

“THE POWER OF PURPOSE”

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by
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Dr. James Hollis, a Jungian psychologist, once said that often people may go to church to avoid a religious experience. One can, in many other churches, sit and passively experience a service. However, that does not seem to be a Unitarian trait, and my theme today is about Purpose and how, if used appropriately, can lead to right, and productive action.

Plato said, “Citizens of Athens, aren’t you ashamed to care so much about making all the money you can, advancing your reputation and prestige, while for truth and wisdom and the improvement of your souls, you have no thought or care.” Victor Frankl, a Jewish survivor of a Nazi concentration camp, and a psychologist once said, “Without purpose, people have enough to live by, but nothing to live for; they have the means, but no meaning”.

Who are prime examples of our modern day obsession with material gain without meaning? I have chosen to use the examples of Bernie Madoff, and Allen Stanford. Both were financial advisors who seemed clever and successful. The estimates are that Mr. Madoff was supposed to have 65 billion dollars in assets, and Mr. Stanford a mere 8 billion dollars in assets, when in fact, the money was not really there. They both were involved with a scheme we have now all sadly heard about called a Ponzi Scheme. Basically this is named after Charles Ponzi, who in the 1920’s, duped thousands of investors. His scheme continues to work on the “rob-Peter-to-pay-Paul” principle. That is, money from new investors is used to pay off earlier investors. The money is supposed to be coming from a legitimate investment, but sadly, the investment vehicle is imaginary. Inevitably, at some point the whole scheme collapses. You might say that they had a purpose, but as Dr. Hollis said, “Ambition that just focuses on material things, will eventually lead to deep unhappiness. The transient cultural icons – success, peace, and happiness – pale before the questions of whether or not one experiences this life as meaningful. Purpose is found, over the long haul, through the feeling of rightness within. I think we can safely say that Madoff and Stanford could not have found true Purpose.

What do we mean then, when we talk about true Purpose? Peter Temes wrote a book entitled, ‘The Power of Purpose’, on which the theme of this sermon is based. His thesis is that finding an ethical purpose is a great motivator; that while financial success is not necessary for happiness, financial success can be gained while at the same time, keeping high ethical standards. Temes states that long lasting success can only be gained by focusing on helping others. The motive to get up and out is not about what matters to me, but what matters to others. You can become successful because your life becomes infused with the purpose of doing good. Present day examples are Warren Buffet and Bill Gates. Warren Buffet has donated his fortune to the Bill Gates foundation. Both have been financially successful, but also have financially supported worthy causes.

While Temes uses purpose as a means to financial success, Hollis, Frankl, and Soren Kierkegaard considered purpose as a means to emotional happiness. I have chosen to consider happiness as

emotional success. I will continue then to present purpose as a potential means to either financial success or emotional success, and at times for both.

Peter S. Temes teaches Humanities at Columbia University. Prior to that, he had been a financially successful investor. According to Temes, Aristotle wrote that Purpose comes from the need to do good things every day, to express our sense of right and wrong in the real world, among real people. We cannot sit passively, just thinking good thoughts, and truly be good. Real goodness is expressed in good action. Temes feels that appropriate good action frequently leads to financial success.

Like our UU creed concerning the inherent dignity and worth of every person, Temes writes that every one of us should cultivate the ability to see even the most wretched of humans as their own parents might see them. By doing so, we take a large step towards living a life of power and purpose, helping others while reaching and even exceeding our goals.

We are often told that too much ambition is selfish. But, ambition can be a beautiful thing – if it is driven by a concern for others, for having a positive impact on the world. The kind of ambition that works in the long run, comes from closing your eyes at night and dreaming of being strong enough to help others. Obviously Bernie Madoff and Allen Stanford did not have the kind of ambition that would have worked in the long run. They could have benefitted from two quotes about business from a book entitled , A Father's Book of Wisdom.

The first is: Prefer loss to dishonest gain; the one brings pain at the moment, the other----for all time.

The second is: Dishonesty is like a boomerang. About the time you think all is well, it hits you in the back of the head.

Temes develops his call for action by describing the philosophy of St. Augustine. St. Augustine saw that evil was not an active force constantly looking for victory over good, but instead, evil is a passive thing, the absence of goodness. Instead of constantly trying to fight evil, we will win the fight against evil by being better people ourselves and creating more of what's good. So, if you want to help solve problems in your community, look for what's working and put your shoulder into actively creating good rather than taking up your time and energy fighting the bad. Use a positive path to success.

Thinking critically about who you are, what you believe, and when you are prepared to say no to authority in order to preserve your values, is an essential trait for personal integrity, for helping others, and for ensuring your own success. Aristotle's insistence on active virtue – virtuous action – over passive virtue speaks directly to the challenge we all face. We can sit around and think virtuous thoughts, but to stand up and act out virtuous actions is another thing entirely. We have to walk the talk.

As the English philosopher Edmund Burke famously said, "All that is necessary for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing." A shining example of doing something was our own Rober Everest Newnham. A man who wrote more than 500 research papers and 5 books, and held 20 patents could have retired to fame and fortune anywhere. Instead, he chose to spend tireless hours

supporting the peace movement and other worthy causes. Like many of you in this Fellowship, Bob did walk the talk.

Anne Frank wrote, "How wonderful it is that nobody needs to wait a single moment before starting to improve the world". Bob Newnham did not wait many moments.

Putting your insights to work – using them to reach goals and to help others – begins with a leap of faith, with a conviction that other people are important and deserve great respect. It's a matter of faith, faith in people. Temes states that once you reach your goals, especially financial success, the only thing that can make life fulfilling, is to make this world a better place.

Emotional success (happiness) is often derived from living a life of purpose. But, where does that purpose come from? Plato answered that question with his idea of the forms. The greatest purpose is helping to make life in the world come closer to the perfection of the forms---bringing all aspects of this imperfect world as close to perfection as possible. Soren Kierkegaard's version of purpose – what he termed, "a leap of faith", meant that purpose is often discovered after great personal struggle. In that case, the individual makes a choice to believe in a purpose.

Victor Frankl, who wrote primarily about emotional success, stated that no man can tell another what his purpose is in life, or in suffering, and in dying. Each must find out for himself, and must accept responsibility for his answer. Man's search for meaning(purpose) is the primary motivation in his life. Finding this meaning(purpose), leads to ambition which can then turn into action.

We should not hesitate to challenge a man or a woman with a potential purpose to fulfill. The challenge will urge one to action. Finding this worthwhile goal is indispensable to mental well-being. Many people without a purpose find that they do not have anything worth living for. They have an inner emptiness that Frankl termed the "existential vacuum". For example, his study of American college students revealed that 70% admitted to mental distress and boredom, which correlated with a lack of purpose in their lives. One of the basic tenets of Purpose therapy, or what Frankl termed 'logotherapy', is that man's main concern is not to gain pleasure or to avoid pain, but to seek meaning in his life. Sadly, much of humanity avoids life's large possibilities. It follows then, that finding purpose, somewhere in life's large possibilities, leads to happiness.

Johann W. von Goethe wrote, "Until one is committed, there is hesitancy, the chance to draw back, always ineffectiveness. The moment one definitely commits oneself, then providence moves too. All sorts of things occur to help one that would otherwise never have occurred. Boldness has genius, power, and magic in it. Whatever you can do or dream you can, begin it."

In closing, I pose a question. Why are we here? St. Augustine said, "We are here to love God and enjoy life". Your concept of God may or may not be a supreme creator. Your God may be this earth or universe and all that is good. God may just be a feeling of spirituality; a feeling of awe, and wonder at the complexity and often beauty of the natural realm. Whatever we believe, we should endeavor to improve our world. I believe that is what Saint Augustine meant by the statement, to "love God". Saint Augustine envisioned loving God in the same light as improving our world. Regardless of our concepts of God, we are called to serve the world by making the most of the purposes we choose to follow.