

**“Are We Just Yolks?”**  
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The first 48 hours of my return to work brought an epiphany; we are so easily distracted. My office email contained over 900 messages, 600 of them spam, multiple offers for coiled tubing, investment opportunities, Viagra, and “unbelievable sex.” Someone had registered me for regular updates from two political candidates and daily faith based updates, none of which I want.

I went to my mailbox (the real one - faithfully kept and sorted during my leave, and, after opening and reading everything found two letters of worth. Granted, most folks knew I was gone and saved their important information, but two letters of worth and 600 spam messages? What about our congregational mission? What about Unitarian Universalist purposes and principles (located on 6<sup>th</sup> page of hymnal). What about being a liberal religious voice in the Greater Cincinnati area?

When Tom Sandman finished his term as Board President a few years ago he gave me a parting gift, a recording of the “Best of Monty Python,” songs from the British comic sextet. As I sat in the minister’s study on the second day, a Monty Python song, “The Meaning of Life,” came to me, which I will now share with you

Why are we here, what’s life all about?  
 Is God really real, or is there some doubt?  
 Well tonight we are going to sort it all out,  
 For tonight it’s the Meaning of Life  
 What’s the point of all this hoax?  
 Is it the chicken and the egg time, are we just yolks?  
 Or perhaps we are just one of God’s little jokes,  
 Well *ça c’est* the Meaning of Life.  
 Is life just a game where we make up the rules,  
 While we’re searching for something to say,  
 Or are we just simply spiraling coils  
 Of self-replicating DNA?  
 In this life, What is our fate?  
 Is there a Heaven and a Hell? Do we reincarnate?  
 Is mankind evolving or is it too late?  
 Well tonight here’s the Meaning of Life.  
 For millions this life is a sad vale of tears,  
 Sitting round with nothing to say,  
 While scientists say we’re just simply spiraling coils,  
 Of self-replicating DNA.  
 So just why, why are we here?

And just what, what, what, what do we fear?  
 Well *çe soir*, for a change, it will all be made clear,  
 For this is the Meaning of Life  
 - *c'est le sens de la vie*,  
 This is the Meaning of Life.

Apparently there *is* a reason to send ministers on sabbatical. Five months of sabbatical have given me a view of ministry that I have not had in the ten years I have been working at it. We are spending too much time on hats.

While on sabbatical I keep bumping into three ideas, life is full of suffering, life is short, and life has great potential and meaning. I also thought about life as sacrifice while on sabbatical. This came to me with great sincerity and power. Life requires choices and ultimately sacrifices of us. Which choices will we make, and will we make them for self-observation and meaning or distraction and irrelevance? Will we make them embracing our UU values such as the inherent worth and dignity of every person, justice, equity and compassion in human relations, and acceptance of one another or materialism. Will we make them sustained by our history of critical thinking, optimism, and universal love or by approval in the court of public opinion?

Last week I shared many of the stories I heard with you. One of the reasons I enjoyed listening to the stories of other people (strangers) was because few of these people knew I was a minister. They weren't trying to impress, teach, or draw comfort from me. Their stories were not calculated, and they had nothing to gain, and maybe a few things to lose by telling me their stories. Their stories were, in short, the unvarnished truth. And this truth shone like a blinding, uncomfortable beacon reminding me of sacrifice, and the choice between and irrelevance in this brief life.

One of the stories I didn't share with you last week was a conversation I had with a young woman whose father was killed in the 1993 Lucasville Prison Riot here in Ohio. This prison riot is considered many things, a clash of religion and medicine, power and imprisonment, racial difference and solidarity, and one of the longest and most brutal prison riots in American history. Her father was an inmate killed during the riot.

This was just part of her story, which also includes the incarceration of her father before she was born for a very bad crime, a childhood spent without Christmas gifts year in and long year out, being told by high school administrators that she would fail in life, having a child before she graduated from high school, raising that child, marrying a good man, and continuing to take in multiple children from her extended family because her childhood left her with one promise to herself, to never let a child suffer without parents like she did. She and her husband may well fall under the poverty level this winter because they have chosen to take on two more troubled and abandoned children from her extended family.

This is my idea of family values and a life of both chosen sacrifice and chosen meaning. To articulate our liberal religious difference, for me this is not a story of family values because there was no abortion, a marriage, and no divorce. For me this is a story of family values, Unitarian Universalist values, because this woman won't give up on the inherent worth and dignity of troubled children, because she won't give up on herself. Growing up spending long, painful Christmas holidays with nothing she had plenty of time to consider how much she was the daughter of her father. Let's just assume she has

had that epic confrontation (“Luke, I am your father”) many times. And every time she has found a way to rise and say “I am not the sum of my family, my misery, my loss and I have love to give and choices to make and people to help so let’s get going.”

We are called to match this depth of dignity, power, sacrifice, hope and meaning (really, the fullness and richness of human experience) with that of our own, through our Unitarian Universalist values, our mission statement, and everything they imply. Anything less is a distraction and waste of time, precious time.

The film *The Meaning of Life* is savagely funny and not for the faint of heart. Skip it entirely if you dislike gratuitous sex and expulsive bodily functions. It won’t be worth your while, but like the scene I read to you before the sermon, this film lays bare our human weakness and irrelevance with great humor (which makes the truth tolerable). To begin with, people aren’t curious about the meaning of life. It’s the fish, in the fish tank of a retirement community that wonder what it’s all about. The human beings in the film can’t even succinctly sum up any worthwhile philosophy.

As thinking viewers we are left to wonder if we are just impotent fish in the fish tank of life making up the rules, searching for something to say, and trying to avoid being eaten. This is a great waste of human potential. Some of the most searing segments are unexpected, for example, when the chapter on growth and education segues from a “boy” forced to play in a sports match where is obscenely outnumbered, and covers his dirty face with his dirty hands, then removes those hands and we see him begin to run on a field of battle where he does not want to be. As Monty Python so unflinchingly notes, there are plenty of things with meaning, plenty of situations that require potential and greatness, we just have a passive tendency to go for the hats.

I don’t want any more hats. “Number 2, Item 6 on the boardroom agenda, matter and energy,” this is the prize. What matters and what is the energy we give what matters? This is the question that needs to drive every worship service, every program, every meeting, every decision.

I would like to thank the many people here who worked on matter and energy when I was on leave. During my leave this congregation passed a by-laws revision, produced an outstanding strategic plan report (connected to mission and growth – copies available in the foyer and in committee boxes), drafted a new endowment proposal with the support of all major parties that will create endowment opportunities for building preservation and maintenance, a general fund, and social justice outreach (now there is living our mission – putting our money where our mouth is). I am so proud of you. These tasks employed our Unitarian Universalist values and they have meaning.

During my leave you painted the stairway, refinished the upstairs wood floor, carpeted those terrible tiles (yes I noticed and silently commended you), added benches by the doorway for those who need seats, gussied up the Linton Street sign, purchased baby changing stations for the women and men’s restroom (now there is justice, equity, and compassion in human relations), purchased attractive shades going up to RE, and new furniture for the foyer (which has not yet arrived). This has meaning. A congregation cannot attract and satisfy members and visitors without caring for itself. Self-care is an act of self-esteem that enables us to dream and work. Buildings that house people with a mission hold their heads up high. And you know what; they have some dirt on the carpet. I was so proud to see stains on our new carpet, that means we lived here,

worked here, fed each other here, got our hands and floor dirty engaging in a greater endeavor. Great work!

At last week's Board meeting the Board voted to buy copies of the new supplemental hymnal, purchase a projector and camera for membership and communication needs, take down the broken fence to protect our children safe, and use funds to fix the grass and concrete on Linton Street so we look welcoming and safe. Most importantly, they voted to install a new sound system in the sanctuary, the foyer (with a speaker in the kitchen) and the Ellen Hall Room.

Now all will hear equally while supporting the mission (which sometimes includes chopping carrots in the kitchen during the service to prepare for the Thanksgiving dinner, or sitting in the foyer with busy children). Those with hearing loss will hear better and all will be served equally (those with children, those with disabilities, those that come late, those who are doing other work) because all matter. This is living our Unitarian Universalist values. This has meaning.

During my leave you debated housing homeless families here through Interfaith Hospitality Network. This is a tremendous opportunity, not only to look at homelessness and families in poverty in our country and community, but also to look at our personal and communal spiritual and ethical development, to consider the true costs of a living wage, health care, day care, crime, insurance for the indigent and children, domestic violence (that sixth and seventh principle- the goal of world community and the interdependent web of which we are all a part).

This is not just about homelessness and feeding the hungry. It is about quality of life and community values. This is about digging into our UU Purposes and Principles (the inherent worth and dignity of every person and justice, equity and compassion in human relations). This is about looking suffering in the face (yours and theirs), naming it, knowing it, and not just being yolks or one of God's little jokes. This, my friends, is about the meaning of life - your life, my life, the life of our neighbors and strangers, the life of the vulnerable and the powerful, the life of a shared community, our community. How do we want to share this life, our only life? With what values will we treat one another in this life, our only life? How do our Unitarian Universalist values guide our actions?

Thank you to everyone who constructively initiated this project, constructively expressed concerns, and constructively accommodated the changes this will require. The lay leadership has heard the overwhelming feedback of this congregation (via the strategic planning committee – you want more long term decision making and better process to direct social justice. Thank you for sharing your truth and hopes. The Board and Social Justice Committee will be working toward this meaningful vision. [SP and Diversity – 3 Principle]

During my leave some lay leaders worked very hard. They need a rest. Worship co-chairs Lyn Martin and Martha Walker will be stepping down after three years of incredible service, which concluded by covering all the Sundays I was gone. Thank you. Worship Committee will need more volunteers, perhaps you. While they worked, someone else here rested. Now it is your turn to volunteer.

John Scott, who has personed the sound system rain, sleet or snow, and the current system is no walk in the park to manage, will be stepping down after decades of service so he can listen to the service instead of worrying about the sound of it. Thank

you, John. Some new volunteers will be needed. Maybe you. Volunteering is how we learn about our Unitarian Universalist values, how we are challenged, comforted, how we give back to this community and the larger community, which everyone yearns to do – make a positive difference. Contribution has meaning. Find a way to harness your time, talent, and money here.

However, no one here should give so much that they lose consecutive nights sleep. That is not what our mission and ministry are about. We must rest, and care for one another, speak kindly and politely through appropriate channels, respect that our individual space cannot exceed that of the community. This too is our mission. Anything less is not acceptable. It is a distraction and potentially destructive. First Church must remain a sanctuary for exploration, rest, and renewal.

Every Sunday I remember that there is someone here, probably more than one person who needs to spend time crying quietly during services, and that is their contribution for now because life has painful choices and too many sacrifices. We are called to love these people, welcome them, and let them be who they are here without judgment or guilt. The day will come when these people rise and participate in our mission in a new way and others take their place because the sacrifices of life have grown too hard. One meaning of life is taking turns and sharing the good with the bad, together.

Prepare for mission driven conversation everywhere. Prepare to meet sacred cows face on. [Define] If our new sound system needs to go where the Sallie Ellis Library is in the sanctuary (I'm not saying it does – I have no idea), prepare to move the library so all can hear. Look, Sallie Ellis had an evangelical mission of radical Unitarian love; she sent Unitarian pamphlets and materials to isolated Unitarians around the country in the mid-1800's. She did it from this congregation and I think she would be offended if we bolted her library in one place, which then prevented dozens of people from hearing our present day mission in another. Think living mission!

If the coffee table in the foyer needs moved to accommodate wheelchairs and strollers, move it. Our Universalist forebearers taught us that God is love and love is the answer. Aesthetics don't matter more than radical hospitality (which is of course, radical love). If the old wood table in the Ellen Hall room needs a new home so we can accommodate more people at meetings and social activities, move it. Aesthetics don't matter more than radical hospitality. If our membership orientation needs to move to Saturdays to accommodate more visitors, so be it. There is a woman in this great city that is preparing to go below the poverty level to raise neglected children. We don't have a moment to waste with distractions. She is exercising sacrifice and choice, radical love and hope, and so must we. It is our liberal religious heritage and voice. What are we waiting for?

There are so many things to try, live, and celebrate in this strangely sacrificial life. I don't want to be a pile of self-replicating DNA and I refuse to invest in hats. Our meaning is to bring souls into greater existence by a process of guided self-observation the Unitarian Universalist way. That is our shared ministry here. Please, please join me in this meaning of life.