



What Is the Meaning of Life?

What Gives Life Meaning?

Sunday, March 31, 2019

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Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Reflection by Jed Shapiro (printed at end);

Stewardship Testimonial by Hally Cahssai

Hymns: #305, De Colores; #86, Blessed Spirit of My Life; #1064, Blue Boat Home.

Reading—The Sources of Meaning in Life

On an insert in your order of service is a reading for today. I've adapted it from the book *Making Meaning*, which was published in 2006. Based on research that included 100,000 interviews with people around the world, the book lists 15 categories of what people consider to be meaningful experiences in life.

Accomplishment —

“Achieving goals and making something of oneself; a sense of satisfaction that can result from productivity, focus, talent, or status.”

Beauty —

“The appreciation of qualities that give pleasure to the senses or spirit.”

Creation —

“The sense of having produced something new and original, and in so doing, to have made a lasting contribution.”

Community —

“A sense of unity with others around us and a general connection with other human beings.”

Duty —

“The willing application of oneself to a responsibility.”

Enlightenment —

“Clear understanding through logic or inspiration.”

Freedom —

“The sense of living without unwanted restraints.”

Harmony —

“The balanced and pleasing relationship of parts to a whole, whether in nature, society, or an individual.”

Justice —

“The assurance of equitable and unbiased treatment...a sense of fairness and equality.”

Oneness —

“A sense of unity with everything around us.”

Redemption —

“Atonement or deliverance from past failure or decline, ... from a less desirable condition to a more pleasing one.”

Security —

“The freedom from worry about loss.”

Truth —

“A commitment to honesty and integrity.”

Validation —

“The recognition of oneself as a valued individual worthy of respect.”

Wonder —

“Awe in the presence of a creation beyond one’s understanding.”¹

Now, let us sing together hymn #86, “Blessed Spirit of My Life.” You may remain seated.



Sermon

Nasrudin is a Mullah or Islamic religious leader of the Sufi tradition. He features in many folk tales and fables from Turkey and other parts of the Mediterranean region, dating back to the Middle Ages. Nasrudin is both clever and foolish. In one story he rose to the pulpit in the Mosque during Friday prayers, as they had asked him to give a sermon. “O people!” he said. “Do you know what I am going to tell you?” “No, we do not know,” they cried. “Until you know, I cannot say,” the Mullah said. “You are too ignorant to waste my time on.”

Nasrudin left the pulpit and went home. Some folks from the Mosque went back to his house to ask him again to come and preach. On the following Friday at noon, he rose to speak and started the sermon with the same question. “Do you know what I am going to tell you?” The people replied: “Yes, we do!” “In that case,” the Mullah said, “there is no need for me to detain you any longer. You may depart.” And he went home. One more time a delegation showed up at his door to ask him to try preaching again.

So on the next Friday, when he rose to speak, and asked the same opening question, the congregation was ready. “Do you know or do you not?” he demanded. They replied, “Some of us know, and others do not.” “Excellent,” the Mullah said. “Now let those who know communicate their knowledge to those who don't know.” And he went home.²

I think this fable applies to the question, “What is the meaning of life?” It’s tempting to try Nasrudin’s third method of preaching: Who here among us has the answer to the meaning of life? And who does not? Now, speak with each other.

The fable hints at how we discover and speak about what gives meaning to our lives. Parker Palmer is a spiritual teacher in the Quaker

tradition. Palmer says that “Relationships—not facts and reason—are the key to reality.” He says that by entering into relationship with one another, we can unlock knowledge of reality and the meaning of life.

I don’t know about you, but when I’m feeling isolated or unconnected, it can be hard to summon the energy to articulate a sense of meaning. It’s easy to feel small. Easy to feel boring! This is why, in my answer to the question, I would emphasize belonging, participation, connection and community as key to the meaning of life. Of course it is; human beings are social animals. I read that mosquitos and polar bears are non-social animals; we’re not like them. Chimpanzees, dolphins and penguins are social animals; we’re more like them.

For most of human history, the meaning of life was to survive it. To be sure there were teachers of compassion, leaders of wisdom and goodwill, neighbors of generosity and care. Yet most people suffered—poverty, disease, hunger, conflict and brutal oppression.

Even today, in our world and in our neighborhoods, many folks are just hoping to make it through life. *Meaning?* For many people, it is a luxury to spend time and energy thinking about the meaning of life.

If we are possessed by an active addiction, our primary relationship is with the focus of our addiction, and the human relationships around us suffer. If we are afflicted by poverty, violence, government abuse, or social intolerance, the meaning of life may be all about survival. At least 40 percent of U.S. Americans are either low-income or in poverty according to federal standards. Though the United States is the most prosperous Western country in the world, the gap of wealth between the most well-off and the worst-off households is the highest gap of any prosperous Western country.³ In the words of Gene Nichol, a researcher on poverty at the University of North Carolina, the persistence of poverty wages “means that many families don’t have a chance to carve out a life that is not at the edge of destitution.”⁴ A woman who lives in fear because of domestic abuse, is forced, at very least, to consider the worth of her life. In the moments of intense fear, she

imagines her flight to safety, and her thoughts are about survival. The undocumented person from Central America who crosses the border into the hot and harsh desert of southern Arizona is not likely to be pondering a question of the meaning of life as he searches for the water caches left by humanitarian volunteers—it's all about survival.

The precarious lives of those who live with addiction, poverty, or the need for physical and emotional safety do not leave much room to ponder. Yet by the ways you try to survive you demonstrate how much life means, and how much you are a person of dignity and worth.

Those of us with enough time and security to explore the question of meaning are fortunate and privileged. Indeed, we can appreciate the growth in humanity's freedom to consider and explore the meaning of life when we notice how much we enjoy making humor out of the question.

A number of cartoons in the *New Yorker* magazine have shown a person climbing a steep rock face, coming to a flat ledge where a religious teacher or sage sits on the ground, awaiting the big question. In one, the sage has cats crawling all around him and sitting on his lap and shoulders. "Cats," he says to the visitor. "The meaning of life is cats." Perhaps your sense of meaning depends on where you are sitting!

Another example: *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* is a novel by the late English writer Douglas Adams. In one famous passage, the book says: "The answer to the ultimate question of life, the universe, and everything is 42." I honestly don't recall if I read the book or heard the radio play or a book on tape. But I do remember hearing friends quoting *that one sentence* when I was in college. Twenty years later it was teenage Unitarian Universalists who recited it to me as their minister. And in 2011 two authors wrote a book, *42*, to mark 10 years since the author had died. They wanted to show the number's relevance to many aspects of life, the universe and everything.

Douglas Adams, however, had said 42 was just a joke—no hidden spiritual or scientific meaning. He said he wanted an "ordinary, smallish number" for the humor of it. He said: "I sat on my desk, stared into the garden and thought, 42 will do. I typed it out. End of story."⁵

If any public figure proposes *only one answer* to the larger questions of life or the problems of humanity, it better be a joke. If it's not a joke, it's a risk. In history, the people or groups who have claimed to have the only answer have manipulated, suppressed, tortured and killed people. Human beings can be lured by those who claim that there is only one right answer and are sure of it. The powerful simplicity of their conclusion can be seductive. And they are dangerous. Hence, I'm relieved to say, I don't know what the meaning of life is.

However, since I'm asking you to take time to think about your answer to the question, I better give you mine. At least it's my answer as of Saturday morning when I wrote it down.

Human life is a mystery and it is a gift. We should be present for it, pay attention to it, and share it with others. Human beings are not self-created or sustained by our efforts alone. Hence, we can experience meaning by connecting with others and participating in community. The meaning of life is to seek understanding with curiosity, to practice compassion and generosity, to cultivate joy and courage, to care for ourselves and care for others. Life can be hard, of course, but it is a gift. As a gift, life should be celebrated, appreciated, and shared.

Having said all that, I wonder if it's even a useful question to ask: *what is the meaning of life?* Such a grand expectation, as if there IS one meaning. Perhaps it is more useful to put it this way: *What gives life meaning?* This is a question we all can think about, each from our own perspective.

What is meaning, anyway? It is how we make sense of the world. We assign meaning to our experiences; this is "how each one of us creates the story of our life and its . . . value and purpose," in the words of anthropologist Clifford Geertz.⁶ In the book *Making Meaning*, the authors write: "Aside from reflexes and instincts, human beings require an explanation of the world that helps us decide how to act." One of its three authors is an old friend of mine. They wrote it while working as business consultants in the field of experience design and marketing strategy.

They wanted reliable data for their work, so they made use of 100,000 interviews conducted over several years in different countries and cultures. From these interviews, they came up with 15 categories of what people around the world consider to be *meaningful experiences*. In today's reading [see above] we looked at a list of the 15 categories. It's not a complete list of all the sources of meaning, yet it includes the most common types of meaningful experiences across countries and cultures.

You may want to take the list home with you and reflect on it. Perhaps you can discuss it with people you know, especially people around this congregation.

The factors that give meaning to life are at play in the most crucial undertakings of our lifetimes, but also in our most ordinary moments. First, let's consider the meanings that adults might experience having to do with rearing children. For countless people over the ages, rearing children is a big source of meaning. Yet, the kind of experience it evokes will depend on each person's personality, circumstances, background, culture and location. For example, children can reflect the creative urge—the desire to extend your family through adoption or birth, to help to shape a new life. Yet in many societies, children provide security, a guarantee against old-age isolation, or a source of extra hands to till the fields or staff the family business. In many traditions, having children is what you do to be a responsible member of society, so it reflects a sense of duty, and probably also a sense of accomplishment to have reared the children.

Some of us do not have children, but we find meaning in connections to them—in our families, in jobs and volunteer activities, and here in the congregation. For many of us, parents or not, having children in our lives evokes the experience of wonder at a growing person, and at their discoveries. It also can foster a sense of community and the experience of unity, unity with individual children, with humanity, with life itself.

Let's consider another example—soda pop. In the 1960s and 70s there were just a few soft drinks on the market. The leader was Coca-Cola—just plain old Coke back then, sold in one or two

standard sizes. As interpreted by the authors of *Making Meaning*, the success of Coke's market appeal was the experience of community and unity. For example, some people had drunk Coca-Cola all their lives. It had not only been part of gatherings with friends, Coke *felt like* a friend. Its advertisers turned a popular song about human kinship into a popular commercial. They adapted the song that went: "I'd like to teach the world to sing." Sung by a diverse, informal crowd, the commercial addition to it went: "I'd like to buy the world a Coke, and keep it company." Friendship, unity, community, Coca-Cola.

In the past few decades, however, freedom of choice has become an even more important experience—that is, freedom is a growing source of meaning in life. In response to this change, companies have provided many flavors of soda pop. There are containers of numerous shapes and serving sizes. Coca-Cola has had to keep up with new competitors; it's no longer able to count on loyalty as much as it used to.⁷

I'm thinking about the list of those 15 identified sources of meaning: accomplishment, beauty, creation, community, duty, enlightenment, freedom, harmony, justice, oneness, redemption, security, truth, validation, and wonder. When I look at the list, I'm struck by my good fortune to have been able to experience most of those factors in my life. I recognize some of this is a result of privilege. Living in this prosperous country, as a white person who is male, I have inherited many advantages.

At the same time, as a gay person in the United States, I have inherited some achievements wrought by those who came before me. In the year 2019, I have a lot more security, personal freedom, and sense of community than LGBT human beings had in past eras. If I had been living a century ago, those aspects of a meaningful life would have been unavailable to me.

To what and to whom do I owe thanks for this greater level of security, personal freedom, and sense of community? I am indebted to the people of earlier times whose devotion to fairness, justice and equality *outweighed* their desire for security. Their devotion to honesty as part of the meaning of their lives often meant a sacrifice of their personal

security and their freedom. Their courage to validate themselves as worthy of respect has left a legacy of equality and community, where only isolation and separation had existed before.

What is the meaning of life? This, I think, is a question without an answer. However, the question that matters more is *What gives meaning to life?* This one has *countless* answers. And every answer brings a question of how we are to live in this world.

In the coming days and weeks, I invite you to a spiritual practice of reflection on your sources of meaning. Take some time to consider what has given meaning to your life. Consider how that came to be, and where you would like to direct your gratitude. What or whom can you appreciate and thank for the gifts that bring meaning to life?

Consider your sources of meaning and your gratitude for them. Then consider how you might extend the opportunities for meaning in life to more people. How might you--how might we--extend and share these gifts?

For too many members of the human family, life has been at risk, precarious, and fleeting. This is all the more cause for us to celebrate life, share it and extend it. All the more cause for us to work so that more people can achieve and enjoy the elements and sources that give meaning to their lives.

Human life is a mystery and it is a gift. Life can be hard, but it is a gift also. As a gift, life should be celebrated, appreciated, and shared with joy.

So may we live. So may it be. Amen.

Personal Reflection by Jed Shapiro

As 30-year-old Jed, I thought I knew what I wanted: the right spouse, the right job, and the right place to live... oh, and financial security... and a cool car. I was fortunate to have all these things. However, time would reveal these things to be fleeting.

On a particular morning, a few decades ago, I was driving from Linden Arizona to Phoenix. It takes about 3-1/2 hours, but you can shave off a good half hour if you're driving a brand new 1983 Honda Accord – as I was.

Don't laugh at my homely Honda – under its skin it was a really a sports car. Light weight, and five manual gears, enabled it to accelerate rapidly and steer precisely. This would turn out to be important.

Arizona Highway 260 is a two lane roller coaster ride that drops 5,000 feet of elevation as it meanders through the largest Ponderosa pine forest in the world. This route offers up-close views of dramatic scenery – mountain rock faces, towering trees, pristine meadows, and ponds – as it winds downward toward the desert floor.

Headed down the mountain, the air was crisp and clear. Overnight rain had washed away the dust and revealed nature's scenery in rich, vibrant colors. It was a perfect day to search for the meaning of life... or put life in jeopardy.

I found myself trapped behind what might as well have been my 64 year old self, out enjoying a leisurely morning drive, appreciating every rock, bush and stream. 30-year-old Jed just wanted to "ride the coaster."

Solid yellow lines indicated, "crazy, stupid to pass" until a clearing made the road ahead visible. It was a long straightaway, descending into a deep valley, then climbing up the other side. Clearly seen, as the blacktop disappeared into the trees a mile away, were dashed "ok to pass" lines. I steered into the opposing traffic lane, hardly noticing when the dappled sunlight revealed another car headed down into the valley from the other side.

Why is it that some drivers instinctively increase their speed when you pull out to pass? And why are we so easily drawn into a race?

The voice of reason would say, "Return to your lane. Relax, what's the hurry? Why endanger yourself or others?"

My 30-year old brain said, “Dude, go for it.”

Approaching the bottom of the valley – at maybe 70 miles an hour – I made a sobering discovery. Water had collected on the flat roadway and the car began to hydroplane on its surface.

My trapped animal mind raced to find a way out... of this predicament I had created. Hard braking seemed a bad choice.

In one desperate continuous motion, I hit the clutch, downshifted, engaged, and punched the gas. Both front tires spun, then dug in forcing water aside, and gripped pavement. I instinctively jerked the wheel, and the car miraculously leapt into the correct lane. A second later the oncoming car blew by.

In aviation they call this a “near miss.” I’d say it was a “near hit.”

¹ Adapted from *Making Meaning* by Steven Diller, Nathan Shedroff, and Darrel Rhea (Berkeley, CA, 2006: New Riders).

²Quoted and paraphrased from *The Exploits of the Incomparable Mulla Nasrudin* by Idries Shah (London, 1983: The Octagon Press), 21.

³ Miller, *op. cit.*

⁴ Stuart Miller, “Poor People’s Campaign Engages in 40 Days of Demonstrations,” *Christian Century*, May 16, 2018, with

Humans seem compelled to test limits, tempt fate, and take risks. Maybe it’s because our life force is affirmed by a pounding heart, adrenalin fueled jitters, and conquered fear.

One thing’s for sure: you have to protect and sustain your life in order to ponder it and, maybe, discover its purpose and meaning.

Lately, I contemplate these weighty subjects on leisurely drives, taking in every rock, bush and stream.

So, enjoy life’s wild ride wherever it takes you – but don’t forget to buckle up.

update August 7, 2018.

<https://www.christiancentury.org/article/news/poor-peoples-campaign-engages-40-days-demonstrations>

⁵ Paul Bignell, “42: The Answer to Life, the Universe and Everything,” *The Independent*, February 6, 2011.

⁶ *Making Meaning*, p. 24.

⁷ p. 131.