

How to Maintain a Sense of Goodness When So Many Things Are Bad

A Sermon by the Rev. Terre Balof

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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Meditation:

This morning we will share some thoughts on a topic that each of us will grapple with, perhaps many times in our lives—how to maintain a sense of the goodness in life when so many things around us seem bad. Any exploration of this topic needs many voices—so our service today will be antiphonal with spoken word and sung response, for music is often the soul’s voice.

In reflecting on how to even begin to approach such a profound topic, I realized that finding an answer to this question is deeply personal. I think it is also true that very often our life-affirming answers to this question call us to make a statement to the world. Each piece of music we will share today was created as a statement about life lived in the midst of personal loss or experienced in the midst of great evil in the world.

In the past few months I have been a part of many conversations with people who are deeply concerned about our future on this planet, about how to keep going in the face of war and devastation in the world, about concerns for children and grandchildren and the kind of world they will inherit, about how to continue to have a sense of good when everything seems to be going bad. It is indeed challenging for all of us to know how to live with hope and to know how we can make our contribution in creating a better world for all living things.

The reality is that for many years we fooled ourselves into believing that we lived in a safe and secure world; that somehow science would give us the answers to our medical needs and concerns about our environment; that diplomacy would bring us closer to peace in the world; that our country would be generous in meeting the needs of all members of our society. And so we look at our world, at our personal losses, at the lives we live, and we realize how more and more often we bring into our lives and our homes the anxieties of our times. And we find that we need one another as we seek our answers to how to respond to the tragedy and evil we see around us.

Adrienne Rich wrote, “My heart is moved by all I cannot save: so much has been destroyed I have to cast my lot with those who, age after age, perversely, with no extraordinary power, reconstitute the world.” We have cast our lot to be together, for we want to find answers to our struggles and to our concerns. Let me be clear that neither I nor anyone else can **give** you an answer that will resolve your concerns, for any exploration for an answer brings us face to face with one of humanity’s essential questions: Does life have meaning? To greater and lesser degrees, it is that search for meaning that brings each of us here this morning. And it is that need to make sense of both the joys and the concerns, the victories and the defeats in our lives that is an essential part of the life of this community.

Candles of Community

Silent Prayer & Meditation

Sung Response #18: *“What Wondrous Love?”*

Offering of Our Gifts

Sung Response

From you I receive, to you I give. Together we share and from this we live.

Meditation:

So often we simply live our lives, not noticing the wonder of the simple moments, the wonder of the gifts we receive and the gifts we give back to the world. Then, without warning, we encounter a crisis or a loss that changes everything. In Thornton Wilder’s play *Our Town*, the character Emily, a young mother who died in childbirth, asks the questions, “Do human beings ever realize life while they live it? Every, every minute?”

We live full lives. We develop long-range plans for how our lives will unfold, as if we could actually control our lives. And Jesus said, “Rain falls on the just and the unjust.” Life happens and our plans come to naught. Perhaps one day we find that the hands we thought were so full of life’s blessings seem empty. We find the lives we thought were full of meaning have lost their meaning.

Our next hymn grew out of one man’s response to his own struggle with what life brought his way. His request was that his story be told before the singing of this hymn.

Read quotation:

In August of 1932, Tommy Dorsey was scheduled to be the featured soloist at a large revival meeting in St. Louis. At the time he and his wife were living in a little apartment on the South Side of Chicago. Nettie was pregnant with their first child. He kissed her goodbye and made his way to St. Louis for the revival. The next night, as soon as he finished playing, a Western Union messenger came up to the stage and gave Dorsey an urgent telegram. “I ripped open the envelope,” he recounted later, “and pasted on the yellow sheet were the words: ‘Your wife just died.’”

Dorsey remembered the evening as a surreal moment. “People were happily singing and clapping around me, but I could hardly keep from crying out.”

Racing home, he learned that Nettie had given birth to a boy. “I swung between grief and joy,” he recalled. “Yet that night, the baby died. I buried Nettie and our little boy together in the same casket.” He managed to get through the funeral visitation and service. But when it was all over, he withdrew from family, friends, and even his beloved music. “I felt that God had done me an injustice. I didn’t want to serve him anymore or write gospel songs. I just wanted to go back to that jazz world I once knew so well,” he said.

In the midst of despair, a friend visited Dorsey and arranged for him to be left alone in a music room with a piano. “It was quiet; the late evening sun crept through the curtained windows,” Dorsey recalled. For the first time in many days, he sat at a piano using his fingers to browse the keys. Soon, the young artist experienced a personal revival: “I felt at peace. I felt as though I could reach out and touch God. I found myself playing a melody, one I’d never heard or played before, and words [for “Precious Lord”] came into my head—they just seemed to fall into place.”

Hymn #199: “*Precious Lord*”

Meditation:

Very often part of the human experience is experiencing a “dark night of the soul.” No one is immune. Part of the human condition is the reality that we are born, if we live fully, then we find that life is full of sorrow as well as great joy. We will all die. Very often a crisis will happen in our lives, and we will declare, “Why did this happen to me? What did I do to deserve this?” The reality is that life happens to us all. And life is full of loss as well as hope and promise. Like Tommy Dorsey’s, our life losses and challenges are the events that force us to find a way to live meaningful lives in spite of and perhaps because of **every** life event that comes our way. The question is What do we do with what we experience? And often we find ourselves in the midst of what theologians and poets call the dark night of the soul. One hymn writer called it the “lonesome valley”—the valley that we must walk alone. It is in that inner place where we must find a way to make meaning out of the whole of our lives. We must discover a way to find meaning, to make peace, so that we can go on.

Victor Frankl in his book, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, wrote that in the concentration camps, he observed that many prisoners died when undergoing less hardship and suffering than those who survived. The survivors tended to be people who envisioned a future for themselves despite their present suffering, people who believed they had a meaning in life and did not surrender to despair. Those who survive are those who discover meaning in their lives, even in the most difficult of hardships. Frankl wrote: “What matters is not the meaning of life in general but the specific meaning of a person’s

life at a given moment. Everyone has his own specific vocation or mission in life to carry out, a concrete assignment which demands fulfillment.”

Even in the most difficult of conditions, human beings have always found a way to find hope. Those who find hope live with the deep understanding that they have work to do in life that demands fulfillment. The composer of the music that the choir will sing asked that the following quote be read in the context of the performance of this piece:

The Holocaust is a stunning reminder of the tragic results of prejudice and hate toward other people. But is also a reminder that hope held firm will eventually reign victorious over the greatest of odds. The following words were inscribed on the walls of a cellar in Cologne, Germany, where Jews were hiding from the Nazis during World War II. Hope was all they had to hold on to, hope was their only bridge to a brighter tomorrow.

Adult Choir: “*Inscription of Hope*” by Z Randall Stroope

Homily:

I have come to believe that there is something hardwired in the human psyche that pushes us to seek meaning. We UU's tend to glorify science, and yet faith takes meaning to another level. Faith gives meaning to what science has not yet understood. Both the hymn “Precious Lord” and the piece the choir sang speak to life’s meaning being grounded in the knowledge that there is something greater than us, that our humanity is not all there is to life. Those of us who question everything will logically question also the existence of, the shape of the Other, whether that Other is called God, Spirit, Goddess, Sacred Unity, Great Spirit, the Interdependent Web of Life, or whether we believe that there is nothing beyond creation that we can see and experience. However we define it, we must make sense of life. That is why our search for meaning is so personal and individual. I could give you an answer about the meaning of life. I think I could give you a good answer—for me.

Victor Frankl wrote: “Ultimately, man should not ask what the meaning of his life is, but rather he must recognize that it *he* who is asked. Each person is questioned by life and can only answer to life by *answering for* his own life, by being responsible. Responsibility is the essence of human existence.” It is often the responsibility that seems most challenging, for in choosing to be responsible we are saying that we are willing to engage with **whatever** life brings our way, knowing that to live fully we cannot hold back the capriciousness of life or hold onto what is past. To live is to honor, to remember, sometimes to grieve the past, but life **lived** is about blessing and releasing our past, our loved ones, our mistakes so that we can shape from our past a path, a future, of meaning. Therefore, **my** answer for how to make meaning of life’s offerings may not speak to what you have experienced, what you have endured. Your journey belongs to you.

What I CAN offer, what our congregation can offer are some hands to hold and some folks to lean on as we seek meaning together. Frankl wrote, “The salvation of man is through love and in love.” So what we can do, my friends, is be reminders to one another that love lives in the midst of life and that there are people who will stand beside us, people who see us as part of a Beloved Community. Together we can journey out into the world to find our ways of making meaning of whatever life brings our way.

I recently read a story the late Senator Paul Simon was fond of telling. It’s a story he told many times, and every time he told it, it choked him up and brought tears to his eyes. I feel the same way, perhaps because it speaks to a deep longing and hope that we all have—to be seen and affirmed in our moments of greatest need. It is the story of a Special Olympics over which he officially presided. The time came for the foot race. All of the runners assembled at the starting line. Each one had a particular disability. The gun sounded and the racers sprinted. About a third of the way through the course, one of the runners fell. The crowd gasped. But, amazingly, with utter spontaneity, the rest of the runners stopped in their tracks. They stopped and looked back at the one who had fallen. One by one they turned around and slowly made their way back to help the fallen runner. They pulled him to his feet, and the race continued with everyone running arm in arm to the finish line. They all finished the race together. All of those runners could see themselves in the one who fell. At some level, they could see

their future suffering in the one who suffered now. That, my friends, is a statement about how we, too, need to hold hands and say yes to life.

Hymn #6: *“Just as Long as I Have Breath”*