

Living a Meaningful Life

A year in review: UDUUF 2012

A service by Laurie Stuart

January 13, 2013

Welcome:

Welcome to the Upper Delaware Unitarian Universalist Fellowship on this warm and foggy morning. This month we are exploring "Living a Meaningful Life." We started with Crone Wisdom, Marcia Nehemiah's new book that tells the story of eight women, including our own Carol Rocklin, spawned from a gathering at Beverly Sterner's house, which celebrated her 70th birthday. This morning, I want to do a bit of a year in review to root us firmly in appreciation of the great work that we did last year. In short, we maintained a liturgical calendar that was in keeping with our mission to be a liberal religions congregation that helps build just and sustainable communities through good works, creative worship and individual expression. Together, we moved ourselves individually and collectively through the exploration of potential, compassion, spirituality, ethics, wonder, astonishment, and all that moves us.

I thought to do this because I am understanding more and more the great potential of reflection and celebrating accomplishments. This service, is the "where do we come from" part of a second service, where are we going, that will finished up the month. Sandwiched inbetween, meaning next week, Barbara Leo will present a service themed around Martin Luther King Jr.

Call to worship: #416

Holy and beautiful the custom which brings us together,
In the presence of the Most High:

To face our ideas,
To remember our loved ones in absence
To give thanks, to make confession
To offer forgiveness
To be enlightened and to be strengthened

Through this quiet hour breathes
The worship of ages,
The cathedral music of history.

Three unseen guests attend,
Faith, hope, and love:
Let all our hearts prepare them place.

Chalice Lighting: #433

How rare it is, how lovely, this fellowship of those who meet together. From Psalm 133

Opening Hymn: The Ceaseless flow of Endless Time. #350

Candles of Joy Sorrow and Concern

Offering: We are here.

Where do we come from:

Our year started out with possibility, and a big highlight of that month was Carol Rocklin's presentation of True Self, False Self. In describing the service, Carol

January: Carol Rocklin presents True Self, False Self:

She set the stage by saying that "Only the true self can be creative and only the true self can feel real." This is a psychological concept promulgated by Donald Winnicott, a post Freudian psychoanalyst who originated the concept of true self/false self. This concept resonates with me and I hope to share some of my thinking and feeling on this subject in the hope they will be useful to you.

Carol: "Each of us comes into this world with a unique set of genes and neurons. Even before I learned of the neuropsychiatric findings of the last decade I became aware of this when I worked at White Plains Hospital. My job was filled with stress and many crises. When I needed a break, I would go up to the neonatal nursery and gaze at the newborns. There they were all lined up in rows in front of a picture window, swaddled up except for their faces. Those were spiritual moments for me. I would ponder the miracle of life. I would think about those lives to be lived and hope for the best possible for them.

"One thing was abundantly clear. They were not all alike. Some were tranquil, some wriggled tensely, even though asleep, some cried furiously. No, they were not blank slates. They had come into this world with their own unique set of genes and neurons giving them their own individual set of characteristics with which to face the world they had just entered."

In February, we explored compassion: with a focus on Karen Armstrong's "12 steps to Living a Compassionate Life."

The Dalai Lamas are the manifestations of the Buddha of Compassion who chose to take rebirth for the purpose of service other human beings.

Here are a few quotes:

"If you shift your focus from yourself to others, and think more about other's well-being and welfare, it has an immediate liberating effect.

"If you utilize compassion, it will bring you tranquility and strength.

"The spiritual actions we undertake which are motivated not by narrow self-interest but out of our concern for others actually benefit ourselves.

"The more we focus on others, the more we have a concern for others, it seems to bring an inner strength.

In March we explored spirituality and Sharon presented a program based on the book *Spiritual Evolution*: how we are wired for faith, hope and love in which George E. Vaillant, M.D. lays out a brilliant defense not of organized religion but of man's inherent spirituality. Evolution, he argues, has made us spiritual creatures.

“Spirituality is derived from spirit, which is from the Latin “breath.” Spirituality, like breathing, is a participation in this animating energy that cycles through time and space to create and sustain all life. Through spiritual practice we come to know ourselves in interdependent relation to the universe. We learn to live as radically responsive to the needs and desires of others as we come to see ourselves as integrally connected. Through this discipline of understanding our connectedness to all life and the source of all life, we grow in humility, reverence and openness. Inevitably, a deep and abiding gratitude awakens.

Ginny presented a program using Deborah Willoughby’s article, “Enlightened Aging,” that discusses the Hindu/Yogic concept of the forest-dweller stage of life.

Ginny: “In the script written by the yoga tradition, the direction is clear. The student and householder phases of life are a prelude to the ultimate achievement – freeing our attention from outward preoccupations and bringing it to rest at the core of our being. Here, in the third stage of life, we have the privilege of stepping away from the external identities that so easily become all consuming....We have enough experience to realize that name, fame, possessions, and power will never be a source of lasting fulfillment, and as this realization dawns, our attention shifts from what changes to what endures, pulling our focus inward.

In the traditional culture that gave rise to yoga, this was called the forest-dweller stage, not because people literally retreated to the woods (although some did), but because, recognizing the transient nature of external achievements, they withdrew from these pursuits to strengthen their connection with the deeper dimensions of their own being. Theirs was a civilization – stretching back beyond 2000 BCE – deeply immersed in the natural world. The full span of life was 100 years. Read the latest studies on the lifestyle that promotes longevity and you’ll understand why. They ate a plant-centered diet of locally grown organic foods. They walked everywhere. Their households were multi-generational and their communities were woven together in a robust web of interdependence. But above all, they had a vibrant sense of the meaning and purpose of life.”

In April, we moved on to Ethics, and guest speaker Virginia Kennedy focused on the environmental ethics defined as the system of cultural and moral principles invested in a community’s specific relationship with the environment. She shared some of her research regarding the ways different cultural communities perceive human relationships with the earth and discussed the concept of ethical consistency or the ways in which we actually live or do not live the particular environmental ethics we believe we espouse. The central premise of the talk was to ask people to think about the need for transformation in our ethical engagement with the earth that supports and sustains us.

“When Westerners first encountered Native kinship philosophies, they defined them as polytheistic or animistic, because these Westerners could only define Native philosophies from within their own ethical system, in which Native people were just as separate from the rest of the world as Westerners are. Indigenous peoples, they believed, worshipped many gods, or they worshipped animals. As I have come to understand it, however, within this kinship philosophy there is not worship. There is thanks or gratitude. And there is reciprocity. Virginia Kennedy, April 1.

We ended the month with David Wolf who spoke on, “Ethical Theory from Ancient Greek Philosophy to the Present Day.” Wolf explored the “big three” among the ancient Greek philosophers who had a lasting influence on morality and ethics in Western culture and related that history to the kinds of INTER-ACTIONS that people have that involve ethics and moral choices, because moral action does not exist in the abstract. He reiterated Aristotle’s point

that what people actually do reveals their true character. People make choices and these have real effects on others and on the community.

In May, we explored scarcity and abundance. In a service of stories, I put forth the understanding that because we live in an abundant universe, that as we seek the answers that we desire, we are assisted, and given the information and the direction that we need. And through this exploration, we are able Then, not only is he able to understand that everything is connected, that we can be a part of an abundant life system where nothing is wasted, that one person's garbage can become another's food of paradise, that we can use our current situation of understanding limitations or scarcity into a state of abundance. This is available to each of us because of our natural curiosity and our ability and our willingness to transform our thoughts and share with others.

Another highlight, on May 20, was Norma's talk about abundance and scarcity focusing on the limitations and realities of scarcity, particularly of the economic kind.

In June, we hosted Kim Wilson, who was later called to the Stroudsburg Church. We shared stories, had a flower communion; and talked about our fathers and family values.

July brought us to an exploration of wonder, which has the capacity to influence our perception of the world beyond our intellect. We learned about the work of Kelly Berkeley, in his book *The Wondering Brain*:

"The psycho-spiritual impact of wonder is evident in both the intense memorability of the experiences and the strong bodily sensations that often accompany them. People regularly speak of being stunned, dazed, breath-taken, overwhelmed, consumed, astonished—all gesturing toward a mode of experience that exceeds ordinary language and thought and yet inspires a yearning to explore, understand, and learn. This is where the noun "wonder" transforms into the verb "to wonder," when the powerful emotional experience stimulates curiosity and knowledge-seeking behavior." July 15

In August we explored Astonishment and celebrated Raymond Rocklin's 90th birthday and our meditation that morning was on the words of Agnes de Mille who said: "Living is a form of not being sure, not knowing what next or how. The moment you know how, you begin to die a little. The artist never entirely knows. We guess. We may be wrong, but we take leap after leap in the dark." August 15

In September we moved into the topic of Making Religion Relevant and immersed ourselves in the writing and teaching of Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, known as Reb Zalman, who is 88-year-old granddaddy of Jewish Renewal Movement — the New Age, neo-Chasidic movement he founded three decades ago — who is considered one of the few Jewish sages alive today. In the 1970s he fused the mystical traditions of his Lubavitch background with modern sensibilities concerning the environment, technology and psychology in an effort to reinvigorate a Judaism he found stultifying. This is from his address at a Roundtable Dialogue for the visit of His Holiness the Dalai Lama in Vancouver, B.C. in April 2004

"Our traditional theologians, in order to defend themselves against existential terror and high anxiety the spiritual vacuum in which they have to preach -- have by and large, been co-opted by those haves, who have the deep pockets, to hold on to the status quo- or by the have-nots who want to return to implausible security of the old time religion.

More and more have deep thinking eco-theologians come to the conclusion that each religion is like a vital organ of the planet and that we for the planet's sake need, each one of us, aim to stay alive and devout in the most healthy way we can manage.

Hence for all my universalism I need to be the best and healthiest Jew I can be and urge my co-religionists to become the best and healthiest Jews they can be in order to contribute to the healing of the planet." Reb Zalman, 4

In October and November, we began a series on sharing what moves us. Bob Santee gave a program on affordable health care, Barbara Leo talked about bird migration, and we tied our work with Bud Rue Walk to process theology, a belief system that puts forth that everything is relational and that specifically, when people act in a way that connects to the other, truly putting oneself in other's shoes, that magic happens. April presented a program on the Ethics of GMOs and Pat Sanders created a service around Celebrating Joy with the work of Unitarian Universalist minister Carl Scovel, who calls the heart of his faith the "great surmise."

The Great Surmise says simply this: At the heart of all creation lies a good intent, a purposeful goodness, from which we come, by which we live our fullest, and to which we shall at last return. This is the supreme mystery of our lives. This goodness is ultimate-not fate, not freedom, not mystery, energy, order, nor finitude, but this good intent in creation is our source, our center, and our destiny. . . Our work on earth is to explore, enjoy, and share this goodness. "Neither duty nor suffering nor progress nor conflict-not even survival-is the aim of life, but joy. Deep, abiding, uncompromised joy."

And that leads us full circle to a service by Jim Sanders called Search for Meaning, based on a chapter from Forrest Church's book "The Cathedral of the World – which we were gifted 10 copies from the Riverside Church.

"My belief that religion is our human response to the dual reality of being alive and knowing we must die initially emerged from my experience with people who were dying, with families who were struggling. Each of us is a religious being. In death's shadow, we ponder who we are, why we live, what the purpose of our life is, where we come from and where we are going. In this many-chambered crucible of bewilderment and wonder, our religion is forged.

He invites us into "looking forward to the present. (Enjoying what you have as if in the state of anticipation rather than aching longingly for that which very likely will not be.) By focusing one's energy, to the extent that it is possible, on the present, one is liberated from fears of the future and also liberated from regrets about the past. ... The opposite of wishful thinking, is thoughtful thinking. I (thinking to wish for what you've got right now.) What we have right now is this day with the wind blowing and the mottled light on the mountains in this beautiful place, carrying on a conversation with another human being who is going to die. It's very precious. It's a miracle that we're even able to converse. We tend, I think, to take our lives for granted rather than receiving them daily as a gift. I would hope that each day I live I might, through some encounter, be born again to an awareness and appreciation for the gift of life, the mystery of being, the wonder and the miracle. Not the miracle out there, but the miracle in here."

And there you have it: From possibility to living a meaningful life – All explored here at the Upper Delaware Unitarian Universalist Fellowship. We are living our mission: individual expression, creative worship, good works.

We look forward to this year's programming and the opportunity to explore what makes us human, how we how love is expressed through our beings and how through our participation with the Fellowship we bless ourselves and our precious world.

Congregational Thoughts:

Closing Hymn: Find a Stillness: 352, Spirit of Life.

Closing Reading: #685.

What we call a beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning
The end is where we start from

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

T.S. Eliot