

The Search for Meaning

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Our theme for this year is exploring the wisdom and spirituality of our faith tradition with reference to our 7 principles. Keeping that in mind I want to focus on our fourth principle: “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.” This is a responsibility I take very seriously and I assume that you do as well. It is after all a cornerstone of our tradition. I also want to tie this search with the first of the UU sources: “Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and openness to the forces which create and uphold life.” I realize this is a monumental topic and that I will barely be able to “scratch the surface,” let alone do it justice. I hope however to expand on the task raised by the fourth principle and the opportunity created by the first source. I want to illustrate how it is possible to have faith without absolutes. I also want to point to some tools I have found useful in my quest for meaning.

In his essay on the fourth principle, UU minister Fredric Muir says the search for meaning begins with the realization that we will die. The Rev. Forrest Church, one of our most well known and loved UU ministers who recently died of cancer said, “When people are on their deathbeds petty problems fall away and what matters most tends to rise to the surface. People close to death tend to live more fully in the present than ever before.” The more traditional religions, for example Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, appear to solve the problem of meaning for us by providing creeds that are to be accepted without questioning, as Ronn Smith spoke about here in September. Followers are told that the meaning and purpose of this life is to get to heaven, to have eternal life - in other words not really die.

Most of us have rejected at least some of this approach to a spiritual life and that is why we are UU's. Thus we have tasked ourselves with the responsibility to search for life's meaning for ourselves. The requirement that each person search for meaning uniquely for herself is founded in the philosophy of Existentialism. Psychiatrist Viktor Frankel who survived the Holocaust stated that it is possible and necessary for people to find meaning even in the most abject of circumstances. He also maintained that the search for meaning is the most basic and essential drive of human beings. Muir says the need for meaning is the “desire for unity, to be at one with the world, to be centered in everything that we make... is a feature of religious truth...”

Muir also addresses the common use of the word “God” as the answer to the question of life's meaning. He argues this word has so many different meanings to different people that may be too ambiguous to be truly meaningful. Karen Armstrong also takes issue with the way the word “God” is used currently. In her newest book she states that “God” is a symbol for something transcendent and beyond our capacity as human beings to comprehend. People often confuse the symbol “God” for what it is supposed to

represent. (This is like confusing the menu with the actual food item.) Some people claim to know God, but Armstrong says this is impossible because God is not a being. Paul Tillich arguably was the greatest liberal theologian of the 20th Century. Tillich said something similar to Armstrong. “(God) is the name for that which concerns man ultimately. This does not mean that first there is a being called God and then the demand that man should be ultimately concerned about him.” So if the word “God” is used we need to be clear that it is only a symbol for something that cannot be known. I hope we can agree also that it is possible to find truth and meaning without reference to the word “God.” Muir goes on to say, “Life is not a problem to be solved but a mystery to be lived.” In other words if we are to have a meaningful life we must embrace a degree of mystery. And if we cannot know “God” then that is a mystery also. I will return to the idea of “mystery” later.

Each person’s search for meaning is “free” in the sense that it is her own and not predetermined by an authority like “the Church.” Many UU’s have rejected the voice of authority in matters of religion but we have not yet taken the next step of cultivating the voice of our own conscience and enhancing our own personal quest for meaning. If we are to approach the truth in this search we must have humility and be ready to admit when we are wrong, when our ideas don’t stand up to the light of reason. Muir tells us also that it helps to be able to draw upon what was useful from the faith we came from, and to become less judgmental of others. Finally, Muir points out that the search for truth and meaning is not a short term project but a life-long journey. As Carl Jung put it, “The meaning and purpose of a problem seems to be not in its solution, but in our working at it incessantly.”

The Rev. John Buehrens, former president of the UUA, stated that in order to search for meaning successfully we must be willing to move beyond pure reason and science to incorporate spiritual values. As our own Ronn Smith pointed out the unity of the committed heart with the clear mind together is the basis of spiritual wisdom. The Dalai Lama has written, and more recently spoken, about the need to employ the methods of both science and religion to arrive at a more complete reality and truth. We need not abandon science in order to advance our faith and search for truth and meaning but we also need to add to it. Even the late Stephen Jay Gould, noted naturalist who opposed creationism and fought against fundamentalist revisions to high school science curricula held a similar view that science and religion need not be in conflict.

But if we reject religious dogma and are on our own in the search for meaning how do we tell if our efforts are leading in a constructive direction? As Forrest Church said, “Unless our faith, whatever its particulars may be, helps us to heal our lives...inspires us to reconcile with our neighbors...and plants our feet firmly on the ground of our being...we have been blinded...” In other words one measure of the effectiveness of a personal system of meaning is the influence it has on the life led as a result of its pursuit.

It is hard to imagine a search for truth and meaning without including the concept of faith. Tillich stated, “Whosoever reflects on the meaning of life is on the verge of an act of faith.” Faith is essential in the quest for meaning because ultimate truth can never be

known just as “God” can never be known. Tillich said faith is an activity that involves our whole being. Faith requires us to accept and (to use Tillich’s word) “surrender” to the unfathomable source of the universe. To quote Tillich, “Faith is more than just the conscious will to believe, but an affirmation of the transcendent nature of ultimate reality. Faith is an experience of the sacred which brings a person in relation to ‘an infinite reality’.” The name Tillich chose for this experience of infinite reality is “Ultimate Concern.” Ultimate Concern represents what is most meaningful and important to each of us in life.

Karen Armstrong pointed out that one of the great errors of contemporary fundamentalism is its failure to appreciate the distinction between the literal and the metaphorical. This distinction was understood by many religious leaders until the last few hundred years. Before then the stories of the Bible were generally interpreted as myths that would provide meaning by revealing a message about how to live best. For example, are we literally expected to believe that Moses parted the Red Sea waters? Or more likely is it that his faith in a higher reality than himself allowed Moses to lead his people to a new way of life from bondage into freedom? UUA president Peter Morales told our congregation that what matters most in religion is not what we believe but how we live our lives. Armstrong tells us myths were intended to guide us toward a more meaningful life and not to tell us what to believe. Joseph Campbell also shared this view about myths.

Armstrong pointed out the distinction between *mythos* and *logos* going back to the ancient Greek philosophers. Armstrong said, “Myth was... concerned with what ought to be timeless and constant in our existence. Myth looked back to the origins of our life ... and the deepest levels of the human mind. Myth was not concerned with practical matters but with meaning.” In contrast, “*Logos* was the rational, pragmatic, and scientific thought that enabled men and women to function pragmatically in the world...” Armstrong argued that *mythos* and *logos* were in balance in western civilization until the industrial revolution. Over the past 300 years or so science and technology have made such tremendous advances and have had so much influence on civilization that *logos* has come to overpower *mythos* as a frame of understanding and a way of life. In an effort to save religion from annihilation the fundamentalist response was to convert *mythos* into *logos*. The result was the literal interpretation of the world’s sacred books. So in order to be an acceptable fundamentalist Christian or Jew one is compelled to believe for example that the world is only about 6000 years old, that the science of evolution is not true because it conflicts with the Biblical account of creation, or that Moses did literally part the waters of the Red Sea, and so on.

Philosopher and historian Morris Berman pointed out along with Armstrong, that the industrial age resulted in a serious loss of our connection to what he called “enchantment,” referring to the sacred or *mythos* side of life. When we gained a greater scientific perspective of life we lost our sense of enchantment with life. In our own time perhaps because we are trained to view the world in purely objective or *logos* ways we often fail to see the magic and the mystery of life. The humanistic psychoanalyst Erich

Fromm wrote that in the post industrial age we have forgotten how to interpret the language of myths and dreams and to appreciate the truths that lie within them.

The words “myth,” “mystery” and “mystical” all have the same linguistic root. They all refer to something not known in an objective or material sense but are nevertheless meaningful. Myths in particular are stories intended to guide our experience to a meaningful life. Joseph Campbell said myths are, “... beyond even the concept of reality, that which transcends all thought. The myth ... gives you a line to connect with that mystery which you are.”

To review, what I have said thus far is that we UU’s are on a personal quest for meaning because we do not accept the dogma and creed of traditional religions. I have also said that pursuing meaning in our lives requires courage because as we seek meaning it will inevitably be accompanied by doubt. The “faith” of a UU involves recognizing that ultimate reality or truth is unknowable, but is still a worthy quest. The search for truth requires humility and an open mind. We must be cautious in the use of the word “God” and remember that it is a symbol for something unknowable. I also talked about how the industrial revolution has led to an overemphasis upon objective reality at the expense of meaning and *mythos*, and that fundamentalists have mistakenly sought to remedy this by attempting to interpret sacred texts such as the Bible in a literal manner. Finally I have suggested that in our quest for meaning we need to add to the rational and objective perspective, by embracing mystery. We need to be open to the enchantment and magic that surrounds us. We need to have faith of the kind Tillich spoke of.

At this point I would like to call attention to a source I believe can greatly enhance our search for truth and meaning, the first source for UU’s, which I quoted earlier, “direct experience of the transcending mystery and wonder...” This method has been a part of human experience as long as we have inhabited this earth. As Jennelle mentioned in her recent talk to this Fellowship human beings may be “hard-wired” to have such experiences. D. H. Lawrence (quoted by F. Church) stated this kind of awareness “represents a gradual process of awakening to the depths and possibilities of life itself...opening our eyes, looking out with new wonder upon the creation, becoming not someone other than ourselves, but more fully ourselves.”

In his book called Free Thinking Mystics with Hands, UU minister Tom Owen-Towle suggests that UU’s are mystics. The point may make the more scientifically oriented among you cringe. This dimension of our faith tradition is under-acknowledged because of the strong rational orientation of the early Unitarians which appeared to be at odds with the spiritual. Nevertheless Emerson, Thoreau and Fuller who are very much part of the UU tradition, were all mystics. Owen-Towle goes on to say, “Rationalism without a sense of mystery grows sterile, and mysticism untempered by reason falls prey to credulity.” Campbell said, “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 a purely physical plane will have resonances with our own innermost being and reality, so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive. That’s what it’s finally about.”

A mystic is simply a person who seeks spiritual experiences. Ronn Smith in a talk he gave a few years ago, defined spirituality as “an awareness of a meaningful connection to the sacred whole.” Rabbi Michael Learner defined spirituality as: “an experience of love and connection to the world and to others...awe, wonder, and radical amazement in response to the universe and a consequent unwillingness to view the world merely in instrumental terms...(Spirituality is) a deep inner knowing that our lives have meaning through our innermost being as manifestations of the ultimate goodness of the universe....”

Mystical, spiritual, or “peak experiences,” visions, moments of awe, inspiration, wonder or whatever we choose to call them can be common occurrences if we are open to them. Bede Griffiths stated an experience of this kind “...may come through nature or poetry, or through art and music; or it may come through the adventure of flying or mountaineering, or war; or it may come through falling in love, or through some apparent accident, an illness, the death of a friend, a sudden loss of fortune. Anything which breaks through the routine of daily life may be the bearer of this message to the soul...it is as if a veil has been lifted and we see for the first time behind the façade ... the world has built around us....We see our life for a moment in true perspective in relation to eternity.... We are no longer isolated individuals in conflict with our surroundings; we are parts of a whole....” To Griffiths’ list of circumstances and activities that can induce this state I would add the method of meditation which is regarded as a discipline intended to promote spiritual experiences.

Emerson, like many other spiritual leaders, did not take the “miracles” of the Bible literally. He said that life itself is the miracle; we just need to awaken to it. Here are Emerson’s instructions for connecting with the transcendent miracle. “The whole course of things goes to teach us faith. We need only to obey. There is guidance for each of us, and by lowly listening we shall hear the right word.... Place yourself in the middle of the stream of power and wisdom which flows into your life, place yourself in the full center of that flood, then you are without effort impelled to truth, to right, and to perfect contentment.”

Albert Schweitzer, the humanitarian, physician, musician, and Unitarian, was searching for life’s meaning while traveling on a river boat in Africa. He spent days trying to write something coherent but to no avail. Of that time he recalled, “Slowly we crept upstream, laboriously feeling... for the channels between the sandbanks. Lost in thought I sat on the deck of the barge, struggling to find the elementary and universal conception of the ethical which I had not discovered in any philosophy. Sheet after sheet I covered with disconnected sentences, merely to keep myself concentrated on the problem. Late on the third day, at the very moment when, at sunset, we were making our way through a herd of hippopotamuses, there flashed upon my mind, unforeseen and unsought, the phrase, ‘Reverence for Life.’ The iron door had yielded: the path in the thicket had become visible.” For Schweitzer this mystical experience became the guiding principle and meaning for the remainder of his life. Reverence for Life might mean for us that if we want the best life possible we need to take responsibility for the choices we make. We

must ask, what are we doing to enhance the life of others and the future of the planet? For Schweitzer, Reverence for Life was his “Ultimate Concern.” The meaning of the principle was to be found in its practice. “Reverence for Life” and “Ultimate Concern” to me are very similar to Peter Morales’ urging “do what you love” and Joseph Campbell’s admonition to “follow your bliss.” Meaning will come more from doing and experiencing than from “believing.”

I will close with the words of Rev. Buehrens: “Each of us has transforming moments. Not all of them are soaring. Many are painful, breaking through our defenses to raise challenging questions of us, just as we so often have questions of life. In such moments, we can sometimes receive life once more as a gift, not as a given. When we do, when we are more open to life’s unfolding questions of us, then we can identify more deeply with others, with those who are also challenged. We can commit (or recommit) ourselves to join with them to serve justice, to love mercy and to walk humbly together before the Mystery that gives us all life—and to do so even in the face of death.” This openness to experience and to the values that uphold life, for me are very useful tools in my quest for meaning and purpose. Let us find faith even while we live with doubt. Let us ride on the “wings of faith and reason.” Let us be open to the mystery and wonder of the gift we call life. And let us be inspired us to make this world a better place. May it be so.