

The Purpose of Living
Sunday, January 29, 2023
Tri-County Unitarian Universalists
Summerfield, FL
Rev. Cynthia A. Snively

On Tuesday this week Júlia Ledur reported for the [Washington Post](#) that, “On Jan. 21, a shooter opened fire on the eve of Lunar New Year at a dance studio in Monterey Park, a majority-Asian Los Angeles suburb, killing 11 people. Two days later, related shootings at two locations around Half Moon Bay, near San Francisco, killed seven people.

“There have already been 39 mass shootings in 2023 in the United States, according to the Gun Violence Archive. There have been more shootings than any other January on the database’s records, which go back to 2014.

“Mass shootings — where four or more people, not including the shooter, are injured or killed — have averaged more than one per day in 2023. Every week has had at least six mass shootings....

“The toll is immense. Less than a month into 2023, mass shootings have already killed 70 people and injured 167 this year in America,” [Mass shootings in 2023: There have been nearly 40 so far in U.S. - The Washington Post](#).

Now on a Sunday when I am talking about our life’s purpose, why would I begin with a roll call of our country’s mass shootings? Because as I think about life’s purpose, I think of a quote from Viktor Frankl’s book [Man’s Search for Meaning](#). He wrote, “Our generation is realistic, for we have come to know (hu)man(ity) as (it) really is. After all, (the hu)man is that being who invented the gas chambers of Auschwitz; however, (the human) is also that being who entered those gas chambers upright, with the Lord’s Prayer or the Shema Yisrael on (one’s) lips.”

Frankl suggests that there is no ultimate meaning, there is only each person’s response to the question. He says, “Ultimately, (the hu)man should not ask what the meaning of (their) life is, but rather must recognize that it is (they) who (are) asked. In a word, each (person) is questioned by life; and (they) can only answer to life by answering for (their) own life; to life (they) can only respond by being responsible,” or as one of you put it by making a choice.

Some have looked at their lives and decided someone else was responsible and that someone else had to pay for all that was wrong. Whole countries have committed genocides. Lone persons with guns have killed scores. But others have looked at their lives and seen hope, love, joy, and opportunity.

Forty-three of you wrote down your thoughts on your purpose in life, and you are decidedly in the second camp. There were some themes among you. Several of you spoke of your responsibilities to yourself. One of you began, “To be able to become the best, most authentic version of myself...,” and another began, “To be the best possible person I can be...,” One of you said, “My response is also my heart’s desire to continue journeying within to embrace and manifest the sacredness within, my true self.” Another said, “My intention is to use this life to learn how to be the best human I can given the constraints of time, talent, and treasure.” And finally, someone said, “The purpose of the planet appears to be to use energy from the sun to reduce disorder and increase the order on Earth through

increasingly complex organisms and societies. God's role in this process is a mystery to me, but I believe my purpose is to search for answers and become a more aware, loving person."

That last quote leads me to the observation that several more of you spoke of learning as a part of your life purpose. To quote, "learn and continue to do so," "to learn, to know, to understand...", "to learn as much about the world and its people," "to seek truth," "to be intellectually engaged", and "promote reading, writing and creativity." Most of you may be senior citizens, retired from work but you still want to learn. As the German physicist Albert Einstein put it, "It is not that I'm so smart. But I stay with the questions much longer." Or as one of you said, "The Universe has been more than generous(!) in providing just the right book, idea, person, event to aid me in growing and learning..."

You spoke of developing your best selves. You spoke of continually learning. And many of you spoke of doing something for others. "To work to encourage fair treatment and justice for all people in the community," "improves lives of humans," "promote justice to the best of my abilities, singularly and by forming alliances," "I would like to share my experiences and values (both good and bad) with all those that I encounter for their benefit," "to inspire the intellectual curiosity of others," "The simple answer is: to keep on living. Whatever that takes. But when I carefully analyze what it takes, then I, in order to live and live happily, I need to do whatever I can to make sure that everyone around me (everyone I can influence) and those who come after get to live happily too," "Throughout most of my life, I seldom thought about its purpose. I had goals but never thought of them as 'purpose.' In recent years, though, I've begun to consider purpose as I've deliberately narrowed my scope of activity. I've thought about and have tried to act exclusively upon my *priorities* of life. Almost all (and there aren't many) are about helping other people – something that has not been the focus of my life. Perhaps it's best expressed in that question about what you'd like on your tombstone. I'd like: 'He helped others.' Better late than never." "I take joy in seeing someone whose life has changed by something I have done. It may be only a momentary change or something bigger. I take pride knowing someone is happier, more confident, less afraid or more secure because of my contribution to them." "To share what I can to bring joy and comfort to others."

Some of you were very specific in who you wanted to help and how. "To set an example for my heirs," "be an example for my children and grandchildren," "12 step AA work," "volunteering with hospice," "to leave this world a better place than I found it to the best of my ability as a writer, horticulturist," "to love and care and support my family and to help any others in need that I can."

In your purposes you are developing your best selves, learning and growing, and helping others, but you are also finding beauty and enjoyment in life. To quote, "enjoy communal meals," "listen to music" "enjoy and be grateful for the beautiful around us," "to appreciate the wonder of life and of nature and the love of my family and friends and to return that love," "to be mindful and aware of the beauty and wonder of the natural world," "to have as much fun as I can as well as do as much good as I can," "To live my life fully, to be fully happy. Because without being happy myself, how can I share myself with others?"

Love came up several times among your answers. "Love myself and others and my God." Several people wrote to live the Golden Rule or some version of that. One person said, "to love animals." Another said, "to be loving and nurturing," and another, "open my heart to others."

There was a spirituality in several of your answers as you used words like sacredness, God, and Universe with a capital U. One person wrote, "The purpose of life is to connect with our fellow human beings

(and other living entities) in a way that makes it difficult to distinguish the boundaries of each other. Focus on your own life and the things that make you happy and complete. But at the same time be responsive to the needs and gifts that flow from everyone (and everything) that you encounter. The goal should be a fluidity of energy between each other whose direction is impossible to discern.”

Several of you, besides the person who I quoted earlier thinking about what he wanted his tombstone to say, thought about your purpose as you would be remembered or as it has changed at this point in your life. “The purpose of living is to leave a positive mark on the world during the time a person is alive. Hopefully, we will be remembered in a positive way rather than for our faults.” “Try to live without regrets and to make decisions accordingly.” “To leave things better than you found them.” My purpose in living has changed over the years. It has gone from ‘getting by’ to ‘achieving’ to ‘family commitment’ to ‘deepening connections’ to ‘redefining and reimagining’ and to ‘winding down.’ ‘Winding down’= settling in, reducing stress, keeping peaceful, helping out when able, filling in some gaps, enjoying friends, staying healthy, enjoying beauty, having fun and thinking more deeply.”

One person spoke of their purpose as recognizing choice. “My purpose in life is to assist myself and others to recognize choice and to take action,” which brings me back to Viktor Frankl, who said the same thing a bit more convolutedly. He wrote, “It did not really matter what we expected from life, but rather what life expected from us. We needed to stop asking about the meaning of life, and instead to think of ourselves as those who were being questioned by life—daily and hourly. Our answer must consist, not in talk and meditation, but in right action and in right conduct. Life ultimately means taking the responsibility to find the right answer to its problems and to fulfill the tasks which it constantly sets for each individual.”

Perhaps the questions life is setting before you today are not the same as those that life is setting before me. We must each choose to hear the question and we must each choose how we will answer.

As Frankl noted, “Our generation is realistic, for we have come to know (hu)man(ity) as (it) really is.” Some of our own kind have chosen to kill. We can choose to be hopeless. We can choose to live in fear. Or we can choose love, beauty, joy, spirituality, learning, kindness, growth. From what I have read and what I have shared you have chosen the second way.

On this Sunday of sharing so many of your thoughts, I end with a meditation by UU minister Dana Worsnop.

“Often people say that they love coming to a place with so many like-minded people.
I know just what they are getting at -- and I know that they aren’t getting it quite right.

“I don’t want to be with a bunch of people who think just like me.

“I want to be in a beloved community where I don’t have to think like everyone else to be loved, to be eligible for salvation.

I want to be with people who value compassion, justice, love and truth, though they have different thoughts and opinions about all sorts of things.

I want to be with independent-minded people of good heart.

I want to be with people who have many names and no name at all for God.

I want to be with people who see in me goodness and dignity, who also see my failings and foibles, and who still love me.

I want to be with people who feel their inter-connection with all existence and let it guide their footfalls upon the earth.

I want to be with people who see life as a paradox and don't always rush to resolve it.

I want to be with people who are willing to walk the tight rope that is life and who will hold my hand as I walk mine.

I want to be with people who let (this congregation) call them into a different way of being in the world.

I want to be with people who support, encourage and even challenge each other to higher and more ethical living.

I want to be with people who inspire one another to follow the call of the spirit.

I want to be with people who covenant to be honest, engaged and kind, who strive to keep their promises and hold me to the promises I make.

I want to be with people who give of themselves, who share their hearts and minds and gifts.

I want to be with people who know that human community is often warm and generous, sometimes challenging and almost always a grand adventure.

"In short, I want to be with people like you."