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## What I Did On My Summer Vacation or The Meaning of Life

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### Opening Words

We are here  
*to celebrate the marvel that we live at all*  
and that there is so much we can offer each other  
*in these summer days,*  
as we celebrate what matters,  
*and praise all that is meaningful. And so*

(together) **Living our lives with purpose and gratitude,  
moved by the beauty of the world  
and claiming justice for all who live upon it,  
we open our hearts to greater loving,  
healthier knowledge, deeper compassion  
and hope of peace.**

Long ago a group of people had to move from their beautiful island home and migrate to a quite ordinary and poor island. Someday they would be able to return to their homeland, but that day was hundreds of years in the future. And since the thought of the life they had lived on their island made their existence on this present miserable island even more intolerable, the islanders soon began to “forget” how good life had been before. After a while, their previous life became only a wonderful dream to their children and grandchildren. But the descendants still cherished the wonderful news that someday it would be possible to return, and so they preserved the great art of shipbuilding so that when that day finally arrived, all would be able to make the journey home.

As hundreds of years passed, though, the memory of home grew dimmer and dimmer. In fact, many now claimed that there had never been a homeland. The art of shipbuilding came to appear as so much useless knowledge and activity. And soon they even forgot how to build them.

But all was not lost. A few people preserved the dream and cherished it, passing it on from believer to believer. Since no one knew the art of shipbuilding any longer, the only hope for return to the island lay in swimming.

Finally these few dreamers who had preserved the old ideas announced that it was time to make the return to the homeland. Of course, most of the islanders by now did not even know about the homeland. They looked at the swimming instructors with amused curiosity, perhaps had a good laugh, and then went about their daily business again. The swimming instructors

told the people about the beautiful island that was their real home. While most thought the instructors a little crazy, a few people here and there believed them. And these believers presented themselves for swimming lessons so that they might make the great journey.

Such a person would come up to a swimming instructor and say, "I want to learn how to swim."

"All right," the instructor would reply, "But what is this bushel of cabbages you're dragging behind you?"

"I will need them for food when I finally arrive in the homeland."

"But the foods of the homeland are infinitely more nourishing and delicious than cabbages, so there is no need to carry all of that with you."

"You don't understand; I need this cabbage for food. How can you expect me to voyage out into the unknown without any food supply?"

"But it will be impossible for you to swim dragging those cabbages along with you. They will tire you long before you reach home; then they will drag you under, and you will drown."

"Well, in that case, I'm afraid I can't go. Because although you call my cabbages a hindrance, I consider them absolutely necessary to my well-being and survival."

Since so many conversations with the swimming instructors ended like this, very few ever returned to the homeland.

But some people tuned to each other and said, "You know, these cabbages are actually quite good. Care to join me for supper?"

### **Communing:**

In summer,  
I do not worship  
so much as worship does me.  
In the morning, golden light splashes across  
my rooms, and roses the color of wine  
greet me in the alley.  
As they bow to me in the breeze, I bow back.  
At noon, sunflowers refuse to turn their face from me  
until again I give a slight bow. What else was I to do?  
In the evening, the thunderheads

mount higher and higher,  
gathering pink and rose from the setting sun,  
creating the kind of vast mountain  
hanging suspended in the air, the mountain  
Jesus spoke of, or the Sufi poet Rumi  
or Vishnu's wild lover, Mirabai.  
Again, I pause and bow. What else can I do?  
At night, when the pastel sky melts  
into a dark indigo lake overhead,  
the rusty beacon of Mars beckons above the horizon,  
so that I cannot fail to notice and bend the knee.  
My friend Doug e-mails me, or Yiannis calls from Athens, or Richard or Kevin leaves a voice  
message, and again, I am bending and bowing in thanks.  
The gestures are small, I know, but surely better than all these ineffective words. And so in the  
end, my praise turns to silence, and silence turns to me.

### *silence*

Our worship continues, delighting us in the names of those we love, or struggle to love, or  
those whom we miss.

Embracing them by naming them, we bring them  
into our common hour, and place with the sweet  
music of their names, sounded aloud, or echoing  
inside our silent hearts.

### *embracing meditation*

In summer, I do not so much worship,  
as worship does me. Praise the gift of another  
summer. Praise the gift of another day.  
Praise for all those I love. And praise for  
the music of summer, which opens the heart  
like the wide embrace of a sunflower.

**The First Reading** comes from the great ancient biblical book of *Qoholeth*, called  
*Ekklesiastes* in the Greek, written c. 450 BCE by an anonymous editor who incorporated  
material from a variety of ancient sources, including the ancient *Book of Gilgamesh*, written  
1300 years earlier. You will hear, some of you, certainly, the title of a famous novel by  
Hemingway within this text, and the title of a famous Italian film.

“Meaningless! Meaningless!  
Everything is meaningless!”

We labor at our work under the sun,  
and what do we get from it?  
We must leave it to those who come after us.  
The generations come and go, but the earth remains the same yesterday, today and tomorrow.  
The sun goes down. The sun also rises, after having circled the earth.  
The wind blows south, then north, then south again, turning and returning on its track  
Streams flow to the sea, but the sea never fills up; and yet the streams never stop flowing  
either.  
All things make me feel weary beyond words.  
The eye is never satisfied.  
The ear never hears enough.  
The more money we make,  
the more there is to spend it on.  
No, the only meaning for us is this:  
that we eat, drink and be merry  
during the few days given us to live.  
If we do this, we will not brood  
over the brevity of our lives.

**The Second Reading** *this morning is a poem by my good friend Kim Vaeth. Kim was commissioned, by the mezzo- soprano Frederica Von Stade, to take and read letters written to her mother from the European battlefield, letters written by her beloved husband, Frederica's father, who died before he ever saw his infant daughter. Kim turned the letters into poetry, that was then set to luminous music by the composer Richard Danielpour. I was at the Carnegie Hall premier of this stunning composition and sat in rapture through it all, for words and music both. These words reflect the lessons which the father wanted to teach his young daughter, should he have come back from the war.*

## **Benediction**

Little soul, where will you go  
From the dark of the womb?  
Where will your lucent world lead you?  
What song will you sing for me  
at the still-point of my departure?

Having risen through the  
earth's corona  
from the heart I once had,  
away from your voice which I will  
Never know –  
I leave you my peace

as you enter the world.

Little pear, threaded with gold,  
open your heart to the pain  
of the world  
which is also its joy.  
Become wholehearted compassion,  
tender in your spacious grief.

In the presence of mystery  
And fear-shrouded song,  
Your child's eye of kindness  
Will carry you home.

## Sermon

I suppose you could say that I had a meaningful summer. But what does that mean? A *meaningful* summer?

Well, let me tell you about my summer a bit. I led three memorial services. Celebrated four weddings. Grieved the loss of friends who moved away. I had a broken tooth pulled. I read 30 books, mostly non-fiction.

I worked on filing papers long overdue, both in regular files and the circular file.

And, I traveled to see family and friends in suburban Detroit, downtown Minneapolis, the bright streets of Oakland and San Francisco, the majestic California Desert and the flowering hills of Los Angeles. And in each place, I enjoyed a memorable meal. Sometimes I cooked the meal, such as the poolside supper for my cousin Sergio and 15 of his closest friends, or the vegetarian feast for Kip and Matthew. Sometimes some one else did, or it was catered, or it was a potluck. One dinner took place on a suburban deck, another in the rocky desert near the Owens Valley, with road-runners (real ones, not the cartoon kind!) dashing past, and coyotes calling. Another dinner was around a dining room table in San Francisco, a sweet, rare combination of close friends I loved dearly and people I just met.

Some of the dinners swelled with great conversations. Others were quieter. But, during each supper, I was suddenly aware of how *meaningful* these moments were, how they made me feel that my feet were on the ground, honored to be alive and part of all this, this wondrous life.

And so this summer I meditated on the ancient question, "what is the meaning of life?"

When I was young, of course, this was not a question I asked. I was told in church school that I lived a meaningful life because Final Authority was in heaven and Christ loved me, and that

death was not a fearful thing but the gateway to paradise. I was, in short, an immortal being, and part of a well-thought out and sacred plan for which, I was told, I should be grateful.

But, as time went on, I began to question my given religion. I began to read books, which, like acid, dissolved the foundations out from under the towering creeds and stories of my faith. By the time I was 21, I had given most of it all up, and decided that life was meaningless, an accident of atoms, and almost ridiculous.

My Baptist roommate was a little scared of me once I lost my faith, especially after I posted the following famous words from Shakespeare's Macbeth (V.v.19) on my dorm wall:

*To-morrow and to-morrow and to-morrow creeps in this petty pace from day to day, to the last syllable of recorded time; And all our yesterdays have lighted fools the way to dusty death! Out! Out, brief candle! Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage, and then is heard no more. It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.*

I used to read this passage aloud as a sort of validation, or a non-believer's prayer that I offered each and every day.

*Signifying nothing!* I would linger on the last line. *Signifying nothing.* Nothing at all. No purpose. No significance. No meaning at all.

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Meaning.

Now the concept of "meaning" is not difficult to explain. We use the verb-form "to mean" in ordinary daily speech all the time.

*"What I meant to say is..." "What do you mean...?" "What does that mean?" "I mean..."*

Or, sometimes we do not say the word in any of its grammatical forms, but it's understood anyway. Let's say I'm driving along with a friend in an awful rainstorm, and someone cuts me off, making me slam on my brakes and waterslide a bit down the road.

*"What a jerk!"* I say to my friend about the driver of the other car. But what I *said* is not necessarily what I actually *meant*.

So here is a list of things which that statement, *"What a jerk!"* means:

It means: *"I'm scared. I almost got killed."*

It means: *"I am angry that my conversation with my friend was curtailed because I had to concentrate on keeping us both from getting killed."*

It means: “*I am amazed once again to find out how close we are to losing life and limb on a daily basis.*”

But what I said is: “*What a jerk!*” What is, “a jerk”? The definition of that word in dictionaries I checked is: “A stupid person.”

Now obviously, I have not met the driver I have just called a “stupid person.” I have no idea if he or she even saw me in their mirror in all the rain. I have no idea about the driver’s week, say if his or her mother recently died. Or if the driver has a PhD in physics from the University of Madrid. I have no idea as to gender, age, ethnicity, IQ, sobriety, condition or situation of the person behind the wheel. I have no information except *the jagged angles of my own feelings*.

But despite that, all I say about the driver is, “*What a jerk!*” or in other words, “*What a stupid person!*”

In short, I do not say what I mean. I say *something else*.

So to talk about *meaning* is often to talk of “something else.”

My words point to, or signify, “something else.”

My deeds point to or signify, “something else.”

My theology points to, or signifies, “something else.”

My emotions point to, or signify, “something else,” often other emotions.

To talk of the meaning of life is to say that things in this life are not what they are, but are pointers, or indicators of “something else.”

Example: If a woman comes to me, like one did last week, and says to me, “You need to be saved like me, otherwise your death will be a disaster,” this person too may be saying “something else.” She may mean to say that she experiences her *own* life as disaster, but perhaps she does not know how to say that in so many words because of the tremendous feelings it raises for her, feelings she fears will swamp her completely. So though she *means* to say, “*Ow! My life..right now...really hurts!*” what she ends up saying is that, “*All people need to be saved from the disaster of their life...after death.*” What she *means* to say is that so many human beings have failed her, disappointed her, treated her as a being without any worth, and she is at a loss about how to feel good about herself, and her life by any ordinary human methods in this life...her friends, family and society have *all* failed.” But even though that’s what she *means* to say, what she ends up saying is this:

“*Nothing human can save us. Only someone more than human, Christ, can save us. And Christ really loves us (that is, loves me), even though we don’t deserve it. No, not one bit.*”

Now I am *not* saying that this woman represents all fundamentalist evangelicals. But I’m sure she represents at least some of them.

And don't be quick to imagine that what I am saying is confined to any particular religious tradition. You see, some Unitarian Universalists may *mean* one thing, but say another too. Take me, for example. When I was first going to the Universalist Church in Farmington, Michigan, after I lost my faith in college, I would have told you that "there was no such thing as God." I would have said that God was a creation of people who were afraid to stand up for themselves, and that science had explained the world, and the concept of mystery was useless and destructive. I would have told you that for anyone to believe in God was just plain embarrassing."

That's what I would have said. What I really meant was this: "So many of the people in my life who say they love God have failed me. They've encouraged me to deny my sexuality, and want me to pretend not to be who I am. They want me to be created, not by my own will and need, but by theirs. I'm an *embarrassment* to *them*. Why should saying 'I am' hurt so much? I feel like I don't belong anywhere on earth, that there is no place for me in the world. So, for me to come alive, their authoritarian and crabbed God has to go."

I am not saying that all Unitarian Universalists think like this. Or that I still think like this. Not at all. But I bet some do.

"Meaningless, meaningless," wrote Qoheleth, the biblical author, almost 2500 years ago. This is *hevel heveleth* in Hebrew, which literally translates "Vapor evaporating." What a wonderfully concrete picture of meaninglessness! For the author of this cynical biblical book, life is meaningless because everything you work for all your life ends up in someone else's hands. So the author suggests we distract ourselves from this unpleasant fact by "eating and drinking and being merry." The author apparently thought that it would be better if we could live forever, accumulating things for ourselves without end, and without death coming to rob us of our earnings and due rewards. The author seems to think the grand idea of living forever, each day massing more and more worth, had evaporated, and that, therefore, life had become meaningless. I wonder.

Certainly in my life, many things have evaporated. The punishing God of my youth evaporated for me. The necessity of a prophet's bloody death to save me from my own death evaporated. Visions of a paradise of rewards and torturing fire both evaporated for me. And for a long time, with Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, and with Qoheleth, I felt like everything had lost its significance, its meaning.

But, look, does something really have to be *everlasting* in order to be meaningful? And so today I ask the question, "Why did I ever think that meaning was made of grand things like Almighty Power, or endless life without change? Who put those ideas into me? They do not naturally arise within me, I think. Tradition feeds them to me, but I am not convinced that they would have come to me had they not been fed to me."



So just because these traditional and vast meanings crumble and falter, it does not mean that “meaning” disappears forever from the human heart. It would be foolish indeed to think of the traditional meanings as the *only* meanings, or that only ideas bigger than life are instilled with meaning...an Infallible Heaven, for example, or unquestionably authoritative Holy Writ.

The miseries of the last century may have served to make many of us in this room less theologically confident and more spiritually fluid...you know, “How could an all-powerful God of Love have permitted Auschwitz?” But, I find myself wondering now why I was so terribly impressed by such theological over-confidence in the first place. And the opposite of *fluid*... namely *rigid*, does not strike me as healthy anyway. Meaning does not have to be confident or large or indestructible...finding meaning in smaller, perishable things is just as wonderful. Now, you may say I can say things like this only because I live in a comfortable city in a rather comfortable life. Don’t be too sure about that.

I knew a woman who watched her *whole life* evaporate. She was a member of the San Francisco church when I worked there. Her story was relentlessly horrific. According to everything I was taught as a kid, she should have cried out, “Meaningless! Meaningless!” and given up the ghost and died. But she didn’t. When she was but a young girl, the Nazis roared into the Slovakian village where she lived with her family. The Christian families of the town singled her family out as one of “those damn Jews.” Her parents were shot before her eyes, and that shot still ricocheted in her heart, she told me. Every morning she heard that shot ring inside her, for the rest of her life. She and her siblings were taken away. She never saw them again.

She watched as numbers were tattooed on her arms. She was assigned to horrible and painful labor. Used and abused, she somehow survived to the end of the war. All around her during those years, her co-inmates were slaughtered before her eyes, or simply went to the “showers,” never to return. The field of her heart was cruelly excavated by the pickaxe of loss, until nothing but a deep hole remained.

And yet she survived. How? Oh, luck of course. And sublime survivors’ skills. But the thing that *she* claimed got her through day after day of terror was “something else.” Each day she took her bony finger, and each day in the talcum-like dirt of the camp, she sketched a chalice, the Czech and Slovak symbol of freedom, a form of which we Unitarian Universalists later borrowed to express the same idea. Under the chalice, she wrote the words “Pravda Vitezi” or “Truth overcomes.”

Now, you’re right. Empirically, she saw no evidence around her that truth overcomes. She had only the massive evidence of the twentieth century before her... truth perishes, is hidden, is twisted, is lost, is badgered, is oppressed. But still she told me, “I came to believe that somewhere, somehow, a truth that was greater than Nazi power would show itself, and that even if I personally did not know freedom or life, others would. My sketch of the chalice on

the ground contained that sacred wine of hope which I drank every day to my delight. That sketch in the dirt gave meaning to my life.”

Or I think of the Mezzo-Soprano Frederica Von Stade, whose young father was slain in that same terrible war, so she never knew him. But her father’s letters to his beloved wife, written as the clatter of war cracked all around him, came down the years, filled with the vapor of his dying breath, which did not evaporate, but only grew stronger in the reading of the words. Kim Vaeth put his words into poetry of unspeakable beauty and truthfulness. And, even as her father was losing his own young life to the unjust lottery of war, he was able to council his still unborn daughter with meaningful words, so simply, so small, so fragile: “I leave you my peace as you enter the world.” “...open your heart to the pain of the world which is also its joy. Become wholehearted compassion, tender in your spacious grief. In the presence of mystery And fear-shrouded song, Your child’s eye of kindness will carry you home.”

No, not eternal cosmic meaning...vast and unbending, such as theories of heaven and hell, the need to be “saved” from death, or even the authoritarian nationalistic posturing around the globe which threatens us daily. No eternal theoretical meaning, such as this *ism* or that *orthodoxy*. No Eden long ago to return to, no perfect island far away, as in the Sufi story this morning, that will redeem our present life. No, none of that.

But, as I said at the beginning of this sermon, meaning always has to do with “something else.” A “something else” that can be as simple and rude as a drawing in the dirt, the letter of dying man to his beloved wife, a basket of cabbages from the local garden, or a dinner with friends, close or not so close, for which you are suddenly thankful. Something small, fluid, perishable, almost quiet...something without swagger or unflagging confidence, but something nonetheless, that “something else” we *mean* when we *say* we have given up all the traditional and swaggering meanings.

Traditional Gods may die, Heavens may crumble, and a thousand absolute certainties may perish. Sure. If that’s what Qoheleth meant by crying “Meaningless! Meaningless!” then, by God, I think the author was as right, as well as Macbeth.

But then, when I look a bit closer, when I try to understand what Qoheleth “meant,” when he affirmed “life has no meaning,” I think he was wrong. Life does have meaning. For “Life has meaning” is what I *say* when what I actually *mean* is this: “I want to improve the world we leave for our children. I want to grow in compassion, love, and joy myself. I want to be welcomed for who I am, to belong to a circle of love greater than myself. I want to remember that pain and joy are inseparable, like weeds and grass. And that any meal I have with a friend is holy communion, the passover seder, the first and last supper, the nectar of Olympus, served in a golden cup on a marble table.”

In carefully claiming these little, homely, and not terribly cosmic meanings in our lives, we have, as Jung once put it, “found our indispensable place.” And so I close from that blest

place of deep meaning: “Praise for summers, for sunflowers, for life, for love, for the possibility of meaning in every moment, and for the privilege of giving sermons on such subjects as this.”

**Prayer: Sinkoffian Form**

Childhood and adulthood; age.  
Childhood adulthood and age.

Gain and loss; contentment.  
Gain and loss and contentment.

Love and fear; awe  
Love and fear and awe.

Memory and hope; now  
Memory and hope and now.

Birth and life; death  
Birth and life and death.

Joy and song; breath  
Joy and song and breath.

Day and night; peace.  
Day and night and peace.