



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“A Time to Work”

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Centering Thoughts

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven. Ecclesiastes 3:1

I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear: Those of mechanics—each one singing his, as it should be, blithe and strong; The carpenter singing his, as he measures his plank or beam, The mason singing his, as he makes ready for work, or leaves off work.... Walt Whitman

It is summer-gone that I see, it is summer-gone. The sweet flowers indrying and dying down, the grasses forgetting their blaze and consenting to brown. Gwendolyn Brooks

Sermon

When Labor Day began in the late 1800s it was to give workers a break from their work and show their union organizing strength. They had no idea the holiday would mark the end of the summer and not a day for labor unions to parade and advance their cause.

Just this past Wednesday about 15 members of this congregation and I stood in solidarity at the UGA Arch in witness to the ongoing struggle for human rights as we remembered the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. We shared with others a desire to not lose sight of current issues regarding many workers' low wages, high unemployment, and high cost of living. By including the Economic Justice Coalition as a Cause of the Month we're showing we put our money where our mouths are, and support or participate in assisting job seekers through education and small business initiatives, as well as advocating for worker rights. I appreciate Executive Director Linda Lloyd being with us today to share some of the benefits EJC provides to the Athens area community.

The work of EJC matters because work matters. And when I say work, I don't only mean employment. I mean the things we do each day, the work of our hands, minds, or hearts. I mean the activities that occupy our days, whether paid or not, and no matter what our stage of life.

You know work matters if you've ever asked yourself, "Is this all there is?" Or maybe you've asked, "What am I supposed to do with my life?" or even, "Why am I alive?" Humans have been asking these questions for millennia and many religions have tried to answer them.

The rhythm of the changing seasons suggest to me a time to work and a time to play. This summer I hope you found time to play, maybe to enjoy the great outdoors, whether at the beach or in the mountains, or maybe just in a back yard or city park. I hope you found time to rest from the work and labor that occupies you most of the year. We need summer Sabbath time so that when the calendar turns to fall and winter, as it is doing, we feel restored and better able to attend to our work, be it schoolwork, parenting work, justice work, creative work, finding work, or even spiritual work. We all need occupations to give our lives meaning and purpose. We don't need work that just keeps us busy or pays the bills; we need work that makes us happy by giving our lives meaning and satisfaction, which make our lives worthwhile.

Last month when we focused on Callings, I highlighted that many of us yearn for deeper meaning in our lives. This month we focus on the theme of Unity.

One thing that unifies all people is our search for meaning. The farmer, janitor, artist, lawyer, retiree, civil servant, we want to live as if our presence on earth makes some difference or means something. As our stand-in, Chester the dog wanted something to give his life purpose. It wasn't enough for him to sit around the house, waiting for time to pass, and it isn't enough for us. We are made for work.

In the song, "Turn, Turn, Turn," the words sum up the contrasting variety of human experience. Pete Seeger used these familiar phrases from the Biblical wisdom book known more by its Greek name, Ecclesiastes, than by its original Hebrew name, Qoheleth. Experts don't agree on exactly what *qoheleth* means, though the Greek word means teacher. Rather than give it a false translation, most scholars now resist translating it and I'll follow their lead.

The Qoheleth book was written around the 4th century BCE. The author identifies himself in the very first sentence of the book, variously translated either as a Teacher during the time of King Solomon or the king himself, though Solomon ruled four centuries prior to when experts date the text.

The book's second sentence cries out the author's summary on life: "Emptiness! Emptiness upon emptiness!" Life's emptiness is a unique and radical notion in comparison to the rest of the Bible. It's no wonder early rabbi's questioned whether to include this book in the biblical canon.

If emptiness sounds unfamiliar to you, perhaps you recognize the King James translation. "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity!" Unfortunately, that translation distorts the Hebrew words. Vanity implies we live life in vain – not vain as in self-absorption – but *in* vain, as in futility, not worth the trouble. This is not the author's message.

To unpack this idea of life's emptiness, another translation provides help. "Merest breath, merest breath! All is mere breath." I like this expressive, symbolic language. The original Hebrew text used the word *hevel*. *Hevel* means breath, the flimsy exhalation of vapor from our mouths – invisible, insubstantial, and instantly dissipates into thin air. This is not 'life's breath,' which is substantial and comes from the Hebrew word *ruah*. In choosing *hevel* the author communicates life's impermanence, life's changing nature. He poetically describes that life is as empty of meaning and as impossible to pin down as an exhaled breath. Any attempt to do so is like herding the wind. Makes herding cats sound easy!

If a finite, permanent meaning or purpose doesn't exist out there in the universe or come from a particular understanding of God, and since we're all going to die and be forgotten, because

we have no permanence either, then what's the point of being alive? Qoheleth's answer of emptiness foreshadows 20th century existentialists who said existence precedes essence (or meaning). (A view that resonates with me.) Just because meaning doesn't exist independently or permanently does not suggest we should just give up on life. Qoheleth determines that the reason for living must be found in something more fleeting.

Before arriving at this answer, Qoheleth sets out to experience life firsthand. He first seeks to obtain knowledge and wisdom, thinking that will satisfy. Noted scholar Rabbi Rami Shapiro translates Qoheleth's words upon obtaining wisdom:

My wisdom has grown beyond all who preceded me. I have delved deep and understood much. I have chosen the whole of life as my subject: the wise, the mad, the foolish. And yet in all my studies I can find no solid ground. There is no permanence in this world. And the pursuit of it is but chasing after wind.

Qoheleth then seeks pleasure. He samples all that life has to offer—flesh and drink, grand houses, beautiful gardens, he even buys men and women to pamper him and maintain his life of luxury. But he realizes that the pursuit of pleasure is also chasing after wind. He writes, “Pleasure, no less than knowledge, is fundamentally empty; and both are without meaning if by meaning we seek permanence.” By permanence, he means something lasting, something unchanging, even within one's lifetime. Although we sometimes wish for a life of greater pleasure or self-indulgence, I think deep down we know that if pleasure was all we had, it would not provide us with lasting meaningfulness. We would feel empty, too.

The author next tries a life of toil to gain wealth and prestige. But he discovers we can't take wealth with us when we die, and we're all going to die, the wise and the foolish, the rich and the poor. He writes, “I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had spent in doing it, and all was empty and a chasing after wind.” Although our culture teaches the best work is the one that pays the most and has the most prestige, we know wealth and prestige have limited value and include many pitfalls. Work performed merely for wealth or status will not provide lasting joy or meaning either.

Qoheleth, concluding there is no substantial meaning to life, advises:

There is no other good than eating when hungry, drinking when thirsty, and appreciating all that comes your way. For pleasure and profit are empty as the wind; there is no lasting joy at all. Joy is as fleeting as the breeze. Celebrate its coming, and do not seek to halt its passing away. (2:24)

He adds:

Life is fleeting, the passing of moments upon moments. Embrace them as they come; do not cling to them as they go. In this alone is there tranquility. Moments of birth, moments of death; moments of planting, moments of uprooting; ...moments and the passing of moments—this is life. (3:1-9ish)

This is a Buddhist-like admonition to live in the now. Others translate it this way: “Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow you may die.” Not a recommendation for hedonism because earlier he said pleasure alone won't give our lives meaning, rather, Qoheleth suggests life is for life's sake—enjoy it!

Qoheleth concludes that God created work to keep people busy during their lifetimes. God or not, the key is *during* our lifetimes. Not work performed only to meet a particular end goal,

such as wealth, prestige, or luxury, but the daily doing, the things that make up our journeys— these are what matter. Do the work for the joy and satisfaction they bring now because nothing is permanent or lasting, not even reputations.

This makes the work we do, the activities that fill our days, very important. And it means that people who have no work, no activities, and no focus to their lives, have no meaning in their lives. Our desire to help ourselves or other people find work that will give life meaning and pay the bills is therefore meaningful and important work. Advocating the right to work, the equal opportunity to gain skills and work, and the right to fair wages is a worthy commitment.

Qoheleth writes, “I know that there is nothing better for [people] than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; moreover, it is God’s gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil.”

However we understand the word ‘God,’ I think we can affirm his conclusion. Take pleasure in what work you have, in all the ways you fill your days. And if you feel no tangible impact from your work, if you feel it has no importance to society, if no one recognizes your contribution, if it doesn’t energize you, then look for something else that will.

I’ve worked at a job that lost its meaning. Where the people in charge created only stress and no joy. Where nothing was appreciated. I wasn’t living meaningfully.

Now I live with great meaning. I serve you, encourage you to discover more deeply who you are, what matters most to you, and what you offer life. This is meaningful work I am grateful to be doing. I know others find meaning in their work, their hobbies, and especially in service to this congregation and to the wider community. Be sure you enjoy whatever it is you do. Don’t waste your life.

Life is fleeting, empty, and as insubstantial as a breath. But you can breathe life into it. Although I hope you won’t die tomorrow, take Qoheleth’s advice, and mine. Eat, drink, and be merry. May it be so.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. Where do you find joy in life? Share a time when life surprised you with joy.
2. Have you found the meaning of *your* life? If so, share how you arrived at your purpose and what is most meaningful to you.
3. Does serving others play a role in giving your life meaning and purpose? Please explain.