

# Sherrí Alms: A Joyful Response

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## A Joyful Response

*Something is very gently,  
invisibly, silently,  
pulling at me – a thread  
or net of threads  
finer than cobweb and as  
elastic. I haven't tried  
the strength of it. No barbed hook  
pierced and tore me. Was it  
not long ago this thread  
began to draw me? Or  
way back? Was I  
born with its knot about my  
neck, a bridle? Not fear  
but a stirring  
of wonder makes me  
catch my breath when I feel  
the tug of it when I thought  
it had loosened itself and gone.*

This poem, called "The Thread", by Denise Levertov is the secondary text for my sermon today in direct violation of the very good sermon guidelines that Celebration Circle has put together, which say that preachers should try to use the Bible readings as text. I am someone who firmly believes that rules are good and made to be broken.

This Sunday marks the second Sunday of our Recommitment

season, a time when we who are part of this community take into consideration, into meditation and reflection whether we are going to commit to the community as members or Stewards for another year. As the years of my belonging here go by, the weight and responsibility of this recommitment have grown larger for me and have given rise to deeper questions that are often left unanswered year after year. It reminds me of the much-loved quote from Rainer Maria Rilke...

*"I want to beg you, as much as I can, to be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer. Perhaps you do carry within yourself the possibility of shaping and forming as a particularly happy and pure way of living; train yourself to it-but take whatever comes with great trust, and if only it comes out of your own will, out of some need of your inmost being, take it upon yourself and hate nothing."*

It is this familiar quote from Rilke that is my primary text, one answer to the question of how we respond joyfully with our lives.

As most of you here know, our theme for this recommitment season, "responding joyfully with our lives" comes from the last line of the [members' commitment](#) and the second to last line of the Stewards commitment, "I commit to respond joyfully with my life, as the grace of God gives me freedom."

The answer to how we respond joyfully is particularly difficult for me as I imagine it is for others. We just marked the one year anniversary of September 11, a day that opened a

hole, a wound in my spirit as in the spirits of many others. Into that wound poured the salt of disease, grief, sorrow and anger at the evil the terrorists had unleashed as well as the self-righteous might our country responded with and is still considering.

I find at Seekers, too, that there is much change and upheaval for all the obvious reasons, the move to a new community and building, the loss of Sonya, who was a leader and holder of much of how we saw ourselves as community. I feel as Amelia said she did in her email explaining why she would be exploring other spiritual homes with Steve, that we are disconnected and scattered. I know that not all of you seated here today feel the same way and I am keenly aware of all that is good, groundbreaking and even holy here.

In fact, for me the roots of this church can be found in the words of Jesus, “**wherever two or more are gathered in my name, I am there among them.**” It is this gathering together, this bringing in and welcoming that we excel at here at Seekers. This community is expansive, open, generous, creative and welcoming of all, Christian and non-Christian, child and adult, gay and straight..There is no doubt that our core is solid and strong.

I find, however, that no matter how strong, how solid, how creative, how welcoming, it is never good to simply take for granted that we have become who we need to be, that we have arrived. This is one reason I like Recommitment season. It is a chance to reflect on ourselves and the community, on what is good and what might need to change.

As I have lived into my calling as a writer, I have realized that a role that comes most naturally to me is that of asking questions, questions, questions. I can be as annoying as the proverbial two-year-old. “Why do we do things this way?” “Well, why not change the liturgy?” “What does it mean that we are using the term leadership team for our paid staff?” People

don't always like my questions and I don't always like the reactions I get (though I prefer almost any reaction to no reaction).

And right now, in my place at Seekers, I find I have lots of questions, none easily answered or very comfortable. Happily, I am not going to burden all of you with all of those questions. I do, however, have one question and that is what does it mean to respond joyfully with our lives as the grace of God gives us freedom? I see that we gathered here have much God-given freedom. How do we use that freedom? How do we respond joyfully? How do we move away from responding out of guilt, need, the feeling that no one else will do it if we don't? How do we find responses that nourish rather than drain us? How do we respond in ways that fill us up with energy for the next thing on the to-do list?

Where do we find the joy?

Joy, to me, has always been an interesting word. To be honest, Webster's was not very helpful to me when I looked the word up since it listed as synonyms happy, glad, delighted. Joy has always carried more weight for me than those words do. It is evocative of both lightness of being and burden, of airiness and firm standing. It is an emotion that does not come easily or without price and carries with it responsibility but responsibility that leads ultimately to more joy.

I find joy intertwined with call, with commitment, with the sense of being home and having a job to do. I do not find joy to be mere happiness. I get happy when someone gives me chocolate, kisses me goodnight, or hands me a gift. I'm happy on days when the sun shines and the breeze blows, when the dog butts her head beneath my hands, when I have a new item of clothing or a fresh haircut. But that does not stand in for joy.

Joy comes like water from the rock that Moses pounded in the

desert, like the gift of sight that Jesus gave to the blind man, like the realization Martha must have had when she knew what it was that she should really be about.

Joy is the emotion you feel when you are in the place you should be in responding as best you know how. My best example is my place as a member of Celebration Circle. I have been in that mission group for several years now and the first couple years were very happy ones. It was a place of stimulation, creativity and acceptance. The work did not feel hard and it was an easy place to go. But in more recent years, we have had conflict and disagreement about both our call and our relationships with others in the group. And, while we've mostly worked through those, I have to say that I still do not find my place in the group to be an easy one. Almost constantly these days I am questioning whether that is my place or if I need to take some time off, re-evaluate.

Yet, always, a voice answers, "Stay." I am given no explanation, no promises, no assurances. I simply hear that voice that says stay and it is powerful enough though not very loud so that I stay. Truthfully (and it may reassure some of you to know that I am not actually hearing voices), I don't hear the voice as much as I feel it. If it was all up to me, I would have run away long ago but I know I am meant to be there, to struggle, question, disagree, grow and contribute to that circle for now and maybe for a long time. In the midst of all this questioning and frustration comes many moments of joy, when I see that others in the group are changing and growing in ways I didn't think they could, when we sit down to talk about a liturgy and, unexpectedly, a reflection and theme emerge, when we all talk so heatedly and animatedly that getting a word in edgewise is difficult, that is joy. It is, I think, the presence of God among us. The promise that Jesus made is coming to fruition in our midst – where we gather in his name – that he will be there.

That gathering is both the promise and the pain of community

for where more than one is gathered, so is more than one opinion, desire, value, etc., etc., etc. as we all know better than we want to.

It is also that gathering of us as a community that lies at the heart of my sermon today. How do we respond joyfully as a community? Many of us can point to the places in our lives where we have found our personal calls. For some, it is being parent to children; for others, it is the work they do in the world; for still others, it comes in the relationships they have with friends, family and others. And that is well and good, as it should be. But the question before us in this time of recommitment to Seekers is, how do we respond joyfully to this community and how do we, as a community, respond joyfully to our future, to our new place in Takoma Park and to the church we will be there?

I feel that we have spent much time in these last few months, the last year coming at these questions from our heads. We have made flowcharts, lists, pictures and maps. We have had meetings, discussions, even arguments over what we will do when we finally arrive in Takoma Park. We have done outreach and worked on transitions and made committees and task forces and groups.

Perhaps now is the time to let the idea of Takoma Park, the vision of Carroll Street move from our heads to our bellies, from our minds to our spirits. Perhaps now is the time for discernment, for quiet, for prayer and reflection, time to let God do the work God does best, which is to illuminate, to whisper our names, to say this is what I need you to do.

As a freelance writer, I spend much of my day shut up in my apartment staring at a computer screen, staring at paper, trying to make words that make sense, that move people or inspire them or educate them. But there come times when I simply cannot sit still anymore, when my head is not what is needed to do the job I need to do.

At those times, I take the dog and out we go to walk in the world. Often, as we walk, I do not think of the task at hand. I think about what I see around me, whatever flowers may be in bloom, how the breeze feels, the quality of the light, what buildings are interesting or cozy or ugly. In other words, I do continue to think but not about the problem at hand. And then I go home, I sit back down and often the words pour out. What had been a dammed stream turns into a flood and all I have to do is catch the flood through my keyboard and get it onto the screen.

It isn't usually perfect as it comes pouring out but it usually is the nub, the seed of exactly what I needed. It isn't until I can make my mind let go though that I can create that seed and capture it on paper. The same is true for writing poetry, only more so. The more I use my head, the lousier the poem is that comes out. But if I let go, if I listen instead of jabber with my mind, if I quiet down, hunker down and really listen, the poem comes.

It is this quality of listening that I have been missing at Seekers as we try to figure out what is next for us. I miss our collective belly. I don't feel the uprising that seems to come from our belly, when we have heard God's voice and listened.

A few weeks ago, as part of the School of Christian Living's summer [Sabbath series](#), Elisabeth Dearborn led a group in pillowcase practice, which boiled down to having all of us sit in the World Room with fabric and thread. We embroidered as she read.

I wonder what would happen if we devoted time at a Stewards meeting or a community meeting to pillowcase practice, to communal reflection on a common question. How do we move from the busyness of our workaday lives, from lists and flowcharts and meetings to the reflective responsiveness that Sabbath brings? How do we find ways for Sabbath practice that might

illuminate our next steps? What would it look like to love the questions that we have around us? What would it look like to prayerfully live our way into the answers? Might there be a way to discern what we are to do and be next that involves less use of our heads and more of our bellies/hearts?

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