Universal collapse is imminent!

Such ominous words. Words that can sometimes hit too close to home, especially when our home is threatened from so many fronts.

You know the stakes when universal collapse is imminent! The world we know is too often not the world we wish. Financial collapse is imminent, with economic injustice and inequality rampant before our very eyes. Environmental collapse is imminent, with climate change and pollution threatening the ecosystems that sustain life on our planet. Political collapse is imminent, with widespread misunderstandings and violent approaches to conflict.

To top it all off, it sometimes feels like the universe enjoys blindsiding us with occasional reminders of our fragility and vulnerability, with natural disasters every so often: earthquakes, hurricanes, forest fires. Already this year, two asteroids have brushed by the Earth, and another one burst in the Russian airspace, in plain view of dozens of amateur videos.

Indeed, the thought of asteroids hitting the earth can prompt interesting existential questions. One of my favourite illustrations comes from the hidden wisdom of unexpected sources, like Hollywood blockbusters. In the sci-fi disaster drama *Armageddon*, a team of deep-core drillers is tasked with saving the world by preventing an asteroid the size of Texas from hitting the earth and ending all life on it. The drillers must rocket toward the asteroid and blow it up, with a good measure of unnecessary Michael Bay explosions and pointless plot twists.

There is a beautiful scene in the movie, when the daughter of one of the drillers is sitting in the grass with her boyfriend, also a driller. He is set to take off the next day, risking his life with the mission of saving the world from imminent destruction, but not before taking his last free evening to share a few tender moments with his girlfriend.
Amid caresses and kisses, a grassy field and some sunshine, she wonders if other people are doing those same things at that very moment.

“I hope so,” he replies, “what else are we saving the world for?”

From the mouths of hackneyed Hollywood comes an echo of that all-important question: “what on earth are we saving the world for?” What are those things that we are willing to die for? To live for? For what purpose is this life?

A neat question, even when it seems to come in inadequate places, or uncomfortable times.

I have spoken before about the book *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*, as one of the scriptures that have inspired me spiritually, and into pursuing a call to ministry, written by best-selling author, Robert Fulghum. There is a sequel to that book, the more cryptically-titled *It Was on Fire When I Lay Down on It*. As a Unitarian Universalist minister, the Rev. Robert Fulghum likes to have fun and be deep at the same time. At the end of a long lecture, or committee meeting, or interminable workshop, if someone ventures to ask *Are there any questions?* and none seem forthcoming, he likes to throw in a curious *What is the meaning of life?*

“You never know,” says Fulghum, “somebody may have the answer” and he’d hate to miss out just because he was too shy to ask.

Usually, his remark is shrugged off with a chuckle and everyone picks up to leave, perhaps taking the question to be a bit too heavy, or complicated, or hackneyed, or too forlorn a task to take seriously.

Still, one time, someone took him up on the question. Someone who seems to be on to something: one Dr. Alexander Papaderos, who has devoted his life to fostering peace in a Greek town that was devastated by hate during World War II. He runs a centre where people go to learn the art of peace. After one such workshop, Dr. Papaderos closed with that classic invitation for more questions: *Are there any questions?*

No one seemed to speak, so Fulghum asked: What is the meaning of life?

After some consideration, he responded: “I will answer your question.”

Dr. Papaderos then explained how he found a broken mirror from a German motorcycle, and kept one of the fragments. He began to play with it, shining light in corners where none would shine, making a game of it. A game that became his life when he devoted himself to the study of peace, looking to shine light where it otherwise might not reach.

“I am a fragment of a mirror whose whole design and shape I do not know,” he declared. “Nevertheless, with what I have I can reflect light into the dark places of this world […] and change some things in some people. Perhaps others may see and do likewise. This is what I am about. This is the meaning of my life.”
With great wisdom, Dr. Papaderos speaks about the meaning of his life… it is
the one he knows best, and is greatly aware that he can hardly speak about the
meaning of all life. But he also knows that he might just share something with many
others, even as he pronounces “this is the meaning of my life.”

This is the meaning of my life.

A meaning in my life, at least. My friends, often
enough I too feel like another fragment of that mirror,
looking to reflect light into dark spaces, and inspire
others to do the same. Or like a prism, to refract the
light that seems of one colour, and display it in all the
diversity that it can include. Or like lenses, a pair of
glasses, to magnify those images that can illustrate our
lives, or focus a vision of what is dearest to us.

My friends, I cannot tell you the meaning of your lives. Yet I have seen many of
you enact the work of kindred mirror fragments, as if that had special meaning to you,
bouncing enlightenment, handed to you, on to others! showcasing the unexpected
diversity that can come from the same sources! sharpening clearer vision and
amplifying the gifts that life has to offer. Sometimes, you even ignite your own
flame, and shine an altogether new light.

And so you have taken on the task of saving the world. Each of you in different
ways. In worship and in writing; in voting and vowing, in e-mail campaigns and
protests; in corner offices downtown and in hospital rooms; in the field and in the lab;
in gifts of the heart and in gifts of the bank; speaking truth to power and gentle angry
speech; you, my friends, are preventing imminent universal collapse. Yours is
complex, intricate, and important work.

Like gargantuan workers with the task of preventing universal collapse by
building wormholes for structural support, you strive to perform that task flawlessly
and with a deep sense of responsibility. And occasionally, you might find yourself
looking out into wind, longing for those otherwise meaningless moments that make
that whole task worthwhile.

I too, have struggled with taking on the task at hand, and finding the purpose
behind that task, sometimes losing sight of the apparently meaningless moments that
end up meaning all that much more.

The ministerial stakes are high. Congregational collapse is imminent! Or so it
seems at times. In looking to preserve others’ spiritual health, lies a challenge to
remember that I too need to find the reason to worship, to absorb the music. Strengthening congregational relationships while keeping family ties, hearing the voices of loved ones. Respecting professional boundaries, while finding someone to go out with, who will hold my hand, tenderly. Tending to immediate responsibilities, and taking a break over the holidays at a friend’s farm, where the memorable moments are shared meals, chords of music, and the opportunity to milk a cow. Making a pledge of solemn service and of sacred silliness, for all that is my life.

For all that is your life, my friends, all of you can answer that question better than I can. All I can offer are some reflections and refractions of glimmers that have come to me about lives that are worth dying for.

If I read you as scripture, you have written that a life worth dying for includes:

Feeding the world and feasting with friends. Preventing financial meltdown and enriching our hearts with music. Holding off environmental disaster and minding the arrangement of a houseplant. Stopping war and making love. Fighting… against violence and hatred, and catching a glimpse of bare flesh. Putting your heart in all that is worth doing, so that you may time and again feel the beating of that heart.

So may we die. And so may we live.
Glory be.
Alleluia.
Amen.