

“Living with Intention by Honoring Our Life’s Purpose”

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

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The Fourth Principle of Unitarian Universalism calls us to engage in a “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.” Social science research on this subject indicates that there is a correlation between the meaning of life that one holds and the wellbeing and quality of life one experiences. An important element of finding and making meaning involves having a sense of purpose in our lives. The more congruent our sense of purpose is with the meaning of life that we hold, the higher the likelihood that our sense of purpose will be vibrant and strong. The more vibrant and strong our sense of purpose, the more likely it is that we will feel good about ourselves and be more connected to those around us. The more incongruence there is between the meaning of life and the sense of purpose we hold, the more likely it is that our ability to cope with the challenges of life will be reduced.

The reading by Parker Palmer that Jeanne shared with us earlier offers an example of how such incongruence can impact a person’s life. Palmer tells us he would “snap awake in the middle of the night and stare for long hours at the ceiling.” If you have ever had sleep disturbances similar to what he describes, you have an idea of how much more challenging life is when you are sleep deprived. Another example of how an incongruence between the meaning of life and the sense of purpose we hold can be found in the book *The Path Made Clear: Discovering Your Life’s Direction and Purpose* by Oprah Winfrey. On page 14 of that book Winfrey writes, “August 14, 1978. It was a Monday, my first day working on a Baltimore talk show called *People Are Talking*. It was also the last day I had a job.” Prior to that day she had been a news anchor and reporter on a six o’clock news show, “a time slot most young journalists covet.” And yet she never felt fully comfortable in that seat. She tells us that; “As a reporter, I’d been exhausted all the time. I really had to drag myself in to work.” She writes, “It wasn’t until I was unceremoniously “demoted” to co-host of *People Are Talking* that I experienced the first spark of what it means to become fully alive.” The demotion from news anchor to talk show host propelled Winfrey into a life, and a career, that she had not previously been able to imagine.

As I read the passages just mentioned by Parker Palmer and Oprah Winfrey, I found myself thinking about my own life, the sense of purpose I have and the career choices I have made in life. As a child and adolescent, I remember being asked what I wanted to be when I grew up. Almost all of my friends had an answer for that question. I didn’t. When I went off to college, I didn’t know what kind of job or career I wanted to go into. In high school I had enjoyed math and science classes. When I had to declare a major the first semester of my freshman year, I decided on engineering. Today I am a minister. While engineering and ministry aren’t opposites, there is certainly a significant difference between the two.

In the early math and science classes I took in college I discovered that I wasn’t good at memorizing formulas or charts, like the periodic table. This posed a problem for my going on in the field of engineering. I soon began exploring courses in other fields of study. When I took an introduction to social work course I began to become aware of my purpose. In taking that course I began to recognize that my purpose in life was to be of service. At the end of that semester I changed my major from engineering to social work. I went on to get a Bachelor’s and a Master’s degree in social work. Almost 35 years of my life were spent either studying or working in social work.

But there came a point in time when I realized that something wasn’t quite right. I didn’t snap awake in the middle of the night as Palmer describes, or have to drag myself in to work as Winfrey did. Yet I could tell that there was some misalignment in my life that I couldn’t quite identify.

In time I came to realize that there was very little opportunity in the psychotherapy counseling business I owned and ran for discussing or exploring matters of spirituality. I had spent much of my life delving into spiritual questions and issues, and yet the work I was doing offered little opportunity to include this area of my life in my work. I don’t recall exactly how or when it happened, but there came a time when I realized

that the purpose I had been holding needed to be revised. It didn't take long for me to identify the revision that was needed. As a social worker I was definitely being of service. What became clear, however, was that I wasn't being of highest service. I was offering beneficial assistance and support to individuals, couples and families. But that wasn't the highest service I could offer. I needed to go to the next level and offer beneficial assistance and support to larger numbers of people and to include the spiritual aspect of my life in that endeavor. So in my mid-50's, an age when many people are thinking about retirement, I closed my psychotherapy practice, moved from Kalispell, Montana to Boston, Massachusetts, and entered theological school to begin a new career. Some people have told me it took a lot of courage to make such a change. They might be correct but it didn't and still doesn't feel like courage that propelled me or made the change possible. And while no one has stated it directly or clearly, I know there are some who view my decision to be an indication that my mental state was out of whack. It is quite possible that their perspective contains at least a grain of truth. When a person lives with intention by following what they perceive to be their life purpose, it might appear to others that the person is suffering from delusions. That is especially the case when following one's purpose doesn't fit with societal norms or expectations.

From my years of sitting with, listening to and offering counseling for individuals, couples and families, I know that many people experience times when they are either uncertain about their purpose, or that their purpose is in need of revision. Many of the children and youth I worked with were uncertain about or even unaware of the purpose for their life, just as I had been when I was young. And a significant number of the adults I worked with had either ignored or neglected to adequately attend to the purpose they were aware of. Lacking a sense of purpose, ignoring a sense of purpose or neglecting one's sense of purpose often leads to difficulties in one's life.

The three life situations I have been talking about, Parker Palmer's, Oprah Winfrey's and my own, are each unique in many ways. At the same time, each has a common thread. The common thread relates to what can occur when a person consciously and intentionally honors what they understand their life's purpose to be. When we honor and follow our life's purpose with intention, we often discover more meaning in the life we live. I have observed that sharing personal experiences of when we followed our sense of purpose can be beneficial for us as well as for others. In sharing our stories of intentionally following our life's purpose, we publicly acknowledge and affirm the purpose that guides us. And when others hear such stories they may be encouraged, or even emboldened, to live their life purpose more fully than they might otherwise have been willing or able to do.

While vocation is a primary focus of the three life stories I have been speaking about so far, life purpose isn't just about the job a person works at or the career path a person follows. A person's sense of meaning about themselves and life in general evolves over time, over our entire lifetime. So life purpose that is confined to what we "do" can become quite problematic as we get older or when we are no longer able, for whatever reason, to do what we could do previously. Life purpose can certainly play an important role in what we choose to do, for example in the jobs we do or the career we pursue. But life purpose encompasses more than what we do. Life purpose is at least as much about who we are as it is about what we do.

Many members and friends of this Fellowship are retired. Several Fellowship members and friends have told me that they are busier now than when they had a job. It seems to me that many if not all of the people who have shared this with me have found a way to continue to live out their life purpose after having left what is commonly referred to as "the workforce." Continuing to find ways to do some endeavor that involves activity and achievement to live out one's life purpose is beneficial and to be applauded. But there may come a time when our ability to "do" becomes so compromised that we have to find another approach to living our life's purpose. And it might be beneficial for us to find another approach to living our life's purpose before we are no longer able to do it in the ways that are familiar to us.

This is where our spiritual development becomes significantly more important. In the book *From Age-ing to Sage-ing: A Profound New Vision of Growing Older*, there is a quote by Harry Moody. When the book was published in 1997 Moody was the deputy director of the Brookdale Center on Aging at Hunter College. Here is a portion of that quote.

“... we can think of aging as a kind of ‘natural monastery’ in which earlier roles, attachments, and pleasures are naturally stripped away from us. What then can emerge is a miraculous sense of discovery, an extraordinary energy that transcends ‘doing’ in favor of ‘being,’ and a clarity of consciousness that comes from spiritual growth.”

Toward the end of the book Moody is quoted again. He states,

“While productive aging propagates the image of elders as active, engaged, and vital, ultimately it presents a rather weak and incomplete vision of life.... By celebrating efficiency and productivity, we abandon the moral and spiritual value of life’s last stage, stripping old age of meaning. What we need is a wider vision of late-life productivity that includes values such as altruism, citizenship, stewardship, creativity, and the search for faith. In short, we need a spiritual vision that recognizes the value of elders’ noneconomic contributions to society.”

With my own retirement approaching rapidly, I look to many of you in this congregation who have retired. I look to you and see how you are actively engaged in practicing our Third Principle, which states, “acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations.” Thank you for modeling a continuing search for truth and meaning. Thank you for modeling that continuing search for truth and meaning by actively engaging with the members and friends of this congregation in the endeavor of spiritual growth. You are my mentors. You demonstrate what I, and I imagine many others as well, need as we age out of work. You show us how to live with intention by honoring your life’s purpose and, through word and deed, you share your sage wisdom with us.

My hope is that what I have shared this morning will get you thinking on, talking about and more actively engaged in living into your life’s purpose. May you, and those around you, be inspired and uplifted as you live that purpose with intention. And may honoring your life’s purpose bring you, and those around you, more joy, more wellbeing, and more peace of mind in the days to come.

May it be so.