

Ducking Your Dharma

Rev. Louise Green, 6/5/16

Text: From *The Great Work of Your Life*, Stephen Cope.

Dharma is a potent Sanskrit word that is packed tight with meaning, like one of those little sponge animals that expands to six times its original size when you add water. Dharma means: path, teaching or law. For our purposes, it will mean primarily vocation or sacred duty. It means most of all—and in all cases—truth. Our greatest responsibility in life is to this inner possibility—this dharma—and every human being’s duty is to utterly, fully, and completely embody his own idiosyncratic dharma.

When the great battle of the Bhagavad Gita begins, two sides assemble for war in the Northern Indian kingdom of Kuru. A generations-old conflict has come to a big showdown between two closely-related lines of a royal family. Our central hero, Arjuna, representing the Pandava clan, is in a chariot heading to war when he suddenly asks his driver Krishna to stop. As he looks out at the enemy, the Kaurava family, he sees many who are his own relatives. A huge dilemma confronts Arjuna, and his body reacts strongly: *“My limbs sink, my mouth is parched, my body trembles, the hair bristles on my flesh. The magic bow slips from my hand, my skin burns, I cannot stand still, my mind reels.”* This is not a good day to take action!

To go forward in battle is his sacred duty, and possibly his dharma. Yet to accept that role will cause tremendous loss and the death of his kinsmen. So Arjuna does the only thing he feels is possible at that moment: he cries out to Krishna, “I cannot fight this fight,” and ducks down in the chariot. He literally sits on the floor of the vehicle, and says he can’t go on. Arjuna has been paralyzed by doubt. Thus begins a long interlude with Krishna teaching--a symbol for the divine voice, inner wisdom, highest ethical understanding, or a yearning of the soul itself. You see, this first chapter of the *Bhagavad Gita*, a much beloved, many-layered text in Hinduism, is simply a set up. Krishna, not exactly your average driver, teaches Arjuna about seeking the truth of his vocation, a kind of holy duty.

In yogic philosophy, every human being has an urge, even if buried deep, to embody the being that only they can be. This inner possibility doesn’t often pop up with neon lights around it, making the way forward clear and unmistakable. (Although that seems to happen in San Miguel more frequently than other places!) You must look for hints and signs, try out different options, seek the shape of dharma by inquiry and design. You sense who you are over time. You gradually give up being that person that others may want you to be, in favor of your authentic self.

Arjuna's fear about action causes him to duck and wait it out. This may look familiar! Stephen Cope's book, *The Great Work of Your Life: A Guide for the Journey to Your True Calling*, is a wonderful tool. He explores a number of lives, famous and ordinary, through the framework of the *Bhagavad Gita*. Cope unpacks the teachings to look at all the ways we avoid going where we need to go. Many of his observations ring true for me, in application to my own life, and in observing the struggles of others. The book is focused on ways that doubt can lead us away from our true dharma.

The first kind of doubt he names is quite common: *Fear of Closing the Door*. You have lived a long time in a way that worked, perhaps in a meaningful career, as parent, in a marriage, something that once held great interest. Yet the time of a good fit is coming to end--that particular dharma is used up, and change is coming. It's not at all clear what comes next, and this not knowing creates doubt of major proportions. Caught in fear, knowing the door must close, you simply duck. You sit still, keep the old life going, and refuse to investigate the new. This can be long, dangerous ducking—the consequences may be ill health, extreme boredom, acting out, depression, or general stuckness. Fear of closing the door can keep you ducking for quite some time, with worsening results over the course of your waiting.

A second kind of doubt, Cope calls the sly version: *Denial of Dharma*. In this case, you are satisfied with work and living, yet maintain there is no calling, simply because it doesn't seem that dramatic. You never take the time to really inquire about who you are, and what you have to offer. People comment on your gifts--feedback pours in about what is experienced in your presence--yet you always downplay your own effect. You are living in a vague way, with less clarity than is possible, with a kind of accidental effect. In yogic teaching, it takes active consciousness to embrace dharma, a choice to be in the flow on purpose. *Denial of Dharma* keeps you kind of fuzzy and variable. It diffuses your gifts, and underestimates the power of your living. You have something to offer, and refuse to name it, so you just drift along.

A third type of ducking Cope calls *The Problem of Aim*. Every person has been on a long trajectory of choices, some in progression to an outcome which is *not* their dharma. Dharma has a lot to do with aim, and to be off just a bit can have a cumulative effect. The place where you have landed could be very close, even semi-related, yet divergences took you further and further away. As you grow older, this one shows up more clearly. Perhaps there was something you truly loved in 20s, and now you are 3 degrees of separation from the actual target you intended.

You come to middle age capable of many things you *can* do, yet not in the flow of what you *should* do for the most fulfillment and impact. In yoga teaching, it's important to live right in the center of your dharma. Otherwise you start to feel what Cope calls "*the accumulated weight of a kind of creeping self-betrayal.*" You may know exactly what your true passion is, and yet you do not follow this path. In the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna has a word on this important point: *Better is one's own dharma though imperfectly carried out than the dharma of another carried out perfectly. For to follow the law of another bring great spiritual peril.*

Spiritual peril can show up as fear, depression, or grief. It takes some courage to follow your dharma, particularly if it involves change. Sometimes you have to leap into the unknown, relying on your intuitive knowledge of who you are meant to be. Dharma is not about doing something perfectly, but rather about doing things wholeheartedly, as you. When you don't, you suffer. The great Christian theologian, Thomas Merton, said it this way from another tradition: *Every man has a vocation to be someone, but he must understand clearly that in order to fulfill this vocation he can only be one person: Himself. Herself. Yourself.*

Over the last four months, I have been leading a new class of UU spiritual deepening at River Road UUC called *Spirit Journey*. I designed it with the goal to more clearly understand who you are and where you are going. How might that happen? In *Spirit Journey* we first explore regular spiritual *practice*, choosing a variety of methods: reflection, writing, art, walking, meditation, yoga, running, or gardening, for example. We then look at the idea of *calling*, sensing what may be rising up from the strong container of consistent practice. The group maps their individual spiritual *roots*, the traditions and experiences that have shaped them to this point in time. We then turn to *action*, seeking the seeds of energy and excitement that may lead in a new direction or deepen an existing commitment. Most importantly, *Spirit Journey* is a community of relationships, a living microcosm that shows some of the best gifts of the macrocosm, the congregation.

We gather in congregations for many reasons--one huge aim may be to avoid ducking! UU congregations are places that value questions, and pose them regularly. Our communities honor life passages and set up ritual ways to observe them. UU learning sites draw from six major sources, finding our way with tools from many wisdom traditions. In all the ways we live our vision—fellowship, spirit, and service—we have decided not to sort it out entirely alone. We keep the company of like-minded seekers, people who want to examine their own spirits, accompany one another, and impact the world.

Impacting the world is key, for we don't ever find our dharma in serving ourselves alone. Let's go back to the *Bhagavad Gita*, and see what Krishna said to get Arjuna up off the floor of that chariot. The path taught was action in the world. There were techniques for inner mastery and spiritual growth, true, yet the whole point was to be more effective in action. Not renunciation, or retreat, but a way of offering external service.

Arjuna must find the courage to be in his own dharma, the unique vocation only he can offer to others. The four pillars of Krishna's dharma teaching were this:

1. *Look to your own dharma, not that of another, for to follow the law of another brings great spiritual peril.* You must find your way to make a difference; and participate in action towards it.

2. Do your dharma full out. Give it gusto, passion, and purpose. No halfhearted measures or puny efforts. All in, all in!

3. Let go of the fruits of dharma. Detach from the outcome. Release the need for success, reward, praise or honor. Do your work and let it go.

4. Turn your dharma over to Source, Universe, or Higher Wisdom. Completely surrender to all that is greater than you.

This work of dharma is larger than your individual ego, and requires a wider view to see clearly. May you have the wisdom not to duck, at least not very often! And when you do, because we all do, may this congregation be a site of inspiration to help you go forward.

When your dharma calls, I hope you listen, and follow. I wish you the courage to be you.