

The Meaning of Life – Today!

A Sermon Delivered on February 17, 2019
by
The Reverend Axel H. Gehrmann

*“The meaning of life differs from [person to person],
from day to day and from hour to hour.
What matters, therefore, is not the meaning of life in general
but rather the specific meaning of a person's life
at a given moment.”*

-- Victor Frankl

Unitarian Universalist Church
of the Monterey Peninsula
490 Aguajito Road
Carmel, CA 93923
(831) 624-7404
www.uucmp.org

Meditation: a poem by the 14th century Sufi scholar, Hafiz, on laughter (translated by Daniel Ladinsky)

What is laughter? What is laughter?
It is God waking up! O it is God waking up!
It is the sun poking its sweet head out
From behind a cloud
You have been carrying too long,
Veiling your eyes and heart...

It is happiness applauding itself and then taking flight
To embrace everyone and everything in this world.

Laughter is the polestar
Held in the sky by our Beloved,
Who eternally says,

"Yes, dear ones, come this way,
Come this way towards... Love!

Come with your tender mouths moving
And your beautiful tongues conducting songs
And with your movements - your magic movements
Of hands and feet and glands and cells - Dancing!

Know that to God's Eye,
All movement is a Wondrous Language,
And Music - such exquisite, wild Music!"

O what is laughter, Hafiz?
What is this precious love and laughter
Budding in our hearts?

It is the glorious sound
Of a soul waking up!

First Reading by the Hungarian-American psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, from his seminal book *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. Our reading is from the final chapter: "The Making of Meaning" (p. 214)

If a person sets out to achieve a difficult enough goal, from which all other goals logically follow, and if he or she invests all energy in developing skills to reach that goal, then actions and feelings will be in harmony and the separate parts of life will fit together – and each activity will “make sense” in the present, as well as in view of the past and of the future. In such a way it is possible to give meaning to one’s entire life.

But isn't it incredibly naïve to expect life to have a coherent overall meaning? After all, at least since Nietzsche concluded that God was dead, philosophers and social scientists have been busy demonstrating that existence has no purpose, that chance and impersonal forces rule our fate, and that all values are relative and hence arbitrary. [Some say] that life has no meaning, if by that we mean a supreme goal that is valid for every individual. But it does not follow that life cannot be *given* meaning. Much of what we call culture and civilization consists in efforts people have made, generally against overwhelming odds, to create a sense of purpose for themselves and their descendants. It is one thing to recognize that life is, by itself, meaningless. It is another thing entirely to accept this resignation.

Second Reading: by the contemporary author Anne Lamott from *Stitches: A Handbook on Meaning, Hope and Repair* (p. 1)

It is easy to sense and embrace meaning when life is on track. When there is a feeling of fullness – having love, goodness, family, work, maybe God as parts of life – it's easier to navigate around the sadness that you inevitably stumble across. Life holds beauty, magic and anguish. Sometimes sorrow is unavoidable, even when your kids are little, when the marvels of your children, and your parental amazement, are all the meaning you need to sustain you, or when you have landed the job and salary for which you've always longed, or the mate. And then the phone rings, the mail comes, or you turn on the TV.

Where do we even begin in the presence of evil or catastrophe – dead or deeply lost children, a young wife's melanoma, polar bears floating out to sea on scraps of ice? What is the point of it all when we experience the vortex of interminable depression or, conversely, when we recognize that time skates by so fast, and [...] we're filled with dread each time we notice life hotfoot it out of town.

One rarely knows where to begin the search for meaning, though by necessity, we can only start where we are.

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This morning I would like to let you in on a secret about our faith, and more particularly about our church. This church. It is a secret we don't talk about much, because some say it's a dirty secret. The secret is this: our church needs money to survive. It needs money to thrive.

And here is the most horrible part of the secret: the church needs *your* money. It needs money from all of us.

I know some of us are uncomfortable talking about money. Actually, I bet some of us are uncomfortable hearing about it from the pulpit. But there it is.

As some of you know, a small, dedicated, and hard working group of volunteers has been working for months preparing for our annual stewardship fund drive. This Sunday marks the Kick Off. This year's theme is "Make it Meaningful!"

The philosopher Jacob Needleman put it concisely in his book "Money and the Meaning of Life." He writes: "The most important thing in our life [is] meaning. You can have all kinds of pleasure, but without meaning you wind up with despair. What I've discovered... is that human beings were built to give. To put it in the most extreme form, we're built to love and serve something greater than ourselves, whether it's other people, something you call God, or whether it's justice. Until we [find a] way to give, there will be no happiness or meaning [in our lives]."

Our Stewardship Committee is asking us to think about the meaning of our lives, and more specifically: How is this church meaningful to you? How does it add meaning to your life?

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For Bob (our Worship Associate this morning), the meaning of this church hinges on our concern for justice, and our ongoing efforts to draw our circle of love and justice ever wider.

And it's true. Over the course of the last fifty years, since the early sixties, when the Unitarian and Universalist denominations merged, this church, and UU congregations across the country, have been coordinating their efforts and joining together as a movement, so that our actions might make a difference, and our voices might be heard. In every one of the past five decades we have worked at the forefront of progressive causes – seeking to challenge racism, militarism, sexism, economic injustice and the exploitation of the environment.

And this work continues. In many ways the issues remain the same. Yes, some progress has been made. But there is so much more work to be done. And the stakes seem higher than ever.

The political course this country has taken in the last few years has been a source of serious concern for many of us. For some of us it has provided an impetus for more vigorous action and engagement. But for others it has been a source of deep frustration, and feelings of hopelessness and despair.

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Anne Lamott says it's easy to have a sense of meaning when life is on track, and all is well. But where do we find meaning in the midst of catastrophe, or in the presence of evil? Where is meaning when we are in the pits, when we lose our loved ones, when we ourselves are suffering?

These are important questions. And there are many different ways to answer them. Anne Lamott writes:

“Christians would say the answer is simple. Life’s meaning is to seek union with God and be [God’s] hands and eyes for the people who need help and companionship. AA might also say it is simple: to stay sober one day at a time and help other alcoholics achieve sobriety. For Buddhists, the answer is mindfulness, kindness and trying to remember to breathe every so often. Environmentalists want to save the planet for all species – or at least a number of them – and so forth.

Ram Dass, who described himself as a Hin-Jew, said that ultimately we’re all just walking each other home. I love that. I try to live by it.

These are true and rich philosophies, but often only on good days.” (p. 6)

In her book, Anne Lamott writes of her own struggles and recovery from alcoholism and abuse. It wasn’t easy. She writes: “I wish there were shortcuts to wisdom and self-knowledge: cuter abysses or three-day spa wilderness experiences. Sadly, it doesn’t work that way... I so resent that.”

How can we find meaning when life feels meaningless? Lamott says, we begin by collecting the ripped shreds of our emotional and spiritual fabric and sewing them back together one stitch at a time. It is in these stitches that the quilt of life begins, and embedded in them are strength, warmth, humor, humanity and meaning.

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In this day and age, more and more people are struggling with a sense of meaninglessness. As the Dutch psychologist Sefh Fontane Pennock sees it, we are in the midst of a “meaning crisis.” He has come to the conclusion that this crisis of meaning can be explained by a single fundamental principle: a lack of depth. “The deeper you can go in an experience, the more absorbed and engaged you are, the more likely you will

experience it as meaningful...If I could only share one thing with you, it would be that this depth leads to meaning. Meaning needs depth.”

There is widespread sense of meaninglessness, because our lives have become shallow.

Many factors can contribute to a life that feels shallow. At the top of the list he puts social media and the state of constant distraction they create. Then there is the preoccupation with success that places a high value on status and appearance. Also, we are oversaturated and overwhelmed by information; researchers say in this age of the information explosion the amount of data we try process is 15,000 greater than when our grandparents were our age. And the decreasing role of religion in our society leaves a hole in our lives that doesn't seem to get filled with anything substantial.

Pennock says, regardless of its true causes, a crisis of meaning cannot be denied. In this age of immediate gratification, many of us are ill-equipped to deal with it.

“Here is the thing: you can't order meaning. There's no next day delivery. It doesn't come with napkins. It's not one click away and is most certainly not to be found on your smartphone... Real meaning comes from connecting deeply to something outside yourself, with other people, while exercising your personal strengths, growing and challenging yourself in the service of a goal that needs you to be stronger than you currently are.”

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We find meaning when we are connected to something larger than ourselves. It might be family and friends, the people we love. It might be a greater goal we can help accomplish, and a greater good we feel called to support. There are many different ways to describe it.

I like the way Rev. Dr. King, put it when he said, the whole universe has a moral arc and it bends toward justice. “When our days become dreary with low-hovering clouds of despair, and when our nights become darker than a thousand midnights, let us remember that there is a creative force in the universe... Let us realize the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”

But, you know, Dr. King didn't come up with the image of the moral arc on his own. He found it in the words of the Unitarian minister Theodore Parker. In a sermon Parker preached a hundred years earlier, he imagined that just as the universe is governed by laws of nature, laws of matter and electricity, it is also governed by laws of morality. Just as we are all subject to the law of gravity, we are also guided by a universal moral law.

“Look at the facts of the world. You see a continual and progressive triumph of the right,” Parker said. “I do not pretend to understand the moral universe, the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways. I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure

by experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. But from what I see I am sure it bends toward justice.”

Neither Theodore Parker nor Dr. King was a starry-eyed optimist. Parker was radical at the cutting edge of the abolitionist movement. He took charge of the Boston movement to rescue and provide sanctuary for fugitive slaves from the south. Parker was an early proponent of women’s suffrage, and an anti-war advocate opposed to the Mexican War. And he knew there was much work to be done.

Born in Lexington, Massachusetts in 1810, Parker did not live an easy life. He was the youngest of eleven children in a working-class family. By the time he entered the ministry, his family had been decimated by tuberculosis. Seven of his siblings and both of his parents had died from it. But for Parker, the tragedies of loss and the suffering he experienced didn’t diminish a sense of meaning and purpose. But rather they deepened his sense that we “are not sufficient for ourselves.” There is more to life.

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Some say life has no meaning, if by that we mean a supreme goal that is valid for every individual. But it does not follow that life cannot be *given* meaning, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi writes. If we set out to achieve a great and difficult goal, from which all other goals logically follow, if we invest all our energy... then each activity will “make sense” in the present, as well as in view of the past and of the future. In this way, we make our lives meaningful.

* * *

“Make it meaningful!” That’s what our Stewardship Committee is asking us to do. They are also encouraging us to think about what it is that makes this church meaningful... And how we can make a meaningful contribution.

What’s a meaningful financial contribution? I like the way Bob put it a few weeks ago. He said: When it comes to deciding a meaningful contribution to the church, he tries to find that amount that’s large enough to be painful but not large enough to lose sleep.

Yup. That sounds right. For Elaine and me this means we will continue our practice of pledging 5% of our before-tax income to the church. That’s \$7,300 this coming year. We are practicing the UU-tithe – 5% to the church, and 5% to all the other worthy causes we support – Public Radio, Planned Parenthood, ACLU, NAACP, and so on. For us that’s substantial, and painful... but it also feels good. And that makes me think we are on the right track.

* * *

When we have the courage to make our lives meaningful, it feels good.

When we make our lives truly meaningful, we will find more than a shallow and fleeting happiness. We will find a deep and abiding joy.

We don't need to wait for our lives to be on track, in order to feel life's fullness. We can start from right where we are. We can start stitching together our emotional and spiritual fabric, and discover new strength and warmth, humor and humanity.

Right now, we can wake up. Like the sun, we can come out from behind the cloud we have been carrying too long, that has been veiling our eyes and hearts.

Right now, we can open our eyes to the abundant gifts of our lives, the wonders of the world, and the moral arc of the universe. Even if we can't see where the arc ends, still – in our every word and every deed - we can bend toward justice.

May we have the courage to open our minds and hearts
and draw our circle of love and justice ever wider.

May we join in a deep commitment
To make our lives more meaningful – today,
And in this way help build a better world.

Amen.

Sources

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