



Auckland Unitarian Church

Love beyond belief

## Are you living the life you chose or the life that chose you?

Clay Nelson © 22 July 2018

Are you living the life you chose or the life that chose you? Definitely a tricky question that raises mixed emotions within us. How might we know? Does your stomach sink at the idea that you chose your life and do you despair at poor choices made along the way, or give thanks that you did not settle for the life offered? Or do you give thanks for the life that chose you or find yourself resentful and unsatisfied?

A few years back while struggling with some difficult decisions about my future and worrying about how others would perceive my choices, I was asked if it was my purpose in life to meet other people's expectations? The question threw me at first. Part of me wanted to say, "Of course". I'd been trying to do it most of my life. It is the curse of more ministers than not to want to please people. But as I thought about the question I realised that in my experience it is impossible to meet those expectations, as they are not all the same and often at odds with each other. More importantly, trying to do so interferes with my choosing my own life. Living the life chosen for me by others can leave too many dreams unmet. But still, how do we know if we are living the life we chose or the life that chose us? There is so much we didn't choose.

We didn't choose the family into which we were born or the country of our citizenship. We did not choose our gender or sexual preference or race or skin colour or socio-economic status or intelligence or physical characteristics or abilities. We did not choose the faith system in which we were reared or our parents' vocations or their politics. Then there are those who had no birth parents in their lives, or only one. Any of these factors can have much to say about living the life chosen for us.

I think back to my parents. As far as I was aware they did not lay explicit expectations on me about the life they wanted me to lead, but I could not escape noticing how they lived theirs, extrapolating what their expectations of me might be. Neither of my parents were reared by their own parents, although they were not orphans. My father grew up in an orphanage. My mother was reared by relatives. When they were both about sixteen their mothers came back into their lives and in neither case was that a happy reunion. When they married and I came along they had no model for how to parent or to be a family, but they resolved to figure it out. In a way, it was a blessing. They had no preconceived notions of parenthood. They made it up as they went along. One of the first decisions they made was to get married in an Episcopal church. Neither had any experience with that tradition, but for their own reasons they liked it. Little could they know that they were also choosing a tradition that would attract their first born to become a priest. If they had gone with my mother's conservative Southern Baptist background or my father's unchurched background I would not have had the life I have the illusion of having chosen.

What this example says to me is that what has been chosen for us and what we have chosen is intertwined to such a degree it is difficult to untangle. For instance, it is not necessarily a negative to have our life chosen for us if it feels familiar, comforting, helpful, expected and enough. It is only when it feels exhausting, disappointing, infuriating, or insufficient that we long to choose a different path or follow a dream.

Those in my line of work refer to that longing to choose a different life for oneself as answering a calling. Some may articulate that as God choosing a life for them. Others, with a more humanistic perspective, may see it as internal dialogue, asking, “Am I living in a way that leaves me fully alive, engaged, and connected with the world and those around me?” Underneath the language of calling is an invitation to slow down and discern if you are living in a way that is in right relationship with yourself, with other people, and with the planet — or if you feel called to live differently.

In making such discernments, one tool from the Buddhist tradition is to consider if the way you are living is cultivating the “Ten Qualities that lead to Awakening” (generosity, renunciation, wisdom, strength, effort, truthfulness, determination, loving-kindness, equanimity) more than the “Ten Fetters” (self-identity, doubt, clinging, craving, ill-will, attachment, comparison, restlessness, and ignorance). Or from the Christian tradition, is the way you are living cultivating what is known as the Fruit of the Spirit: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control?” If these positive equalities are missing or if their opposites are present in abundance, you are right to ask yourself if you are living in right relationship. If the answer is no, how do you go about changing that?

Howard Thurman, an African-American philosopher, educator, theologian and civil rights activist offers this advice: “Do not ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive, and then go and do that. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.”

It sounds like good advice but carrying it out is not so easy. New Zealander Phil Keoghan comes to the rescue. Keoghan planned to apprentice as a TV camera operator but at 19 auditioned to be a presenter on the children’s show *Spot On*. After that and a series of positions as a presenter, as well as being a reporter on *That’s Fairly Interesting*, he went to the US at the age of 23 when his show *Keoghan’s Heroes* was picked up by a US network. He became best known in the US as the host of *The Amazing Race* since its inception in 2001.

At the age of 19 he nearly died filming an episode of *Spot On* while diving down to a shipwreck. From then on, Keoghan set out to live his life to the fullest by accomplishing exotic goals and taking risks, creating a “No Opportunity Wasted” (NOW) list of activities he wanted to complete in his life. Since then, Keoghan has broken a world bungee jumping record, gone diving in the world’s longest underwater caves, eaten a meal on top of an erupting volcano, and renewed his wedding vows underwater while feeding sharks.

While none of those is on my bucket list, it gives credence to his article *8 Ways to Create the Life You Want*. Keoghan writes:

“So what’s on your list? I’m not talking about a grocery list. Or a to-do-around-the-house list. I want to know what’s on your List for Life. Show me the list where you’ve written down all the meaningful, memorable, or just-plain-crazy things you want to do in your lifetime. You mean you don’t have a list like that? You’re not alone. Most people never take the time to even think about such things — let alone write them down. We’re all too busy dealing with the everyday realities of life. There are children to raise, jobs to do, bills to pay, houses that require tending. Who needs a list of even more stuff to do?

“You do. I do. We all do. Human beings crave new challenges and experiences. We always want a little more out of life, even if we’re not sure what that more is, exactly. Scientists have found the desire to experience – to explore, try new things, learn, be stimulated and test ourselves – is hard-wired in our genes. Even if you think your hectic daily routine is

demanding enough, something inside you (specifically , the D4DR gene, which I call Gene Wild) yearns to break out of that routine occasionally to try something different. If you ignore Gene Wild, you will always have a little itch in your soul that remains unscratched.”

Keoghan goes on to say:

“How do you know what to focus on? Open your mind to the possibilities. You may have no clue what types of things to include on your list, but that’s only because you haven’t devoted enough thought to it.

“What is it that makes you come alive? What is uniquely yours?

“Your list should be different from mine. It’s important to create a list based on experiences that have special meaning for you...

“Divide your list into these themes: Face Your Fears, Get Lost, Test Your Limits, Rediscover Your Childhood, Express Yourself... Think of an interesting idea that ties in with each of these five themes and you’ll have a great list.

“Once you have the list: Go public. Stashed away in a desk drawer, a list is easy to forget about or ignore. Once you’ve written it, keep it in plain sight. Keep copies all over — on the fridge, near your desk — so you constantly see it and are reminded of your dreams. Show it to your spouse, your kids and your friends. Soon they will be encouraging you to take action.

“Lose the guilt (‘Ha!’ you say.) You’re a ‘responsible adult.’ People depend on you! If you’re off having fun, how will everyone survive? Answer: They will manage. And maybe everyone will be better off. But leading a fuller life, an authentic life, you’ll make yourself a happier, healthier person and a better spouse and parent. Your loved ones will probably be thrilled and supportive and willing to fend for themselves for a day as you go chase a rainbow. Don’t be surprised if they begin to follow your inspiring example and make their own dream lists.

Keoghan concludes, “Remember that failure is not an option. Fear of failure often stops us from trying something that challenges us.... Just by going out and trying it, you guarantee yourself a memorable experience regardless of the outcome.”

I’d like to tell you that choosing the life you want to live only has to be done once. It is my experience it is a little like having to go through your wardrobe periodically to clean it out. What doesn’t fit anymore? What was a gift, but you never felt good in it? What is too worn? You get my drift. As we live out the life we choose we are going to grow. We will come to see the world and ourselves in new ways. We will discard some dreams and add new ones. It turns out, choosing our life is a full time calling that can occupy us for a lifetime.