

## Is Passion Over-Rated?

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Personal Reflections From Terry, Kirsten, Ron

### Sermon

*Living lightly on the environment.*

*Helping others to be happy, productive and generous.*

*Good health, the way nature intended.*

*Cycling city streets in the sunshine.*

*Antiques.*

*Music, music, music, music, music, music.*

What are your passions? What I just read aloud are a few of the responses I received from congregation members, colleagues and friends last week. I asked about passions on our Facebook page and at an Adult Enrichment class here at UUSS. Last Friday morning, as I sat reading the newspaper in the lobby of the YMCA, one of my friends asked me: “So, what’s the sermon this weekend?”

I said: “Is passion over-rated?”

He paused.

“You mean like Love?”

*Well, perhaps.* “Or do you mean March Madness?” I hadn’t thought of that one, though I should have. Back home in Indiana, basketball tournament season brings the diagnosis of Hoosier Hysteria, whether at the level of high school basketball or the NC Double-A. I often think of a passion as an all-consuming drive, burning obsession, irresistible delight, and a possible source of heartache. So yes: March Madness works for people. But not for me, since I don’t follow basketball.

What comes to mind when you hear the word “passion”? My dictionary says passion can be any powerful emotion or appetite. Or passion is defined as the abandoned display of emotion. Outbursts of anger sometimes lead to acts we label “crimes of passion.” These definitions are why I’m wary of passion.

I can be uncomfortable with displays of passion. I can shy away from people who are “fired up!” I don’t trust people with a lot of charisma or cockiness. In politics and religion and social causes, I am slow to trust the true believer, the crusader, the propagandist. I am skeptical even about passions displayed in the causes that I support. If someone proclaims a truth with enthusiasm, I think about the opposite claim. I try to examine their assertion in my mind, study it, take it apart before accepting it.

Of course, I do have my own convictions and commitments, though I arrive at many of them analytically and philosophically. But passion? I’ll have to get back to you on that.

For much of my life I did not feel that I had any passions to speak of--no hobbies, not things I built, nothing I collected, no expertise in music and no training, no skill at sports and little interest as a spectator. I felt I was just observing life. I didn’t sense that fire in the belly I was hearing about. I decided that I was *passion-deficient*.

Twenty-two years ago, when I was a regular member of Second Unitarian Church of Chicago, a friend named Karen led a group worship service about passion. It happened on Palm Sunday. Four people spoke about their passions. After speaking, each one would set an object that represented their passion on a table. As each person did this, I felt skeptical, and increasingly boring as a human being. Karen was the last one to speak. After speaking, she sang a solo--one of her own songs! Yep, I was pretty boring all right.

Several years ago while preaching at a UU ministers’ meeting and retreat, I confessed my passion-deficiency to them. At mealtime, a few of them teased me: “You need a hobby!” Since they wanted to help, I said: “Okay. I’m collecting two-dollar bills. I will take all that you can give me.” Nobody took me up on that.

One guy said he collected vintage labels from fruit and vegetable crates, those works of commercial graphic artists, with vibrant colors and striking scenes of people, animals and produce. He offered to get me started collecting labels. I don’t remember engaging his offer with much enthusiasm. However, a week later in the mail I received a padded envelope of vintage labels, a gift, a starter package. Ever since then, when I see that minister, he says, “Roger, how’s your fruit label collection coming along?” I have not enlarged it, but I’ve kept it, even framed a few of them. They

look nice, but they are not my passion. I am happy to have them but they do not evoke “a boundless enthusiasm,” as the dictionary says.

Another definition for passion is ... suffering. The root of the word passion, in both Greek and Latin, means suffering. Artists have a reputation for passion. Stories abound of painters, writers, composers and sculptors going through pain and sacrifice in their drive to create something new and beautiful. A book about the life of the great Michelangelo is entitled *The Agony and the Ecstasy*. As a boy, my older brother built model airplanes and model cars. I built one model car. It was agony. That’s all.

These days, business consultants and executives talk about the need for workers to feel passion for their work. This use of the word passion implies full engagement, that all-consuming drive. A friend of mine works long hours at a small company where the owners urge them: “Let your passion out! Show your passion.” My friend wonders: “What if you don’t want to use up your passion at work?” Some people just want it to be a job.

What if, instead, you want to devote your energies to your loved ones and to your community? Or if you are unemployed? Does passion become irrelevant then? Or is passion needed then more than ever, needed to sustain you until you land another paying position?

Today is Palm Sunday, one week before Easter. Another name for it is Passion Sunday. Here is the Palm Sunday story: Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a donkey, receiving cheers from the crowd, with his friends around him. This is a big, bold move. Up till now, Jesus has focused his ministry in smaller towns, in familiar places. But now he’s taking his message to the big city of Jerusalem, the seat of imperial power in Palestine. Jesus probably knows that going to the city will be his end, but he is compelled to go, called to go, destined for it. He takes his radical message of justice too close to the power structure, and the empire strikes back. He is betrayed and arrested, convicted and tortured. The suffering he undergoes will come to be known as the Passion of Jesus.

Such a story naturally leads to my question, “Is passion over-rated?” Is it worth it?

I do accept and use words like devotion and duty, conviction and commitment. I like those terms. But passion sounds... too hot to handle. People who get too passionate get *burned*, don’t they? Sometimes they get burned at the stake, but mostly they just get burned out, don’t they?

Of course, I am devoted to the work I do in ministry, and I love this congregation. Going to church, singing in church, working in church, helping to make church happen—it’s all fulfilling. I love our Unitarian Universalist movement. Even so, I am reluctant to say I have a passion for all of this. If I say I am passionate then... I will need to act fired up about everything, won’t I? If I’m passionate, I might have to be less reflective, rational or skeptical than I want to be. If I’m *passionate*... won’t I get burned out or feel beaten down? Passionate people are those who make history... even if they are history-making failures. They flare up like a comet; they light up the whole world, or they die trying. Can I claim to want that?

Remember that service I attended in my UU church before I was a minister? When people gave testimony to their passions, and I felt so boring... The presenters brought an item to lay on the table, a visual representation of their passions. My friend Karen sang a solo of a song she had written. Then, silently, she took off her sandals, placed them on the table, and walked back to her seat. Walking is one of her passions. She walks countless miles around her city, often walking home from work instead of taking the bus or train. I can see how that fiery, fierce musical artist has a quieter passion too. I would not have thought of walking so often, taking such long walks, going step by step, *as a passion*, but I could see that now. I could see it in the well-worn sandals that she put on the table.

Seeing things from that perspective helped me look at my own life in a different light. I could see that some things were important to me. I could appreciate my own interests, my own commitments and convictions. I could appreciate what gives me joy. I could see what matters, what feeds me, stretches my abilities, delights my soul. *So what*, if I can’t say that my commitments and interests look like the dictionary definitions for passion. Maybe *other* terms fit better. How about you? What matters to you? What feeds you, stretches you, delights your soul?

This is what I asked ... on our Facebook page and in class last Tuesday: What is a passion or a calling or a commitment of yours? Not your ONLY one, but one that you can claim?

People who answered me were parents, musicians, engineers, cooks, counselors, civil servants, UU ministers, professors, custodians, volunteers, retired people, students, working people, unemployed people. I asked for answers in six-word phrases.

*Reviving ancient music, art and wisdom.*  
*Respectful and fulfilling workplaces for everyone.*  
*Providing comprehensive sexuality education to youth.*  
*My family, my home, my dogs.*  
*Teaching second grade boys and girls.*  
*Striving toward fully connecting with others.*

Friends have said to me that they admired my passion for my work. Oh! I didn't know you noticed. Because I had not noticed, or not seen it as passion. I just thought I was doing the work. And it felt right. Doing the work has its ups, its downs, and its steady-as-you-go stretches of time. It has full and rich moments and moments of tedium. It has times of gladness, and hope, and heartache. At the end of some days, I fall into bed sleepy but satisfied; I wake up the next morning with eagerness, perhaps with inspirations and sermon ideas. Other nights, I am restless, waking up worried at three o'clock in the morning, with faces flashing in my mind, as the mind re-runs old conversations or does a rehearsal of a conversation that I need to have. My mid-morning time of meditation is interrupted by my to-do list and by worries. I trust that I am not alone in such experiences. I trust I am not the only person here whose commitments, cares and concerns yield some sleepless nights or doubt-filled moments, as well as moments of joy, richness and a sense of connection.

Some would say that this is what passion looks like and feels like. We can call it that, or we can say it's a calling. The word *calling* to some could seem limited to certain activities, or certain people, such as ministers or teachers. But it's not.

All of us can be open to a sense of calling. Indeed, your calling may not be your paid work. It

may be what you find enriching, challenging and important—whether it's your official occupation or some other way that you express your talents, commitment, longing and joy.

The word calling is an inclusive one. All of us can be open to hear and feel that we are called. The writer Frederick Buechner says: "The place you are called to be is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."

Here are some callings, told to me in six words, in response to my questions:

*Teaching love amid sorrow; hope endures.*  
*Helping others who are staying sober.*  
*Sharing belief in everyone's inner wisdom.*  
*Share, support, organize. Listen, love, give.*  
*Learning about human struggle and equality.*  
*Creating order and beauty amid chaos. Whoever you are, please come by my office next week.*

In a congregation I served before this one, a woman who was retired from teaching said that she felt a calling to tend the flower garden in front of her house. Of course, she was generous with her time in church work and other volunteer activities. But when I asked a question about calling, she said it was her flower garden. It gave her pleasure to imagine the people who would drive and walk by, enjoying the blooming plants that resulted from her labors and her cooperation with Mother Nature. Perhaps the flowers would make someone's day a little easier, she said.

"The place you are called to be is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."

*Watching people making community.*

That's only four words, not six, but I wrote it, so I can approve it. First: Watching people is a joy of mine: watching people of all ages, from a distance, or just a few feet away, is fascinating. Being in the midst of people, is a joy. Second: Making community, watching it happen, and helping it happen, are sources of love and joy for me. Watching all of you making connections and building community with one another, makes me smile. It restores my hope.

It inspires me to work and serve among people who think about important questions like:

What is a passion, commitment or calling of yours?  
It inspires me to be with people who give answers  
like these:

*Living lightly on the environment.*

*Special Needs Parenting: Total Commitment  
Required.*

*So much to love about life.*

*Defending and liberating all beings.*

*Shaping the future, mindful of heritage.*

*Making the world a better place.*

My vision of religious community at its best--my vision for us--is that we provide a place for everybody to explore our personal passion, commitment or calling—to explore it and appreciate it. In small settings and in and in large-group gatherings, we help one another to seek “the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.” We encourage one another in this work of a lifetime.

The people in this place clearly show a sense of purpose and calling, whether or not we choose to call it passion. We have commitments. We are called. And we need encouragement and reminders. The reminders are all around. Let’s notice how blessed we are. Let us help one another to notice.

Is passion good? That depends on what we mean by passion. A violent outburst is not good. The agony of a person trying to create something new might not feel good, but it can yield beautiful results. Actions based on love and connection are surely good. They are something to get fired up about.

However we might name our commitments, and however we discover them, each of us is called to make them. Whether you name it a calling or a passion... or just a pretty good thing, every choice you make, every act born of love and connection will be something to get fired up about. So may it be. Amen, and blessed be.