

Send me?
November 17, 2019
Harold and Marcia Beer

Marcia: As I reflect on my life, I see so clearly the turning points. Those moments of my life when unexpected opportunities opened up and my best laid plans got derailed. The growing edge as Howard Thurman would say. Through each event, I learned something new, experienced life in a new way, and learned to trust while my faith grew. I've had a lot of practice with flexibility and trusting that a force greater than myself is at work. My life's work, or my calling, as I understand now is: Planting seeds of possibilities and building places for belonging, growing and serving.

You too, might be able to reflect on times in your life where your plan led to somewhere you couldn't even imagine. At the time, these choices, situations, affirmations, successes and failures sometimes seem quite undramatic: no flashes of lightning, no great rolling thunder, not earthshaking. These moments can seem completely ordinary: hardly noticeable, even quiet, like a whisper or just sheer silence. Taking time to look back on these seemingly random events and trajectories is one way to discern and define God's call in my life: who I am, how I live, and discovering my purpose.

One particular summer. The summer of my 16th year stands out as possibly one of the most important 'I said yes, here I am, send me' moments of my life. One Sunday, a new boy came to our Sunday School Class and shared that he had returned from a summer mission work camp experience. That planted a seed that took root over the next few months. I started looking at work opportunities like this. Because, A: I love a good adventure, B: Growing up I had other role models who did volunteer mission work and I longed for experiences like these, C: Truly, I felt a spirit-led need to do this, and D: My church supported this dream and affirmed my ability to engage in mission work.

So, I found a brand new organization sending teams of youth out into the world. They had a team going to Alaska and I wanted to go! So without much more research than that, I signed up, received the financial support from my church, and next thing I knew, I was in Chicago waiting for a school bus to pick me up at O'Hare to travel to Bethany, Missouri to work with Missions Outreach.

Upon arrival, we discovered that not all of the cabins for lodging were built or complete. So part of our training was to finish building the cabins. We worked in teams to build some of the skills that would be needed in Alaska. But in Missouri, it was hot, it was humid, and there were wandering dogs. I met my first ticks, we ate outside under a big tree, and each evening gathered to learn more about what were would be doing. We built relationships, and we talked a lot about our mission.

After a week at the ranch, twenty of us packed up our stuff and boarded "Joy" our white 1965 International School Bus. Our leaders: Don and Donna, Janet and Charlie were amazing, even at the time I thought I can't believe you are doing this! We drove to Alaska, it took seven days, and we slept on the bus or on church basement floors, sometimes we even sang for our supper. We arrived in Haines only to find that the ferry boats were on strike and we were unable to get to our destination. I had my first airplane ride: a bush pilot who dropped me and my stuff off on the beach at Echo Ranch where I'd spend the next six weeks living, eating, and working along side sixteen other youth under the direction and leadership of our four leaders. It was amazing: each day began at daybreak, morning devotions and prayer, then off to the worksite. By the end of the six weeks, we had built three cabins - including digging foundations by hand, mixing cement by hand, all the way up to putting the shingles

on. I truly learned the joy and the sacrifice of discipleship.

These cabins would be used to house children and families, who would stay at the camp during the summer. It was the last day in Alaska, gathered around in the circle, that I made a commitment. Having learned the life changing power of working together, sharing reflections, devotions, prayers, and singing, I would commit to making experiences like this for others when I grew up and I trusted that one day I would have the opportunity to live out my call.

Jumping ahead twenty years to the year: 1996. My position here at Edgewood was the Christian Education Coordinator. So much of my life's work is being in ministry with children and youth, and with teachers and parents. Most of this work involves engaging volunteers in our mutual ministry, sowing seeds and extending invitations to serve Recruiting teachers, chaperones, drivers, working in collaboration on multi-generational worship and learning events - identifying leadership for Edgewood camp. You get the picture - perhaps you've received an invitation to work our youth?

I received a call from Ann Hansen from the United Church of Christ National Setting in Cleveland. She asked if Edgewood would be interested in participating as a test site for a brand new curriculum called Our Whole Lives. Our Whole Lives, or OWL, is a comprehensive sexuality education curriculum whose first component, was one written for youth in 10th to 12th grades. It's a collaborative effort of United Church of Christ and the Unitarian Universalist Association, OWL is an abstinence based curriculum that provides accurate information about sexuality and tools needed to make wise decisions to avoid unintended consequences.

To participate I would need to identify a male and female facilitator to travel to Florida for training with the authors. With the Christian Education Board's blessings, I started to search for two facilitators who could commit to the extensive five day training, and also to prepare, facilitate and evaluate the 13 week program. Oh, and loved working with youth!

I found Mary Schuring fairly easily. And then I faced a challenge identifying another. After three weeks of searching, asking, and being turned down from all the good men in the congregation I could think of, all reasonable excuses: work, family, vacation, not interested, don't have time.

I came home disappointed and feeling pressured by the deadline to respond.

M: "I just don't know what I'm going to do, I've asked everyone I know and no one has said yes." I've run out of ideas. I've asked everyone I can think of, and I still can't find a man."

H: "For what?"

M: "I can't find a man to do this new curriculum, Our Whole Lives."

H: "You haven't asked me."

M: "No, because you're busy with work, and you almost always fill the gaps. And besides, I thought you'd say no."

H: "You haven't asked me."

M: "The training is 5 days long. Are you sure you are willing to do this?"

H: "Yes."

Harold: And a few weeks later, I found myself in Orlando, Florida, in July, a strange place where your glasses fog up when you go outside. One of the first things I had to do is find Mary Schuring, because

while we both went to Edgewood, we hadn't met, yet. One of first group activities were introductions. Picture an oval of forty people. As the introductions went on, from doctors and nurse practitioners, people from Planned Parenthood, and social workers, I felt out of place, intimidated. There was no way my 'yes' at home compared to the qualifications and experience of this group. I wanted to get on a plane and go home that night. But I stayed, and we practiced, and as a group went through the entire twenty-six hour long curriculum.

After all that time together, Mary and I were affirmed by this group that only a few days earlier I had felt only intimidation.

That's when it all got started. Of all of the roles that I have held in this church, I think that co-facilitating Our Whole Lives has been my growing edge, bringing a sense of purpose and call in a profound ministry to our youth and this community. I see it as a call because in no other role have I used all of my gifts, or felt so utterly depleted after each session, in a good way. In the few months each group is together, we don't spend energy concerned with how many youth are participating, but rather to the honesty and authenticity of our participation. At first, we give the youth a lot of information about their bodies, how things are supposed to work, some basic values, and we facilitators answer a lot of questions. In time, maybe right around when we discuss healthy relationships, the curriculum shifts towards the youth developing answers for themselves through exercises, role plays and conversations. In a brave space, we help the youth make and refine their own decisions about safer sex, choices of contraception, communication, consent, how to end unhealthy relationships, and lifespan sexuality.

There is joy, too. I feel joy when the group becomes a safe and supportive space where vulnerabilities are shared without judgment. I feel joy in the laughter, tears and the silence of deep thoughts. I feel joy to be a trusted adult in the lives of the young people. I feel joy knowing that each of these youth will take their knowledge and experiences into the world, sharing their wisdom with friends, correcting falsehoods, challenging stereotypes and bigotry.

I've sometimes quipped that OWL has saved my life because I probably found my testicular cancer at an earlier stage. I think the affirmations of the youth have saved my life when I've wondered if my presence on Earth makes any difference. And I know that a feeble 'yes' twenty-two years ago has led to other 'yes's' along the way, including us standing in front of you right now.

Marcia: The scriptures are full of stories about God's ordinary and amazing people taking the first shaky step and trusting that what they can give will be enough to do the work they were called to. Elijah's experience in the cave on the mountain is just one example. What are you doing here? We didn't hear Elijah's response, but we know he left the mountain to continue his work rather than hiding in a cave.

Parker Palmer, in his book *Let Your Life Speak*, asks this question: "Is the life I'm living the life that wants to live in me?" We ask you: Where is the spirit leading you?

H: Is it time to listen more carefully?

M: Is it time to refine your purpose, look to your growing edge? Is it time to boldly claim and to live your life fully rooted in being and doing God's work in the world?