



Auckland Unitarian Church

Love beyond belief

Are you living the life you chose, or are you living the life that chose you?

Clay Nelson © 25 June 2023

Rachel seems to remember the lyrics from every song she has ever heard, especially if it is by ABBA. Me, not so much, especially if it is by ABBA. But occasionally, a lyric will reach out and grab me and not let go. That is true of a refrain from a Jason Isbell song: “Are you living the life you chose, or are you living the life that chose you?”

Long before Isbell sang it, his question haunted me. By this point in my life, countless choices have been required. Each has had consequences, both positive and negative, and each has raised Isbell’s question.

There are, of course, a whole host of choices I had no part in. I didn’t choose the colour of my skin, my gender, sexual orientation, country of birth, family, socioeconomic class, birth order, or religious upbringing, to name only some of the most obvious. I think of these as the cards I was dealt in life. Learning how to play them was the task. Some were a royal flush creating opportunities that enhanced my life choices, and some were a bust requiring a bluff that all was well when it certainly was not.

But these choices are not the ones I find most troubling. I wasn’t responsible for them. It is the choices that have been wholly mine that Isbell’s questions demand an answer.

Sometimes it’s not giving an answer that’s hard, but not being able to see the choices available.

When I was beginning my last year at university, I was clueless as to what I’d do after graduation. My problem was I liked almost everything I studied but couldn’t see what I was to do with my wide interests. During this time, Dad happened to be in town and suggested lunch. I didn’t have high expectations he would give me any answers. He’d always made me work it out. Damn him.

Over lunch, I shared my quandary. Dad observed that from what he could see, I was a B+ student even though I didn’t go to class or study

except for the last two weeks of the quarter. What did I do the other seven weeks? I shared my passion for improving campus life, building community, protesting the Vietnam War and social injustice and seeking to empower fellow students to make the world a better place.

I remember my father smiling and asking if I knew that schools offered graduate degrees in my passion, called “student affairs”. The conversation ended with him saying that the answer to my quandary may be simply following my passion.

I immediately went to the library (that’s what we did pre-Google) to research this choice I’d been blind to. Sure enough. Some very prestigious schools offered such degrees. I wrote down the pertinent information to apply to the top three. The best and most competitive of the three, Ohio State, accepted me, granting me free tuition, housing, books and employment for two years. Their generosity certainly had nothing to do with my grades but came instead from their recognition of my passion. When I look back, the choices that have clearly been mine have always been about following my passion. Those, I have no memory of regretting. Not just because mine led to a very successful career working with students in higher education but because I loved my work.

If we are given a choice, we all want to choose the life we live, but that requires finding our passion. [Dr Carl Gregg](#), a UU minister and trained spiritual director, says it begins by slowing down and asking yourself if you are living in a way that is in right relationship with yourself, with other people, and with this one planet — or if you feel called to live differently.

He offers Buddhist tradition to help us make such a discernment. Ask yourself if the life

*“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 live cultivating what is known as the Fruits of the Spirit: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control?” If these positive qualities are missing (or if their opposites are present in abundance), then we are invited to make some essential discernment about positive choices and living in right relationship.”*

<https://www.patheos.com/blogs/carlgregg/2015/08/are-you-living-the-life-you-chose-how-to-discern-your-call/>

In my case, when my discernment unexpectedly led me into the ministry, I was held back by my fetters. I had to let go of the notion that I had to be holy and pious to be a minister, for I certainly wasn't. I had to let go of beliefs I'd held since childhood, which no longer made sense to me. I had to let go of my self-doubts and honour my honest doubts about almost everything the church taught. I had to stop avoiding the hard work of constructing a spiritual life that was meaningful to me, even if the institutional church considered me a heretic. Unfettered, I and my heretical passions excelled, graduating with honours at the top of my class.

But that is far too much about me. Faith communities must find their passion as well. They have to answer Isbell's refrain.

If life has chosen the congregation, it may feel positive, familiar, comforting, helpful, expected and enough. It is also true that if life has chosen the congregation, it may feel negative, exhausting, disappointing, infuriating and insufficient.

A congregation is fettered if they have lost sight of their purpose: If they have chosen to remain the same. If they fear being disruptive when required to promote justice. If they are no longer generous. If they no longer consider hospitality a sacrament. If they forsake a determination to be a Loving Community offering kindness to all. If love, joy and peace no longer resonate through all they do.

Sadly, when we give up making our own choices about how to live, we lose our passion. Then we might as well close our doors, for our death is inevitable. In Deuteronomy 30:20, Yahweh tells the Hebrews, "I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live."

Then move on to [Mary Oliver's question](#):-

What does this congregation "plan to do with [our] one wild and precious life?"