READING FOR THE NEXT SESSION

A final and critical dimension of a liberal religious theological stance has to do with human meaning. Over the past three decades we have witnessed distinctive value-tinged periods: the "Me Decade" of the 1970s, which was in turn a response to the "activist decade" of the 1960s. We passed through the "greed decade" of the 1980s, which spilled over into the 1990's "I deserve it" decade. What does the new millennium bring?

In his book *God and Other Famous Liberals,* F. Forrester Church writes that "we are the religious animal. Religion is our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die. When we discover we must die, we question what life means. 'Who are we? Where did we come from? Where are we going and why?'"

Albert Camus suggests that there is no inherent meaning embedded in the universe. Human beings don't *find* meaning—we *create* it out of the raw stuff of our own experience. So, if the cosmos, history, and life have no meaning to discover, we can live so that our lives have meaning. We are its originators. We behold the stars and write our meanings in them.

Viktor Frankl in *Man's Search for Meaning* suggests three sources of life meaning. He calls them experiential, attitudinal, and creative values. A fuller explication of these values can be found on pages 97–137 of his book in a section titled "Basic Concepts of Logotherapy."

By experiential values Frankl means experiences of love or beauty, which are of intrinsic worth in and of themselves. There is a Zen parable that illustrates the point, "A man traveling across a field encountered a tiger. He fled, the tiger after him. Coming to a precipice, he caught hold of a vine and swung himself over the edge. The tiger sniffed at him from above. Trembling, the man looked down to where, below him, another tiger waited. Only the vine sustained him. But two mice, one white and one black, kept gnawing away, little by little, the vine by which he hung suspended. Seeing a luscious ripe strawberry nearby, the man let go of the vine with one hand and held on tight with the other, as he plucked the strawberry and brought it to his mouth."

While it is hazardous to interpret a Zen story, it would seem that the parable is about life as the interim between two eternities. We live in the interim, dangling between birth and death. Knowing all this, what do we do in the interval? Of course, we eat the strawberry, a metaphor for all those experiences of love and beauty that grace our all-too-brief lives. Perhaps that is what we cling to, those delicious moments of being that present themselves to us. Perhaps what sustains us is the revelation of that creating, commanding, sustaining, and transforming power of life, a revelation never sealed.

The revelation is presented to us in the many common folk who have endured as we would endure. It is presented to us in the giants of the race whose names sound the gong of courage within us. It is presented to us in the sounds of poems and songs, written out of the deep moments of existence. It is presented to us in the tender touch of those we love, who love us as well. All this and more are in the offering of life that makes all things new. It remains for us to pluck the berry, seize the joy, and savor the meaning.

Experiential meaning needs nothing else to justify it. It is experience good for its own sake. There is no particular utility in witnessing a sunset, climbing a mountain, or enjoying friends and family. We do not usually do these things for their instrumental value—that they will earn us some kind of reward. We do them for their own sake—for the sake of doing them.

In memorial services I often say, "Some see life as a process of tearing the pages from a calendar and throwing them away, always looking to the pages still intact. But it is more than that. It also consists, not of discarding used pages, but of tenderly storing them in our hearts as experiences and memories that can never be lost. The life we live, all too brief, has its own fullness, its own memories, now stored in the hearts and minds of those who love us for as long as they shall live."

By attitudinal values Frankl means our capacity to find meaning even in suffering, tragedy, and death. It may seem strange that suffering as an attitudinal value is a source of life meaning. At first blush, we might think that suffering impedes our enjoyment of life's meanings. The theological issue of theodicy—justifying the ways of God to humanity—is an age-old problem. From the Hebrew bible's Book of Job, to modern literary efforts to explain suffering like Archibald MacLeish's *J.B.*, to Robert Frost's *Masque of Reason*, people have tried to find a reason for suffering, in vain.

Even that venerable philosopher, the late *Peanuts* cartoonist Charles Schulz, has Snoopy uttering this soliloquy while sitting atop his dog house with a cast on his paw, "Today I get my cast off. These have been the longest six weeks of my life. Of course, an accident like this makes you think. . . . It forces you to take a closer look at your own life. . . . It makes you want to ask questions . . . like *why me?*"

In the TV show "All in the Family," the legendary Archie Bunker was having a fierce argument with his agnostic son-in-law when he was asked, "Archie, if there's a God, why is there so much suffering in the world?" Archie replied, "I'll tell you why. . . . Edith, if there's a God, why is there so much suffering in the world?" There was only awkward silence, so Archie yelled, "Edith, would you get in here and help me? I'm having to defend God all by myself."

Ultimately the question of suffering appears to have no answer. We are left with the issue of how we respond to it. Buddha instructed a young mother with a dead child in her arms to go into the village and bring him rice from any home that had not known death. Of course there was none, and she returned with understanding of the inevitability of suffering and death.

It is not that suffering by itself is meaningful. It is that we bring something to it. As Anne Morrow Lindburgh wrote, "I do not believe that sheer suffering teaches. If suffering alone taught, all the world would be wise, since everyone suffers. To suffering must be added mourning, understanding, patience, love, openness, and the willingness to remain vulnerable." Viktor Frankl believed that suffering is an attitudinal value because the way we respond to it is the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's own way.

By creative values Frankl means commitment to another person or to a cause beyond the self, be it in the artistic or social sphere.

A vital source of personal religious meaning emerges out of a commitment to causes that transcend the self, the creation of something that will outlive the self. While psychologist Abraham Maslow has developed the concept of self-actualization, we need to study him more closely. He speaks of "deficiency needs"—requirements for security, status, and love, without which we could not survive. These blend into "being needs" as we ascend—the need to grow, to transcend the self, to serve causes beyond the self, to discover life meaning.

Abraham Maslow wrote, "Self-actualizing people are, without one single exception, involved in a cause outside their own skin, in something outside themselves. They are devoted, working at something, something which is very precious to them—some calling or vocation in the old sense, the priestly sense."

As we pursue the spiritual, we need to remember that a vital source of religious meaning is our participation in the passions of our time. It is a theme sounded by contemporary prophets like Dag Hammarskjöld in his book Markings, "In our era, the road to holiness necessarily passes through the world of action." Paul Tillich said, "An ultimate concern must express itself socially." James Luther Adams wrote, "The holy thing in life is the participation in those processes that give body and form to universal justice."

A convictional theology provides personal meaning. While much attention is paid in ethical thought to commandments and principles, not enough attention has been paid to the moral actor as person. The result has been moral and spiritual burnout. Without the empowerment of a theological vision, our actions often lack total commitment; our staying power is limited; we become victims of the "demonic of privatization." I affirm what James Luther Adams calls the "pragmatic theory of meaning." Meaning emerges from lived human experience.

The French writer Antoine de Saint-Exupery states it poetically, "To be [human] is, precisely, to be responsible. It is to feel shame at the sight of what seems to be unmerited misery. It is to take pride in a victory won by one's comrades. It is to feel, when setting one's stone, that one is contributing to the building of the world."

William Butler Yeats wrote in "The Second Coming," "Things fall apart, the center cannot hold. The best lack all conviction and the worst are full of passionate intensity." It is to regain the center, to rekindle the passionate intensity that convictional theology seeks. It becomes our "centerstance in the midst of circumstance," as James Luther Adams put it—a place to stand in the midst of a world that seems to have lost its way.

Work toward the Beloved Community of Earth is simply part of what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist. Faith exists by mission. Charles Peguy rightly said, "Religion begins in mysticism and ends in social action."

Background Reading

Frankl, Viktor E. *Man's Search for Meaning.* reprint ed. Boston: Beacon Press, 2000, pp. 97–136.

SESSION 8

We Are the Meaning Makers

I continue to believe that this world has no ultimate meaning. But I know that something in it has a meaning and that is man, because he is the only creature to insist on having one. This world has at least the truth of man, and our task is to provide its justification against fate itself. . . . If, after all, men cannot always make history have a meaning, they can always act so that their own lives have one.

—*Resistance, Rebellion and Death* by Albert Camus

The work of the world is common as mud.
Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust.
But the thing worth doing well done
Has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident.
Greek amphoras for wine or oil,
Hopi vases that held corn, are put in museums
But you know they were made to be used.
The pitcher cries for water to carry
And a person for work that is real.

—"To Be of Use" by Marge Piercy

Purpose

- To explore the sources of meaning for religious liberals

Materials

- Recording of "We Are the Music Makers" and "Who Is in My Temple?"
- Copies of *Singing the Living Tradition*
- Chalice or candle holder and matches

Preparation

- Before this session meets, review the information about the "Purpose in Life Test" and the instructions for writing an eschatological laundry list.
- Obtain recordings of "We Are the Music Makers" and "Who Is in My Temple?", which are on the UUA album *The Music Makers*, by Mary Burton, Bart Gould, and Peter Baldwin.

SESSION PLAN

The Purpose in Life Test — 75 minutes

Ask participants to look at the Purpose in Life Test (Worksheet 5) in this session. Explain the basis for this test by saying the following:

"This test is an attitude scale developed by Dr. James C. Crumbaugh from Logotherapy, a system of existential therapy created by psychiatrist Viktor Frankl. The test measures 'existential vacuum,' a concept Frankl developed to explain what happens when a person fails to find meaning or purpose in his or her life and thus fails to feel a sense of unique identity. The Purpose in Life Test has been useful in individual and group counseling to measure the progress of meaning orientation. It has also been helpful as a research tool to measure the expected degree of meaning and purpose in the life of various population categories (male, female, old, young, rich, poor, successes, failures, city, country, etc.)."

Have participants complete the test.

Eschatological Laundry List — 30 minutes

Ask participants to look at the material they have already written in their journals regarding religious experiences and values. Invite them to write an "eschatological laundry list"—succinct statements of learning values that provide a source of meaning for their lives.

For a model of such a laundry list, see the suggested reading for the Closing Ceremony. The reading is from *If You Meet the Buddha on the Road, Kill Him!* by Sheldon Kopp. Have the whole group share their statements or have them break into small groups for sharing.

Homework and Preparation for Session 9

- Ask participants to continue their credo writings. What is the central meaning or meanings for their life? Do their life meanings come in a philosophical framework or in the mundane details of the ordinary life? How do they relate to Viktor Frankl's model of the three sources of meaning (experiential, attitudinal, and creative)? What particular experiences in their lives have transcendent meaning?
- Have participants do the reading for the next session.

Closing Ceremony — 15 minutes

Ask the group to form a circle. Light the chalice or candle. Have participants write a cinquaine poem using one of the items listed on their laundry lists.

A cinquaine poem has five lines, as follows:

Line one: a noun
Line two: two words modifying the noun
Line three: Three "ing" words relating to the noun
Line four: a related four-word phrase
Line five: a synonym for line one

Example:

Vocation
Who, Me?
Centering, focusing, hoping
An act of faith
Calling.

Have participants share their poems around the circle. Ask the group to join you in this responsive reading, created from the writings of Sheldon Kopp.

This is it—there are no hidden meanings.

There is no particular reason why you lost out on some things.

The world is not necessarily just.

Nevertheless, you have a responsibility to do your best.

You are free to do whatever you like—

You need only face the consequences.

Yet it is necessary to keep on struggling.

There is no way to get all you want.

Often things are as bad as they seem.

Even so, some of the time it is possible to enjoy life as it is.

But the better anything gets, the more we miss it when it is gone.

What's a person to do about feeling helpless?

For a while there's just no way to see what's funny about being stuck.

At last you cry out in anguish: "Why me?"

And God answers: "Why not?"

You wait for everything to be all right,

Knowing all the while that the next problem is already in the mail.

Life just keeps coming at you.

There's nothing to figure out. Life is not "about" anything.

The answers keep changing.

The questions remain the same.

It helps to know that everyone is in the same situation.

It helps, but not enough.

Remember we are all in this alone.

We must live within the ambiguity of partial freedom, partial power, partial knowledge.

All important decisions must be made on the basis of insufficient data.

We must learn the power of living with our helplessness.

And loving with our helplessness

And beginning again and again and again.

End the session by playing the song, "We Are the Music Makers" or "Who Is in My Temple?" Or sing "Dona Nobis Pacem," hymn #388, or "It Sounds along the Ages," hymn #187, in *Singing the Living Tradition.*

WORKSHEET 5

THE PURPOSE IN LIFE TEST

Age _____ Sex _____ Date _____

Part A

For each of the following statements, circle the number that would be most nearly true for you. Note that the numbers always extend from one extreme feeling to its opposite kind of feeling. "Neutral" implies no judgment either way; try to use this rating as little as possible.

1. I am usually:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
bored		completely routine	neutral		exuberant	enthusiastic

2. Life to me seems:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
completely routine			neutral			always exciting

3. In life I have:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
no goals or aims at all			neutral		very clear goals and aims	

4. My personal existence is:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
utterly meaningless and without purpose			neutral			very purposeful and meaningful

5. Every day is:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
exactly the same			neutral			constantly new

6. If I could choose, I would:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
prefer never to have been born			neutral		like nine more lives like this one	

7. After retiring, I would:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
loaf completely the rest of my life			neutral		do some of the exciting things I always wanted to do	

8. In achieving life goals I have:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
made no progress whatever			neutral			progressed to complete fulfillment

9. My life is:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
empty, filled only with despair			neutral			running over with exciting good things

10. If I should die today, I would feel that my life has been:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
completely worthless			neutral			very worthwhile

11. In thinking of my life, I:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
often wonder why I exist			neutral			always see a reason for my being here

12. As I view the world in relation to my life, the world:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
completely confuses me			neutral			fits meaningfully with my life

13. I am a:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
very irresponsible person			neutral			very responsible person

14. Concerning a person's freedom to make his or her own choices, I believe one is:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
completely bound by limitations of heredity and environment			neutral			absolutely free to make all life choices

15. With regard to death, I am:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
unprepared and frightened			neutral			prepared and unafraid

16. With regard to suicide, I have:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
thought of it seriously as a way out			neutral			never given it a second thought

17. I regard my ability to find a meaning, purpose, or mission in life as:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
practically none			neutral			very great

18. My life is:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
out of my hands and controlled by external factors			neutral			in my hands and I am in control of it

19. Facing my daily tasks is:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
a painful and boring experience			neutral			a source of pleasure

20. I have discovered:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
no mission or purpose in life			neutral			clear-cut goals and a satisfying life purpose

Part B

Make complete sentences out of each of the following phrases. Work rapidly and fill in the blanks with the first thing that pops into your mind.

1. **More than anything, I want** _____
2. **My life is** _____
3. **I hope I can** _____
4. **I have achieved** _____
5. **My highest aspiration** _____
6. **The most hopeless thing** _____
7. **The whole purpose of my life** _____
8. **I get bored** _____
9. **Death is** _____
10. **I am accomplishing** _____
11. **Illness and suffering can be** _____
12. **To me all life is** _____
13. **The thought of suicide** _____

Part C

Write a paragraph describing in detail your aims, ambitions, and goals in life. How much progress are you making in achieving them?

When participants are finished with the test, have them tabulate their scores with the following instructions by Dr. James C. Crumbaugh.

Scoring the Test

Part A only:

- Add the twenty numbers you circled in Part A.
- Scores falling between 92 and 112 indicate some indecisiveness of purpose and meaning in life.
- Scores below 92 suggest a lack of clear meaning and purpose.
- Scores above 112 suggest the presence of definite purpose and meaning in life.

It should be stressed that these "norms are based on statistical samples and all individual scores are subject to error variance; they offer only a rough indication of the individual's probable level of purpose in life, but can be used well as a source of exploration of individual circumstances."