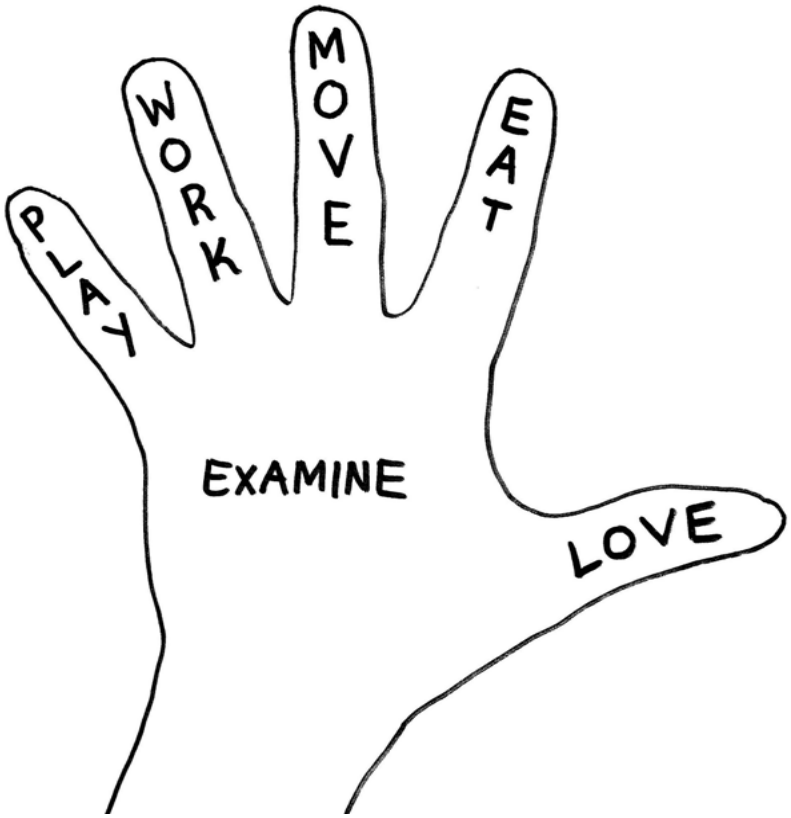

20 Questions: What is the Meaning of Life?

A Worship Service by the Rev. Jeff Briere

Unitarian Universalist Church of Chattanooga

November 7, 2010

Good morning and welcome to the Unitarian Universalist Church of Chattanooga. My name is Jeff Briere and I am the minister of this church. Let's begin with a new hymn, number 329, which I never heard before Kate played it the other day. The words are by Sara Teasdale, a popular American poet of the early twentieth century. She was an intensely emotional writer whose work concentrated on themes of love, beauty, and death. She committed suicide in 1933. These words were published as "Barter" in *Love Songs*, a book that won her the 1918 Pulitzer Prize for Poetry. Number 329, "Life Has Loveliness To Sell."

Hymn 329, "Life Has Loveliness to Sell"

Greetings

Eric. Thanks so much for joining us in worship today. We hope you find the service rewarding and that you leave here inspired and uplifted. And thank you so much for helping to create a reverent atmosphere during *Connections.*

If you have a particular **joy or sorrow** or something you'd like added to the prayer of the people, please clearly write it on an index card and drop it in the basket back there. You may sign it or not, as you wish.

The coffeehouse comes back on November 19th at 7 pm. Poetry recitations, music, juggling, line dancing, martial arts, whatever you got, bring it on. See Catherine Long for more information. You are invited to celebrate **Thanksgiving at the church,** on Thanksgiving Day of course, at 3 pm. Kate & Jeff prepare the turkey, stuffing and gravy, you bring a side dish or a dessert. Please put your name on the sign–up roster on the kitchen door.

A complete listing of announcements is included with the bulletin. The best way to find out what's happening around here is to sign up for a weekly e–mail. To do that, please see Chris in the office.

George Olin brought his clarinet today and begins with music by Jean–Xavier Lefèvre.

PRELUDE: "Sonata No. 3, I"

LIGHTING THE CHALICE

A couple weeks ago, because she was going to be away, Mary Hunter asked Bonny Sinclair to arrange the altar and distribute hymnals for the service. So she did. And as long as she was doing that, I asked her to light the chalice, too. Bonny was stunned, because in all the years she has been coming to this church, no one ever asked her to light the chalice. And I don't want to leave you out either. If you would like to light the chalice, please tell me and we'll make it happen. To light our chalice this morning, I bring you the words of Ted Loder. Rev. Loder is a retired Methodist minister, known for his artistry and passion for social justice. He is recognized as one of America's outstanding creative preachers. Your words are in italics.

Empower me
to be a bold participant,
rather than a timid saint in waiting,
in the difficult ordinariness of now;

to exercise the authority of honesty;
rather than to defer to power,
or deceive to get it;
to influence someone for justice,
rather than impress anyone for gain;

and, by grace, to find treasures
of joy, of friendship, of peace
bidden in the fields of the daily
you give me to plow.

STORY: Treasures from the Sea

As you can see, I have brought a treasure chest with me this morning. And my treasure chest is full of treasures from the sea. Would anyone like to guess what kinds of sea treasures are in the chest? *[Seashells?]*

That is correct—I have a treasure chest full of seashells. I am going to let each of you select one shell from the chest, and then we will talk about them. *[Select a shell.]*

As you look at the different shells that you have chosen, what do you notice? All of them are different in some way. No two shells are exactly alike. Notice the different shapes, sizes, colors, and texture. What colors do you see in the shells? Feel your shell. Is it smooth or rough?

Can anyone tell us what these shells were originally? They were homes to different kinds of sea creatures. Inside these shells, real, live creatures of the sea used to live.

You know, that is the thing about homes, isn't it?

All homes are different—not only with creatures of the sea, but with humans as well. All of us here today come from different homes. And no two of those homes are exactly alike. Some live in big homes, and some live in small homes. Some live in brick homes, and some live in wooden homes. Some live in homes that are white on the outside, and some live in homes that are another color.

But the families who live inside our homes are different as well. No two families are exactly alike. Some homes have a mom and dad and two daughters. Some have a mom and dad and two sons. Some have a dad and daughter, and others have a mom and a son. Some homes have two moms, and some have two dads.

The fact that our homes are all different doesn't make one home better than another one. They're just different, that's all.

So if you meet someone here at church, at school, or at some sports outing whose family is different from yours, remember the lesson of the sea shells—all homes may be different, but each and everyone is special and has special people living in it, like you.

Thanks for listening to my story. You are free to go to your classes now.

CHILDREN'S RECESSIONAL

We hold you in our love
as you go, as you go
May your heart
be at peace as you go.

To nurture the spark
of your precious life
We hold you in our love
as your go.

OFFERTORY: BIZET: "ANGUS DEI"

When you meet someone who has lived for a long time and appears in good health, it usually happens that the person is asked about the secret of longevity. It happened to Sir Malcolm Sargent. Sargent was a British conductor and organist. He died in 1967.

At the age of seventy, Sargent was asked by an interviewer, "To what do you attribute your advanced age?"

"Well," replied the conductor, "I suppose I must attribute it to the fact that I haven't died yet."

The other aspect of living a long time is that we have plenty of time to consider our own passing. Or not. Apparently, William Saroyan, an American writer who died in 1981, did not much consider his own death. Until it was obvious.

Before he died, Saroyan picked up the telephone and called the Associated Press with a final observation: "Everybody has to die, but I have always believed an exception would be made in my case. Now what?"

It so happens that I can answer his question. Now we will collect the morning offering for the support and ministry of this church.

If you have a pledge payment, please mark it as such. As always, the Wood–Wilhoit Memorial Food Bank is happy to accept your donations of non–perishable food and household items for the Community Kitchen. The collection basket for that is by the front door. If you wish to light a personal candle of joy or sorrow, you may step up here and Bonny Sinclair will assist you.

♪♬♪♬♪♬♪♬♪♬♪♬

Eternal Spirit of life and love, we are profoundly thankful for the blessings we experience today. Would that we recognize our blessings every day and remember to be thankful for them.

Christina—and Jesse—please lead us in our Hymn of Thanksgiving.

HYMN OF THANKSGIVING

Oh, we give thanks, for this precious day,
For all gathered here, and those far away,
For this time we share, with love and care,
Oh, we give thanks, for this precious day.

Orison

Dona Nobis Pacem. Give Us Peace. *Dona Nobis Pacem.*

Thou, which are everywhere,
Many are your names.
May we always feel your presence,
May your wisdom guide us,
In our deeds as well as in our dreams.
May we have what sustains our body and soul;
Lead us first to forgive the mistakes of others
Even as we hope our own mistakes will soon be forgiven.
May we resist the temptation of the quick and easy,
And be delivered from that which demeans and destroys life.
May we live purposefully and joyfully
in every moment, in every encounter,
now, and in the time to come.

During this time of silence let us hold close to our hearts those who are suffering and rejoice with those who are jubilant, but let us never forget those who suffer the fallout of war.

Dona Nobis Pacem. Give Us Peace. *Dona Nobis Pacem.*

Response

When our heart is in a holy place
When our heart is in a holy place
We are blessed with love and amazing grace
When our heart is in a holy place

Here

Here may no one be altogether a stranger,
no honesty of thought ignored,
no depth of feeling dismissed,
no life belittled, and no life shut out.

Here may clarity of mind and heart
be humbly treasured,
brought to bear toward word and person.

Here may fellowship be treasured most of all
and paths to sustain and renew it
be sought and found.

Here may growth of spirit be our purpose;
such understanding as shall lead us
to new ways in which to live our lives.

Sermon: The Meaning of Life

Before I tell you the meaning of life, I have a few images to show you. When I went searching for images concerning the meaning of life, I didn't find much. Far less than I found for other topics. And the interesting thing is, I found more cartoons than anything else. This tells me that people have a hard time trying to express the meaning of life, either as a photograph or a painting or a sculpture. With a cartoon, it is easier to *talk* about the meaning of life or joke about it than to express it.

Leo Tolstoy really set people off. He was a Russian novelist who lived from 1828 to 1910. In 1882, he published an essay he titled, *A Confession,* in which he described his struggle to answer the question, "What is the meaning of life?" He was about 52 when he wrote the essay and it details a period in his life when he had seriously considered suicide.

He asks himself, "What is the meaning of my life?" And he replies, "There is none." Phrasing it differently, he says, "What will come of my life?" And the reply comes, "Nothing." Trying one more time, he

says, “Why does everything exist that exists, and why do I exist?” His only answer is, “Because it exists.”

And he couldn’t live with that. Nor could he commit suicide. So he had to find some meaning in his life, to his life and for his life. What he found was the Christian faith he was taught as a boy and had cast off many years before. He returned to his faith through an argument for the existence of God known as the “First Cause.” He knew that someone had caused him to be here, and someone had to have caused his parents to be here and likewise, his grandparents and so on and so forth all the way back to the first cause. And that, he concluded, had to be God and that gave life some meaning.

But his original question, “What is the meaning of life?” has caused as much or more angst in philosophers, theologians and Joe Six–Packs primarily because Tolstoy’s answer only works for him. The meaning of life for Tolstoy is not the meaning of my life. Or yours.

Tolstoy’s question has a few problems. It’s not a question which has only one answer like, “Where is my cell phone?” It’s not a question that implies how to answer it, such as, “How much do you weigh?” It’s not a question that can be answered easily, unless you have spent a lot of time studying for the test.

One problem is he wrote in Russian and we English speakers must do with a translation. Or learn Russian. Even so, if his Russian were slightly different, or the translation slightly different, the question remains unanswered.

A second problem is the meaning of the word “meaning.” I really wish the translators had used another word, like essence or significance. The dictionary says that meaning, as a noun, is

1. Something that is conveyed or signified; sense or significance. 2. Something that one wishes to convey, especially by language, as in, *the writer’s meaning.* 3. An interpreted goal, an intent, or end, as in, *the central meaning of his presidency.* 4. Inner significance, as in *the meaning of her voice.*

Some synonyms for meaning are import, sense, significance. What these words share points to “the idea that is conveyed by something.” Any or all of those usages could be in play here. Asking about the meaning of life is not like asking about the meaning of a red, octagonal sign with the letters S–T–O–P on it. We understand what kind of meaning is the meaning of that sign.

Asking about the meaning of life is more like asking about the meaning of a grapefruit. In a sense, the question is absurd, like “the meaning of a grapefruit.” A grapefruit is a grapefruit, that’s all. It has no meaning beyond growing and maybe being eaten. We can easily say that life is life. That’s it. Life has no meaning beyond being lived. Some people can live with that. I think this is a perfectly reasonable response. And if we accept that, then our life has no more significance than the life of a grapefruit. I don’t know about you, but I’m with Tolstoy here. I can’t live with that and I can’t commit suicide.

You see, even the fact that Tolstoy even considered suicide tells me that there is meaning in life, or that we are driven to create meaning. If this were not so, why would Tolstoy despair of finding meaning and consider suicide? If life were meaningless, then suicide is not the appropriate response. Indulgence would be a better response. If there is no meaning, then we are free to indulge ourselves in whatever way is pleasurable.

But it’s a way out, you know? Saying that life is just life, that there is no meaning to it, or the meaning is 42 or something equally absurd is a way to answer the question without answering the question. But for all we know about life and our existence, it’s just as reasonable an answer as Tolstoy’s.

Meaning is not purpose, although sometimes the two are conflated as in "a bicycle means transportation." No. A bicycle doesn't mean transportation; a bicycle doesn't even mean that someone built it. The *purpose* of a bicycle is transportation. But a bicycle really has no meaning. Unless we give it meaning.

I have a calico cat. Does my calico cat have any meaning? Nope. Just a calico cat. I also have a black cat. All black except for three white whiskers. Does my black cat have any meaning? Yes, for some people, it does. It means bad luck. But my cat did not create that meaning; it did not come from the essence of my cat. The essence of the bicycle is "bicycle–ness"; it's purpose is transportation. The essence of my cat is "cat–ness"; the purpose of the cat is to live and chase small moving objects in my house.

In order to answer Tolstoy's question, we must avoid conflating our answer with the purpose of life and we must find something that is conveyed by it, some sense or significance to it. This is not easy to do. All those cartoons we saw earlier are the result of people giving up and making jokes about the meaning of life.

Even *Calvin and Hobbes* tackled the subject and made a joke about it. You know the comic strip, right? So Calvin and Hobbes are sitting under their favorite tree and Calvin says, "Why are we here?"

Hobbes. Because we walked here.

Calvin. No, no. I mean why are we here on earth?

Hobbes. Because earth can support life.

Calvin. No, I mean why are we anywhere? Why do we exist?

Hobbes. Because we were born.

And in the last panel, both Calvin and Hobbes are scowling and Calvin says, "Forget it."

Hobbes. I will, thank you.

You can see this question gives people headaches. It's tempting to laugh at the perplexing questions that we human beings ask ourselves. We can't answer them, yet we don't give up. We keep trying to answer questions like, "What is the meaning of life?" It is often noted that humans are meaning–makers, that our brains evolved to make some meaning out of our experiences.

And this leads me to my answer to this question. I think it's a poorly worded question and ought to be re–cast as "What gives my life meaning?" "What is the meaning of life?" is a great headline, catchphrase or motto. It's in the company of other lines like, "Frankly my dear, I don't give a damn." But as a philosophical question, it's unanswerable. Tolstoy's question wants to know the meaning of life in the general sense, the significance for everyone. That's not possible.

We are meaning–makers. We make, or we find, the meaning of our own lives. The meaning of my life is my responsibility to realize, just as the meaning of life for you is your responsibility. And I will answer the question, "What gives my life meaning?" in just a moment. First I want to introduce you to this book and summarize answers from other people.

This is *Twenty Questions: An Introduction to Philosophy*, 7th edition, by Bowie, Michaels and Solomon. It's a college textbook, and I discovered it during my sabbatical.

I was staying at the home of a SERVAS host in Nova Scotia and was browsing her library when I came across an earlier edition. It really is a book of twenty questions, twenty big questions, like "What is the right thing for me to do?" and "Does my language make me think the way I do?" and "What should I think about the morality of abortion?"

Each question is addressed by several thoughtful people, some philosophers, some artists, some poets. I realized that I had the basis of twenty sermons in this book.

The first section of this book contains the question we have been wrestling with today. And it contains responses that are very technical (I won't bore you with them) and a few that are suggestive or poetic. They are chosen not as answers, but as responses that might give the reader some ideas and provoke thought. As you might suspect by now, there is no one true, right and correct answer to Tolstoy's question.

Here's what the Dalai Lama had to say about the meaning of life:
We humans have existed in our present form for about a hundred-thousand years. I believe that if during this time the human mind had been primarily controlled by anger and hatred, our overall population would have decreased. But today, despite all our wars, we find that the human population is greater than ever. This clearly indicates to me that love and compassion predominate in the world.
The words of the Dalai Lama.

He goes on to indicate that we must make a concerted effort to develop our love and compassion. He points out that the energy we derive from anger is blind and irrational and in the end, angry people hurt themselves more than others. He concludes by suggesting that we try to meet everyone as if they are old friends.

bell hooks is a professor of English at the City College of New York and a writer of several books about culture, politics and race. She writes about love as the practice of freedom.

When I look at my life, searching it for a blueprint that aided me in the process of personal and political self-recovery, learning to look both inward and outward with a critical eye was very helpful. Awareness is central to the process of love as the practice of freedom.

If we discover in ourselves self-hatred, low self-esteem, and we face it, we can begin to heal. Acknowledging the truth of our reality, both individual and collective, is a necessary stage for personal and political growth.

This is usually the most painful stage in the process of learning to love—the one many of us seek to avoid. Once we choose love, we instinctively possess the inner resources to confront that pain. Moving through the pain to the other side we find the joy, the freedom of spirit that a love ethic brings. The words of bell hooks

She goes on to say that a love ethic emphasizes the importance of service to others. Service strengthens our capacity to know compassion and deepens our insight. She is sad that service to others is not valued highly in our society.

Robert C. Solomon was a professor of philosophy at the University of Texas. He wrote about gratitude.

Suppose it were possible for you to be any one of the many human beings on earth at this moment. The odds are that you would be impoverished, malnourished and ignorant, and living in the middle of a famine, a civil war, under a harsh dictatorship, without real hope or possibilities. That you were not condemned to such a miserable life and early death is surely, a matter of luck. Though we may acknowledge this in the abstract, it seems almost impossible to live with this profoundly disturbing realization. What would we owe, and to whom, if all of our successes and even our health and our talents had to be credited? The words of Robert Solomon.

He goes on to say that seeing your good fortune *as a matter of chance* is to wave away any obligation to be grateful or thankful for it. But seeing your good fortune *as a matter of luck* implies that you are grateful for it. Or should be. And to see your good fortune *as a matter of fate* indicates a much grander vision of existence. He concludes, therefore, that being grateful is desirable. Grateful both

for our life and *to* our life.

Now what gives my life meaning are two things, I think. Creations and Connections. I find great meaning in creating something. My creations using paintbrush or crayon or pencil are very awkward, and ill-proportioned. I can't draw worth a damn. My creations of stained glass are crude, as are other craft items I have attempted to make. My hands do not work well when I fashion something in two or three dimensions.

But they work very well on the keyboard. I find great meaning in creating words that flow together and sensibly express my thoughts. I also find great meaning in creating characters or voices for the stage. Lately, in collaborative efforts, I have found meaning for my life in creating worship services.

I find meaning in connections. Connections to other people. My wife and family of course, this congregation and other people with whom I have more than a passing acquaintance. It wasn't always this way for me. For many years I had more connections to things than I had to people. I had a closer association with recording devices and audio tape than with my wife. That may be why she is my ex–wife.

Connecting to people is so much more difficult than connecting to things. It is fraught with malaprops, embarrassments, bruised feelings, apologies and boo–boos. I am scared of people sometimes. I am sometimes flying blind into places they never told me about. But connecting with people is infinitely more rewarding and I see now that there is more meaning in my life because of my connections to people.

One final passage from this book. Mary Oliver is a poet whose poems comprise three separate readings in our hymnal. She wrote these words about a summer day.

Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?

This grasshopper, I mean—
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down—
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.

I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.

Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?

Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

Please join me now in singing Hymn 354, "We Laugh, We Cry."

HYMN 354, "We Laugh, We Cry"

EXTINGUISHING THE CHALICE

We extinguish this flame,
but not the light of its truth,
the warmth of this community,
nor the fire of our commitment.
These we carry in our hearts
and share with all the world.

Benediction

Chuang Tzu was a Taoist teacher about 400 years before the birth of Jesus. Tao, you may recall, means "the Way."

If you understand the true nature of life, you do not try to make life something different from what it is. If you grasp the true nature of destiny, you do not try to influence the course of life through ingenious schemes.

If you wish to sustain your body in good health, take care of the world. Your body is part of the world; so you cannot abuse the world, and still expect your body to remain well.

By treating the world well, you can be at peace with it. By being at peace with the world, you can be calm. By being calm, you can follow the Way.

Postlude: "Sonata No. 3, III"