



Living a Life of Meaning

Small Groups: May 2015

In a recent article in the New York Times, political pundit David Brooks draws a distinction between résumé virtues and eulogy virtues. His essay entitled *The Moral Bucket List* reflects on how our society is really good at teaching résumé virtues - skills and characteristics that help one build a successful professional life. Yet we spend little time teaching eulogy virtues, the virtues that people will lift up about you at your funeral. Obviously, eulogy virtues are far more important than résumé virtues, yet they get far less attention. I suspect these eulogy virtues are the ones that hold the greatest key to creating lives of meaning.

These deeper eulogy virtues are not qualities with which we are just born. Like résumé virtues, we develop them. We develop them through a combination of moral adventures and deep self-awareness. One of our Unitarian Universalist principles affirms the “free and responsible search for truth and meaning.” It’s important to understand that this “search” is not just an external one. The discovery of truth and meaning is an interplay of our experiences of the world as they interact and sharpen our own self-awareness. In other words, we create meaning as we intentionally seek to integrate our experiences of the world, including our own personal successes and defeats, as an opportunity for a growing self-awareness.

Brooks describes what can happen when we neglect this internal journey:

“If you live for external achievement, years pass and the deepest parts of you go unexplored and unstructured. It is easy to slip into a self-satisfied moral mediocrity. You grade yourself on a forgiving curve. You figure as long as you are not obviously hurting anybody and people seem to like you, you must be O.K. But you live with an unconscious boredom, separated from the deepest meaning of life and the highest moral joys.”

In our tradition, the idea that truth and meaning are not just handed to us, but the result of a willingness to approach our lives as a journey of discovery and meaning making invites us to live lives that balance the résumé and eulogy virtues. We make time for both our education and professional development, as well as the development of our capacities for courage and kindness, generosity and love. Throughout this month, as we explore what it means to live a life of meaning, we’ll look at ways to integrate external experiences with, as Brooks says, “the deepest meaning of life and the highest moral joys.”

Yours in Love,
Rev. Susan



Living the Theme: Meaning

Choose one of the exercises below to engage the theme. Come to the meeting prepared to share how you tried to experience meaning and what you learned from the practice.

1. Find meaning in your daily activities

As you go about your daily life, think about which of your activities foster spiritual growth or meaning, and which do not? Notice those that seem most meaningful. How can you make room in your life to spend more time doing these things?

2. Write your own eulogy.

Most of us want to live a meaningful life. What does your life mean? What will be remembered about you when you are gone? What do you want people to say about you at your memorial service? Try to write that message now.

3. Creating a meaning map.

Create a visual representation of the places, things, and people that have been most meaningful to you. Cut images out of magazines, use photos, draw pictures, write words – anything that creates a timeline of the important moments in your life, both past and present. Share the meaning with others by showing them points on your map and explaining why they are meaningful to you.

4. Find your meaning in the chalice.

Symbols are imbued with meaning. Perhaps the most potent symbols are those that are "powerfully ambiguous". Open to multiple interpretations, these symbols help diverse people feel part of a unified community. The chalice may be one such symbol for you. Share the meanings you associate with the chalice. Ask other UUs about their interpretations.

5. Share some meaning.

Think of someone who has meant a lot to you. Write a note to that person(s) to share what meaning he or she has brought into your life.



Some Questions to Live With

As always, don't treat these questions as "homework." You do not need to engage every single one. Instead, simply look them over and find one that "hooks" you most. Live with it for a while. Allow it to regularly break into – and break open – your ordinary thoughts. Then come to your small group prepared to share that journey with the group.

1. **Currently, where are you finding meaning?**
2. **Are you looking for more meaning in your life?**
3. David Brooks speaks of the distinction between résumé virtues and eulogy virtues. **How are you doing in developing eulogy virtues? What are the eulogy virtues you hope to live?**
4. **Have you ever experienced a real gap between what is happening in your life and a sense of meaning?**
5. **Have you ever had a time when you felt that life was meaningless?** What was the context? What helped you through it? Are you still struggling?
6. **Where do you think your children find meaning?**
7. **How do you talk to your kids about meaning and what matters most in life?**
8. **What do you feel is your purpose?**
9. Viktor Frankl says that one's purpose in life is different for each individual and that it changes for each person according to life stage and circumstance. **Looking back on your life, do you find that what used to be meaningful at one life stage has changed with time?** How so?
10. **How do you rekindle the sense of meaning in your life?** Do you find yourself returning to certain texts? Listening to music that always resonates for you? Seeking the counsel of trusted friends or mentors?
11. Participating in ritual can bring meaning to our lives. Attending weekly services at UUCP, the celebration of certain holidays, and gathering with friends at a favorite restaurant -- these are a few examples. **Which rituals matter most in your life?** Are there others you wish to create?
12. **Have there been times in your life when you gained a personal sense of meaning through work, loving and caring for another, and/or being courageous?**



Recommended Resources

These are **not** required reading. We will not dissect these pieces in our group. They are simply meant to get your thinking started and offer different ways to see and explore the theme.

First Thoughts and Wise Words

Meaning: The end, purpose, or significance of something. Syn: sense, significance, purpose.

Nobody ever finds life worth living: one always has to make it worth living. All the people to whom life has been abundantly worth living, have made it so by an interior, creative, spiritual contribution of their own.

Harry Emerson Fosdick, Unitarian Universalist

The capacity to care is the thing which gives life its deepest significance.

Pablo Casals

To leave the world a bit better, whether by a healthy child, a garden patch, or a redeemed social condition...To know that even one life has breathed easier because you have lived...This is to have succeeded.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, Unitarian

Life is without meaning. You bring the meaning to it. Being alive is the meaning.

Joseph Campbell

He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how.

Friedrich Nietzsche

Love is our true destiny. We do not find the meaning of life by ourselves alone - we find it with another.

Thomas Merton

Words mean more than what is set down on paper. It takes the human voice to infuse them with shades of deeper meaning.

Maya Angelou

We want life to have meaning and want to be fulfilled, but it is hard to accept that we find these things by starting where we are, not where we would like to be. Our greatest spiritual blessings are likely to reveal themselves not in exotic settings but in everyday tasks and trials.

Kathleen Norris

I have been thinking a lot about what brings meaning to my life. Music. Some things I read. But my thoughts always come back to what is most important. That would be people - family, friends, sometimes people I meet just briefly. Always people!

Small Group Facilitator

In everyone's life at some time our inner fire goes out. It is then burst into flame by an encounter with another human being. We should all be thankful for those people who rekindle the inner spirit.

Albert Schweitzer

People say that what we're all seeking is a meaning for life. I don't think that's what we're really seeking. I think that what we're seeking is an experience of being alive, so that our life experiences on the purely physical plane will have resonance within our innermost being and reality, so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive.

Joseph Campbell

There is not one big cosmic meaning for all, there is only the meaning we give to our life, an individual meaning, an individual plot, like an individual novel, a book for each person.

Anais Nin

Someone once told me that time was a predator that stalked our lives. But I rather believe that time is a companion who goes with us on the journey and reminds us to cherish every moment because they will never come again. What we leave behind is not as important as how we have lived.

from the film "Star Trek: Generations"

The language of Friendship is not words, but meanings.

Henry David Thoreau

No one is useless in this world who lightens the burden of it for anyone else.

Charles Dickens



Life is not primarily a quest for pleasure, as Freud believed, or a quest for power as Alfred Adler taught, but a quest for meaning. The greatest task for any person is to find meaning in his or her life.

Rabbi Harold Kushner, forward to Man's Search for Meaning

Western liberal humanism is not something that comes naturally to us; like an appreciation of art or poetry, it has to be cultivated. Humanism is itself a religion without God – not all religions, of course, are theistic. Our ethical secular ideal has its own disciplines of mind and heart and gives people the means of finding faith in the ultimate meaning of human life that we once provided by the more conventional religions.

Karen Armstrong

*...the meaning of life differs from man to man, 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...Everyone has his own specific vocation or mission in life to carry out a concrete assignment which demands fulfillment...Ultimately, man should not ask what the meaning of his life is, but rather he must recognize that it is **he** who is asked. In a word, each man is questioned by life; and he can only answer to life by **answering** for his own life...First it is not we who should ask for the meaning of life, since it is we who **are being asked**. It is we ourselves who must answer the questions that life asks of us, and to these questions we can respond by being responsible for our existence.*

Viktor Frankl

In summarizing Marcus Borg's *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*:

The book of Ecclesiastes speaks directly to the question of what gives meaning to life. It starts by taking the nihilistic view that everything is hebel, commonly translated as "vanity" but better understood as "breath", "vapor", "mist", or "fog". "All is vapor, and a chasing after wind". Death comes to everyone, nothing we do lasts, and soon we are forgotten.

How then to live? For everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven. In every season, live fully. Be present to what is. Life is not about grasping, pursuing ephemeral rewards. Life is about living in the present.

Worship Associate

Go, eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine with a merry heart ... Enjoy life with those whom you love...Whatever your hand finds to do, do with your might; for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in death, to which you are going.

Ecclesiastes 9:7-10

*O Me! O life!... of the questions of these recurring;
Of the endless trains of the faithless—of cities fill'd with the foolish;
Of myself forever reproaching myself, (for who more foolish than I, and who more faithless?)
Of eyes that vainly crave the light—of the objects mean—of the struggle ever renew'd;
Of the poor results of all—of the plodding and sordid crowds I see around me;
Of the empty and useless years of the rest—with the rest me intertwined;
The question, O me! so sad, recurring—What good amid these, O me, O life?*

Answer.

*That you are here—that life exists, and identity;
That the powerful play goes on, and you will contribute a verse."*

Walt Whitman, Leaves of Grass

I have always believed, and I still believe, that whatever good or bad fortune may come our way we can always give it meaning and transform it into something of value.

Hermann Hesse, Siddhartha

*Rely on the teacher's message, not the personality
Rely on the meaning, not just the words
Rely on the real meaning, not the provisional one
Rely on your wisdom mind, not your ordinary, judgmental mind.*

Buddha



As a scientist, we chase 'p' values to indicate significance. Many times, the real differences are very small, but statistically significant. In these situations, I lead my research team to interpret the results as to whether they are meaningful.

In the world around us, we constantly seek to define differences between groups using objective measures, often clouded by preconceived notions and experience. Although differences can be quantified, it is up to the individual to ascribe meaning to those differences. Often times, the differences are subtle enough so as to not achieve a meaningful difference.

Small Group Facilitator

To Be of Use

*The people I love the best
jump into work head first
without dallying in the shallows
and swim off with sure strokes almost out of
sight.*

*They seem to become natives of that element,
the black sleek heads of seals
bouncing like half-submerged balls.
I love people who harness themselves, an ox to a
heavy cart,
who pull like water buffalo, with massive
patience,
who strain in the mud and the muck to move
things forward,
who do what has to be done, again and again.
I want to be with people who submerge
in the task, who go into the fields to harvest
and work in a row and pass the bags along,
who are not parlor generals and field deserters
but move in a common rhythm
when the food must come in or the fire be put
out.*

*The work of the world is common as mud.
Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust.
But the thing worth doing well done
has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident.
Greek amphoras for wine or oil,
Hopi vases that held corn, are put in museums
but you know they were made to be used.
The pitcher cries for water to carry
and a person for work that is real.*

Marge Piercy

My elderly father is fading. He is in a group home now with 24 hour care. Between his deafness and his dementia, he can no longer have a conversation, and he no longer recognizes my sister on the phone. Can he find meaning in his present? Can we? We sing #128, "For sorrows we must bear; for failures, pain, and loss; for each new thing we learn; for fearful hours that pass ..." It is hard to come with thanks and praise for this part of life, but there it is. To everything there is a season. Somehow, the meaning must come from living with it and through it.

Worship Associate

The fish trap exists because of the fish. Once you've gotten the fish, you can forget the trap. The rabbit snare exists because of the rabbit. Once you've gotten the rabbit, you can forget the snare. Words exist because of meaning. Once you've gotten the meaning, you can forget the words. Where can I find a man who has forgotten the words so that I can talk to him?

Chuang-Tzu (c. 200 BCE)

The most important thing I've learned about "the meaning of life" question is "don't search for meaning,.. create it." There are universal values and pathways to meaning, and also personal and cultural values, all of which can be combined to create a meaningful life. To me, our children's covenant beautifully and simply sums up what can create meaning: An open mind, a caring heart, and helping hands. And the ultimate purpose of all this? To leave the world a little better than we found it.

Small Group Facilitator



Additional Resources

Articles:

David Brooks “The Moral Bucket List”

<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/12/opinion/sunday/david-brooks-the-moral-bucket-list.html?smid=nytcore-ipad-share&smprod=nytcore-ipad&r=0>

Parker Palmer “Meaning Changes as Life Unfolds”

<http://www.onbeing.org/blog/meaning-changes-as-life-unfolds/7394>

Why Meaningfulness Matters More Than Happiness:

<http://www.businessinsider.com/a-lesson-about-happiness-from-a-holocaust-survivor-2014-10>

Videos and Films:

Neil deGrasse Tyson on the meaning of life:

<http://bcove.me/rb23qq57>

Books:

Acedia & Me - A Marriage, Monks, and a Writer's Life by Kathleen Norris

Man's Search for Meaning by Viktor Frankl