

in the hope and faith that it will soon become clear, that we will get through the crisis somehow. Sometimes all we can do is to "hang in there," with very little faith and very little hope, but with just enough that we don't give up on ourselves or that we don't despair.

At such times it is terribly important to be able to draw upon the faith of liberal religion that human life is sacred and worth living and that there are resources deep within which will sustain us and see us through. It is also crucial to have the support of a caring community. A liberal faith offers much by way of both insight and support when we face difficult times.

## PART II

# THE CRISIS OF MEANING AND PURPOSE

## THE PROBLEM OF MEANING IN THE MODERN AGE

We live not by things but by the meanings of things.

Antoine de Saint Exupéry

There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy.

Albert Camus

The business of religion is meaning.

Dean M. Kelley

Tall, good-looking and in his early thirties, Tim had just started coming to my church when he asked to see me. He got straight to the point. "I'm looking for a reason to live," he said. "I have a decent job; I make good money; I have friends and a woman I enjoy being with. But I have no direction, no purpose in my life. Making money and having a good time aren't enough. I want my life to count, but I don't feel that it does."

He went on to say that he had felt this way for as long as he could remember, but that he had previously buried such thoughts by keeping busy. Recently, however, his yearning for meaning and purpose had refused to stay buried. He had started coming to church hoping to find a spiritual foundation and direction. He could no longer believe in the traditional Christianity of his childhood and was looking for a religious philosophy that would make life worth living.

As I probed further, I concluded that he was quite stable emotionally, but felt keenly a void in his life that he wanted to fill. It seemed to me that he articulated clearly the situation that many people feel but do not always express. Many of us fill our time with busy activities which distract us from the awareness that our lives have little or no purpose or direction.

For Tim and for many people the search for meaning and purpose in life is neither an intellectual game nor a dispassionate exercise. It is a matter of life and death — not in the biological sense but in the spiritual sense. To find an answer is to be on the road to a life of satisfaction and fulfilment. To fail to find an adequate answer is to experience a lack of fulfilment and perhaps despair, what Kierkegaard called “the sickness unto death.”

Albert Camus, in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, put it dramatically: “There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy.”<sup>1</sup>

Carl Jung believed the source of many of his patients’ problems was meaninglessness.

About a third of my cases are suffering from no clinically definable neurosis, but from the senselessness and emptiness of their lives. . . [T]his can well be described as the general neurosis of our time.<sup>2</sup>

Jung and Camus wrote in the 1930s and early 40s of a timeless human concern. I know of no one who has expressed that concern better in recent years than New York Governor Mario Cuomo who, at the Commencement exercises of Iona College in 1985, said of the graduates,

They will have to decide soon the ultimate question — whether or not to live for *something*, or simply

go from experience to experience, concerned about nothing more than what’s in it for them. . . . They’ll have to deal with the most fundamental question of all: *Why* do we make the effort? *Why* do we work? *Why* do we try? . . .

Then, speaking of his own generation and the parents of the graduating class, he went on.

Can we, who found the ultimate truth so elusive for so long, tell them with confidence now of the futility of gathering up riches and the things of the world?

Most of us have achieved levels of affluence and comfort unthought of two generations ago. We’ve never had it so good, most of us. Nor have we ever complained so bitterly about our problems. The closed circle of pure materialism is clear to us now — aspirations become wants, wants become needs and self-gratification becomes a bottomless pit.

All around us we have seen success in this world’s terms become ultimate and desperate failure. . . . Entertainers and sports figures achieve fame and wealth but find the world empty and dull without the solace or stimulation of drugs. Men and women rise to the top of their professions after years of struggling. But despite their apparent success, they are driven nearly mad by a frantic search for diversions, new mates, games, new experiences — anything to fill the diminishing interval between their existence and eternity. . . .

Do you think they would believe us if we told them today, what we *know* to be true: That after the pride of obtaining a degree and maybe later another degree and after their first few love affairs, that after earning their first big title, their first shiny new car and travelling around the world for the first time and having had it *all* . . . they will discover that none of it counts *unless they have something real and permanent to believe in*.<sup>3</sup>

We human beings differ from other animals in that we need something to live for, as surely as we need food and



water. It is not enough simply to live; we need some reason for living. St. Exupéry said it this way: "We live not by things but by the meanings of things."

Psychotherapist Viktor Frankl stresses the importance of finding meaning to one's life and documents its relationship to survival in his remarkable little book, *Man's Search for Meaning*. He tells of his experiences as a prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp. Referring to those spared from the gas chambers, he concludes that the men and women who survived the years of hard labor and terrible deprivation had something to live for, some higher purpose to their lives. Those who died had lost the sense that their lives were worth living. On the basis of his camp experience, Frankl founded a school of psychotherapy he calls *logotherapy*, or *meaning therapy*. Frankl believes that many emotional problems result from a failure to find meaning in one's life and that these can be resolved only when one discovers something to make life worth living.

Throughout history religion has given expression to the perceived meaning of human life. Indeed, a widely-accepted definition calls religion "the search for meaning and value." Religion has to do with finding something to live for, a cause or object of devotion to which to give oneself. In a book entitled *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing*, Dean Kelley has written,

The business of religion is meaning. . . . By far the most important patterns for human life are the very biggest ones, which explain the purpose of existence, the nature of reality, the fate of the world, the character of the beings or forces that determine our destiny and how we can relate to them. These largest patterns of meaning are the subject matter of religion.<sup>4</sup>

By providing an overarching meaning in ultimate terms, religion makes sense of everything that happens to its followers and provides them a reason or reasons for living. If our child dies and we ask, "Why do bad things happen to me?" our religious faith should help us answer that question. When we question why we should keep on working day after day or why we should not just look out for ourselves and say, "To hell with everyone else!" our religion should give us an answer. Liberal religion also offers ultimate meaning and purpose for the lives of its members.

Before describing what a contemporary liberal faith gives us, let us look at the answers our western religious traditions have given in the past.

The faith of Israel was grounded in the idea that Yahweh God had chosen Israel as his people. Yahweh had made a covenant with them, if they followed his commands, He would bless them. The meaning of their life as a people consisted in obedience to their God. Later their purpose expanded to include the task of making Yahweh known to the rest of the world. Their purpose as a people was to be "a light unto the nations" as the prophet Isaiah put it, and each individual Israelite could view his or her life as meaningful insofar as he or she participated in this larger purpose which included the perpetuation both of the nation and its religion. However, with the conquest and dispersal of Israel by her neighbors, another myth became operative. God would send a Messiah who would re-establish the kingdom of Israel and restore the people to their homeland. In each case the meaning of life was bound up with the purposes of the Almighty and would be fulfilled in the future. The life of the individual attained significance by contributing to the divine plan.



Christian faith also set the individual's life in a larger cosmic context. For the Christian the meaning of life lay in doing the will of God who in turn made the individual's life meaningful because it was part of the divine purpose of creation and redemption, culminating in the future realization of the kingdom of God. Human life is meaningful because of its role in God's larger purposes, and each person finds both meaning in the present and hope for the future by following what he or she understands to be God's way.

For many today, the meaning structure provided by the traditional religions has broken down. For various reasons, the biblical world view and the traditional religious perspectives no longer command allegiance or offer satisfying answers to life's ultimate questions. Cut off from the anchor of traditional belief, many people feel adrift; they experience life as without meaning. Loss of a center for modern life gave rise to the movement known as existentialism, a response to the sense of inner emptiness, hopelessness and despair which many felt without the traditional meaning structure.

In his book *The Courage To Be*, liberal Protestant theologian Paul Tillich characterized what he called "the anxiety of meaninglessness" as the dominant problem of our time. Tillich said three types of anxiety seem to be intrinsic to human nature: the anxiety of fate and death, the anxiety of guilt and condemnation, and the anxiety of emptiness and loss of meaning. Some degree of each type of anxiety is part of the human condition, but in different periods of history one kind of anxiety seems to dominate. Tillich believed that in our epoch the anxiety of meaninglessness is most pervasive. He described it in this way.

The anxiety of meaninglessness is anxiety about the loss of an ultimate concern, of a meaning which gives meaning to all meanings. This anxiety is aroused by the loss of a spiritual center, of an answer, however symbolic or indirect, to the question of the meaning of existence.<sup>5</sup>

Drawing on the ancient figure of Sisyphus, Camus depicted this modern experience. Sisyphus was a greedy tyrant condemned by the gods to push an enormous boulder up the side of a mountain. A punishing task, it was made worse by the fact that just as he got it nearly to the top, the boulder rolled down, and he had to start all over again. Sisyphus was condemned to this never-ending, purposeless task for eternity.

If Sisyphus depicts the human situation, it means that all we do leads nowhere. Life is without meaning or purpose. It is simply "the same thing over and over and over again."

Most of us would admit to feeling that way at times. We may experience our jobs as a treadmill; no matter how hard we work, we get nowhere. We may question the worth or value of our work, or our personal and family life may sometimes seem to be pointless. For most of us the meaning of our lives is not a problem when things are going well, but it concerns us when we experience some kind of difficulty, as when we lose our job, or our marriage falls apart, or one of our children gets in trouble, or death takes someone close.

This is what happens to television producer Mickey Sachs in the movie *Hannah and Her Sisters*. Early in the movie, we see Sachs, played by Woody Allen, working at a frenetic pace, producing shows, creating new shows, making a great deal of money and on his way to the top of the ladder of success and fame.



However, he has paid a high price for his life in the fast lane. His marriage to Hannah has failed; his relationship to their children is marginal; and he has no real friends. The Mickey we see at this stage is a man dashing around frenetically, quick to lose his temper, self-centered and ambitious. He doesn't really connect with people — not with his former wife, nor his children, nor his business associates.

But he has recently been bothered by the loss of hearing in one ear. He learns from his doctor that his hearing problem could mean he has a brain tumor. He must have more tests made, but these will take time and while he is undergoing the tests and awaiting the results, he confronts the possibility of his own death, apparently for the first time. Frightened, he imagines that he has an inoperable tumor and only a short time to live. Imminent death forces him to look at his life and to ask what its meaning and purpose have been or ought to be.

Haunted by the threat of death and the emptiness of his life, he is unable to work; so he leaves his job and devotes himself to searching for an answer to his question. He desperately wants to believe in God and in life after death, and to the bewilderment of his Jewish parents, he tries to convert to Catholicism. But his efforts fail; he cannot believe. He reads philosophy trying to accept the arguments for the existence of God, but that doesn't work either. He looks at other possibilities, but nothing satisfies him.

Then he learns that he has no tumor. This brings relief, but it does not give him peace. For he has been confronted with death and the question of the meaning of his life, and his life has been forever changed. He cannot give up his search until he has found a meaning to life that satisfies his deep need.

Many of us are like Mickey Sachs; not until we are shaken by some unexpected and shocking experience do questions of meaning intrude upon our daily routine. It is when we are confronted with a chasm between our expectations of life and its reality that we experience the crisis of meaning.

If it is true that the "striving to find a meaning in one's life is the primary motivational force in human beings,"<sup>6</sup> then it is essential that liberal religion offer a spiritual framework for meaningful living, the kind of foundation sought by Tim, the young man whose concern for meaning began this discussion. A liberal religious framework is spelled out in the next two chapters.



## WOODY ALLEN, *ECCLESIASTES* AND THE SEARCH FOR MEANING

If we hope to live not just from moment to moment, but in true consciousness of our existence, then our greatest need and most difficult achievement is to find meaning in our lives.

Bruno Bettelheim

When the meaning of our lives is not self-evident and when many of us cannot derive our sense of meaning from traditional religion, where and how do we find meaning? Let us look at Woody Allen's answer in *Hannah and her Sisters*.

One day in the course of his increasingly anguished search, Mickey walks the streets of the city until, exhausted, he goes into a theatre just to sit down, without even noticing what film is playing. The movie happens to be an old Groucho Marx film Mickey had seen many times, but this time it becomes a vehicle of revelation for him. As he watches the movie, he is overtaken by the feeling that life is good and worth living even if there is no God and no after-life. All that really matters is to be able to affirm the present, to enjoy living and to have meaningful relationships with others. He decides it is not necessary to believe in God and immortality for life to be meaningful. His views on these matters have not changed, but clearly *he* has changed from the frenetic, competitive television director he was.

Shortly after this experience, Mickey meets one of Hannah's sisters, a woman who has had difficulty finding herself, and he is able to help and encourage her in her

latest endeavor, writing. Later they marry, and we see a new Mickey Sachs, a man who has found happiness, contentment and peace in a life centered on his family and friends. At the end we see a more relaxed Mickey enjoying his wife's success and finding meaning and satisfaction in human relationships.

The movie says several things I find important from a liberal religious perspective. It points up the emptiness of the lives of those who pursue fame and fortune, whose lives are centered on themselves. Secondly, the film depicts the redemptive function of pain and loss. They often shake the weak foundations on which we have built our lives and force us to seek more solid ground.

And finally the movie suggests that even when the traditional structures have crumbled, that does not mean life can have no meaning. Life's meaning is not simply a given, not inherent in life itself. But that is not a cause for despair. Rather, it represents a challenge and an opportunity, for now it is up to us to create or discover meaning. We are the meaning makers; we are the ones who make our lives worth living. Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick, distinguished liberal Christian minister of a generation ago, put it this way:

Nobody ever finds life worth living. One always has to make it worth living. All the people to whom life has been abundantly worth living have made it so by an interior creative, spiritual contribution of their own. Is life worth living? Most people seem to think that is a question about the cosmos. No, my friend, that is a question about the inside attitude of you and me.

The question is shifted away from the metaphysical to the existential. The quest for meaning is not a matter of discovery but a creative task. Moreover, there is no one answer to the question of life's meaning. For what will satisfy one



person may not be sufficient to another. A noncreedal liberal religion will maintain on this matter, as on others, that each person must discern what makes sense to him or her. But reason and experience offer some guidelines as to how we can make our lives meaningful.

Unitarian Universalist minister Richard Gilbert suggests two possible responses to the search for meaning:

I arise in the morning torn between the desire  
To save the world and to savor it —  
To serve life or to enjoy it —  
To savor the world or save it?  
The question beats in upon the waiting moment —  
To savor the sweet taste of my own joy  
Or to share the bitter cup of my neighbor;  
To celebrate life with exuberant step  
Or to struggle for the life of the heavy laden?<sup>7</sup>

I suggest that for our lives to be most meaningful, we need both to savor the world *and* to save it, or, as I would put it, to contribute to enriching the lives of others. Most of us lead very busy lives. Someone has said, "We are so busy making a living we don't have time to enjoy living." We set goals for ourselves which demand long hours and hard work, and if we reach one goal we set another, ever believing that if we just attain one more rung on the ladder, we will be satisfied. We are like the swimmer who swam the English channel but, instead of savoring that accomplishment, immediately began training to attempt to swim it in both directions. Some of what we do is worthwhile and valuable but some is not; some consists of fruitless efforts to make ourselves important or acceptable or to prove our worth or to try to exercise power and control over others.

Instead of constantly working or running or reaching for the next goal like Mickey Sachs, many of us need to learn to savor more of the moments of our lives. We need to learn,

like Mickey, to enjoy the companionship and conversation of others. We need to learn, when it snows, to take time to enjoy the loveliness of the snowfall rather than cursing it because it disrupts our routine. We need to learn, in the spring, to take time to appreciate the flowers, and, in the summer, to walk in the grass in our bare feet; to play with our children or grandchildren; to let ourselves feel awe at the sight of a soaring bird or an airplane lifting off. "Life is a series of moments," wrote Corita Kent. "To live each one is to succeed."<sup>8</sup>

This is the conclusion of Rabbi Harold S. Kushner in his book, *When All You've Ever Wanted Isn't Enough*. Kushner draws upon the book of *Ecclesiastes* in the Bible to illustrate the futility of many of the options we choose in our attempts to make our lives meaningful. *Ecclesiastes*, he suggests, was written by a man who had tried to make his life worth living in several ways. He had sought wealth and apparently succeeded in making a good deal of money. But his wealth did not bring him happiness, for he writes, "God sometimes grants a man riches, property and wealth, so that he does not want for anything, but God does not permit him to enjoy it." (*Ecclesiastes* 6:2)

He gave himself to pleasure, but this too he found futile. Kushner notes that young people, feeling they have a lot of time ahead, can justify spending their time in pleasure, but as people grow older and become more concerned about whether or not their lives count, pleasure-seeking does not satisfy. Kushner writes, "Having fun can be the spice of life but not its main course, because when it is over, nothing of lasting value remains."<sup>9</sup>

If neither wealth nor pleasure could provide what *Ecclesiastes* sought, perhaps knowledge and wisdom would. He



turns to the pursuit of learning. Again, he experiences futility, for he discovers that knowledge and wisdom are transitory. They do not guarantee contentment.

Finally in desperation the author of *Ecclesiastes* turns to religion. Perhaps by following the practices and teachings of his religion, he can find peace and serenity and the sense that his life is significant. But again he is frustrated. For the kind of religion he practiced consisted mainly of legal discipline and ritual. "He learns that even the highest level of piety cannot protect him from death and the fear of death, or from the oblivion to which death leads."<sup>10</sup>

Having tried all these paths and found them wanting, what is left? These four paths constitute the ways most people take. They represent the faiths of our time and apparently of every age. If they are futile, is there any hope that our lives can be meaningful? Kushner says that the author of *Ecclesiastes* provides an answer, and that answer is found in what we have called savoring life.

Go, eat your bread in gladness and drink your wine in joy, for your action was long ago approved by God. Let your clothes always be freshly washed and your head never lack ointment. Enjoy happiness with a woman you love all the fleeting days of life that have been granted you under the sun. Whatever it is in your power to do, do with all your might. For there is no doing, no learning, no wisdom in the grave where you are going.<sup>11</sup>

This, Kushner suggests, is more than an "eat, drink and be merry" hedonism. It is the profound advice that our lives are meaningful to the extent that we can savor each moment and find in each relationship and each experience something precious. The meaning of life is not a question with one big answer, but with many little answers. We don't eat one big meal and expect never to have to eat again. So we should

not look for one big meaning to life which, once discovered, will satisfy us for the rest of our lives. Instead, like eating three meals a day, we will find life's meaning by savoring many everyday experiences.

Life is not a problem to be solved once; it is a continuing challenge to be lived day by day. Our quest is not to find the Answer but to find ways of making each individual day a human experience.<sup>12</sup>

Kushner's conclusion is similar to the Hasidic emphasis on discovering the holy in the events of daily living and to Martin Buber's teaching that religious living is a matter of hallowing the everyday. That is how Mickey Sachs finds meaning in his life, too, although his language is secular, not religious.

To savor each moment and each experience, to hallow each relationship, to make the most of every event — this is essential if we are to find life worth living. Does that seem obvious? Yet it is a way many of us find difficult to follow. We are products of a goal-directed culture. We are always looking ahead and planning the next task or accomplishment. In that way, we often fail to appreciate the present, to live in what Paul Tillich called "the eternal now."

We can find meaning in simple, ordinary human experiences of love and beauty. Like Mickey Sachs we can find meaning and purpose in our relationships with those we love. Our devotion to the care and nurture of our family can be a major source of meaning because it is in the family that we feel loved and needed, and it is in the family that we are able to give ourselves to others in meaningful ways. The countless day-to-day tasks connected with the nurturing and growth of our children, the joys and even the disappointments of sharing and supporting each other which a couple experience — these things help to make life worth living. I



find, for instance, that if I can help one of my sons learn how to solve a difficult math problem or gain some insight into a book he is reading, I feel those moments have had meaning and purpose. These experiences fulfil some very deep biological and emotional needs which left unfulfilled can frustrate our sense of meaning and purpose.

The experience of being loved by someone else and of being needed by another person outside the family also helps to give meaning and purpose to our lives. A member of my church involved in one of our support groups recently told me how significant the experience had been for her. She said she went into the group to find help and support for herself during a personal crisis, but she soon found that the help she was able to give to others was even more important to her. It gave her a sense of meaning beyond her own individual concerns.

Painting a picture, singing a great choral work or enjoying a trip to an art gallery are meaningful experiences. They lift us out of ourselves and inspire us to mold the clay of our lives into something sublime. The ordinary experiences of our lives can be enough to give us a sense that life is worth living.

The intrinsic satisfaction of work is another source of meaning and purpose for many, far more important than the financial rewards of the job.

Personal growth is yet another way of savoring life and making it more meaningful. Mr. Sammler, in Saul Bellow's novel, *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, puts it succinctly when he says: "The spirit knows that its growth is the real aim of existence."<sup>13</sup> Not only is personal growth worthy in itself, but it also carries on our evolutionary development. The person who is consciously growing can feel satisfaction that

his or her life has direction and value. He or she lives at a level deeper than the life devoted merely to material abundance and self-indulgence.

Jung wrote that the second half of life must concentrate on the growth of the self. Jung believed that the first half of life centers on gaining competence and mastery in a field of endeavor such as engineering or raising children. The second half of life must focus on the soul, the development of one's personal and spiritual life. If growth does not occur, Jung believed, the individual will not achieve a sense of fulfillment and completeness when death comes.<sup>14</sup> The so-called mid-life crisis which many experience lends credence to Jung's view.

Personal growth and self-realization provide an important dimension of meaning to my life. If it were not a major purpose of my life, I would feel an emptiness and a lack of direction. But I have to ask what value my personal growth has beyond my own satisfaction. I find that I want to grow, not only for my own sake, but so that I can be of greater service to others.

Similarly, if we look closely at the reasons people find meaning and purpose in their work, we will find that even more than from their ability to savor each moment and task, satisfaction comes from the fact that their work contributes to something larger than their own happiness. For, important as it is to learn to live in and savor the present, that is not enough. Here I part company with Rabbi Kushner. We need larger goals and purposes which give our lives a meaning that transcends the self. It is these larger goals or purposes that make our lives truly worthwhile, and which make it possible to savor the world. Dick Gilbert reminds us,

What is that you say?  
To savor one must serve?



To savor one must save?  
The one will not stand without the other?<sup>15</sup>

The eminent twentieth-century Protestant theologian H. Richard Niebuhr put it this way.

It is a curious and inescapable fact about our lives, of which I think we all become aware at some time or another, that we cannot live without a cause, without some object of devotion, some center of worth, something on which we rely for our meaning. In this sense, all [human beings] live by faith because they are [human beings] and cannot help themselves. . . . We never believe that life is worth living, but always think of it as made worth living by something on which we rely.<sup>16</sup>

Life is made worth living by our commitment to and involvement in causes which contribute to human welfare and world betterment. It is when we are trying to "save the world" that our lives become meaningful. Only then can we truly savor life.

So, personal growth is important not merely as an end in itself, but as a way of making it possible for us to contribute more to our family and friends and to the larger communities of which we are a part. It is true, paradoxically, that we realize our highest potential selves only when we focus on some other goal than self-realization.

Those who find meaning and value in their work are most likely to be engaged in work that contributes in some way to a better world. Those whose jobs do not offer that kind of satisfaction or who may be retired can engage in voluntary activities which add meaning to their lives. I think of a business woman I know who spends a great deal of her spare time working in a soup kitchen. I think of a retired couple who have dedicated their lives to working for peace. I think of a man retired from government service who is working in

the area of low-cost housing. Each of these persons will tell you that their lives take on greater meaning and purpose because of these volunteer activities.

Alfred Adler wrote:

Every human being strives for significance, but people always make mistakes if they do not see that their whole significance must consist in their contribution to the lives of others. . . . *Life means — to contribute to the whole.*<sup>17</sup>

What we do for other people and the world as a whole makes our lives worthwhile.

Again Governor Cuomo states it well in the address quoted earlier. Having decried the emptiness of the values of so many contemporary people, Cuomo goes on to say:

. . . the philosophers were right. . . . St. Francis, Buddha, Mohammed, Maimonides — all spoke the truth when they said the way to serve yourself is to serve others; and Aristotle was right before them, when he said the only way to assure yourself happiness is to learn to give happiness. . . . [They] knew the only way to be fulfilled and pleased and happy was to *give* instead of trying to get.<sup>18</sup>

As I reflect on my own life, the times most meaningful to me are those times when I have been able to help someone else, those times when something I have said or done has been of value to another, and those times in which I have participated in efforts to create a better world through social change. And as I think of those people I admire most, whose lives I look upon as most worthwhile, I think not of those who have amassed fortunes, but of those who have contributed beauty or wisdom, those who served others or increased social justice. Those who have centered their energies on themselves, whose sole purpose has been self-gratification, are not people I respect or wish to emulate.



And, when I think of works of art, music and literature, or of architectural masterpieces, or of philosophies, scientific discoveries, technological triumphs and advances in psychology, I realize that these are the contributions of others, many of whom are no longer alive. What survives of them are the contributions they have made to human life. Those who made no contribution left nothing behind, and so their lives have been lost. Perhaps that is the meaning of Jesus' parable in Matthew 25 where he says that those who gave food to the hungry, clothing to the naked, and so on, would inherit eternal life whereas those who did not would be condemned to eternal damnation.

Dag Hammarskjöld put it this way.

Only what you have given  
is salvaged from the nothing  
which some day  
will have been your life.

It is what we give rather than what we get, what we do for others rather than what we do for ourselves, that makes life worth living. This principle lies at the heart of a liberal faith. However, it may seem that only those who make some great contribution to our world can live meaningful lives. It is fine for the Dag Hammarskjölds, the Aristotles, the Alfred Adlers, the Martin Luther Kings, and the Mario Cuomos to say these things, but what about the rest of us who cannot make so memorable a mark on the world?

It is not necessary to become famous or to change the whole world to make a significant contribution to the welfare of others. There are ways all of us can help to ease someone's burdens. There are ways in which we can give help or encouragement to another. There are movements in which we can participate which might have a significant impact on our community, nation or world. In a word, we

can find meaning and purpose in life through being part of the larger community of people working for the things that make life better, more beautiful, more just, more livable, and more truly human for all people. Life is worth living when it is used in the service of a cause or purpose greater than the self. And when it is thus used we discover, paradoxically, that such a way of life enriches our selves as well.



## THE LARGER CONTEXT: A THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

I believe we are here to some purpose, that the purpose has something to do with the future, and that it transcends altogether the limits of our present knowledge and understanding... If you like, you can call the transcendent purpose God. If it is God, it is a Socinian God, inherent in the universe and growing in power and knowledge as the universe unfolds. Our minds are not only expressions of its purpose but are also contributions to its growth.

Freeman Dyson

All are parts of one stupendous whole  
Whose body Nature is and God the soul.

Alexander Pope

It is important to put the liberal faith perspective on meaning and purpose in a larger context — the context of human history and even the entire cosmic process. This is the theological task or, if you will, the mythological task. I mean by mythological not something factually untrue, but images, stories and symbols which help us to make sense of our lives and also have the power to motivate us. Myths provide a context for both meaning and ethics.

Joseph Campbell, in that extraordinary Public Broadcasting television series with Bill Moyers, said we need a new myth to replace the Christian myth which has empowered and informed the Western world for two thousand years. I believe we are witnessing the emergence of such a new

myth. It is a two-dimensional myth inspired by a modern scientific understanding of the universe.

The theory of evolution gives us the temporal dimension of the myth. This is the vision of all reality as a single whole in an ongoing evolutionary process. In contrast with traditional western religion, with its dualism of natural and supernatural worlds, this view posits one world, one unified whole. And, instead of conceiving the "truly real" as static and eternally unchanging, all things are in process. This new vision is found in the process philosophy and theology of Alfred North Whitehead and his followers, in the writings of the Jesuit paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and physicist Freeman Dyson, in the work of Sir Julian Huxley, and in the work of Unitarian Universalist minister/theologian John Ruskin Clark and many others.

In this world view the world is imperfect and incomplete. Humanity's task is to work toward its completion. As long as there is hatred, oppression, poverty, hunger, disease, ignorance, suffering and evil, there is work to be done. In doing the unfinished business of the great evolutionary process our lives find meaning and purpose. According to this vision, evolution involves three stages.

The first, or inorganic stage, saw the emergence and increasing organization of matter. There was the formation of stars, planets and galaxies, of mountains, seas and rivers. Physical and chemical interactions which produced these and which continue to cause them to change have been going on for at least six billion years and are still evolving.

In the second stage life forms emerged, at least on planet Earth. The process of natural selection produced increasingly varied forms of life. This organic stage culminated in the birth of mind and self-consciousness in human beings.



The emergence of mind and consciousness has brought about a qualitative change in the nature of evolution. No longer simply an unconscious process of natural selection, evolution can now be a conscious process, not only biological but psycho-social. We are aware that what we do affects the future, and it is our responsibility to create a better future. This third stage of evolution involves *moral and spiritual* evolution, advancement in psychological and behavioral understanding, advancement in social and political justice, advancement in knowledge and the arts.

We have reached the point where we can influence the evolutionary process significantly. To some extent we alter nature to accommodate ourselves as, for example, when life is prolonged by modern medicine. To an even greater degree we exercise control over our social, cultural and moral development.

With this capability comes responsibility for the enhancement of life and the world and responsibility to shape the future more positively. At the psycho-social level humankind is the instrument of evolutionary progress through the advancement and application of knowledge and the arts. We are to be responsible toward the whole, toward the Great Living System or the Creative Process. It is our duty to respect the earth and its resources.

We are also responsible to others; we are to do what we can to improve their lives, economically, educationally, and politically. (In traditional terms, this is the ethic of love, meaning to seek the well-being of others.) Poverty, ignorance, and injustice all point up the unfinished nature of the world. By working to overcome these problems we can contribute to the psycho-social evolution of Life and bring meaning and purpose to our lives as well.

And we are to be responsible to and for ourselves. In this context that means nurturing our own growth and self-realization. Through personal growth and self-realization, we can contribute more both to the enhancement of others' lives and to the life of the world. Florence van Straten puts it this way.

What this means to me is that every human being is now charged with a new responsibility. The evolutionary process for us is no longer a matter of passing on "good" genes to offspring but a duty to pass on the results of our creative activities — artistic, scientific, inter-personal — to the coming generations. . . . This is where the evolutionary ladder takes on a new twist and reaches into a new dimension. This adds a new dimension to what gives our life meaning.<sup>19</sup>

In Julian Huxley's words, we are "the trustees of evolution." It is our responsibility to chart a better future. We are part of a Great Living System and our lives gain meaning insofar as we participate in life-enlargement and life-enrichment and oppose all that would diminish and destroy life. Some of us will be leaders and some will be followers. As far as the question of meaning is concerned, it does not matter if our contribution is large or small. What matters is not the quantity but the quality of our contribution. What matters is that we are part of the process, that we identify ourselves with those communities and movements that are aiming toward human betterment.

The second myth, or perhaps second dimension of the myth emerging today, is the unity of all things. This spatial dimension of the myth points to the interconnectedness and interdependence of all life linked together by shared resources and common needs, rooted and grounded in a common Source. This myth finds expression in one of the princi-



ples of the Unitarian Universalist Association which affirms "the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part."

It is found in modern writers, as in the passage quoted in Chapter One from Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. Fifty years ago John Steinbeck depicted it in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Early in the book the preacher Casey tells Tom's family of his struggle with his faith, and how, like Jesus, he went into the wilderness to sort things out.

Nighttime I'd lay on my back an' look up at the stars; morning I'd set an' watch the sun come up; midday I'd look out from a hill at the rollin' dry country; evenin' I'd foller the sun down. Sometimes I'd pray like I'd always done. On'y I couldn't figure what I was prayin' to or for. There was the hills, an' there was me, an' we wasn't separate no more. We was one thing. An' that one thing was holy.<sup>20</sup>

In denying the idea of special creation, Frederick Gilkey reminds us, Darwin

gave us a place in a family that embraces all life on earth. When I look into the eyes of a gorilla in the zoo, I don't see a dumb beast, but a cousin, a remote one, to be sure, but a genuine relative. Is it not a source of strength to see all life on this planet as profoundly, intimately, and truly related?<sup>21</sup>

Recent scientific discoveries reinforce this sense of oneness. George Wald notes that despite the great variety of life forms which have evolved over the millenia, the basic biological entities differ little.

The biological cells which constitute a maple leaf, a caterpillar, and a human brain are basically the same in structure and components; the organisms have achieved different forms by organizing the cells in different patterns and calling upon them to perform different functions.<sup>22</sup>

Wald writes that biologists have recently become acutely aware of the kinship of all living organisms. Few changes have occurred in the structures of the proteins and genes constituting the basic building blocks of all life. Wald points out, for example, that in the remote past humans shared a common ancestor with yeast.

From that remote ancestor, yeast went its way, and we went ours. The journey has been made twice, yet has resulted in such minor differences. So, all life is akin; and our kinship is much closer than we had ever imagined before.<sup>23</sup>

Even breathing exhibits our relatedness. One estimate holds that owing to the thorough mixing of the Earth's atmosphere, each of our inhalations contains at least one atom breathed by each person on Earth within the last few weeks. "That air is carried by the lungs into the bloodstream. It becomes a part of you" and that means that our breathing constitutes nothing less than "a low-frequency chain of chemical contact between all living humans and with all humans past and present."<sup>24</sup> It may be an exaggeration to say that each time we inhale we take in one atom exhaled by every other person, but the point that we breathe common atoms is valid. Our lives are interconnected.

In this global village of ours, we are becoming more and more aware that what happens to one person or group affects all of us. When there is oppression and violence in Central America, we suffer, too. When the Solidarity movement in Poland wins an election and seats a Prime Minister, we win, too. That lone student who dared to face a tank in Tiananmen Square did not stand alone. Millions all over the world stood with him in spirit.



Each time I buy a box of cereal in the grocery store or a gallon of gas at the service station, I know that I stand at the end of a long process to which many people have contributed. We may feel like separate and distinct individuals and we may too often act as though we are separate and distinct individuals. We are not. We are interdependent and interrelated.

Norman Cousins has written,

I am a single cell in a body of four billion cells. The body is humankind. I glory in the miracle of self, but my individuality does not separate me from the oneness of humanity . . . Human unity is the fulfillment of diversity. It is the harmony of opposites, a many-sided texture with color and depth.<sup>25</sup>

Quite different from the highly individualistic perspective of liberal religion heretofore, this is an increasingly accepted perspective among Unitarian Universalists.

Earlier I quoted Albert Einstein suggesting that "the religion of the future . . . should be based on a religious sense arising from *the experience of all things as a meaningful unity*." <sup>26</sup> More and more there are signs that such a religious sense is emerging. If it is, we may be standing at the threshold of a sea-change in the human spirit, a revolution in our thinking and world view comparable to those ushered in by Moses and Copernicus. And as with the Mosaic and Copernican revolutions, it comes with enormous ethical implications, for change in our thinking must inevitably lead to changes in our actions. At least two ethical implications follow.

First, awareness of our unity with and dependence upon nature should lead to greater respect for the interdependent web of all existence, which in turn should lead to increased efforts to conserve our precious resources. Conservation will

require us to reduce our level of consumption, which is currently gross over-consumption, to waste less and re-cycle more, and to stop filling the air and the water with pollutants.

But the sense of unity and interdependence among all human beings leads to even more basic changes. Instead of every person serving primarily himself or herself, all of us must learn to put the good of the whole community ahead of our own private welfare. *Instead of looking out for number one, we must learn to look out for one another.* We must learn to make decisions not on the basis of what is best for *me*, but what is best for *us*. We must learn cooperation instead of competition.

We cannot continue to adhere to the creed that "greed is good," for the world has shrunk and our greed and selfishness are harmful to others, as theirs is to us. We are inter-related. We must learn not only that "when I cut a tree my arm will bleed," but that when another person is gunned down by an assault rifle, my life is diminished, that when the democratic movement in China is crushed, a part of me is crushed as well.

This emerging myth of the unity and interconnectedness of all life may be understood from the perspective of either an open humanism or a natural theism. A naturalistic theist would simply add that the sense of oneness is founded upon and grounded in belief in the kind of God described in Chapter One, God the Power of Life and Love immanent in the world, God the Source of all, God the Sea of which each individual life form is but a momentary wave.

This God — understood not as a supernatural being separate from humankind and the world who relates to us as a powerful lawgiver and parent — is, rather, the creative



power within all that is, or the magnetic force that energizes and pushes us toward goodness, love, beauty and truth. God is immanent, not other. Moreover, God is not complete and unchanging as in the traditional Western conception, but is also evolving and involved in the evolutionary, ongoing creation. And, God is neither omniscient nor omnipotent. God learns and grows as the universe unfolds.

Charles Hartshorne has referred to the world as "God's body," a phrase reminiscent of Alexander Pope's lines:

All are parts of one stupendous whole  
Whose body Nature is and God the soul.<sup>27</sup>

When we understand our individual lives as part of one great universal process, we see that, rather than disconnected, unrelated individuals, we are each part of a greater whole, a universe of all other people and other living things as well. The meaning of our lives is not therefore so much a matter of our own individual achievement as it is a matter of how we can work together with others to contribute to the whole. Our manner of living, the decisions we make, and the actions we take play a role in the ongoing process of the Great Living System. Although our individual contribution may seem slight, it is part of the sum of all those actions which together shape the course of history.

We have come full circle. For at the outset we suggested that the modern world has lost the sense that life is meaningful because it is part of a divine grand design in which each person has a role to play. That loss of faith in a meaningful life is rooted in loss of faith in a divine being, traditionally understood. The old myths and symbols have lost their power for our age. We need a new form of conceptualization, a new mythos, a new symbolization compatible with the modern world view. The vision described

above, drawing on a modern scientific world view, offers a new way of understanding our lives as meaningful in a larger context. Our lives do play a role in an ongoing divine process.

### *Conclusion*

We are the beings who ask the question of meaning. Much of the time the question remains in our subconscious, and we are not aware of meaning as a problem. We take it as given that life is worth living. But from time to time, often when we experience grief or shock, the question intrudes, and the problem of meaning becomes crucial. When that happens a religious perspective becomes important, as does a community which lifts up a vision of what makes our lives worth living. We cannot count on a chance revelation from an unexpected source, as in the Woody Allen movie.

We have suggested a perspective on the question of meaning and purpose, a liberal religious view. But it is important to have more than a theoretical approach, a theology. Religion involves appropriation by the self and assimilation of what one believes. It also involves the continual reinforcement of one's beliefs and values. In this, the religious community plays a vital role.

Religious communities point the way to meaningful living and reinforce our belief in life's meaningfulness by means of songs, stories, myths, symbols, rituals, sermons and readings, celebrations of the passages of life, and through the love, friendship and support of others who share our lives and experiences in a meaningful way. The liberal religious community provides these kinds of support through worship services, support and growth groups, one-to-one relationships, and social service groups.

Tim, the young man who came to me seeking a reason for living, recently left his job in business and went back to school to prepare to teach math in an inner city high school. He feels that he has found the meaning and direction he had previously lacked. He is excited and very happy; for he sees his new work as a way of contributing to the enrichment of individuals and of human life as a whole. I believe it will also enable him to savor life more.

Everyone of us needs to feel a sense of meaning and purpose in living. To find and live that sense is a religious task. Within the broad context of the liberal religious perspective, there are many kinds of work and many ways to find and live a deep and satisfying sense of meaning and direction, ways in which we contribute to the ongoing universal evolutionary process of life-enlargement and enrichment.

### PART III

## THE CRISIS OF PAIN AND SUFFERING



## SESSION TWO

### THE CRISIS OF MEANING AND PURPOSE

#### PREPARATION FOR THE SESSION

Participants should have read Part II (pages 21-52) before this session.

#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

- 1) Discuss: The book suggests that traditional religious beliefs that once gave meaning to life no longer operate for many people today. Do you agree? Do they work for you?  
Ask each person to relate a recent experience that gave meaning or purpose to their lives and made them feel that life was worth living. If the group is larger than 8, do this in pairs or triads; then ask some members to share their experience. (10-15 minutes)
- 2) Optional: Rent the video tape of the movie "Hannah and Her Sisters." Watch it as a group and discuss Mickey Sachs' struggle to find meaning. [Note: This will require an entire (extra) session.]
- 3) Harold S. Kushner in his book, *When All You've Ever Wanted Isn't Enough*, as summarized on pp. 33-35, draws on the Biblical book of *Ecclesiastics* to suggest four ways in which people try to make their lives meaningful. They are:
  - through pleasure;
  - through wealth;
  - through knowledge and wisdom; and
  - through religion.

Discuss these, asking group members what they think about each of these four options.

- 4) a. Hand out paper and pencils and ask each person to write a brief response to the following question: "What gives meaning and purpose to your life?" or you may prefer to state it as: "What makes life worth living for you?"

The response may be either a list of things or a descriptive paragraph. If it is a list, ask them to number their responses in order of importance to them. Allow about ten minutes for this.

b. Next, break up into groups of two and ask them to discuss what they wrote with each other, giving examples from their own life. Again, allow ten minutes.

c. Call the group back together and ask each person to share one thing from what they wrote. The leader might want to list these on newsprint or chalkboard. After all responses are recorded, ask the group to categorize them into "savoring life" or "saving the world" (serving others).

Ask which of the two categories gives greater meaning to their lives? Do they find the experiences that fall under "savoring life" to be adequate to make life worth while? Or do they agree with the idea that "to savor one must save?"

- 5) In one of the groups led by the author the point was made that one's emotional situation determines how one finds meaning and whether one is able to give to others at all. So, for some, the most meaningful experience may be to try to understand oneself better. What do you think about this idea?
- 6) The book suggests that a new myth with two dimensions is emerging in our time. The temporal dimension of the myth understands life as part of a universal evolutionary process in which humankind now consciously participates. The author maintains that what each person does to enrich life and the world contributes to the cosmic evolutionary process, and that that gives a larger meaning to our lives.  
Discuss whether the members of the group find this concept to be meaningful or helpful. The spatial dimension of the new myth involves a sense of the unity and interrelatedness of all things. Ask the group if they agree that such a concept is emerging and whether they find it helpful.

### ***PREPARATION FOR THE NEXT SESSION***

Assign Part III (pages 55-86) for the next meeting.

### ***CLOSING***

Dag Hammarskjöld wrote (as quoted on page 40 of the book):

Only what you have given  
is salvaged from the nothing  
which some day  
will have been your life.

Ask the group to reflect silently on the quotation for a moment. Then conclude by reading the two quotations (by Freeman Dyson and Alexander Pope) found at the beginning of Chapter 5 (page 42).