

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.