

Opening Reading: From "Logotherapy in a Nutshell", by Viktor Frankl

“The pessimist resembles a man
who observes with fear and sadness
that his wall calendar, from which he daily tears a sheet,
grows thinner with each passing day.

On the other hand,
the person who attacks the problems of life actively
is like a man who removes each successive leaf from his calendar
and files it neatly and carefully away with its predecessors,
after first having jotted down a few diary notes on the back.

He can reflect with pride and joy
on all the richness set down in these notes,
on all the life he has already lived to the fullest.

What will it matter to him if he notices that he is growing old?
Has he any reason to envy the young people whom he sees,
or wax nostalgic over his own lost youth?

What reasons has he to envy a young person?
For the possibilities that a young person has,
the future which is in store for him?

No, thank you,' he will think.
'Instead of possibilities, I have realities in my past,
not only the reality of work done and of love loved,
but of sufferings bravely suffered.

These sufferings are even the things of which I am most proud,
although these are things which cannot inspire envy.' "

**Introduction: Giving Meaning vs. Finding Meaning:
Sermon by Rev. Norm Horofker Oct. 16, 2011**

When Searching for Meaning Isn't Enough: A Sermon by Norm Horofker

The inspiration for my sermon this morning is the Fourth Principle of Unitarian Universalism. **“We the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote a free and responsible search for Truth and Meaning.”**

As I was preparing this sermon, I was drawn to the work of Viktor Frankl, a man uniquely qualified to comment on searching for the meaning in life. Viktor Frankl survived life in a Nazi death camp. His mother and father his brother and his wife all perished in those camps. Yet, Viktor Frankl not only survived the experience of the death camps, he transcended them, emerging from the experience with a most powerful and positive understanding of human motivation. Frankl's book “Man's Search for Meaning” written in 1946 sold over ten million copies by the time of his death in 1997.

Viktor Frankl's teaching can be summed up in one quote: **“Life is never made unbearable by circumstances, but only by lack of meaning and purpose.”** Frankl once gave a simple example of how answering a question can help us to transcend our circumstances. He described being stuck on an airplane with a seat mate who was totally focused on how much of a hassle the trip had been for him. He had experienced every possible aggravation; delayed flights, lost luggage, surly cabin stewards, bad food, crying babies and on and on it went. And Viktor Frankl was stuck next to this person who wanted to nothing but to wallow in his misery. Can anyone here relate to that experience?

Viktor Frankl led with a question. Tell me why are you making this journey? The seatmate began to talk about returning home after a long business trip, and how he hoped to be met by his wife and his children at the airport. He took pictures out of his wallet and shared them with Frankl, and as he talked about why he was taking this journey, his attitude changed completely.

When Frankl's traveling companion acknowledged the question... the why, instead of focusing on the circumstances, he transcended those circumstances.

Unitarian Universalists have enshrined a belief in the importance of a searching for meaning in our lives in our Fourth Principle. But what does the search for truth and meaning look like for most of us?

I lost my car keys a few months ago. At first I was totally engaged in a passionate search. I turned the house upside down. I asked my wife what she had done with my keys... (always my default position when I lose something.) I retraced my steps. I asked everyone I met if they had seen my car keys. I searched everywhere and at every opportunity.

But as days went by and then weeks and now months I must confess that the passion has gone out of my search. Oh, technically the search is still on but frankly I have given up hope of ever finding them. It is hard to sustain passion in a search when you have given up hope of

finding what you are looking for. I am afraid that my search for meaning in life has all too often been like my search for the car keys.

(By the way, there is a black Pontiac key and a silver Ford key on a round silver key ring along with a sandalwood elephant... just in case anyone here might happen to see them.)

To make an analogy, and preachers love analogies... we behave as if the keys to the Kingdom of God are lost out there somewhere. We are keeping our eyes out for them, but we are no longer excited by the prospect that I will ever find them, and unlike my car keys, we don't even know if I would recognize them if we stumbled on them.

I have three issues with our commitment to a search for truth and meaning. First, do I have any idea of what it is I am searching for? What is this "truth and meaning" that I search for? What is its source and how does it arise in my experience and my consciousness.

Second, I can justify my existence as a process of searching and yet I never actually have to do anything. When challenged to explain the incongruity between my professed beliefs and my actions, I can say, "Well, I am still searching for the answers. I will let you know when I find them."

Third, when I need my religion the most, the idea of a search is not adequate. There are times when I just cannot search. At times when I most need spiritual support, when I cannot see because my eyes are clouded with tears, when I cannot think because my mind is seized, obsessed with worry, fear or guilt... At times like these, the idea of engaging in a search is not much comfort.

Let me tell you a story about a search on a cosmic scale. This search has the power to sustain my passion. In 1990 NASA launched the Hubble Space Telescope. In the intervening years the Hubble telescope has provided us with images of our universe that are, in my opinion, some of the greatest achievements in the history of science and the history of religion. These images of our universe set a whole new standard for the meaning of the word awesome.

We should be very proud that the two astrophysicists considered to be the father and the mother of the Hubble Space Telescope were also Unitarian Universalists. Lyman Spitzer died in 1997. He and his wife, Doreen Canaday Spitzer, helped to found the UU Congregation of Princeton New Jersey. Dr. Nancy Grace Roman, is a lifelong UU and an active long time member of the River Road UU Congregation in Bethesda Maryland.

In 2004, the scientists that control the Hubble Space Telescope decided to undertake a search. They decided to search a tiny patch of sky, a patch of sky the size of a grain of sand held out at arm's length. They purposely chose a section of the sky that from all earth based observations was completely black. As far as we could observe from earth there was nothing there.

Using their remote controls they moved that giant space telescope until its 8 foot diameter,

light-collecting mirror was pointed at that small patch of empty sky. And then they waited, and they waited, and they waited some more. They waited for the equivalent of a 28 day time exposure.

Eventually, a fantastic image emerged: ten thousand galaxies *each* of which contains billions of stars, ten thousand galaxies like our home galaxy the Milky Way, ten thousand spirals and globular clusters and islands of billions of stars and planets.

The most distant of these objects is at the very edge of the “visible universe.” That phrase, the “visible universe” has important implications. Because the universe was created at a moment in time, and because light travels at a finite speed, there is a limit to how far we can see into the universe, and the Hubble Telescope takes us very close to that limit.

It takes us not only to the end of space, but to the beginning of time. It is impossible to know what lies beyond the boundary of the visible universe and it always will be so. This edge of the visible universe is the edge of our home, a circumscribed bubble of time and space in which all we know and all we ever can know exists.

What analogy, what metaphor, might provide a handle on this bewildering and improbable experience that is our home? This morning, I invite you to imagine the Universe as the Ultimate Theme Park.

We find ourselves alive and conscious in this amazing Theme Park. It is constructed in a way that provides mysteries to be explored, challenges to be overcome, choices to be made and most importantly, questions to be answered.

Like manmade theme parks, we are only allowed inside for a short time. Our ticket will expire and we will be obligated to leave the park. Some might say, we have to go home! But our mortality and finitude is not as a curse, rather it is a challenge to make our lives, to make our choices, to make our answers matter!

The Ultimate Theme Park presents a paradox. The great physicist Niels Bohr had the following to say about the role of paradox: **“How wonderful that we have met with a paradox. Now we have some hope of making progress.”**

This paradox arises because, on one hand, the improbable beauty and consistency of the universe calls on our emotions, it pulls us into a personal relationship and it demands an explanation. We find ourselves in a world of beauty and mystery, of living things, diverse and interdependent, of complex patterns of growth and evolution, of subatomic particles and cosmic swirls, and we feel compelled to sing of God the Creator, the Maker and Source and Sustainer of all that is. This is the foundation of religious thought.

On the other hand, the best rational explanation, the only scientific explanation for it all, is random chance. The best scientific explanation tells us that the entire universe and everything in it is the result of chance, a random fluctuation in the quantum field.

What I am striving for is a working hypothesis that allows me to explain the apparent absence of God in the midst of a creation that speaks to me of the reality of God.

The Ultimate Theme Park is fundamentally different than any other theme park. At Disney Land, if I wanted to ruin the theme park experience for a 5 year old, (And I would never intentionally do that!) I could go around exposing the man made illusions. After all, it is all chicken wire and plaster isn't it? I could pull the plastic head off of Mickey Mouse, exposing the very human aspiring actor within. I could even ruin the child's experience of a hot dog by showing him or her where the meat came from.

But a fundamental aspect that distinguishes the Ultimate Theme Park is that we can never expose the hand of the creator. If we could, then the magic of the park, the very purpose of the park, would be destroyed.

One of the great Unitarian preachers of the 19th century reached this conclusion. Octavius Brooks Frothingham spoke about the "Hidden God." Hear his words from 1873!

"The development of individual character, the progress of society demands that God remain hidden. The world of circumstance and responsibility, of culture and duty, of study and growth, must be ours; ours to investigate and to comprehend; ours to conform to or to force into conformity with ourselves; ours to do battle in, to conquer, to shape; ours as a school of instruction, a laboratory of experiment, a field of toil, a home of affection.

There must be no spot too holy to be trodden, no peak too sacred to be scaled, no depth too awful to sound, no laws too solemn to be questioned, no book too divine to criticize, no institution too venerable to be altered, no creed too full of inspiration to be submitted to the search for reason.

Man must be free, nay, must be compelled to do his own work, without interference from specters."

Frothingham is telling us that we must be the agents that give meaning to life and that we give meaning when we answer the most challenging questions that the universe can pose.

I earlier stated that the first problem with the idea of a search for meaning is that we don't know what it is that we are searching for. Where then, do we begin our search? Viktor Frankl proposes a solution to that problem. He tells us that we are searching for the answer to questions, questions that arise from a dialogue between our consciousness and the reality of the universe, the ultimate theme park.

The universe presents us with experiences of great joy and with experiences of unspeakable suffering and tragedy. We are confronted with willful injustice, evil and capricious suffering, the blind desecration of the sacred web of life. At some point the search for meaning is not enough. We need to answer the questions that the universe is asking us. When we stand mute in awe before an image like the Hubble Ultra Deep Field, the question emerges, what does this mean for us? Is that question posed by the biochemical processes within our brain, or is the question posed by the reality of the theme park. In fact the question arises in the dialogue between the two. The universe is inviting us into a dialogue.

The second problem, with the search for truth and meaning was that we could continue the search indefinitely without it ever really affecting our lives. The universe, however, is not

calling us to a unending search, rather it is calling to us for our answer to the questions that it presents. The important thing is not the search for an answer. It is instead the conscious decision to give an answer. We are called to get off the fence and answer the questions of life, even if our answer is only provisional; a working hypothesis that can guide our actions.

I am reminded of the angry person confronting Saint Peter at the Pearly Gates. “Why,” he asks, “did God stand by and allow suffering and injustice when God had the power to do something about it?” And, Saint Peter responds, “I was about to ask you the same question!” We are being asked! We must wake up and hear the questions.

There are big and little questions. Here are a couple of the big ones. What does it mean when people risk their lives coming here to escape grinding poverty and we then arrest them and lock them in prisons that we operate for a profit? What does it mean when the best science tells us that we are risking the very balance of nature over global warming, and we choose to turn away?

Finally, when we realize that we have been called into relationship with the universe, and when we have heard the questions and given our answers, then our answers become the basis for our religious beliefs; beliefs that can sustain us and help us to transcend those times of tears, mourning, fear, guilt and despair.

I choose to believe that life means something, that this experience of consciousness in the Amazing Ultimate Theme Park is not an accident, but is instead, a call to become fully human a call to live in love and compassion and joy within the park until the moment that it is time to leave.

Remember my reference to the lost keys to the Kingdom of God? The fact is that the keys to the Kingdom were not given with the Kingdom. The secret of life is not finding the keys to the Kingdom, it is instead giving the answers to the questions posed by the Kingdom. In giving answers we cease our endless search for meaning and instead we give meaning to our lives. Thereby we create, we make, we fashion our own key to the Kingdom.

The good news of Unitarian Universalism is that we are truly free to give our own answers to the questions posed by our experience of life in this Amazing Theme Park. Unitarian Universalism provides a loving non-judgmental religious community, a community that is ready to support us in that quest.

Being a community dedicated to giving meaning, not just searching for meaning, is what makes us a religion. Trusting each person to be their own judge of what is true makes us unique, and doing so in a joyful, supporting and sustaining environment is what keeps us coming back.

May it be So... Hallelujah and Amen

Closing Words: A Prayer for A Day By Norm Horofker

May we live each day with the excitement of a child in the greatest of all theme parks.

May we celebrate our joy in God's creation, taking nothing for granted and finding delight in the simplest of pleasures.

And when times of great sorrow come, may we know that there is no shame in tears.

But may we be granted the grace to glimpse through our tears a meaning that transcends our lives.

At the end of the day, may we rest secure in our faith in the beauty of the Spirit, the Spirit that sustains us all through whatever fortune may come our way.

May it be so,
Amen