

“Hereby Resolved: Take Inventory and Use My Gifts” - January 1, 2017

Preached by Ministerial Intern D. Scott Cooper at the Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento.

First Reading: Excerpt from *Unbinding the Heart: A Dose of Greek Wisdom, Generosity, and Unconditional Love* by Agapi Stassinopoulos

Second Reading: “The Summer Day” by Mary Oliver

Thank you for being here. I imagine many of you were like me and stayed up past midnight to make sure 2016 was over and done with and you got up early to see if it had all just been a bad dream. Between elections and 80s icons, I’m over it. Princess Leia, really?

You came to church to wish everyone a Happy New Year. Some of you may have even arrived extra early to walk the labyrinth with Lucy. Some stayed up late to wish everyone a Happy New Year, and many of those people aren’t here.

I, of course, had planned to wish you all a Happy New Year, then wouldn’t you know it, just like me, I overthought even that simple greeting and realized that happy isn’t the point. I know that sounds sacrilegious in America where we’re supposed to be able to buy ourselves to happy, but hear me out.

I read on the internet that Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, “The purpose of life is not to be happy. It is to be useful, to be honorable, to be compassionate, to have it make some difference that you have lived and lived well.” But then I read on Wisdomquotes.com that Emerson didn’t really say that, someone else did.¹ But like Abraham Lincoln said on Facebook, “Don’t believe everything you read on the internet.”

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Viktor Frankl, the renowned Viennese psychiatrist, wrote the bestselling book *Man’s Search for Meaning* in just nine days in 1946 about his experiences in Nazi concentration camps. In his book, Frankl concluded that the difference between those who had lived and those who had died came down to one thing: Having meaning in their lives.

Research has shown that having purpose and meaning in life

¹ <http://www.wisdomquotes.com/quote/ralph-waldo-emerson-169.html>

increases overall well-being and life satisfaction, improves mental and physical health, enhances resiliency, enhances self-esteem, and decreases the chances of depression. I'll trade a superficial happy for all those things. On top of that, the single-minded pursuit of happiness is ironically leaving people less happy, according to recent research. "It is the very pursuit of happiness," Frankl knew, "that thwarts happiness."²

And perhaps especially this time of year when we're practically commanded to be merry, holly jolly and happy. On every greeting card, every song playing from store speakers, every sentimental commercial on television, we may feel we're the problem if we don't exhibit delirious happiness.

We recently observed the day with the fewest hours of daylight. It can get pretty gloomy this time of year. Spring, of course, has an entirely different feel to it. By then, days are getting noticeably longer. The holidays in spring are about rebirth and new life, it's very clear that in the Spring a new world is emerging from its sleep, and we have lots of reasons to be optimistic.

But here in the dead of winter we need other signals that we have a chance for a fresh start. Perhaps the beginning of a new calendar year is just the signal we need. It gives us permission to take inventory of our lives thus far, think about the talents and strengths and gifts we have, and figure out just how we're going to make an even more positive impact in the world. In other words, intentionally pursue meaning and satisfaction, not just happiness.

Back when I thought of the theme for today's sermon, I was trying to capitalize on it being New Year's Day – creating a metaphoric framework for my remarks: stores take inventory, so I'd talk about taking inventory of one's life; we just opened presents so using one's gifts, and New Year's Day, I'll refer to making resolutions. But after coming upon the Emerson quote, about "the purpose of life is not to be happy. It is to be useful," I realized that these are good ways to work toward giving meaning to our lives, not simply pursuing happiness. Or phrased differently, contemplation, allocation and action. The Three Shuns, it sounds like a doo-wop group from the fifties – but it can be three steps toward meaning.

² <http://www.businessinsider.com/a-lesson-about-happiness-from-a-holocaust-survivor-2014-10>

There are lots of different ways people describe living with resolve: living intentionally: living on purpose, living deliberately, all referring to our living our lives with meaning, not just going through the motions. Emerson's pal Henry David Thoreau famously wrote, "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived."³

So, first, before we explore that middle shun, allocation, let's look at the two outside shuns, contemplation and action - taking inventory and resolution. Back in seminary, I kept coming across the word praxis. P.r.a.x.i.s. Many of you may know what that means, but it wasn't clear to me, even after a trip to dictionary.com – "practice, as distinguished from theory; application or use, as of knowledge or skills." But the contexts in the readings lead me to believe the writers intended for it to mean more than that.

When all else fails, I decided, ask the professor. When I asked, my theology professor wrote on the white board 'practice – do' on one line, then just below that 'theory – think.' He then drew curved, double-headed arrows pointing toward each end of the lines, indicating a cycle. He then described the circular or spiraling interplay between contemplation and action, implied in the term praxis.

I happened to be reading *The Active Life* by teacher and activist Parker Palmer for another class at the time, and I was surprised at how this concept fit in with something he had written.

In the book, Palmer wrote, "Our drive to aliveness expresses itself in two elemental and inseparable ways: action and contemplation. We may think of the two as contrary modes, but they are one at the source, and they seek the same end – to celebrate the gift of life. . . Rather than speak of contemplation and action, we might speak of contemplation-and-action, letting the hyphens suggest what our language obscures: that the one cannot exist without the other. When we fail to hold the paradox together, when we abandon the creative tension between the two, then both ends fly apart into madness. That is what often happens to contemplation-and-action in our culture of either/or. Action flies off into frenzy – a frantic and even violent effort to impose one's will on the world, or at least to survive against the odds. Contemplation flies off into escapism – a flight from the world into a realm of false bliss."

³ <https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/h/henrydavid107665.html>

So, you can't just think about doing it, you have to do it. And you have to stop and consider if what you're doing is getting the results you're wanting, so you can adjust what you're doing. We can't just have good intentions. We've all heard which road is paved with good intentions. And one of the tenets of liberal religion is the idea that that good things do not just happen, as if by magic, but instead that we must work to make those things happen.

All this may seem pretty obvious to some, but I bet we can all think of someone who is stuck in one or the other – people who only think up ideas but never get anything done, or people who are always off in a frenzy but don't stop to consider what they're doing. Or, we may just find ourselves so busy on life's treadmill we don't stop to consider what we're doing, or why. I hope one of the reasons you show up here week after week is to pause and consider what you're doing and why. Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?

People have written volumes about this idea, about praxis, about the cycle from action to contemplation and back again. But today, at no extra cost, I'm sandwiching a third item in between them. Allocation – giving our gifts, our strengths and our talents and using them intentionally in the world.

So, we're adding the third shun, allocation. We'll not only act, go do good in the world, work for social justice and our beliefs, we'll not only think about the effects of our actions, and how we can maximize our efforts, we'll do a third thing, and consider how we are uniquely qualified to do specific things that need to be done.

First, we contemplate – what needs to be done and how is what I'm doing helping to accomplish that? Next, we determine how we are best qualified to help accomplish what needs to be done – Greek philosopher Aristotle advised us, "Where your talents and the needs of the world cross; there lies your vocation." Then we take action – go and do what needs to be done. Then the cycle of praxis begins again.

You may wonder why this middle element takes reassessment. Most of us knew what we were good at back in high school. I hated math, I wasn't going to run for Pep Club Treasurer back then, I'm sure not going to run for UUSS Treasurer now. But we change and things change, not only do we discover we have strengths we didn't realize, but the world changes, the things we can do may be in demand now when they weren't a couple of years ago.

And like the actress on the bus we heard about earlier, we can't put so many conditions on our gifts. She was able to touch a woman's life without being on stage, without winning a Tony award and without even winning the role. She learned and taught us, "To know even one life has breathed easier because you have lived" crystalizes giving.

I'm aware of another reason to periodically reassess how we may be able to currently serve the world. At some points in our lives we have the time and money to more easily think about these things. At other times, we just flat don't. I know there are people whose only action is job-hunting and whose only contemplation is how to get by. I know there are people focused on serious health issues. I know that there are single parents going to night class and working during the day whose only action is getting dinner on the table and whose only contemplation is studying for the next test. But once they've graduated and the kids are grown, I hope they can pause to take inventory and decide how their gifts can be used intentionally in the world. Perhaps that's what they're studying to do.

A statement by the noted theologian Frederick Buechner inspired me as I was deciding to go to seminary. "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."⁴

Speaking of God, and I do sometimes, one of the things I'm trying to learn this year is to keep in mind how folks with different beliefs hear what I'm talking about. UUs come with lots of different philosophies, which is one of the things I love about us. It occurred to me while writing this that the term 'gifts' implies a giver. Probably like many of you, I don't think an old white guy with a long white beard is putting bows on musical talent and giving it to young folks or putting athletic prowess in a gift bag to deliver to lucky recipients, despite the many thanks that particular deity may receive after the Grammys and the Super Bowl. Some of you may be more comfortable with the term strengths – the things you are unusually good at. I was surprised at how very different the results are when you google 'using your gifts' as opposed to 'using your strengths'.

But then I remembered that perennial piece of wisdom, "The purpose of life is to discover your gift. The meaning of life is to give your gift away."⁵

So, whether or not we believe there is a deity or force or whatever to thank for our unique strengths, we can still think of those talents we

⁴ <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/140448-the-place-god-calls-you-to-is-the-place-where>

⁵ <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/17637-the-purpose-of-life-is-to-discover-your-gift-the>

possess as gifts because we are to give them away. That's why the middle Shun is allocation.

Which circles us back around to happiness and meaningfulness. In a recent study, psychological scientists asked nearly 400 Americans whether they thought their lives were meaningful and/or happy.

Examining their self-reported attitudes toward meaning, happiness, and many other variables — like stress levels, spending patterns, and having children — the researchers found that a meaningful life and happy life overlap in certain ways, but are ultimately very different. Leading a happy life, the psychologists found, is associated with being a "taker" while leading a meaningful life corresponds with being a "giver."

"Happy people get a lot of joy from receiving benefits from others while people leading meaningful lives get a lot of joy from giving to others."⁶ In other words, meaning transcends the self while happiness is all about giving the self what it wants. People who have high meaning in their lives are more likely to help others in need.

The study participants reported deriving meaning from giving a part of themselves away to others and making a sacrifice on behalf of the overall group. They report, in the meaningful life "you use your highest strengths and talents to belong to and serve something you believe is larger than the self."

The pursuit of meaning is what makes human beings uniquely human. By putting aside our selfish interests to serve someone or something larger than ourselves — by devoting our lives to "giving" rather than "taking" — we are not only expressing our fundamental humanity, but are also acknowledging that there is more to the good life than the pursuit of simple happiness — we do indeed come together to deepen our lives and be a force for healing in the world.

We contemplate — what needs to be done and how is what I'm doing helping to accomplish that? We determine how we are best qualified to help accomplish what needs to be done, and allocate those talents. Then we take action — go out into the world and do what needs to be done. Then the cycle of praxis begins again. Take inventory of your life, use your gifts, and resolve to act intentionally. Repeat. Have a meaningful new year.

⁶ Kathleen Vohs, one of the authors of the study