to yourself, "Today I won't make any decisions by myself." Then add, "I will make no decisions by myself because it is no longer intelligent to do so. Instead, I will make all my decisions in silent counsel with the Infinite."

⁶ In *Yoga: The Spirit and Practice of Moving into Silence*, by Erich Schiffmann, p. 335. Also available at www.movingintostillness.com/book/meditation_divine_guidance.html

As you do these things, Schiffmann says, “listen deeply inside yourself for inspiration and be attentive to the way circumstances unfold in your experience. What does your deepest being, the deepest part of you, want to do?”



Maybe you already have a spiritual practice: you meditate, you pray. Maybe what grounds you and connects you with wisdom is music, painting, or writing in a journal. Please don't hear me as urging you to take up an inauthentic practice. I'm not attached to whether you wake up tomorrow and try asking these questions.

As your minister, what I am attached to is the state of your spiritual lives and the continued flourishing of your growth. By holding up the importance of listening for wisdom and courage underneath the chatter of fear and busy-ness and ego, I'm inviting you to discern whether these ideas might enrich or give new meaning to your practice.

What you practice grows stronger — always and eventually. What you practice grows stronger, sets down roots, weaves itself into memory, body, and the impulse of soul.



I believe that we're receiving help all the time, whether we've asked for it or not. We're receiving help *especially* when we feel lost, confused, or overwhelmed. We receive nudges and taps on the shoulder and beckoning and guidance *all the time* — but that wisdom gets lost when the “noise” of normal human life builds up.

We come from a religious tradition that says, “truth is on the way,” whose prophet of Concord said, “trust thyself.” Trust yourself: when Emerson said that, he didn't mean “trust your ego, or the supercomputer of your brain.” No, if I know Waldo, he was referring to the Oversoul, the

In the days ahead, trust that you know enough; you do enough; you *are* enough. And may you know that wisdom accompanies you, accessible in every moment.