

The Life Worth Living
Examining and Defining the Values that Hold You Steady

By

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When I was called as your minister nine years ago, you asked me to begin at the start of July, a month earlier than is usual. This meant I had a month less than I'd expected to get our home ready for the market. I renovated a bathroom, repaired a section of our garage roof that a tree had fallen over and crushed, repainted much of the inside, installed new wiring and plumbing, bruised a bursitis in my knee while laying a new kitchen floor, and had to unexpectedly repair a patch of dry rot I discovered under the refrigerator in the process. I worked every hour I could right up to moving day, knowing I wouldn't be able to finish everything and that I'd eventually have to just walk away, leaving much undone.

When moving day came, I got off my knees to start packing the moving truck. My 19-year-old son, who had only moved out two weeks prior, was to bring his SUV over so I could trade him my more fuel-efficient Scion XB. We needed the larger vehicle his grandparents had given him to carry three people, three dogs, and our essentials with us across the country. When he arrived, I heard a terrible grinding noise coming from his Suzuki XL7. He got out and said, "I think there's something wrong with the brakes." He had correctly diagnosed the problem. In fact, there were no brakes. They had been ground down to nothing, so badly that the shoe on one side had completely fallen apart. So, on moving day, I had to get the vehicle towed to Sears Auto, which could take care of it that same day, then returned to the house to finish packing the truck. By the time I got the car back and loaded, I was exhausted, and felt I was leaving way too much unfinished, including saying goodbye to our neighbors, and little ceremony saying goodbye to my son who didn't want to leave Louisville. But I'd done all I could. It was time to let go.

The trip itself was not entirely uneventful, especially once we got to Kansas. It was extremely hot, which caused our overworked air-conditioner to begin flooding our floorboard with condensed water. To make matters worse, it happened on Sunday of the July 4th weekend, making it nearly impossible to find a mechanic to work on it. Eventually we found a tire store that was open and able to help us out. In the process, they let us know the scorching hot Kansas interstate had ruined our tires. Many hours later, and a new set of expensive tires to boot, we were on our way. We ended up spending a part of three different days in Kansas, instead of just the one we had planned on. That's when I began joking that I'm no longer a Universalist because I now believe in eternal damnation: Kansas is hotter than Hell and it lasts forever.

I begin with this snippet of our journey to Spokane as a metaphor of life. Things don't always go as planned, we run out of time, we can't do everything, and we encounter unexpected

problems. Yet, here I am, nine years later. Why? Why didn't we give up and say we can't move on because we've got unfinished business, or because our vehicle is inadequate, or because we'll have to go through hell getting there? We endured all these unpleasant realities because the point was never about finishing the house, or the car we'd drive, or how difficult the trip might be. The point was getting to Spokane.

That's the question I think should be before each of us in all we do: *What's the point?* The answer is something we each have to figure out for ourselves. This isn't to say the meaning of life is entirely subjective. As we struggle to understand the perennial problems of meaning, truth, and morality, we should pursue them intelligently and responsibly, by seeking empirical evidence for our conclusions, and interpreting such evidence through reason. Because of our limitations, however, it's not possible for anyone to fully grasp meaning, truth, or morality, which is why it always come down to some degree of subjective guesswork. But I think we should base every leap of faith on our best educated guess, not upon our emotional whims and instinctive desires.

I also believe that we should each be able to easily articulate, for ourselves if for no one else, what the point of our lives is. What is our source of meaning? What is our purpose here? Why do we think so? If we don't understand *why* our goals, principles, or values give us purpose, then we are not living a worthy life, at least not according to Socrates who famously said, "The unexamined life is not worth living."

Each of us has values, even if we aren't fully cognizant of them, even if we sense them only through unconscious emotional cravings and instinctive desires. They might drive us to pursue the welfare of our children and families, a good income, wealth, fame, fortune, power, to be a good person, to be a kind person, to live on Easy Street, to find love, to make the world a better place, and so forth. Knowing what we're about, what our purpose is, what the point of it all is, helps us get there, no matter what barriers we must work around along the way. Knowing what we're about, what the point of it all is, enables us to let go of the things distracting us from our goal, or from fulfilling our purpose, of from living out our values, Knowing what we're about gives us permission to leave other things undone, to maintain the vehicles that will get us there, and to endure whatever hardships we encounter along the way.

So, we've all got something driving us, but how many of us have intentionally determined what it is and, more importantly, what it should be? What if we discover we're motivated most by an unworthy goal or unworthy values? What if our reason for being is merely our personal safety, or controlling others so we always get our way, which manifest as greed and authoritarianism? Yet we don't know we behave as greedy authoritarians because we've not examined our lives, our purpose, or our underlying values? We go through life, rather, pursuing the immediate gratification of our instinctive desires; rationalizing and justifying them on an emotional whim?

In his book, *How to Think Like a Roman Emperor*, about the stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius, author Donald Robertson says, “Foolish people ... vacillate, driven by contradictory passions, which flutter from one thing to another like butterflies. That’s why we often hear the Stoics praising the wise man for remaining ‘the same’ no matter what he faces—even his facial expression and demeanor remain consistent come rain or shine.”¹ That’s the value of having values, of being clear on what we’re about before ever arriving upon a difficult situation. It’s how we know what we must do in the midst of chaos and uncertainty. It’s how we maintain integrity and express character in the most difficult of circumstances.

This is the reason the Stoics came up with a different answer to the same problem Buddha faced. Before he became the Enlightened One, young Siddhartha experimented a great deal while trying to figure out the meaning of life. First, he tried aestheticism by over-indulging in life’s pleasures. Unsatisfied, he went in the opposite direction, asceticism, by entirely avoiding all forms of gratification and indulgence, even to the point of suffering. But Prince Siddhartha became Buddha when he discovered the Middle Way between extreme indulgence and extreme austerity.

The Stoics prized such moderation too. In fact, temperance is one of their four basic virtues, or what I prefer to call values. At the time of its emergence around 300 BCE, Athenian society had been decimated by war, its population was widely dispersed, and it was slowly being overtaken by the encroaching Roman Empire. Its people, feeling depressed, despondent, and disenfranchised, badly wanted something to help them feel better about life. They wanted what the Greeks called, *eudaimonia*, which means “good spirit.” They wanted to feel cheerful and content again. They wanted to be happy.

It was at this time three new philosophies emerged to solve the problem, Epicureanism, Cynicism, and Stoicism. The first of these, Epicureanism—also called, *Hedonism*—like Siddhartha, pursued happiness through pleasure. Cynicism pursued it through austerity, like Buddha’s asceticism. But Stoicism is not like Buddha’s Middle Way. The Stoics didn’t think temperance, all things in moderation, was the secret to happiness. In fact, they didn’t believe happiness has anything to do with pain or pleasure. For the pain and pleasures we might experience are inconsequential to the matters of truth, meaning, and morality—to the perennial questions before each of us.

The only thing that should matter, according to stoicism, is the fulfillment of our core values. Everything else is indifferent. If pursuing certain pleasures doesn’t diminish our values, then enjoy. If avoiding unpleasant experiences doesn’t diminish them, then, by all means, avoid undesirable circumstances. But if fulfilling our values requires us to endure certain difficulties, then endure them we must if we want to fulfill our own purpose, have integrity

¹ Robertson, Donald. *How to Think Like a Roman Emperor* (p. 107). St. Martin's Publishing Group. Kindle Edition. 2020.

and character, and demonstrate truth and morality as best we understand them. So, pain and pleasure, indulgence and austerity, are indifferent. Moderation is good stoic practice but embodying our values in everything we do is the greatest good because it is the only thing that remains useful in all circumstances.

If you agree with this, and you haven't yet thought about it, the questions to begin with are, what are your core values? Why are they your core values? What does it take for you to fulfill them?

My core values are reason, freedom of conscience, and the humanistic ethic. By reason, I mean testing my own assumptions with empirical data, facts, and logic, and treating others reasonably, with thoughtfulness, not "driven by contradictory passions, which flutter from one thing to another like butterflies." Being reasonable means being consistent in the demonstration of my values, no matter the circumstances. It's not always easy, but I do my best. Being reasonable also means being able to properly consider the value of what others tell us is true.

Freedom of conscience is about respecting the autonomy of others, not only enough to allow them to freely express themselves, even when I disagree with them, but to also do my best to protect their right to do so. It means standing against authoritarianism and authoritarians, even on behalf of those who say things I disagree with. It means being able to openly extend the hand of friendship and demonstrate respect for those in other ideological camps.

And the humanistic ethic means working for human welfare and for a society that fosters the unfolding and potential of every person. It means recognizing we are all far more akin than we are different, and, because we are part of one family, the human family, we can genuinely celebrate our differences without fear or hostility. It means, as Chief Joseph said, "The Earth is the Mother of all people, and all people should have equal rights upon it."²

Living out these values is a pleasure when the community one is part of is also working in the same direction. But when they begin deviating from them, it can be painful standing up for our values. If avoiding pain is the point of our lives, then we won't. But if our values, what we stand for, are the point of all we do, then pain and pleasure are indifferent.

Some of you may recall my annual report last year, when I told you about the controversial book I had written, and what I planned to do with it:

Several months ago ... I had to take a hiatus from working on [another book] to begin researching and writing a briefer book about how identity politics, safetyism, and political correctness are detrimentally impacting Unitarian Universalism.

² Freedman, Russell, *Indian Chiefs*, Scholastic Inc., New York, NY, 1987, p. 111.

I found the amount of interest and scholarship written about these subjects surprising, but also extremely beneficial in helping me frame what's going on in our larger culture and, sadly, in our denomination these days. My efforts have resulted in a short book about my concerns, which I intend to distribute during the UUA General Assembly in Spokane later in June. With apologies, I'm withholding its release until then, because timing, in this case, matters. I'm not sure what the consequences of this action will be but expect some hostility to head my direction because of it. Nevertheless, if our denomination is going to survive, and be worthy of survival, I feel it is a course of action I must take while the opportunity presents itself right here in our own backyard.

Despite the additional stress preparing this book, entitled *The Gadfly Papers: Three Inconvenient Essays by One Pesky Minister*, has caused, and feeling anxious about its uncertain impact, the research and writing has been rich and rewarding. I love learning about new areas of thought. It keeps the world fresh and alive for me, and fills me with information, insight, and wonder that I'm always eager to pass on to you on Sunday mornings.

Boy did I ever underestimate the level of hostility that would come my direction. But even if I had known the complete fallout, I would have done so anyway, because that's what my values require of me. I am among very few who have had the courage to push back against the assault on our traditional Unitarian values, which are also the best values our Western culture has to offer. But I had to do so as surely as the salmon must swim upstream against all odds to return to its spawning ground. Because these values are the point. It's one thing when we're all swimming in the same direction, but quite another when we're not. It's one thing, as a liberal, to go up against conservative ideas and values. Then your peers love you. They are with you. They call you a hero. But when defending your values means going up against other liberals who have forgotten our ways, it's not so easy, to say the least. But, again, that's indifferent to the point.

Fortunately, I'm not entirely alone, though my detractors have worked hard to isolate me as an evil outlier who has gone insane. In early March, the members of the UU Congregation of Salem issued a public statement saying:

We oppose recent efforts by ministers in our denomination to discourage discussion of *The Gadfly Papers: Three Inconvenient Essays by One Pesky Minister* as well as the censure of its author Rev. Todd Eklof by the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association ... We call on the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association to rescind its censure of Rev. Todd Eklof, to cease referring to the UU movement as a white supremacy movement, and to encourage discussion and action to counter oppression and injustice wherever they are found.

And just this week the members of Valley UU Congregation in Chandler, Arizona issued a statement to our national leadership expressing:

... its support of Rev. Todd Eklof and his publications on "Political Correctness" issues in our denomination. Here is a summary of our concerns:

- The UUMA and, by its silence, the UUA itself have criticized and restricted the expression of concerns of a loyal UU minister, who is speaking as a matter of conscience.
- Neither the UUA Board nor the President have supported in any way (through spoken word or otherwise) the integrity and courage of Rev. Eklof.

... We are very disappointed that our financial contributions support actions and policies that directly counter several UU Principles. We are strongly requesting that:

- the UUA Board express public support of Rev. Eklof's courage in raising important issues in our denomination.

Other congregations and individuals have made similar statements, because, like me, they feel we must stand up for our values if they are going to survive the radicalization of the extreme Left that's impacting liberalism throughout Western society. But going up against extremism, whether on the Left or Right, isn't easy, because extremists tend toward demonizing, dehumanizing, and destroying anyone who threatens their ideologies, rather than behaving reasonably. But, again, avoiding such displeasure isn't the point of our lives, unless we agree with the aesthetics.

When I first began planning this sermon, I meant to link it mostly to how defining our values can help get us through the chaos caused by the COVID-19 crisis, which should be the biggest concern for all of us right now. Unfortunately, in light of what's transpired in our own congregation these past couple of days, it has become necessary for me to once again address where I'm at with this other issue. I had been trying to take a hiatus from addressing the dogmatic takeover of our liberal religion, so we can all fully concentrate on getting through what should be considered a far more important problem. But it has become necessary for me to also address the pandemic of infectious intolerance and dogma threatening our free society and our liberal community.

I'm not sure where any of this is going to end for our church, or for my ministry. It's not looking good, and it's certainly not going to be pleasant. But, at least for me, pleasure isn't the point. I'm still going to pursue my values—reason, freedom of conscience, and the humanistic ethic—because this is the point of my life. These values are my responses to the perennial problems of truth, meaning, and morality. The question before all of us, our church and our world, is are they still our values too?