

The Examined Life: What Have I Done?

Rev. Shawn Newton
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
18 November 2018

N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation.

What have I done?

It's the question we may ask in exasperation,
when looking to something in particular we did,
and something, most often, we may wish we had done differently.

At times our regrets may be as much
for something we didn't do,
as for something that we did.

Sins of omission, as well as sins of commission,
to borrow the heavy-laden language of Catholicism.

Whether we subscribe or not to this notion of sin,
we can be easily burdened by a host of “oughts” and “shoulds”,
whenever we examine our lives closely.

“What have I done?” may also be the question we ask,
when we look back across the years and wonder
just what we've made of the gift of our existence.

Have we found our life's purpose,
and done something with it?

Have we done the important things we set out to do?

Have we become the person that we hoped to be?

In her book, *Walking Toward Morning*,
Victoria Stafford tells the story

of visiting an old cemetery and finding
“a strangely soothing epitaph” on one of the gravestones.

The name of the deceased and her dates
had been scoured away by wind and rain,
but there was a carving of a tree with roots and branches
and among them the words,
‘She attended well and faithfully to a few worthy things.’

Stafford says, “At first this seemed... a little meager,
a little stingy on the part of her survivors,
but I wrote it down and have thought about it since,
and now I can’t imagine a more proud or satisfying legacy.
‘She attended well and faithfully to a few worthy things.’”

“Every day,” Stafford reflects, “I stand in danger
of being struck by lightning
and having the obituary in the local paper say,
for all the world to see,
‘she attended frantically and ineffectually
to a great many unimportant, meaningless details.’”

How do you want your obituary to read[, she asks]?

‘He got all the dishes washed and dried
before playing with his children in the evening.’

‘She balanced her checkbook with meticulous precision
and never missed a day of work—missed a lot of sunsets,
missed a lot of love, missed a lot of risk, missed a lot—
but her [finances sure were] in order.’

‘She answered all her calls, all her e-mail, all her voice-mail,
but along the way she forgot to answer the call
to service and compassion, and forgiveness,
first and foremost of herself.’

‘He gave and forgave sparingly,
without radical intention, without passion or conviction.’

‘She could not, or would not, hear the calling of her heart.’

How will it read, how does it read...
if you had to name a few worthy things
to which you attend well and faithfully,
what... would they be?

When I was in seminary, I took a course
titled “Death and Dying in Life and Literature”—
or more affectionately known as “Crying for Credit.”

And we did, indeed, do a fair bit of weeping across that term.

Towards the end of the course, my classmates and I
were required to write and deliver our own eulogies.

It turns out it’s harder than you might imagine
to speak of yourself in the third person,
and in the past tense.

But, that was the assignment.

And the catch was that these wasn’t to be
some glowing look back on a long life,
as we might imagine and hope them to be,
should we live to be a hundred.

These eulogies were to be given,
as though each of us had died the day before,
at whatever age we had reached, then and there.

There was no room for future aspirations,
for dreams we hoped might come true.

There was only what had been,
right up to that day, and nothing more.

It can be a sobering thing to sit with our lives in this way.

To ask, “Just exactly what have I done?”

Now, if and when that question comes to you,

I sincerely hope you are gentle with yourself.

I hope you steer clear of simply listing the accomplishments that might be the typical measure of success in our society.

I hope you give yourself credit for shining moments of integrity or courage.

Moments when you've persevered through more than anyone else will ever know.

Moments when you've drawn on resources you didn't know you had.

Moments when you've shown aspects of character and virtue that are the best of who you are— and the best of who we, as humble humans, can be.

I hope you search your memory bank to discover those few, worthy things—the things, in the end, of which you are proudest, even if in a quiet way.

And I hope that in some small way what you deem worthy has been supported, or sustained, or inspired by being part of this community.

I know this is true for some of you, because you've told me.

You've told me how you've gained sobriety, or come out, or finally forgiven your parents, because of what we do here.

You've told me that you've left a job that was killing you, or recommitted to your marriage because we encourage you to live out your values, as best you can, every day.

You've told me that you've shown up for social justice work, and surprised yourself by your own capacity for generosity, because you've heard a call, coming from the heart of this community, to see yourself as part of the larger whole,

part of the web of being, to which each of us belongs.

My hope is that this place has made
an enduring difference in your life.

That you've found healing and comfort here, in community.

And that you've been challenged along the way.

That you have received invitation after invitation to grow.

Ironically, what we do here
is becoming increasingly unconventional.

Congregations are one of the last places in our society,
where we gather with people across the generations.

And it is the rare place where you
can journey across the stages of your own life.
Aging and "saging." Changing and becoming.

Unitarian Universalism is a faith
that works on you over the long haul.

We tend not to have many immediate conversions.

Instead, we are a people who tend to evolve,
sometimes slowly, and sometimes with great speed.

And as is the case for Toronto, diversity is our strength.

We hear ideas from each other that challenge us, and change us.

We encounter here people with different theologies,
or different backgrounds,
or different pronouns than we are accustomed to.

People with wealth,
and those struggling to afford to make the trip to this building.

Those who are neuro-typical, and those who are not.

People who are polyamorous,
and those who are asexual.
A rainbow of sexualities and genders, all under one roof.

And we find here, often in the very same pew,
people wading through depression,
and those overflowing with enough hope
for everyone around them.

It's frequently true that you can find someone here
who has lived through something
that you are now only beginning to contend with yourself.

And, if you're lucky, you may well find your nemesis here, too!
The contemplative writer, Henri Nouwen,
said that community is the place
“where the person you least want to live with always lives.”
And so it is.

In this way, we are marvelous and sometimes
completely infuriating gifts to each other.

At our best, though, the gift we give to each other
is what Lord Shaftesbury, centuries ago,
called “amicable collision.”

“Politeness. . . kindness, compassion, self-restraint,
and a sense of humour[, he said,]
are “the final fruits of a ‘polished culture’ . . .

“We polish one another,
and rub off our corners and rough sides
by a sort of amicable collision.

To restrain this, is inevitably[, he said,]
to bring a rust upon [our] understanding.”¹

¹ Lord Shaftesbury, *The Scottish Enlightenment, The Scots Invention of the Modern World* by Arthur Herman, as quoted in “Canadian Unitarianism: An Idea of a Possibility” by Ray Drennan, UUMA Selected Essays, 2004.

As I've said before, in this place,
we are each other's spiritual practice.

And my deepest hope is that we—
led to bring more love and justice into the world—
are transformed in the process.

That we make more of each other.
That, together, we become the people we long to be.
That when asking, "What have we done,"
we can say with confidence that we
have changed each other and the world around us, for good.

As Margaret mentioned earlier,
we are all being asked in the coming week
to consider our financial support for this place.

As always, I ask that you sustain this place that we create together
by giving at a level that makes a meaningful difference to you—
by that I mean at a level that makes a tangible difference,
a level that you actually feel in your wallet.

Because that, I believe, is a sign
of giving in a way that truly matters to you.

Because that, I believe, is where genuine generosity begins.
Where we can feel it.

And, not least, because what we do and create here,
isn't just about us, gathered within these hallowed walls.

As important as it is that we come together
to build up a community here—
what I call our little, loving laboratory of the human spirit—
it matters as much, if not more, what we do
with the power and potential of this community beyond this place.

Many of us fret around here on a regular basis
that we're not more effective at taking collective action, together.

And that may still be possible,

and certainly is possible from time to time.

But the power for transformation
at the heart of this community
is actually to be found in our going out from this place each week
to live lives of purpose and integrity,
and to bring more love and justice to our own corner of the world.

Earlier this week, Doug Buck shared with me a piece that
described the work of Arie Kruglanski,
a research psychologist at the University of Maryland.

Kruglanski's work focusses on how people become so radicalized
that they carry out terrible acts of violence.

In searching for common threads,
what he has found is that the particulars
of someone's ideology don't seem to matter,
be they fueled by Islamaphobia, Anti-Semitism,
or hatred of some other sort.

What those who resort to violence share, though,
is a pattern, "a quest for significance,"
with three predictable elements.

The first is "the universal need to live a worthwhile life—
to have significance."

Usually, this comes through normal means,
living for the "few, worthy things" we're all hoping for.

For people who are moved to terrible violence,
the second element is a dominating "narrative"
that gives them permission to use violence,
a story that justifies their use of violence towards others.

This usually involves a feeling of being attacked by others,
and leads to an impulse to defend themselves,
and to gain "respect, honour, or glory."

The third element in this is having a community

that reinforces the narrative of grievance and validates the use of violent means.

Three elements, three steps:

- 1) a quest for significance,
- 2) a narrative of grievance,
- 3) and a validating network that encourages violence.

This framework makes sense to me on a gut level.

And recent trends among political leaders, both near and far, who are stoking the coals of intolerance and distrust, play right into this most insidious form of politics, with, as we have repeatedly seen, terrible ramifications.

And, yet, as I have reflected on these three elements, this framework for radicalizing people toward acts of hatred, it's occurred to me that these three elements could actually be transformed to radicalize people toward acts of love, compassion, and understanding.

Hear these elements in a new way.

1) Everyone shares the longing for significance.
The desire to live a life of meaning and purpose.
To know that what we do with our lives
makes some difference beyond our days on this earth.

2) Rather than holding a narrative of grievance and suspicion towards others, there is a deep need for a different story.

One that calls us to look to the best in others.
One that calls us to put ourselves in someone else's shoes.

One that calls us to be grounded in our common humanity,
yet empowered to live the life of the boundless heart.

A different story that always and everywhere calls us
to turn from violence and, instead, sow the seeds of peace.

3) And the third element, to be surrounded
by a community of validation, a network of people
who support and challenge each other
to live into the promise of building a better world,
one person at a time.

Those three elements—
the process of leading a life of radical love—
should be familiar to you all.

Because, that, my friends,
is what this place is ultimately all about.

We often lean on the UU proverb that,
“We need not think alike to love alike.”

And that is true.
And so desperately needed in this world of ours.

And, so, that is our work.
Together.
Here and now.
And for as many tomorrows as we are given.

For the most pressing question we now face
is not “what have we done?”,
but “what is it that we can and must do, together?”