

**THE FIRST UNITARIAN SOCIETY OF MILWAUKEE**

**WHAT DO YOU BELIEVE?  
Part V:**

**“What Are the Purposes  
of Our Lives?  
Exploring Teleology”**

**by  
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## INTRODUCTION AND READING

Welcome, everyone, to Part V of our six-part “What Do You Believe?” series of services.

Today, I’d like to explore with you another fairly basic spiritual question, namely: “What is the purpose of our life – of your life, of my life? Or, in the plural, what are the purposes of our lives?”

Our subtitle is called, “Exploring Teleology.”

Now, if any of you happened to look up the word “teleology” in the dictionary, you probably would have found something like: “Teleology: (from the Greek, *telos*, meaning end, or purpose). Teleology is the philosophical study of design and purpose. A teleological school of thought is one that holds all things to be designed for or directed toward a final result, that there is an inherent purpose or final cause for all that exists.”<sup>1</sup>

Or you might have found: “Teleology, in theology, the doctrine that all things are designed by God; in biology, the theory or study of development as caused by the purposes which things serve.”<sup>2</sup>

So, for instance, the venerable old idea that God has a Master Plan for our lives is a teleological idea – there is a purpose for our lives. In contrast to teleological notions, we have naturalism, sometimes called metaphysical naturalism, which says, no, nature has no design or purpose whatsoever. It just happens according to certain biological mechanisms, but there is no Grand Design or designer behind any of it. Likewise, a biological teleology would say that a person has eyes because humans have the need of sight, while naturalism (or metaphysical naturalism) would say, no, it’s the reverse: humans have sight because people have eyes.<sup>3</sup>

In any case, for today, I am really not going to argue any grand teleological notions. In fact, except in more orthodox religious communities, such notions, by and large, especially in the academic world, have largely given way, and appropriately so, it seems to me, to naturalism.

More simply, for the most part, what I would like to do today is to explore some of the self-identified purposes of our lives, exploring such questions as: For what do we

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<sup>1</sup> “Teleology,” from Wikipedia.org, found on the Internet.

<sup>2</sup> Durant, Will, “A Will Durant Glossary of Philosophical and Foreign Words,” Will Durant Foundation, found on the Internet.

<sup>3</sup> “Teleology,” Wikipedia.org, op. cit.

live? What is most important to you, to me, to us? What are your goals in life: at work? at home? in relation to yourself? to others? to the world? and to the cosmos? – these kinds of questions.

But let us begin with a very brief Reading. This Reading is by Blaise Pascal, the seventeenth century French philosopher, who writes:

When I consider the short duration of my life, swallowed up in the eternity that lies before and after it, when I consider the little space I fill and I see, engulfed in the infinite immensity of spaces of which I am ignorant, and which know me not, I rest frightened, and astonished, for there is no reason why I should be here rather than there. Why now rather than then?<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Pascal, Blaise, *Pensées*, from a website entitled, “Meanings of Life: Using Philosophy in Everyday Life.”

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**“What Are the Purposes of Our Lives?”**  
**Exploring Teleology**

Bill Schulz, former president of the Unitarian Universalist Association and, following that, the Executive Director of Amnesty International USA, says,

One of my favorite *New Yorker* cartoons depicts a man and a woman staring at the stars. They look at first glance as if they’re contemplating the Eternal Questions. But then one turns to the other and says, “I’m not religious; I’m just scared.”

Picking up on this sentiment, Schulz continues,

I learned a very helpful secret during my twelve years as Executive Director of Amnesty International USA. That position gave me the opportunity to come to know or observe at close hand heads of state, powerful poli-ticians, sophisticated business leaders, famous actors and actresses, news media stars, top-notch academics, and highly successful people of all stripes.

Here’s the secret: *They’re all scared.* Every single one of them. And if they don’t look scared, it’s just because they are excellent actors or strangers to feelings.<sup>5</sup>

This “secret,” or insight, from Bill Schultz comes to mind because it is similar to our reading by Pascal, who, as you’ll recall, was both frightened and astonished at the relatively short duration of his life and at his incomprehension as to why, as he put it, he should “be here rather than there, now rather than then.” And that, of course, was in the seventeenth century, a long time ago, but it remains an eternally good question. Why indeed should *any* of us be here and now, rather than there and then?

Another French philosopher, a contemporary atheist, André Comte-Sponville, writes: “Why is there something rather than nothing? We do not know. We will never

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<sup>5</sup> Schulz, William F., “Hold On,” *UU World* (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association), Winter 2008, p. 27.

know. . . [And] to what purpose? We do not know whether there is a purpose.<sup>6</sup>

In short, as we presume today to try to discern such a lofty goal as the purpose, or purposes, of our lives, let us at the outset acknowledge our humility and the tentativeness of our conclusions.

## II

I suspect many of you have at least heard of a book called, *The Purpose Driven Life* by Rick Warren. Rick Warren is the founding minister of the Saddleback Church, a non-denominational, evangelical mega-church located in Lake Forest, California. Saddleback boasts more than 20,000 people attending four campuses each week. And the church supports some 200 different ministries.

Rick Warren's book, *The Purpose Driven Life*, has sold a whopping fifty-two million copies since it was published in 2002. According to *Publisher's Weekly*, this makes it the best-selling hardback book in American history. So, even if it is not ultimately a particularly good fit for us as Unitarian Universalists, nevertheless, with fifty-two million copies out there, clearly, it is a book with which to be reckoned about the purposes of our lives.

So, let's take a look.

Warren says that the starting place to think about the purposes of our lives should not be with us and what we think, but with God and His eternal purposes. Real meaning and significance, Warren argues, comes from our understanding and our fulfilling God's purposes for putting us here on earth. (In this respect, you'll note that Warren is clearly taking a teleological point of view — teleology, you'll remember, having to do with a purpose or a plan discerned as being built right into the cosmos, as being built right into history, and into our lives.) So, again, Warren is suggesting that God has a Master Plan, that Warren knows what the plan is, and that each of us has a role in it.

Now, according to the Purpose Driven Life.com website, Warren explains that God has five purposes for each of us. Our first purpose is to worship God, for we were planned, according to Warren, for God's pleasure. Our second purpose is to enjoy real fellowship, for we were formed, according to Warren, to be God's family. Our third purpose is to learn what Warren calls "real discipleship," for we were created, he says, to become like Christ. Our fourth purpose is to practice real ministry, for we were

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<sup>6</sup> Comte-Sponville, Andre, *The Little Book of Philosophy*, from a website entitled, "Meanings of Life: Using Philosophy in Everyday Life."

shaped, he says, for serving God. And our fifth purpose, according to Rick Warren, is to live out real evangelism, for we were made, he says, for a mission.<sup>7</sup> So, those are the five purposes of our lives according to Rick Warren and his book *The Purpose Driven Life*.

Now, for me, it is hard to argue with the success of Warren's church and his *Purpose Driven Life* book, because Warren and his church are actually doing a lot of good things with prisoners, CEOs, addicts, single parents, the homeless, and so forth. And that's significant. I take that seriously.

But, as I break it down, there are three underlying premises here:

1. There *is* a supernatural God.
2. This supernatural God has a teleological Master Plan for each of our lives.
3. Rick Warren is the one who knows what that Plan is – in some detail.

This whole set of interlocking premises is just *not* something to which many of us, as Unitarian Universalists, I suspect, can positively relate. I know *I* can't anyway: I just don't accept that God – if there *is* a God – has a Master Plan for each and every one of us. I just don't think so.

### III

So, this leads me to want to continue the search elsewhere, so let me take another approach to this question of the purposes of our lives. At this point, let me simply share a few short responses that *I* personally find helpful as we continue to focus in on this question of the purposes of our lives.

The late, beloved Unitarian Universalist minister Forrest Church writes, "The purpose of life is to live in such a way that our lives will prove worth dying for."<sup>8</sup> And, shortly before he died, Forrest hit upon what became for him a new mantra, and I think it's a good one. See what you think. He says, "Want what you have; do what you can; and be who you are."<sup>9</sup>

This, in turn, reminds me of one of my favorite guiding pieces of wisdom, which also speaks to the purposes of our lives. It's from Jack Kornfield, the Buddhist teacher, and I've shared this with you before. In fact, I have it typed and hanging over each of my computers – one at church and one at home. Kornfield says, "In the end, these are

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<sup>7</sup> The Purpose Driven Life.com website, paraphrased.

<sup>8</sup> Church, Forrest, *Love and Death: My Journey Through the Valley of the Shadow* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2008) p. 110.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 111.

the things that matter most: How well did you love? How fully did you live? And [-- here's the more distinctly Buddhist part --] how deeply did you learn to let go?"

Another Buddhist, the world's leading Tibetan Buddhist, the Dalai Lama, writes:

One great question underlies our experience, whether we think about it consciously or not: What is the purpose of life? I believe that the purpose of life is to be happy. From the moment of birth, every human being wants happiness and does not want to suffer. From the very core of our being we simply desire contentment.<sup>10</sup>

Elsewhere in his book, *Voices from the Heart*, the Dalai Lama writes,

I don't know whether the universe, with its countless galaxies, stars, and planets, has a deeper meaning, but at the very least it is clear that we humans who live on this Earth face the task of making a happy life for ourselves.<sup>11</sup>

Now, the way to make "a happy life for ourselves," according to the Buddha, in one of its many formulations, is to adopt a certain radical, but enlightened acceptance of impermanence and imperfection (which together are called *dukkha*), and this acceptance, when properly cultivated with non-attachment and boundless compassion, leads us to an end of suffering and to the beginning of great, but simple wisdom, peace, and happiness. This is the Buddhist way.

Even the fourth century Christian theologian, Augustine of Hippo (perhaps better known as Saint Augustine), once wrote, "Isn't precisely happiness what we all want, without exception?"<sup>12</sup>

Now, for Augustine, happiness was to be identified with knowing and loving and serving God. Let me suggest here that perhaps one of the take-aways that we can glean from both Rick Warren and from Augustine — both of whom in different ways invite us to know and love and serve God — is, at the very least, that we perhaps ought to align our purposes and aspirations with something larger than ourselves.

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<sup>10</sup> Dalai Lama, *Voices from the Heart*, from a website entitled, "Meanings of Life: Using Philosophy in Everyday Life."

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, from a website entitled, "Meanings of Life: Using Philosophy in Everyday Life."

## IV

This brings me, then, to something else that you may have heard before. It has to do with what *I* believe to be the purposes of our lives. I believe that there are at least five worthy purposes for our lives in relation to what I see as the five basic relationships of our lives. (So, you see, Rick Warren and I are right there together on the same page – both affirming five purposes for our lives!) Seriously, I see our lives as being comprised chiefly of five key relationships, or sets of relationships, which can be visualized as five concentric circles of relationships. These five key relationships are our relationship to ourselves, to others, to the world (by which I mean the social and political world), to the environment, and to the cosmos and the big questions of life and death and meaning.

So, for me, corresponding to these five concentric circles of relationships are five key purposes.

The first purpose, as Socrates (and others) have suggested, is to know thyself. We are called, I would suggest, to know ourselves – to regularly reflect upon who we are and what we are doing with our lives.

Again, as Socrates famously said, “The unexamined life is hardly worth living.”

Our second purpose, in relation to others, is to love. We are called, it seems to me, to pay close and loving attention to all of our personal relationships, especially, of course, to our families and loved ones. But, moreover, I would also suggest that we are called to love even the difficult people in our lives, as well....*You* know who they are!

A third purpose for our lives, in relation to the social and political world, is to reach out and to serve the world – to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to visit the sick, and so forth. Moreover, we are called to advocate for the appropriate systemic changes that are needed to avoid hunger, homelessness, etc.

A fourth purpose for our lives, in relation to the environment, is to revere and to respect the interdependent web, the ecosystem, of which we are a part.

And, finally, a fifth purpose for our lives, in relation to the cosmos and to the big picture of life and death and meaning, is, for example, if we are a theist, to love thy God with all of thy heart, and mind, and soul; if we are a Buddhist, it is to be fully present and infinitely compassionate. And, otherwise, generalizing this, I would say that we are called to grow in wisdom.

So, again, I believe that there are at least five worthy purposes for our lives. We

are called, it seems to me, to know thyself; to love others; to serve the world; to revere and respect the environment; and to perpetually grow in wisdom. I believe these constitute five basic relationships, and five worthy purposes, for our lives.

## V

Finally, let me leave you with this thought. Many of our greatest thinkers and spiritual leaders – people like Jesus and the Buddha, Mahatma Gandhi and Mother Teresa, Susan B. Anthony and Martin Luther King – have long insisted that the inner world and the outer world are intimately connected – or that they should be anyway – and that what we *do* grows out of what we *believe*, and that what we *believe* needs confirmation in what we *do*. As it says in the Bible, “Faith without works is dead.” Or as Bob Dylan puts it, “You’re gonna have to serve *somebody*.”<sup>13</sup>

So, why are we here? What are the purposes of our lives? Whatever we think the answer is to those questions ultimately needs to be found both within and without. One of my ministerial colleagues, the Reverend Jim Nelson of Pasadena, California, puts it this way. He says:

I want to suggest that we are here for one purpose and one purpose only, and that is to live better lives. All the religious experiences in the world, all the sophistication or depth of theological thinking, all the clarity of belief, all the excellence in practice does not amount to a hill of beans if we don’t live better lives. That is the bottom line.

“We *are*,” Nelson continues,

in the deepest and truest sense, what we do. We are loving only if we love; we are generous only if we give freely; we are free only if we are not in bondage. It doesn’t work any other way.<sup>14</sup>

So, friends, in sum, let us stretch and grow that we might discern better clarity of purpose and that we might live better lives.

So may it be. Amen.

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<sup>13</sup> Dylan’s song, “You’re Gonna Have to Serve Somebody,” was sung at all three services.

<sup>14</sup> Nelson, Jim, “The Likeness to God,” a sermon found at “Best of UU: the Good News of Unitarian Universalism,” a website maintained by Jess Cullinan, formerly a member of the First Unitarian Society of Milwaukee, now living in Los Alamos, New Mexico, p. 2.