

Finding Purpose in the Shadows

By Reverend Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, Ellicott City, MD, Nov. 15, 2020

I know I have wondered the question many times – maybe sitting alongside my mother’s vibrant garden, or else contemplating in those rows of cushioned chairs in the first Unitarian Universalist congregation I ever attended. What is the meaning of life? What is it? Why am I here? What is my purpose? Many things are universal to the human condition – this question may be one of them.

And just as hard as it is to find tangible things in the darkness – such as when you are stumbling around for a cup in a dark kitchen with only the moonlight as your guide – it can be hard to find the answers of these fundamental questions when we find ourselves in a mentally dark space – our thoughts and actions veiled in shadows. Perhaps shadows of grief or anxiety or trauma. And yet it is when we are in these places that these questions perhaps become the most critical. We can meander through the shadows, or we can strike a match and create our own light to guide the way.

Perhaps one of the most telling tales of finding purpose in the shadows is that of Holocaust survivor and prominent psychiatrist Viktor Frankl. Frankl survived several concentration camps during World War II, including Auschwitz, while his family perished. And yet his story of survival and thriving has graced bookstores all around the world. He encourages his readers to find meaning even when all seems hopeless, even when faced with a detrimental situation that “cannot be changed.” In fact – he demands it! He calls this “human potential at its best,” the ability each and every one of us has to turn tragedy to triumph, to an act of achievement. This is what he claims allowed him and others to survive the most

tragic of tragedies. We will inevitably be faced with difficult situations we cannot change. Yet we can always change ourselves.¹

Suffering is universal. We heard about this in the Buddhist tale we explored in our Time for All Ages. When the grieving mother was asked to collect a mustard seed from each townspeople who had not encountered suffering, she came back empty handed.² Everyone has faced hardship! Everyone has suffered. This is inherent to the human condition. What changes is how we respond. Do we give up in the shadows, or do we strike a match and find the way?

Some folks who faced hardships as children strike the match and find their way by choosing helping careers as adults.

Some folks who have faced grief strike the match and find their way by creating beautiful works of art.

Some folks who faced stigma strike the match and do advocacy work.

Each person decides. There is choice in this. Autonomy.

Viktor Frankl espouses this idea that suffering is as universal as both life and death; without it our journeys are not complete. If we can't find meaning in suffering, we can't find meaning in life.³ If we don't find meaning in that inevitable hardship we will all face, we will get stuck, and succumb to misery or anxiety. We will get lost in the shadows. Viktor Frankl notes in his book two men that were about to succumb to suicide in a concentration camp. In an attempt to save their lives, he encouraged them to realize that there were still things to live for – there was still meaning in their lives – their lives had purpose. For one man, it was the life of his small child living in a foreign country. For the other man – a

¹ *Man's Search for Meaning* Viktor E. Frankl pg 112

² *The Buddha and the Mustard Seed Medicine* Ralph Roberts

³ *Man's Search for Meaning* Viktor E. Frankl pg 67

scientist – his purpose that kept him alive was to finish a series of books he had begun writing. Whether family or academia, these two men, so close to death, realized their purpose and meaning.⁴

I wonder what else can give folks purpose to continue on no matter what. I know my purposes – my family, both the one raised in and the one I created – the life I live with my husband. My vocation as a minister. I know others who find it in art or research or creativity!

This query brings us back to that ever-looming question: What is the meaning of life? What is the purpose? Why am I here? Frankl believes the responses to these questions are the most critical piece of surviving even the harshest of conditions – nothing is as important to survival as knowing one's meaning; one's purpose.⁵

What can trip us up here is looking for some large, looming, abstract, and yet profound answer! Some extraordinary universal response! Some overwhelming wisdom. The answer is simple – it is within each and every one of us. It is there. We all have our own meaning for life. We all have our own purpose that – if we hold on tight – can guide us through any tragedy. The meaning of life is what gets a person through each and every moment – it is as unique to each person as their own thumbprint. Just as those delicate swirls on the tips of our fingers are unique to each one of us, so are our answers to this profound question. Everyone has their own mission, their own vocation. What we return to here is autonomy – for just as we each have meaning, we need each choose to act on it. We need each do that introspective work to find it and thrive on it. It does not come easy, it takes work, especially in the shadows. And yet this work can save us. Frankl writes of the critical need for a future goal to get folks through whatever they are facing – even a concentration camp.

⁴ Ibid pg 79

⁵ *Man's Search for Meaning* Viktor E. Frankl pg 104

I am reminded of a story of a woman and her son, a family I met during an internship in seminary. While both of these characters will remain unidentified, I was given permission to share their story years ago. We'll call the woman Kate. Kate was an alcoholic and had been in and out of Alcoholics Anonymous for decades. She struggled with addiction since she was a teenager, and even though she tried repeatedly, she was unable to maintain sobriety. Kate had a son, and as a teenager he began to struggle with mental health and addiction himself. His mother saw this, and saw where her son was headed, and made some drastic life decisions. She found meaning and purpose – her family. Helping her son survive. She found meaning and with meaning and purpose found sobriety. Not only did she find sobriety, but she helped others who were struggling with mental illness and addiction as well. She started what is called a “dual-diagnosis group,” a 12-Step group to help folks with both mental illness and addiction. She created this for her son, and through this work helped dozens of others recover. She found meaning: to be a mom, to help her son, and to use her experiences to help others. She continued to struggle and suffer as is inherent to the human condition, but she also thrived. She is happy. She is content. And she is one of the most compassionate people I have ever been blessed to know. If she didn't find this purpose, she may still be in the shadows.

Viktor Frankl penned the words, “He who knows the ‘why’ for his existence will be able to bear almost any ‘how.’”⁶ He who knows that ‘why’ for his existence will be able to bear almost any ‘how.’ For Frankl, his “why” was his life’s work – his manuscripts. For those two men he saved from suicide it was a child, and a book series. This got them through the “how” of a concentration camp. For Kate, it was the life of her son, and the goal of using her experience to help others. This was the “how” of overcoming addiction. Frankl expands, “There is nothing in the world, I would venture to say, that would so

⁶ *Man's Search for Meaning* Viktor E. Frankl pg 80

effectively help one to survive even the worst of conditions as the knowledge that there is a meaning in one's life."⁷ Meaning is not abstract and general but concrete and specific to each one of us.

Some of the most remarkable stories I have ever heard came from folks who suffered, and yet found meaning and moved forward. Some of the richest lives I have witnessed were formed in response to suffering. I am reminded of Kate and her son. I am reminded of multiple people I met in seminary who transformed their pain into inspirational ministry. In seminary we sat together by those large windows overlooking Millennium Park in Chicago, and I heard stories about losing parents as a young child or past struggles with addiction – stories from folks whose purpose became ministry. I am reminded of folks I met while serving as a chaplain. Years ago I served at a University hospital in New Jersey. I met a woman there whose purpose was art. Each morning I visited her and perched upon a cushioned chair while she arranged her tray in front of her bed, took out colored pencils, and we sat and drew pictures together. She found joy in this, and, along with sound medical advice, healed and returned to her family. I am reminded of all the remarkable folks I have met overcoming mental illness through the work I have done at NAMI – the National Alliance on Mental Illness. During my time there I met folks with all sorts of diagnoses – bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, obsessive compulsive disorder – folks who found purpose and were thriving! Some found purpose in sharing their stories. Some found purpose in advocacy work. Some found their purpose in deeply held friendships or their families. These stories have served to inspire me and to inspire others.

Suffering is universal. What changes is our response to it.

I am reminded of the serenity prayer,

⁷ Ibid 104

“Grant me the serenity,

To accept the things I cannot change,

The courage to change the things I can,

And the wisdom to know the difference.”

There are things we cannot change. There is death, there is terminal illness, there is addiction. There are things we can change – every single day we can work to change ourselves. And this takes intention and work! Sometimes the hardest part is making this distinction. And yet if we are blessed with acceptance, blessed with courage, and blessed with wisdom, we can create beauty from the shadows. We can find meaning. We can find purpose. We can survive. We can thrive!

Author Douglas C. Smith sees beauty from wounds as a mystery. He writes it is a mystery that wounds do not just “take away from life” or “take away from who we are” or “take away what we can do for others” – that they don’t take away, but they add. They add to life and to who we are and they add to what we can do for others.⁸ If we are intentional, our wounds can add so much! Is this not miraculous? Is this not beautiful? The author sees that as a mystery. I see this mystery in the universal question: what is the meaning of life? Once we center in ourselves and find that unique response, that response as unique and personal as the swirls in our thumbprints, our wounds add so much. When we find a purpose, this ability for suffering to add to our lives is not so mysterious after all.

And as we reflect on the past I’ll take a quick detour to the future. Life is cyclical – following suffering comes peace and following peace comes suffering. Just as we have survived the sufferings of our past, let us be reminded that we can survive the suffering we will be presented with in the future. Let us

⁸ Excerpt from *Being A Wounded Healer* by Douglas C. Smith

articulate and hold tight to that which gives us meaning – to that which we find a purpose. Armed with an arsenal of life-giving goals and achievements, we will survive, and we will thrive.

If any of us toured our neighborhoods looking for mustard seeds from individuals or families who had not suffered, we would come back empty handed, just as that grieving mother did. Everyone suffers. And yet we each have that sacred opportunity to strike that match, to create light to guide us through even the darkest of shadows, the hardest of situations. And that spark is meaning. That spark is purpose. That spark will carry you through anything life throws at you – and cast that light so you can make it through, and thrive.

May it be so, and Amen