



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK
Spirituality · Community · Justice

**Meaning, Purpose, & Love:
How to Reimagine Your Life during a Pandemic**
The Rev. Dr. J. Carl Gregg
29 March 2020
frederickuu.org

One of the books I have been reading during such a time as this is Life Reimagined: The Science, Art, and Opportunity of Midlife by Barbara Bradley Hagerty. Some of you will recognize that name from hearing her voice over the years on NPR—National Public Radio.

Hagerty’s book is about navigating midlife, but there are a surprising number of relevant insights for finding your path through any disorienting event, including a pandemic. So much of the shift to midlife is about being more regularly confronted with the fact that we do not have unlimited time on this earth—and we are all being regularly confronted with that truth these days.

One response might be *despair*. (And don’t get me wrong: spending some quality time in the fetal position now and then is legit.) Another response could be *hedonism*: buying that sports car or having an affair. In the words of the prophet Isaiah, “Eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we die” (22:14). But both history and psychology tell us that all such attempts at sensual self-indulgence are, at most, fleeting pleasures. So, a third—and potentially much more satisfying response longterm—might be *reimagining* your life in previously unforeseeable ways. And it is the possibility of such a life reimagined that I would like to invite us to spend a few minutes considering.

If I could ask you to remember only one thing that I say this morning, it would be this: “**Choose purpose over happiness.**” Choose *purpose* over happiness—and you

may well give yourself the greatest chance of stumbling forward into both (7). If we seek happiness alone, the temptation is to pursue fleeting pleasures that give our brain a temporary dopamine rush: eating junk food, checking to see if someone “liked” something we posted on social media, or other forms of self-medicating. (We each know what our thing is.) The trouble is that a crash inevitably comes on the other side of that dopamine rush, leaving us craving another hit in an endless cycle of unsatisfactoriness.

Again, don’t get me wrong. Binge-watching, binge-eating, binge-whatevering all have their time and place. After all, the calendars of many societies historically have included many feast days (for indulging and celebrating) and fast days (for turning inward and reflecting). So how do we choose *purpose* over happiness on all those regular days in between the feasts and the fasts—especially when our usual routines have been upended through physical distancing?

One example here at UUCF that the staff and I have been talking about in the wake of this pandemic is that we more or less know what we should be doing generally—even if we have to figure out the specifics through new mediums like Zoom Video Conferences. Whether before, during, or after a pandemic, we have a mission here at UUCF—so we’ve been asking ourselves, “What does it mean to encourage spiritual growth, build a beloved community, and act for peace and justice *during a pandemic*?” Our answers to those questions are what we’ve been doing and emailing you all about for the past two weeks. (I’m grateful to have heard from many of you that we’ve been doing a pretty good job of living our mission for such a time as this. Thank you also for everything that you all are doing as well.)

So what does that look like for you *personally*? Although I can’t answer that question for you, I can give you some tools to help. When philosophers talk about the importance of choosing *purpose* over happiness, part of what they are referring to is an ancient idea that goes back more than two thousand years to Aristotle (384 – 322 BCE) called *eudaimonia* that is best translated as *human flourishing*: **“Pursuing long-term goals that give meaning to life.... Figuring out your purpose in life given your unique set of talents and capacities”** (7).

So how do we do that? Again, I can't answer that for you, but I can share with you some touchstones that have been helpful to me. Almost two decades ago now, the Lilly Endowment began putting millions of dollars into funding programs across the country related to the theological exploration of vocation. And I had the opportunity to be a counselor at quite a few different camps for young people along those lines at Furman University (my *alma mater*), as well as at Duke University and Maryville College.

In helping plan and co-lead those programs, part of what I did was collect a long list of quotes related to discerning one's vocation, one's purpose or calling in life. For now, I'll share with you my top three favorites in the hope that one or more of them may be of use to you in the coming days.

The first definition is from the author and minister Frederick Buechner, who begins by saying that, "Neither the hair shirt nor the soft berth will do." A berth is a nautical term for a location to anchor, where a ship can swing round at the length of her moorings"—as in, "keep a wide berth of." The problem with a soft berth is that in a storm a ship can flail around, hit something, and end up with a hole in its hull. So—too soft a berth won't do.

Conversely, being too strict or harsh won't do either. Buechner's image here is a hair shirt, which ancient ascetics used to wear underneath their clothes to constantly chafe the skin as a reminder to be penitent.

So what should we do? Buechner concludes, "The place [you are called] to is the place **where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet**" (*Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*)—a place neither too strict nor leaving you too much at loose ends. Rather, you are seeking "where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."

The second definition is from the African-American author and activist Howard Thurman, who wrote, "Don't ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive. And then do that. **What the world needs is people that have come alive.**" I love that. The needs of the world can be overwhelming, but witnessing others living into their joy makes the world a better place for all.

Rounding out my top three favorite definitions of vocation is Tal Ben-Shahar, a positive psychologist and professor at Harvard University who has written that you will

find your calling at the “**intersection between pleasure and meaning**”—where personal satisfaction meets with a larger significance for the world and others.

With each of these three definitions, the first step is to notice the activities that give you joy. What makes you feel alive, connected, and engaged with others and the world around you? What do you love doing that allows you to get into a flow state for hours on end? The second step is to discern how those activities that you love might intersect with the needs of the world for such a time as this. At that intersection of pleasure and meaning, you will find *purpose* that has a significant chance of giving you longterm satisfaction and flourishing.

And I’m not saying that you need to figure out a grand plan for your life by the end of next week. But you may want to start experimenting with what does or doesn’t work. Let me give you two small examples. Since physical distancing started, I noticed that one thing I really wanted to do was to go running: to get out of my head and in my body. This past week I decided to shift from running random distances a few times a week to following a marathon training plan—which introduces further structure, purpose, and meaning. That’s still a step away from necessarily being connected to the needs of the world, but it’s a start along the path of me finding my way and my equilibrium for such a time as this.

Another example is that my aunt mailed me a beautiful, handmade quilted stole (a type of clergy vestment) that she made during her time of physical distancing. Making a gift for someone else is a way of introducing meaning, purpose, love, and connection into an activity you enjoy doing.

There’s a lot more I could say about vocational discernment, Hagerty’s book, and midlife generally, as a guide for such a time as this, but for now I will share with you two final things that have been on my heart this week.

First, in the spirit of savoring what we do still have—and are still capable of—in the midst of so many limitations and threats these days, I thought of a poem this past week that I haven’t thought about in quite a few years: “**Otherwise**” by **Jane Kenyon** (1947-1995). I’d like to invite you to hear it. You’ll have to adjust her words to what is true for you, but out of her experience, Kenyon writes:

I got out of bed
on two strong legs.
It might have been
otherwise. I ate
cereal, sweet
milk, ripe, flawless
peach. It might
have been otherwise.

I took the dog uphill
to the birch wood.
All morning I did
the work I love.
At noon I lay down
with my mate. It might
have been otherwise.

We ate dinner together
at a table with silver
candlesticks. It might
have been otherwise.

I slept in a bed
in a room with paintings
on the walls, and
planned another day
just like this day.
But one day, I know,
it will be otherwise.

In so many ways our lives these days already are *otherwise*, but we are each still here. So in whatever time that we do have, may we continue to **savor all that remains good and true and beautiful in our midst.**

The second and final piece I wanted to share with you is from the meditation teacher Jack Kornfield, about a Buddhist response to this pandemic. He is wrestling with what we do when we—and those we care about—are repeatedly impacted by hatred, greed, and delusion from some of the highest seats of power. Kornfield writes:

How will we respond?

With greed, hatred, fear and ignorance?

This only brings more suffering.

Or with generosity, clarity, steadiness and love?

This is the time for love....

Trust your dignity and goodness.

Where others hoard, *help.*

Where others deceive, *stand up for truth.*

Where others are overwhelmed or uncaring, *be kind and respectful.*

("The Bodhisattva Response to Coronavirus")

May it be so for such a time as this, as we recommit ourselves anew to meaning, purpose, and love.