

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, 405 Washington Ave. Albany, NY 12206

10.13.13 Sermon: "Higher Purpose"

Presenter: Rev. Sam Trumbore

Poor Hamlet, such a troubled character.

The recent death of his father, the king of Denmark, and the hasty remarriage of his mother Gertrude to Claudius, his father's brother, paralyzes him with grief and anger. Yet, he has no focus for that anger until he meets his father's ghost and learns of his mother's betrayal and his father's murder by Claudius' hand. As Sir Walter Scott put it so well:

Oh what a tangled web we weave,
When first we practise to deceive!

The ghost of Hamlet's father, stuck in purgatory because he died before he could confess and be absolved of his sins by the church, wants revenge and his son is the one who needs to step up and even the score.

Sadly, Hamlet isn't quite up to the task, and partly because he has been infected by the changing attitudes of his time. The "to be or not to be" soliloquy reveals his reluctance, perhaps born of exposure to the Calvinist view of eternal torment or a flirting consideration of Greek philosophy that reemerged during the Renaissance. What is the meaning of life anyway?

Hamlet's sense of being ungrounded in a changing world, feels so true to our time as well. Remember, only a few hundred years have passed since our planet has gone from being the center of the universe to an insignificant speck of dust on the outer rim of a galaxy in an incredibly large, expanding universe on its way to fizzling out some short billions of years from now.

Science robbed humanity of ultimate significance by showing us how small we are in the greater scheme of existence. The forces that shape stars, planets and solar systems operate at a scale that minimizes our importance.

Listen to how William Lane Craig, author of Reasonable Faith puts it:

"If there is no God, then man and the universe are doomed. Like prisoners condemned to death, we await our unavoidable execution. There is no God, and there is no immortality. And what is the consequence of this? It means that life itself is absurd. It means that the life we have is without ultimate significance, value, or purpose."

The philosophers who've expressed this angst well are the Existentialists. The world can only be approached as absurd, lacking inherent order and value, unsound and devoid of rationality. French philosopher Camus, used the Greek myth of Sisyphus to express the ultimate futility of human existence. King Sisyphus was a very crafty fellow. He promoted navigation and commerce but was avaricious and deceitful. He offended Zeus by killing travelers and guests, a

violation of hospitality, to maintain his iron-fisted rule. Sisyphus even tricked death, the god Thanos, and locked him up with his own chains. Zeus condemned Sisyphus for eternity to roll a huge stone up a hill then watch his efforts made meaningless as the stone then rolled back to the bottom each time.

Camus thought Sisyphus was still able to make meaning of his eternal punishment. Remember Sisyphus was a crafty fellow. He still could make meaning in the act of rolling the rock up the hill rather than the achievement at the end. After all, time will eventually wash away all of our achievements anyway. Who remembers who invented the wheel after all.

This parallels the central proposition of existentialism, that existence precedes essence. In other words, the fact our individual existence is more important than the preexisting forms into which society may wish to mold us, be it labels, roles, stereotypes, and categories. The life we make for ourselves individually creates our essence, rather than a preexisting form that we must shape ourselves into. We are free to create our own values and determine our own meaning and purpose, not submit to one imposed upon us by society, religion or the state.

But that freedom to shape oneself is a heavy burden as we see Hamlet waffling about what to do. In an earlier age, he would have taken up his sword and avenged his father's murder without a second thought. Polonius, the duplicitous courtier hoping to marry his daughter Ophelia to Hamlet and set her up to be queen, is killed by Hamlet while hiding behind a curtain spying on him for Claudius. Laertes, his son, doesn't hesitate after hearing of his father's murder. He returns from France, hot headed and ready for revenge. But Hamlet would rather hold the skull of Yorick the clown and blather on to his faithful companion Horatio, about how many times he kissed his lips as a child. Hamlet will not step up and claim his essence, claim his purpose.

For better or worse, many of us, at times, are like Hamlet. We too are driven by events and opportunities. We are rarely able to stand apart from the onrushing rush of life's demands and calmly make a free and reasoned choice. Being born in the Hamptons will shape vastly different opportunities than being born in Outer Mongolia. The good or bad fortune of our birth, the good and bad parenting we received, our genetic aptitude for hand-eye coordination, talent of ear and eye, ability for clear thought, to reason and analyze, the fitness and health of our body, all these factors cast the die before we are ready to choose a direction and form a purpose. And the circumstances around us may vastly limit our options. None of us can conjure genius out of the skillful use of learning styles. Mozart was born not made.

So we are far less free to create ourselves than we might like. And those who rise to greatness often have uncommon advantages.

But whatever our limited choices might be, we still can choose the higher purpose over the lower one. Discerning that higher purpose and choosing it imbues our lives with meaning.

Here are four qualities a higher purpose has to assist you in that discerning process.

First, a higher purpose isn't self-serving, it transcends the self. The Biblical Prophets were not arguing about the size of slice of the pie they should be getting. They spoke God's anger at the

violation of God's covenant. The authors of the Declaration of Independence were not doing a cost-benefit analysis of what they would get by rejecting British rule. Give me liberty or give me death. Malalai Joya, the Afghan woman who I heard speak here on Wednesday about the crimes going on against her people, especially women, by the warlords and fundamentalists who've been backed by the faith and credit of the US Government, doesn't advocate to advance her personal wellbeing. She has survived seven assassination attempts made against her. She is working for a greater vision of justice, equality and democracy than the Afghans know today.

She is an example of the second quality of a higher purpose. A higher purpose serves the good of the whole rather than any person or group. I'd put all the work being done to stop dumping sewage and toxic waste products in our rivers and landfills in this category. I find the movement to get to zero waste, in which chemist Paul Palmer was an early leader, terrifically exciting. Engineering manufacturing processes so well that the effluent leaving a plant is cleaner than the water that came in, is example of that vision we desperately need for every industrial facility.

A government dedicated to serving a higher purpose would look for ways to care for all people without endangering the ecosystem upon which we all depend for life. It would treat all the peoples of the world without prejudice assuming their inherent dignity and worth. Now that humanity dominates this planet, we must take responsibility to care for its future. The greater good of earth is in our hands right now. I believe we can both love people and live sustainably on this planet.

The third quality of a higher purpose is its timeless nature. A higher purpose will have the same value it had in Sumeria, Greco-Roman times, Biblical times, in Medieval times, the reign of Asoka in India, the Han and the Ming Chinese dynasties, the Kofun and Shogun periods of Japanese history, during the Renaissance, during the Victorian era as it does today. The care for and preservation of life has a timeless quality. Honesty and respect have a timeless quality. The pursuit of knowledge, truth and meaning has a timeless quality. Forming community and connections has a timeless quality. Generosity, compassion and wisdom have timeless value.

Which leads me to the fourth and last quality of a higher purpose I'll mention: it must, in one way or another, be a creative expression of love. Every higher purpose points us to the greatness of which we are made and have our being. For some that love is identical with God, but that word cannot convey the lived reality, the water in which we swim. What I know is that love is more real than what our senses can report to us and our mind can conceive. The best we can do is ponder it with awe and wonder ... and give our lives to its service. I love how Emerson puts it in the Oversoul which we read quotes from this morning together:

When it breaks through our intellect, it is genius, when it breathes through our will, it is virtue, when it flows through our affections, it is love.

For all Hamlet's angst about what to do, he is very fortunate to have faithful Horatio by his side. Horatio is the hidden-in-plain-sight model of virtue for us to observe and appreciate. From the first scene, Horatio embodies rationality, and calm. He is fearless in the face of the ghost as he demands to know its purpose. Hamlet praises Horatio for his virtue and self-control. His stoic bearing, a model of ancient character, doesn't waver, inspiring Hamlet's confidence and trust. Yet

Horatio feels deeply and loves Hamlet with all his heart.

At the end of the play Horatio, moved by duty and honor, is eager to drain the last poison from the cup that has killed Gertrude so he may accompany Hamlet in death. Hamlet must forbid him this act so Horatio may live to tell his story to the world.

As we see in the contrast between Horatio and Hamlet, discerning a higher purpose is not the same as acting upon it and living it in the world. And many of us do not follow just one higher purpose but have several of them that sometimes compete with each other. My calling to ministry sometimes conflicts with being a husband and father. And those may not square with taking a week of time to do a meditation retreat. Walking the Buddhist Eightfold Path may not always dovetail with a western lifestyle. Our hardest struggles can be to reconcile seemingly conflicting higher purposes.

This is why we need some source of inner guidance to bring it all into balance. Emerson suggests that source, one's intuition brought to life and refined by being passed through the fire of thought.

In that refining fire, can emerge a common thread. In Emerson words:

One tendency unites them all. The voyage of the best ship is a zigzag line of a hundred tacks. See the line from a sufficient distance, and it straightens itself to the average tendency. Your genuine action will explain itself and will explain your other genuine actions. Your conformity explains nothing. (from Self Reliance)

As the late, Rev. Dr. Forrest Church put it:

Is Shakespeare right? Is all the world a stage, with all the men and women merely players? Not exactly. Remember, we help write the play in which we are featured. This is a challenge, because we don't control our own material. The curtain may fall before we have a chance to perform our monologue or sing our swan song. On the other hand, we needed to follow the script. We can improvise, try out lines, strike poses, experiment while discovering, as best we can, what the play in which we're featured, is all about. (from Lifelines)

What I know, from the time I've strutted on this stage, is the satisfaction and meaning I've found, following my intuition and translating it into genuine action. To follow my example, though, would be folly. However, to follow your own inner light, passed through the fire of your thought and your experience, can be an excellent path to finding and fulfilling your higher purpose.

May this congregation be an excellent resource and support for you as you walk that path toward meaning, satisfaction and fulfillment.

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