

THE MEANING OF LIFE
OKC October 1, 1995/UUFDC December 11, 2016
The Rev. Cynthia B. Johnson

I remember talking with Flora Kramer a few times when Al and I moved to Door County in 2000 before she moved away. On the morning my sister came to the Fellowship with me, Flora and Caryl had a conversation during which Caryl told Flora that she, Caryl, had grown up Unitarian but belonged to a Congregational church was presently a Lutheran. Flora said, "Oh, I didn't know anyone went backwards."

Caryl mentioned that comment this week when we talked on the telephone. It was a hurtful comment. Our Fellowship's commitment to interfaith work calls us at this moment on history to genuinely welcome the stranger and to expand our own too small view of the world.

In Flora's and my very first conversation she was interested I was a Unitarian Universalist minister. She said something like, "Oh good, you must have lots of sermons and you could spend a 10 or 15 minutes to revise them and speak here." This morning's sermon is one of those that comes from my Before Door County life, and I love the story so much that I talked about it once before.

It starts this way...Once upon a time, more than twenty years ago, long SerenaJoyJ met a stranger named PUFF JOCKEY late one night in the Internet. In that meeting, this sermon was conceived...

People who work or play with computers will recognize this as the language of people communicating with each other by sending letters to each other via computer. In that world, I send and receive mail under a playful pseudonym that I selected because I would like my life to intermingle Serenity and Joy. (Bruce's comment about SerenaJoyJ—sounds like soft porn.) Most of the email I received on my computer at that time were from members of my family or church members. I was interested to see a letter from a stranger. PUFFJOCKEY introduced herself and requested me to contribute a chapter to the book she intends to write about the meaning of life. She had selected me -- among others -- because of my short biographical data I filed with American Online, probably the part where I listed my life motto as Pay attention, pay attention, pay attention.

As I thought about her project and considered whether I would take the time to answer PUFFJOCKEY, I realized that I had been given a fun sermon topic. What IS the meaning of life? This morning I shall give you my answer about the meaning of my life -- and later invite your answer about the meaning of your life...

I was a little surprised at how quickly the answers came and how concrete they were. I discovered that many of the central ingredients of meaning have been themes and motifs of my life since childhood. For me, there are ten elements that give my life meaning. I'll tell you about them before I tell you about the big question I have left over...

First -- although these are not rank ordered -- I thrive better when I am in right relationship with something that qualifies as Nature. It can be trees or hills or water or sky or wind or a certain light. That week I lay looking at the changing light on a couple of leaves in the magnolia tree outside my bedroom window, and my life was shot through with delight and meaning. Let me name **Nature** as one of my sources of meaning.

For decades I have responded to the Shaker hymn "Simple Gifts" with its image of finding a place just right, twill be in the valley of love and delight. I knew the place just right had to do with finding my vocation as well as the right spot of earth. I wrote this poem in July 1990, capturing some of the pain of being in a place that was not just right. I had just returned to Dallas after spending several weeks in the upper Midwest.

The Intentional Tourist July 18, 1990

My lazy summer spiral took me back to places I once knew as home,
to spots of earth when once I stood well-rooted,
to people whose faces and voices are as familiar as my own,
to the deep and dappled woods where I am welcome,
to the wind that feels like another layer of my skin.

Now I arrive in a whirlwind of commotion accorded an honored guest,
someone for whom the guest room is carefully prepared,
whose arrival and departure are marked on the family calendar,
whose presence is the occasion for the gathering of the clan.

A traveler in time and space, caught by orbits past and present,
I must integrate new images with the faded sepia photographs,
write new program notes in the margins of the old play bill,
add a new layer to the collage of the place I knew as home.

The past must be laid to rest...

They update themselves on my life, for changes mark my life, too:
raw data set out boldly and my updated dreams shared,
what each child is doing, and how much AI is liking work,
where we have been, what wonderful places we are going next.

And then it is time to go away. Not too much pain this time,
more like a poignant jumble of blessing and regret.
Somewhat weary with the effort of being a welcome visitor,
eager to lie again in my own bed, to stroke my own cats.

And so I have come back here again, to this place,
to read and drink iced tea by the pool under an umbrella,
cooled by alien wind, listening to voices I do not recognize,
partially rooted in the soil, in a spot of earth not yet home.

Will tomorrow find me somewhere else, fed by other wellsprings,
anchored by new places, voices, trees and wind?
And will some future lazy summer spiral bring me back here
in some pilgrimage to a living shrine called Memory?
It is too soon to tell, but not too soon to hope.

Rockford, Illinois; Iowa; Connecticut; Appleton, Dallas, Oklahoma City, Door County... When Al and I were planning our retirement destination I said I wanted four things: 1) to see the color green; 2) to have the trees be tall enough that I had to tip my head back to see the tops of them; 3) to see the cycles of the moon; and 4) to be where squirrels and the woods looked just right. Let me name **the place just right** as another building block of meaning in my life.

I am happier when I am creative; I am more creative when I am happy. This pair bonding of creativity and happiness is another part of meaning in my life. My writing is the most consistent evidence of this in my life. But I feel something else welling up in me that tells me some other medium is about to arise, some new way in which my hands will become connected to my creative impulse. I welcome this awakening of **the pair bonding of creativity and happiness**.

I need laughter in my life. It is so easy to take the world too seriously. I need to laugh at it -- and myself. I remember choosing to laugh at Dallas's excesses rather than rage against them. I loved showing out-of-town guests the most outrageous examples I could find. One time I had a visitor who did not want to see the city through the eyes of laughter. She wanted only to see sub-standard housing and poor neighborhoods. I need to have **laughter** close at hand because sometimes it is hard to live in this world.

A favorite going-away present from a friend in Dallas was a book about simplicity. Al and I both read it, enjoying the irony of exploring 100 ways to simplify our lives at the very same moment we implemented a bi-state commuting marriage. But the book did influence our decisions about what to keep and what to discard. For example, I chose to bring to our new home in Oklahoma City only things that I really liked and had a place to store or hang. If I am honest, I believe that my vision of simplicity is not unrelated to the television ad for cat

food: -- the finicky cat that has simple tastes: she wants only the best. Therefore, I will claim **simplicity –but not austerity** as part of the meaning of life, but know that others -- and I -- might well snicker at my affirming this as one of my core values.

The next element that contributes zest to my life is a large pinch of adrenaline. I do not have an addictive personality, but the addiction that I find most tempting is the adrenaline of crisis. I learned this about myself when I was a chaplain at Parkland Hospital in Dallas. There were days when I felt I had been shoved off a cliff into situations I had to respond to before I had made any sense of them in my heart; there were wonderful days when this happened as many as four times. I loved the rush after the soft landing. So, **a pinch of adrenaline, please.**

These first six elements that give my life meaning are different from the next four. These next ones are larger and more complex and have even deeper roots than these qualities I have just mentioned.

The first is clustered in my delight in -- and yearning for -- **people to love and people to love me.** This is a core value and commitment of my life. I am humbly aware of my incredible good fortune in this part of my life. There's a definition of "grace" that I like: the gifts we have we did not earn. Al and Bruce and Tad and Ellen -- they are gifts I did not earn. True, too, for our children-in-law and Alexander, Lucinda, Netta, and Wyatt.

These days it is interesting to discover and invite new ways to love people when I don't see them every day. That comes with the territory with adult children, of course, but I did not know that one day I would have to learn new lessons about loving mightily with light bonds that span the miles... In Oklahoma City -- as I rolled the cart of trash to the curb, I wondered if there are neighbors who can't figure out if I am married or not. I had a wonderful surge of realizing how very married I am even though I saw my husband only on weekends for many months way back then...

Besides people to love and people to love me, it is essential that **my life connected to larger purposes and deeper truths.** This has to do with vocation, but it is even larger than that. It is nothing less than Micah's words that resound deeply inside me: "What does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God." Another way I sometimes hear the words: "What does Life call you to be: to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with all that is Holy."

There is a particular messenger who delivered this idea to me more than fifteen years ago. She was the young conductor of the symphony in Appleton, Wisconsin; she was our speaker at the Unitarian Universalist fellowship that morning. Still under thirty years old, she spoke of her discovery that music was so large a field and so deep a passion that she could devote her entire life to music and feel that she would have merely scratched the surface. She spoke of looking around at her contemporaries who bounced from one interest to another and being extremely grateful she felt had already found that vast center of her life. I have thought about Kate's words many times since then. I believe that finding the answer to what fills us that fully is one of the most important questions we ask in life. My life connected to larger purposes and deeper truths.

The meaning of my life includes imagining myself as a gyroscope that returns from its dazzling spins to be balanced and grounded in the real world. The spinning gyroscope, rooted by gravity in the real world, the real world spinning and rooted in some caring Presence larger and older and wiser than it is. Dizzying, dazzling spins, grounded in something more real than we can see or touch or taste. **The gyroscope spinning and re-balancing.**

One final ingredient in the recipe for the meaning of my life is **the peace of night**, the ability to let things slip away, maybe like the last sliver of that miraculous orange circle as it slides into the water at sunset. The time comes to let it go, let it go. I include this as an important ingredient although it is often in short supply in the cupboards of my life.

Nature. The place just right. The pair bonding of creativity and happiness. Laughter. Simplicity –but not austerity. A pinch of adrenaline. People to love and people to love me. My life connected to larger purposes and deeper truths. The gyroscope spinning and rebalancing. The peace of night.

Though I might wish it were not so, there is something left over in my construct of the meaning of my life. It is hard to figure out what to do with this loose end. If my life changed so that one -- or two -- or four -- or seven -- or all ten of these things that lie at the center of my life were gone in an instant or perhaps in the cruelty of suffering of soul or body, would there still be meaning? I confess I do not know.

I remember meeting a nurse whose career had focused on nursing homes and hospice care who told me that hope is possible -- nay, is essential -- to living with meaning when losses pile up one on the other, and it always has to do with savoring what is possible and knowing it as good. I heard about Christopher Reeve's television interview with Barbara Walters in which he said he had contemplated suicide after becoming permanently paralyzed when he fell from a horse but when he looked at his children, he suddenly knew that he and they mattered so much to each other that life was worth living, even without the movement of his arms and legs.

What Christopher Reeve's answer -- and my common sense -- and knowing myself as a religious person tell me is that the meaning of life changes throughout life. I truly miss the physical closeness of mothering young children, the knowledge that I was both jungle gym and the safe center of the universe. That would have been the epicenter of life of my life twenty or thirty years ago. But it is not as central to the meaning of life for me these days, in this chapter of my life. Christopher Reeve loved the physical challenge of riding horses; never again will he do that, and he will have to find meaning made manifest in other ways. I suspect the process continues our whole lives long and that what he named as the meaning of life is a significant part of our being human.

For the religious question for each of us is, "What is the meaning of my life?" Hearing another person's answer is interesting, perhaps instructive, but the best thing that could happen is that this sermon would catapult YOU into wrestling with your answer, asking yourself, "What is the meaning of MY life?"

I have an idea. When a bunch of you have your answers, let's collect them and publish a book of the answers in our church. I have some ideas on how we could do this fast and cheap -- and have it ready the next time we welcome new members. For wouldn't it be a terrific gift to give them, a gift that would model our way of being religious by honoring the range of answers that lie in our hearts? And they could be invited to contribute their answer for the next edition.

So, here and now, how about the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Door County creating a simple 8 ½ x 11 book of the meanings of our lives? At this moment in United States history, we may be strengthened in our commitment to survive and thrive -- and our words could be an important artifact of a people of faith in our time and place.

*Dear Governing Board, how about just one more small project that wouldn't take very much money or very much time to have a small committee achieve this wee task?
Now, I don't think I want to chair the committee, but I definitely want to be on the team!*

#165 When Windows That Are Black and Cold (I've never heard this sung in a UU congregation...)
English melody, 1931, Oxford University Press...

When windows that are black and cold
are lit again with fires of gold;
when dusk and quiet shall descend
and darkness come once more a friend...

And when the sky is swept of wars
and keeps but gentle moon and stars,
that peaceful sky, that harmless air,
how sweet, how sweet, the darkness there....

Always, in all ways, go in peace, return in love...