

## Sermon “The Work of Christmas”

Rev. Charlie Dieterich

My Reading this morning is related to the two other readings in the service-- the one on the work of Christmas and Rev. Harmony’s exultation of why *we gather in community*. This reading is by psychologist and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl. Please notice that he writes in an old style, where “man” is used for any person, and masculine pronouns are used without the intention of specifying gender. He writes:

*As each situation in life represents a challenge to man, and presents a problem for him to solve, the question of the “meaning of life” may actually be reversed... Ultimately, man should not ask what the meaning of his life is, but rather he must recognize that it is he who is asked. In a word, each man is questioned by life; and he can only answer to life by answering for his own life; to life he can only respond by being responsible.*

(Man’s Search for Meaning, chapter: Logotherapy in a Nutshell, section: The Meaning of Life.)  
Doctor Frankl’s school of psychology invites you to...

“Live as if you were living already for the second time, and as if you had acted the first time as *wrongly as you are about to act NOW*” (*italics his*)  
“It seems to me,” (says Dr. Frankl) “that there is nothing which would stimulate a man’s sense of responsibility more than this maxim, which invites him to imagine first that the present is past and, second, that the past may yet be changed and amended.” (*ibid. section: The Essence of Existence*)

Sermon:

A very dear friend of mine died this week... He was a member of the congregation that ordained me, and because I had left that congregation, I had not seen him for years.

This September I went back for a visit. The membership still had the same people... a bit older and grayer, but also a number of new folks running things like the kitchen and ushering. AND there were some people absent from the assembly.

My friend was present, but not the big powerful builder I remembered. Richard was one of those “OMG Unitarian Universalists”... one of the people who come through the doors and say “Oh My God I’m a UU!!” Well, he didn’t quite come through the doors, he built the doors-- as a contractor for the congregation’s new building... as he did the work he learned about the faith.

And when I was there he was one of the most active DO-ERS of the congregation. He videotaped my sermons, he preached himself, and he helped with many activities, and sang in the chorus. When I was ordained he was a reader for part of the ritual.

But when I saw him this past September, he was in a wheelchair. His cancer had slowly spread even after a dozen experimental treatments had been tried. He was in hospice, but still able to come to church for this special occasion. Though wheelchair bound, he still felt that RESPONSIBILITY to life. And in the last three months I can only imagine what more he accomplished. Dr. Frankl explains “that the meaning of life always changes, but it never ceases to be... we can discover [our] meaning of life in three different ways: (paraphrase)

- (1) by creating a work or doing a deed
- (2) by experiencing something or encountering someone; and
- (3) by the attitude we take toward unavoidable suffering.

I would say that my friend Richard was a create-er.. a do-er of deeds, though his life had considerable suffering and always he had a loving family life.

While we might say that he embodied “the free and responsible search for truth and meaning” – to quote from our principles, we could also say it the other way around... that TRUTH and MEANING had Found HIM. That they called him to a life of creative responsibility.

They called him to a life of creative responsibility.

*“WE GATHER TOGETHER each week... for the study and practice of morality and religion as interpreted by the growing thought and noblest lives of humanity, believing that we may thereby prove helpful one to another, and promote the cause of truth, righteousness, and love in the world”*

*We do this because*

*“We are Unitarian Universalists.*

*A people of: Open Minds*

*Loving Hearts*

*And Welcoming Hands !!” (UU Congregation of Erie’s Bonds of Union)*

Rev. Marni Harmony is a bit more realistic...

*We, whose journeys are always beginning,*

she declares.

*We, whose mission always awaits us..*

Just as Viktor Frankl asks us to consider this moment of time a do-over, a chance to not screw up this time, Rev. Harmony sees that we have a mission in life’s journey.

She doesn’t see us all standing in neat rows... men in suits and ties, women in proper conservative dresses. Instead:

*We gather as a community drawn together out of common need, each toting our own carpetbag of treasures and dreams.*

We come to figure stuff out... more of a wrestling match than library research:

*We gather together seeking our own meanings,*

*yearning for life in all its dimensions as it challenges and expands,*

*as it burdens, as it consoles and heals.*

*We gather in together with questions-- the kinds of questions that provoke us to the path of action.*

*We gather with hope, the kind of hope that pulses on through uncertainty.*

*We gather with tenderness, the kind of tenderness that can only be born from knowing both imperfection and earnest effort.*

*We gather in openness, an openness that is wakeful to possibilities and equally discerning and gentle in judgments.*

*We gather thirsting.*

Is that what we are here for?

Marni Harmony’s vision of Congregational Gatherings is much more like the *free-for-all* described in the Gospel of John, chapter 5--- where the blind and lame and diseased all surround a sacred pool... waiting for an angel to disturb the waters... when that happens the waters suddenly have magical healing powers...

.. first one in gets healed!

But with us, as UU’s, it is not a competition. With us healing is always available to everyone. We can awaken to new possibilities in our lives. Feel the pulse of hope, accept our own imperfections and suffering.

Perhaps you may be thirsting for the inspiration that can get you through the week. We know that even though life calls each of us to a different RESPONSIBILITY, the search for truth and meaning works better together.... Listening and Sharing.

In his play *Our Town*, Thornton Wilder sets up a situation of one of the characters being able to live their life twice. The present and past are combined, though, unlike Viktor Frankl's imagining, the character does not have the right to change what happened, merely to re-experience a day in their life. (*Our Town*, Act III, paraphrased)

The character is Emily Webb, who had died young. From her seat in the graveyard the Stage Manager takes her to re-live her twelfth birthday. She is allowed to wake up again, a young girl on a snowy morning, rising and going down to breakfast... and her family giving her birthday presents around the table... The scene is repeated exactly.

The same words,  
the same gestures.

In her re-living the moment she sees it.

She sees how automatic and unsensing her family's lives were...

*"Oh mama, just look at me one minute as though you really saw me."* she says.

Soon she realizes that re-living the past is torture:

*"I can't I can't go on. "* she tells the stage manager, begging to return to the grave, *"It goes so fast. We don't have time to look at one another.... We never noticed."*

Perhaps Thornton Wilder would say the meaning of life was in noticing those we love, or (from Frankl's point of view) Perhaps Life calls you to the responsibility of noticing-- to see the essential traits and features in those you love... and the potential in them... the work of loving them into fulfillment.

If only we would stop and really notice.

*"Live as if you were living already for the second time,  
and as if you had acted the first time  
as wrongly as you are about to act NOW"*

My friend Kevin says that Christmas is torture. The empty nest is filled again with reassembled family, and somehow old conversations are recreated.

Dr Thurman's litany, which includes the line "Make peace among NEIGHBORS" was actually modified by me... he originally said "peace among BROTHERS"... but as I understand it, long term conflicts in families are not restricted to one gender... and his word implied that our families fit a traditional mold... as we know these days – it's complicated.

Still, at Christmas.. Somehow the old hurts which have been hidden away are brought out again-- Like Emily Webb's breakfast kitchen in *Our Town*, the second time through the conversation does not improve.

There is no growth, only repetition.

And how different that is from my late friend Richard's life... he seemed to take every moment as an opportunity to break out of the cycle.. to act differently and with intention, to find new ways to celebrate being alive.

He loved Mary Oliver's poem "The Summer Day" which asks:

*Tell me, what is it you plan to do  
with your one wild and precious life?  
(<https://www.loc.gov/poetry/180/133.html>)*

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And so finally we return to Dr. Thurman's observation that life has an ebb and flow. There is a season for rituals of welcome-- whether it is the grandkids or the inlaws or an old friend from long ago.

There are choir pieces to practice and pageants to put on...

The children dressed as farm animals must each go and look into the manger...

The argument over who gets the drumstick or what kind of pie to buy is repeated as if it too were part of some giant Christmas pageant.

And then it's over:

*"When the song of the angels is stilled,  
When the star in the sky is gone,  
When the kings and princes are home,  
When the shepherds are back with their flock,  
The work of Christmas begins:  
To find the lost,  
To heal the broken,  
To feed the hungry,  
To release the prisoner,  
To rebuild the nations,  
To bring peace among [Neighbors]  
To make music in the heart."*

Just as Viktor Frankl speaks of different ways to take responsibility for your own life.. so the Work of Christmas is not a scavenger hunt:

"Fed Hungry", check...

"Found two Losts", double check...

Instead he provides a way to re-center yourself from a life of stories and rituals to find again that which you are called to do.

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

and so:

*"We gather then, unbounded-- but close*

*We gather thirsting.*

*We gather, drawn to our Source. Amen."*

*Notes:*

("Twenty Nine" by Marni P. Harmony, in "Exaltation: A Mediation Manual" compiled by David B. Parke, published by the Unitarian Universalist Association 1987.)

("The Work of Christmas" in "The Mood of Christmas" by Howard Thurman, Friends United Press 1985.)