

A Deliberately Interesting Life

Part I

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(This is the first Sunday of Julia's Candidating Week.)

Are you clear about your really big life priorities? It is common among Unitarian Universalists to think, "well, I value education and time together with people I love and wow do I enjoy Saturday mornings when I don't have to leap from bed and begin a long list of chores and we do plan a trip every summer and when we save up we're going to repaint the house . . ."

But how often do we grapple with the competing priorities that define our lives in the largest of contexts?

We assume that we know what our ethics are, and we have some vague notions about the universe and how people fit in, and we have lots of opinions about politics, but even among Unitarian Universalists, our understanding of what life is about, I find, is often vague and inconsistent.

There was a class at Duke University, my alma mater, called something like, "Planning Your Life." I expect it was thought to be one of those "soft courses" that folks take to keep up their grade point averages. It turned out to be a much more significant kind of learning experience. Students were asked to list the values they considered to be vital to a well-lived life. Then they wrote autobiographies and did some general dreaming and then several weeks into the course, they were to write about a hypothetical wonderful day in their future life. Now, here was where the big kicker was: They were then asked to analyze how their greatest values, already preserved in an earlier reflection paper, showed up in their day-to-day future lives. Mostly, there was very little correlation.

Think for a bit about how you might express "the meaning of life" in a few sentences.

OK, OK, that was a trick question, because I'm not sure that there is a meaning to life. I am not sure that we are put here to solve a particular puzzle for life on earth, or that we are here to perfect a certain trait that will further evolution, or that there will be a reward for living life in a good way. That's why I define myself as a humanist. I am not altogether sure that those things *don't* exist, but neither am I so sure that they do, so I have to make a life here in this present, in this world. And at the same time, I can't stand not to have some sense of direction.

Human beings are meaning-making machines. We insist on making everything mean something. Something happens and we speculate on why and what it means. We will attach meaning to it. Those who have really given up this very human habit either live in despair, or they are truly enlightened and have learned to submit in every moment to exactly "what is" without making up a story about what it means. There is a very long conversation around what life becomes if we can actually show up, present moment after present moment, without attaching a judgment. But that is for another time.

Most of us, if our lives seem just a haphazard jumble of events, feel out of whack. We need some sense of order. Without that sense that we are on track, we feel aimless and unproductive and unsatisfied and lost. We *require* meaning or a sense of purpose, even in the face of the possibility that there is no outside and lasting meaning.

Think about how little kids are when they are at play. When they have a goal, they are busy and excited and find it hard to finish lunch so that they can get back outside to work on "the project."

When I was a kid, one of my best ideas was to dig to China. I had heard my folks talk about China being on the other side of the world, and my buddy John and I, both about four years old, were gonna dig to it. We had quite a start in my backyard before my Dad, who loved his lawn, caught us. We would have lost interest before we made it, I am almost sure, but the pleasure in having a goal and committing to it was great.

So, if we cannot be sure that life has meaning, and being committed to a project feels good, maybe it doesn't matter what the project is, if in the moment it seems interesting.

My guess is that for children this might be true, any involving game or project and they are in it up to their necks. But as we grow older, most of us find, I suspect, that we need something more. Some sense that what we are about will make our lives *more*.

More what? Well, perhaps more safe. That's true if we are getting an education and making money and saving for the future. Putting by for rainy days and our children's education. Playing by the rules. Society certainly wants us to be enrolled in these ideas. All of our institutions depend on most of us trying to live safe lives. Of course, we also know that real safety has never been in our control. We can make ourselves fearful but we can't make ourselves or our world safe. I'll bet you are already filling in the rhetoric of "saving the world from terrorism."

Maybe we invest in making life more beautiful. I am a nester and I love working on my home. I am always planning some new aesthetic addition or new way of organizing. A redesign, a new color. Even now while living in an RV parked in my kids' driveway. It really does keep me occupied and happy for long periods of time. But I have moved so many times and after I have moved, the new owners of my home will do it their way. Maybe they will dig up my carefully planted garden or repaint my persimmon living room. I find that I have to make all of that mean something. Perhaps I can make it mean "an opportunity to practice non-attachment."

There is in Berkeley a particular shopping area. It has a chi-chi hardware store and a fabulous trendy cooking store, and many shops with beautiful clothes. I don't let myself go there too often. I come away wanting things. Wanting new dishes with the dream of beautiful dinner parties. New garden accessories. Maybe I'll perform weddings in my own back year next year. And new clothes. It is possible that sometime before I keel over I'll achieve sophistication. OK, not likely, but possible. I had an Aunt from New York who said, "dressing well is an art form." I think it actually is. But is it really the kind of art that I want my life to be about? If I let this kind of shopping mean something, I find myself, more often, frustrated by what I don't have than delighted by what I do. There is something about this kind of life for me that seems to always be about getting one more thing, and then . . . and then . . .

My conclusion: A good life is less about being a consumer than it is about being creative. We are happy in the project, its designing and implementation, in the dreaming and doing. Of

course, to do some things, we need supplies, but only just enough. So, then the question becomes: "What is enough?" That is a provocative question. One that needs constant exploration. It is finally, I think, not resolvable. It requires reflection and balancing and more reflection and analysis and re-balancing. How we define "enough" is fodder for many more sermons.

Hinduism honors all of these ways of finding meaning. Everything is a stage for spiritual growth. Earn as much money as you can in this life. Live in opulence. See what you figure out. Maybe your next life will be the path of Jana or learning, and the one after that, the path of karma or good works. All ways of living are valuable.

But what if we are less sure of having multiple lives? That would seem to stack the deck against such long-term experiments. I want to find a rich life this go-around.

The Dali Lama has said that the purpose of life is to be happy. Even against all of the suffering that modern Tibet has seen, visitors report that the Tibetan people are a happy people. They smile and laugh easily. They seem genuinely to be enjoying the moment. There's a tricky bit. I was raised with a "put your best foot forward" "try harder" "don't let it get you down" sort of training. And I have seen people smile when they didn't genuinely feel like it and, frankly, it is not a pleasant thing to be around. My old buddies in NC and I call it "chirpy." "Chirpy" behavior. The bright and brittle smile. The kind of person who says "No, really, I'm fine." "Don't worry about turning on the light. I'm OK here in the dark."

It is horrible to be with someone who is all doom and gloom all the time. It is equally horrible to be with someone who smiles through everything. unless it is a genuine joy breaking through even a great disturbance. In Judaism there is an expression, "*gem zoh l'tovah*." Even in this moment. It reminds us that everything is complex. Everything is a mixture of elements. There is nothing that is without both good and evil. Joy and pain.

Circumstances do not actually create our moods over the long term. There is something much much deeper in the fabric of who we are that is at work, something that I believe can be nourished and cultivated. The great example of this, in my lifetime, are those who made a life in the concentration camps. Death everywhere, terrible cold, physical suffering, the loss of everything that was ordinary, all of those things that we use to make us happy, and some

people had real lives in the face of all of that horror. Not only a dream that it would all be over, or a way to survive, but a real life. According to Victor Frankl, it was because they found meaning and almost always that meaning had to do with serving someone else. Even when that someone else was not present.

A man prayed continuously for his wife to survive. Not in the way of hoping that he would be reunited with her, but that she would live to have freedom again. There was a focus on her wellbeing rather than his own gratification. He experienced a sense that it mattered that he held her and her wellbeing faithfully. He came to believe that her life would be altered because of his constancy. He discovered usefulness in the midst of hell and everything was different.

Closer to home, one of the forensic patients at Napa Hospital where I was a chaplain always maintained his innocence. Now, I have no idea if he was really innocent or not, but I am convinced that he thought that he was. Imagine being locked up on a small ward with fifty people, all judged to be criminally insane. Imagine the noise. The lack of privacy. The constant restrictions on your freedom. Imagine what your quality of life would be. This man, exactly my age, was learning to read. And he was so grateful. He lived with hope. In his language, "God always provides."

What do we have that is beneath all of our acquisitiveness and our dreaming about what we are going to do or where we are going? What is the bedrock of our lives? This is the inquiry that we need to be about to have a life that is deliberately interesting.

"Begin with the end in mind." A famous book and training course begins: Imagine that you are at your own funeral. Who will be there? What will your acquaintances say mattered about your life? What are you most proud of? What will they want to write on your memorial?

Better yet, what do you want them to write on your memorial?

There is an old graveyard near the Outer Banks in North Carolina. One of the newest stones has a picture of a fiddle on it and the words: "You ain't heard nothin' yet." It not only made

me smile, I had a wonderful sense of a life lived in joy. Doing things to keep us moving along is not the same as finding a life with joy. We do many things just to anesthetize us from our lives. An ice cream cone on a hot afternoon may be a joy. A gallon of rocky road standing before the freezer at midnight is not. I have tried both.

So, how is it that we come to joy?

Are you actually hoping that I can give you an answer? Surely not. But I can share a strategy. And it is very simple.

Notice what you love. We are never in this life completely bereft of things that we love. Small things, perhaps. Even the memory of things. In the film *The Shawshank Redemption*, while in a terrible prison, the protagonist is sustained by his *memory* of music. Of Mozart. There are things which endure and bring balm to our hearts and can be cultivated. It may be that what we love is enough to build an entire life. Perhaps everything else is only distraction.

Notice what you love, seek it out, allow yourself time to reflect and give what you love a priority. Be sure that the long list of responsibilities you take on does not crowd out what you love. Time for what you love is important.

Now, if you begin to argue that you must use your time to fulfill your responsibilities rather than to chase joy, let me remind you that fulfilling your responsibility is itself a kind of joy. Especially when you stop to honor it. It is a yoga practice. A legitimate path.

Making space for what you love is often accomplished by attention to the simple and the ordinary. Things which we neglect in our rush toward . . . Well, toward what? What?

Let me offer a small example of tending to my own joy. I know that I am calmed by being near water. I find when I sit before the play of light in a stream, I grow quiet inside and some kind of elemental knowing that I am part of all that is, is restored. Almost no matter what else is going on. Like that wonderful Wendell Berry poem. I sit in the presence of wildness and I find something in me healed.

Many years ago now, I was doing a silent retreat in my own home. For ten days I had the phones turned off and the TV unplugged and all of my friends knew that I would be cloistered. Going into deep silence is very hard work. During this kind of retreat, I don't even read. Not only is the getting into the quiet a huge challenge, but the deeper I go, the more troublesome are the demons that awaken. I may explore these haunting interior caverns in other sermons, but in this one, I ask you just to accept that I needed solace.

I found a large tin washtub in the basement, put a few rocks in the bottom, half filled it with water from the hose and sat before it. It proved a worthy experiment. I was soothed and comforted. It may have looked silly, but the play of light on the ripples in my tiny, homemade pond, took me where I needed to go. I was able to submerge into something that I love and I was able to enter the quiet.

It was most likely more than mere serendipity that revealed this source of joy. It is probably true that the sustained effort to stay inside silence cleared the way for me to notice.

This is a good time to mention my great odyssey, the time I took from "real life" to seek the quiet and see what was important to me. There is a direct line from that great journey to my standing here in this pulpit right now

I was 52 years old. My parents had died in the early 1970s. I had raised two children into adulthood. I had broken up with a partner whom I loved very much but who, in my version of the story, was losing his battle with alcohol. And, I had run a small real estate business long enough to have a comfortable little nest egg. In other words, I had before me a great opportunity for recreating my life.

I bought a little recreational vehicle which I named Rover, and with my goofy dog, Molly, I roamed for nearly eighteen months. The bumper sticker 'All who wander are not lost' would have suited me quite well. My charge to myself was to leave behind all of what was familiar and to see, out of the emptiness and silence, what genuinely called to me. Here I am.

I have a nearly 2000-page journal from that wandering and the sad thing is, it is tediously boring. Nearly every entry opens with: "It was such a wonderful day. I was in the most beautiful place. I am so grateful for this life."

Notice what you love. Perhaps it is your grandmother's quilt warming you in bed. Perhaps it is the red-ribboned sky in a winter sunset. Perhaps it is the smell of a wood fire or the smell of cooking when you come in in the evening . . . even if it is from a crockpot that you filled yourself in the morning. Coming in from the dark to smell food must be a pleasure bred into us from the time of *Homo habilis*, when we first learned to use tools and cook our food instead of gnawing it raw off of the bone.

Notice what you love. What part of your life, of your work, of your body, of your family, of your home, of your time with friends, of your solitude, of this beautiful earth, do you love?

I know that I love community, being in community, building community. And feeding people. Feeding one another is a primal communal act. It is always a communion.

I love to eat with friends and talk and laugh and sometimes to grieve and cry. It is not quite the same to order a pizza and eat it on our laps watching a movie. I enjoy that, too, but I need a big table, a pot of homemade chunky soup, some crusty bread and genuine fellowship.

Notice what you love. Spend time cultivating it. Honor it. Build from it . If you take it seriously, it *will not allow* you to be seduced by the superficial. It *will* take you where you need to go. I believe it is foolproof. Joseph Campbell said to "follow your bliss." This is the same thing. Just start with the ordinary. The everyday. The most common elements of life and make room. That simple.

I'm now thinking that this should come with a warning tag. If you do this, if you notice and honor and ritualize the things you love, you have no idea where this life of yours may lead. That is the topic for next week's sermon, but I can promise you two things. It *will* be deliberately interesting and it will have real joy woven through every part of it.

Blessed be.