

## To Make a Life of Meaning

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For a long time I believed that making a life of meaning meant that I had to accomplish great things. Be known. Stand out. Affirmed by others that what I was doing was important.

Today I know otherwise.

Not always. I still fall prey to old beliefs. But for the most part, my compass regarding what it means to make a life of meaning, or to do something of value beyond my own benefit, has changed. Whereas it used to be measured in external validation or recognition, today it is measured in my own feelings of self-integrity, authenticity and adherence to values found in our faith and in my spirituality.

As this has evolved for me, I find myself drawn to others who can serve as models of this way of living. When I pay attention, I do not have to look far.

These people are everywhere. They are living and they are deceased. They are sitting here today, they are in the news, *you* are in the pews.

The Universalist in me believes that the possibility of making a life of meaning is inherent in all people. The possibility of the opposite is also true and is also evidenced all around us.

For the moment, let's look at what it takes to make our lives meaningful. To live knowing that what we do matters, and at the same time, knowing that we are not the center of the universe.

Living like this demands that we are awake: aware of opportunities, small and large, to respond with love to others.

Mark Nepo in our reading this morning called this "listen: to all that holds us up" and having the "courage: to ask of everything you meet, 'What bridge are we?'"

The second quality necessary for living this way is acceptance. Not jumping from seeing a need right to acting upon it. Instead, taking the time, be it a moment or months, for acceptance. Harder for some of us than others.

With acceptance we recognize the limitations of our ability to make a difference. We can then put ourselves out there, offer to help, say "I hear you." and "Here I am." without need for an expected outcome.

Then... once we've acknowledged and accepted what is, then... we take action. Simple action. And not every time. Not as a martyr and not to save the world, not with promises of doing something forever. But one action. One decision. And then the next.

Sometimes what we do is never known by anyone other than themselves. Other times it leads to something larger. But the impetus, the origin of the action, is not to be something great or extraordinary.

When you get inside of other people’s stories, it’s clear that the most amazing people who have done incredible things did so without any intention of being great, or big.

Take for example, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He was to me for the longest time an icon. Inspiring, yes, but, quite honestly, also intimidating. I was in awe that one mortal man could have such a great impact on the world. My perception was that he was somehow more or better than the rest of us.

Then one day while researching about Dr. King for a sermon I came across something that changed everything. It was a poem entitled, *Incarnation*, written by UU minister David Rankin, whose words I also shared in this morning’s prayer.

Rev. Rankin wrote referring to Dr. King: “I met him in 1962—in Mount Vernon, Iowa. He was not a good planner: two hours late for the appointment and unaware of the location. He was not a handsome figure: slightly overweight and clothes too small for the body. He was not a congenial person: impatient in conversation and never fully present. He was not a great speaker: words lost in the nose and ill-timed gestures. He was not a creative individual: ideas borrowed from others and frequent repetition. He was not a happy character: wide mournful eyes and lips not made for smiling. But if God appeared anywhere in the 20th Century—it was in the form of Martin Luther King, Jr.”<sup>1</sup>

Not a great speaker, two hours late for the appointment—in those words Martin Luther King moved off a mountaintop and became a real person to me.

Reading a sermon that he delivered in in 1959 in Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, he became even more accessible. In this sermon, Dr. King said to his congregants, “I don’t want a long funeral. In fact I don’t even need a eulogy more than one or two minutes. I hope that I will live so well the rest of the days—I don’t know how long I will live and I’m not concerned about that—but I hope that I can live so well that the preacher will get up and say ‘He was faithful.’ That’s all. That’s good enough, that’s the sermon that I would like to hear. ‘Well done my good and faithful servant. You’ve been faithful. You’ve been concerned about others.’”

That’s it. That’s what the late and great Dr. Martin Luther King wanted said at his funeral. “Well done my good and faithful servant. You’ve been faithful. You’ve been concerned about others.”

Knowing Elena as I do, that’s all she wants, too. She didn’t mean to be great—she even told me as much—in donating her kidney. She was being faithful to an idea that visited her, and she followed in her concern for others. Small, and big. As her spiritual director explained to her.

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<sup>1</sup> *Incarnation*, David O Rankin, date unverified

We are all both small and big. Each day we make many choices not knowing exactly where they may lead. The ordinary and the extraordinary. In life, we have all been both the beneficiaries and the benefactors of such grace. A moment when another chose to respond.

I can think of many times that I have been the benefactor, one of them comes to mind this morning. It was 16 years ago. We had a new minister coming to our congregation in Hartford. I had two young children at the time and was unable to attend the installation service. So I set up a time to meet with this said minister. Talking in her office, she asked me about myself. I told her how much I loved being a mother, that I was a fundraiser in my paid work. Some other words slipped out of my mouth like, “but I really want to be a minister...” She stopped me midsentence. Tell me more she said.... You can fill in the rest of the story.

Twelve years later I enrolled in divinity school and here I am. Would that have happened if she didn't hear me, accept what I said, and take the time to ask me to share more? I don't know. But I do know that if no one ever took the time to say, “tell me more...” I'm pretty sure I would not be a minister today.

I've told her many times since then how much I appreciate what she did that day. I think that she gets it. That her one small decision changed the course of my life forever. I certainly hope so. The thing about life though, right, is that we have no idea how many other ripples that one small decision had. How many other people have been impacted. That's how life is.

Palms... I have always loved Palm Sunday. I think of those people lining the street waving their palms thinking that they had overcome. That the teacher they followed was finally going to overthrow the evils of their day. It didn't exactly work out that way. But still, they had their belief and their hope.

As a child, I loved to go to church—I've told you that before—but I was the only one in my family that felt that way. So we made our obligatory treks to church three times each year: Christmas Eve, Palm Sunday and Easter. Palm Sunday was my favorite. Because on that Sunday I got this palm. I would take the palm and pin it my bulletin board in my bedroom. For the entire year, I would look at that palm and it would carry me. Through times when I felt utterly alone. I would look at that palm and remember. I would hold on. One small act. Giving a child a palm. Saved my life. Many a year.

As we leave here today may these palms remind us that we are all one. That what we do matters. That every day of our lives, we can choose to listen, to accept and when appropriate, to act. With love to one person at a time. Small and big. Ordinary and extraordinary.

Amen and Blessed Be.