



## Message from Ed Fallon

by Sam Garchik on Sat 23 Jun 2007 12:16 PM CDT |

### By Ed Fallon

Dear Friends,

In response to last week's Update, a friend wrote to say, "Good message -- but still not at the heart of the problem. The real problem is lack of spiritual connection, to each other, to the planet, to Life itself. Until this separation issue is addressed, everything else will be in vain. This has been the message of the sages throughout the ages, whether Buddha, Jesus, Moses, ML King or Gandhi."

Good point. While respecting the diversity of spiritual perspective and religious experience, our yearning for peace, justice, stewardship and community must be driven by moral values, by a heartfelt concern for the life around us. Yet what inspires us to connect with others, to engage in a compassionate way with the world around us?

This conversation could be – and should be – long and ongoing, as it gets to the heart of the pressing challenges of our time. For today, I'm content to bite off one small piece: the question of how we are called to serve. If the reader will indulge me a longer-than-usual Update, I would like to share a modified and condensed version of a speech I gave earlier this year at Drake University as part of the Stringfellow Lecture series. The speech was entitled "Politics as a Religious Vocation."

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What does it mean to be called to a religious vocation? Daniel Webster defines vocation as “a call, summons or impulsion to perform a certain function or enter a certain career, especially a religious one.”

In the Hebrew Bible, God plucked Amos off his farm and commanded him to prophesy to Israel. In Jeremiah’s case, he tries to resist God’s calling and says, “I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth.” But God will have none of it, and Jeremiah goes forth to prophesy, largely ignored and abused by those to whom he is sent. Then there’s Jonah, who does everything possible to avoid God’s calling. With the help of some angry sailors and one giant fish, God finally compels Jonah to warn Ninevah of its pending punishment, and the people of Ninevah repent and are spared.

In the New Testament, Jesus calls his first disciples with remarkable brevity, saying “Follow me and I will make you fishers of men.” In the Book of Acts, Luke writes of the calling of the apostle Paul while on the road to Damascus, who required a voice from heaven and sudden blindness to accomplish his transformation.

Literature and history are full of calls to vocations in political and social justice work. Dorothy Day was deeply moved by a march on the Feast of the Holy Innocents, and “offered up a special prayer, a prayer which came with tears and anguish, that some way would open up for me to use what talents I possessed for my fellow workers, for the poor.” The next day, she met Peter Maurin, who helped her found the Catholic Worker movement.

Gandhi’s call came through his own pain, and through understanding how that pain was but a small reflection of the pain of many others. After being physically thrown off a train because he wasn’t white, Gandhi writes, “winter in the higher regions of South Africa is severely cold . . . I sat and shivered. There was no light in the room . . . I began to think of my duty. Should I fight for my rights or go back to India? The hardship to which I was subjected was superficial – only a symptom of the deep disease of color prejudice. I should try, if possible, to root out the disease and suffer hardships in the process.”

My own calling came while fasting to cure an intestinal problem. During the second day of my fast, without any warning or expectation, I had the sudden, emphatic realization that I was being called to a life of service. It was an ecstatic experience. Yet once the luster of the moment wore off, the idea terrified me. What I really wanted to do was to farm and play music. So, for the next five years, like Jonah, I did everything I could to run away from my calling.

Yet each time I got more deeply involved in farming, I would injure my back, each incidence worse than the last. I tried to focus entirely on music, but back problems kept me from sitting for more than 10 or 15 minutes at a time, making it impossible to practice. It was becoming clear to me that, no matter how hard I tried to continue on my own “road to Damascus,” something was pushing me in a different direction.

Since 1984, my public service work has taken many forms, both inside and outside the arena of electoral politics. Religion, spirituality, community and role models have been critical motivators in my work. Several years ago, inspired by Gandhi’s “Confession of Faith,” I wrote a set of guiding principles. While I am saddened at the times I have failed to live up to these principles, they have served as a compass and proven instrumental in helping me find my way.

The evolution of my political activism is a series of ad-ons, beginning with peace in 1980s, justice and poverty in the early 1990s, land use and sustainable agriculture since the mid-1990s, and now global warming. Holding political office is only one aspect of my work, but a critically important one. If we truly want justice, if we truly desire systemic societal reform, then we MUST be involved in politics.

Gandhi said it like this: “My bent is not political but religious and I take part in politics because I feel that there is no department of life which can be divorced from religion and because politics touch the vital being of India almost at every point.”

Politics motivated by a thirst for power, or money or even a love of the “game” of politics, will achieve more harm than good. Too many people approach the political realm with ulterior motives, lacking vision, without a sense of calling or greater purpose. It is this type of person that has come to give politics a bad name, and of such that Webster spoke when he defined politician as a term “frequently used in a derogatory sense, with implications of seeking personal or partisan gain, scheming, opportunism, etc.”

Back to Gandhi. In America today, more than ever, we need good people in politics, people genuinely motivated by moral values, people concerned with the greater good. Not the narrow values of exclusion and fear. Not a false set of values that negate the integrity of people who think differently, who worship differently, who look different, who have a different sexual orientation. When religion becomes exclusive and provincial, it becomes harmful, hurtful and false.

Over time, as I’ve talked with people who want to run for office, I’ve developed a list of traits one should possess and develop. They are: (1) a sharp mind, (2) clear vision, (3) a compassionate heart, (4) a strong stomach, (5) a stiff spine, (6) a good set of legs (for all that door knocking!), and most important (7) a sense of spiritual purpose.

Perhaps even more important than all these is COMMUNITY. Community doesn’t just mean our family, friends, coworkers or even extended circles of people who think like us. Community means all that and more. As Bill McKibben writes in his new book, “Deep Economy,” “The key questions will change from whether the economy produces an ever larger pile of stuff to whether it builds or undermines community – for community, it turns out, is the key to physical survival in our environmental predicament and also to human satisfaction.”

Community building is an important part of the work that Lynn and I hope to accomplish through “An Independence Movement for Iowa.” Again to McKibben: “{development} should aim not at growth but at durability. It should avoid the romantic fantasies

offered by the prophets of endless wealth in favor of the blunter realism of people looking out for each other.”

That’ s community, a spiritual vision of economic growth and political engagement that is both democratic and sustainable. Though the seeds and traditions of community run long and deep in this great, pluralistic country of ours, we have much work to do – and much damage to undo. Rediscovering our neighbors and rebuilding our town squares is gaining momentum from one end of America to the other, and as much as anywhere, right here in the heartland. Yet to move beyond the culture of fear and consumerism sold to us by those who would divide and distract us, to move beyond a segregated, isolated America of gated prison communities for the poor and gated safe communities for the rich, there must be a deepening of our personal and collective commitment to values-based lives, work and civic engagement.

Gandhi challenged himself to listen to “that small, still voice within.” That’ s good advice today in a world grown noisy, chaotic and confusing. We would each do well to listen for that voice and let it guide us in our lives.

Thank you,

Ed Fallon

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