

Awakening to Meaning

By Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD, April 3, 2022

I wonder if we can each reflect on a time when routine and monotony led us into a state similar to hibernation, sleeping, in a sense, as the world around us buzzed with activity and potential and growth and love. We work or we tend to our dwellings or we parent or we go to church and yet in each of these moments we are present in body but not in mind. Now, I invite you to think of a moment where you felt truly alive. When you noticed the beauty around you, when you realized that your actions made a difference, when love stared you in the face. Perhaps we are alive working or tending to our dwellings or parenting – what matters is not always the activity but the meaning and intention we partner it with. When we awaken, we find meaning in that which can so easily slip into the mundane. We may think we are living, until we are confronted with that which triggers our inner senses – a book, a song, a prayer, an experience in the natural world – and we realize our days melt one into the next as the excitement of life drifts away and routine, boredom, and restlessness step in to fill the void.

We spent the past month reflecting on the importance of faith in our lives. Faith slips effortlessly into meaning as we engage both with that which is greater than ourselves to offer us guidance and as we connect to and listen to our core and all that we hold with in. Faith gives us the foundation upon which we build meaning. What is your sacred calling you to do in each moment of your life? What does your faith tell you matters the most? When we clutch faith tightly in our grasp we are accompanied by that parent of meaning. When we awaken, we see meaning as those one or two or three ultimate goals around which we structure those significant and fundamental pieces of who we are and who we strive to be – perhaps parenting, following a calling, or serving the world in justice. When we truly awaken, we also find meaning in each moment. When we hold a child close, we contribute to a lifetime of security. When we read a book, we expand our knowledge and serve to share that with the world. When we cook a shared meal, we work to provide sustenance to those we love.

Let us pause and connect with ourselves just as we connect with all that is much greater. Let us distinguish between those superficial forms of meaning and those desires of the heart. We are taught, in this country, to pursue money, prestige, power, beauty, advanced degrees, marriage. We can chase and chase and chase these things without even realizing the beauty and wonder surrounding us as we pass joy and happiness by on our quest for what we are taught is a fulfilling life. Yet, do these things ultimately serve to cultivate a life of meaning, a life where, on our deathbeds, we can be at peace with the life we have lived? I know I have fallen into this trap – so focused on receiving straight A’s that the beauty all around me fell to the wayside. I invite us, instead, to those humble things we can appreciate: relationships, faith, love, humor, dedication. Sitting on the floor laughing, noticing the first spring flower, hugging a beloved – these simple things offer meaning and serve to fulfill lives. This distinction between the superficial and the callings of our hearts offer two contrasting ideas of success – one receives outside accolades and approval and the other simply allows us to be happy in our humble lives. This does not mean that one who has obtained power or money or prestige is living an unfulfilled or shallow life. What it means is that we should focus on that which gives us meaning, whether or not it is met with approval of all who seek to measure us by our exterior successes. We cannot live for the approval of others: parents, colleagues, friends, society. We can only live for the approval of ourselves.

I think of all we are born with, and all that can slip away as we fall into the slumber of routine and monotony or chase superficial meaning while ignoring what we hold within. Our lives begin with an innocence that fosters goodness and love. Whether this slipped away quickly with a difficult childhood or slowly dissipated over years of hardships and excessive expectations, we can return to these birthright qualities, and that inherent meaning we were blessed with in our early days. 13th Century Persian poet Rumi writes that when leaving the womb, we are born with “goodness and trust... ideals and dreams,” that we were born with “greatness.”¹ These innate qualities – these are our wings that allow us to fly! These innate qualities allow us to soar through life, and yet when we forget them – when we release our

¹ “You Were Born with Wings” by Rumi

trust and our dreams – we lose our momentum, stumble, and revert to crawling. Let us use our wings and soar! In reconnecting with trust and dreams we are offered such precious potential. What is beautiful is that, when we return to those gifts of new life, we bring with us all of our experiences. When we return to trust it is after we have been wounded. When we return to goodness it is after we have faced hardship. When we return to dreams it is after our visions and goals have been diminished by unforeseen obstacles. Each time we awaken and return we find deeper meaning and deeper connections. When we remain awake, we delight in all that we have accomplished – the large, and the small – and rejuvenate ourselves in all that we hold within. We find joy in each moment. We find meaning in who we are. We find greater appreciation for the good within because we have navigated the hardship without. This is learning to use our wings. This is learning to fly.

When we awaken to meaning, we awaken to ourselves, and a seeming paradox: who you are at your core is beautiful. And we can still become wiser, stronger, more compassionate, more humorous. But let's begin with our core which is just right. Let's strip away that pervasive goal in our society for self-improvement and instead realize, just as American Tibetan Buddhist Pema Chödrön did, that "we already have everything we need." She writes of jealousy and rage as rain clouds that temporarily block the warmth and light of the sun. I think of clouds hovering over our souls, covering that goodness we were born with, covering that "warmth and brilliance that are right here."² Right here. We each have unique beauty within us – at our core – each day. It is always there. We are just right. We have the strength to overcome hardship. We have the love to overcome hatred. We have the laughter to overcome sadness. We have all that we need to create meaning in our lives. When we lose sight of that, tragedy happens, life slips away into monotony or depression. When we lose sight of what allows us to fly, we stumble and fall. Not to cherish what is within is the first step towards immersing oneself in the superficial that can consume us; we fall into slumber because we do not heed the call within for us to use our gifts to craft beauty. "Open your heart to who you are, right now... all of you is holy," wrote author John Welwood. "Not who you would like to be, not the saint you are

² *Start Where You Are: A Guide to Compassionate Living* by Pema Chödrön

striving to become, but the being right before you, inside you, around you.”³ Know this in your heart. We don’t need to punish ourselves for not being someone “better” or spend time chasing after idealistic goals. All of you is holy.

And. With a life of meaning, we are called to be present in each moment, and living a life of true connection and awareness cannot help but shape and mold us. When we approach the world, creating meaning from what we hold within, our love and compassion and strength is amplified. We grow stronger and kinder simply from living genuine lives on a consistent quest for meaning. When we are truly present for hardships, we cultivate strength and the calling to make the world a better place. When we are fully present in joy, we tend to those seeds which foster both greater humor and a survival net for when things get hard. Death, birth, heartbreak, love – a genuine appreciation for each cultivates our core to give us the tools we need to live lives full of meaning. Life is a balance of joys and hardships – how can we work to receive from each experience all that they have to offer? In this sense, even difficulties can become a blessing. Each thing we are present for that offers genuine growth is to be embraced. A life of meaning draws strength from that which can seek to destroy. Genuine engagement offers growth.

I think of new love that allows us to see enhanced beauty in all that surrounds us, or a heartbreak that leads us with a deeper sense of gratitude for the relationships we do have and an appreciation for the power of love. I think of the birth of a baby that leads us to engage with the miracles of life, or a death that inspires us to cherish with greater appreciation the living among us. Each experience, when lived fully, leads to a deeper sense of meaning and inner growth. Each moment of our lives is precious. Let us not waste a minute. We most easily find meaning in the monumental – those life-changing events that serve to leave a lasting impact. And yet, it is finding meaning in the mundane – in doing the dishes, in wiping a child’s tears, in pausing to sip tea – that our lives are truly altered. Finding meaning in that which could simply pass us by leads to appreciation and wonder.

³ “Forget About Enlightenment” by John Welwood

Meaning means connecting with our passions, and when we connect with our passions, we help heal an aching world. When we pause, when we center, when we connect with our faith, what makes us come alive? What makes each of our days a little bit brighter, no matter what we are experiencing? Art, humor, gardening. When we do things that fill our hearts, we inadvertently fill the hearts of others. We need a bouquet of passions on this planet to enhance each other's lives – to make the most out of our lives and to give abundantly to the lives of others. The dedication we offer in crafting a work of art brings beauty and awareness to all who experience it. The fulfillment we grasp when jokes stream seamlessly from our consciousness brings laughter to all of those in our midst. The gratification we feel when we create works of fiction that offer nuance to the world around us, or when we tend to gardens that serve to connect each person who experiences it to the beauty of nature, or when we recite prayers that connect another to the sacred. The fulfillment we feel when guided by our passions – by that which gives us meaning – we heal ourselves and all of those in our midst. Beauty and fulfillment and joy and wonder ripples out.

And we craft meaning by reacting to the world around us – when we awaken to injustice and hardship. To racism, warfare, poverty. When we awaken to the hardship of mental illness or physical ailments or addiction. In our interconnected web we each experience the suffering of another. In our faith as Unitarian Universalists we are called to heal – we covenant for justice, equity, and compassion for all of those in our midst. Each person in our web of life can work to aid another and in doing so strengthen the threads that hold us all together. We find meaning and grow within when we serve to cultivate a society and a world where everyone's worth is realized, even if simply one small act at a time. Each person has the power to help another. In healing one, we work to heal all. In awakening to injustice, in awakening to the pain around us, we create perhaps the most powerful meaning of all – the opportunity to help each life to be as full as possible – for each person offered this fleeting time we have on this planet we call home to obtain as much joy as much fulfillment as possible. For each person to craft meaning by not just surviving but thriving.

So let us ask ourselves, when navigating all of this which offers us meaning, what is most important? Our Story for All Ages this morning provided us wisdom, “Remember then that there is only one important time, and that is now. The most important one is always the one you are with. And the most important thing is to do good for the one who is ... at your side. For these, my dear boy, are the answers to what is most important in the world.”⁴

We find meaning in each moment. Our lives are strings of significant moments held together by the mundane – and each one is grounded by our awareness of the present moment. What matters is now. Let us awaken to each moment, to each opportunity for meaning. Let us awaken to life. This day, and every day.

May it be so, and amen.

⁴ *The Three Questions [Base on a Tale by Leo Tolstoy]* by Jon J. Muth