



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“The Meaning of Work”

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Centering Thoughts

It's not enough to be busy, so are the ants. The question is, what are we busy about?

Henry David Thoreau

If you want to make good use of your time, you've got to know what's most important and then give it all you've got. Lee Iacocca

I've learned that making a 'living' is not the same as making a 'life'. Maya Angelou

How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives. Annie Dillard

Sermon

How many of you feel like Sisyphus? Do you push a rock up a hill each day, only to face the same rock the next day? Whether we're students preparing for jobs, workers who want jobs, workers with jobs, or retirees living on the fruits of past jobs, life can sometimes mirror the myth of Sisyphus. Life can feel futile and hopeless—but it doesn't have to.

Before his eternal punishment, Sisyphus loved life and all its possibilities for joy and happiness. He loved life so much he defied the gods by stopping death. When the gods discovered his trickery, they designed the perfect punishment. They gave Sisyphus eternal life, just not one filled with joy. It was a punishment because no one would desire a life comprised solely of pushing a rock up a hill, knowing it will only roll back down again, and thus accomplish nothing beyond its reaching the top.

In 1942, Albert Camus, a French philosopher, challenged the idea that Sisyphus had no life and suffered through his punishment. He argued that this seemingly tragic figure was actually happy. He suggested that Sisyphus' awareness and acceptance of his punishment put Sisyphus in control, not the gods. This allowed Sisyphus to exercise his own agency and bring his own meaning to his endless, repetitive, unrewarding activity. Viktor Frankl outlined similar agency in his book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, following his personal experience surviving a Nazi concentration camp, another living Hell.

Camus argued that if Sisyphus gives up hoping for a change in his circumstance, he can find *happiness* in his efforts to accomplish his assigned task, and *satisfaction* in getting the rock to the top. I'll agree that we can find a degree of intrinsic meaning in the performance and accomplishment of a task, but that's not enough to make anyone truly happy, not if that's all life includes.

Camus thinks Sisyphus represents all of humankind because *our* fate seems no different, our lives are equally absurd. No matter what we do, death will come to us all. Even if we believe there is life after death, we cannot stop death. And if the only meaning to be had is waiting for us beyond, in a hoped-for life-after-death, then life truly is absurd. There may be another meaning waiting for us beyond this life, though I personally doubt it. I'm also not willing to merely get through this life while I wait for the next. I believe we must make our lives meaningful here and now, and we can do that, even if some days we feel we're experiencing a Sisyphian punishment. Making our own meaning isn't cause for despair, because it gives me and you the freedom to find it in our own way.

Many of us find meaning in our studies as we prepare to enter the work force, in our work activities or hobbies, and in the many other activities and relationships we fill our lives with. If Camus was right about Sisyphus, he found meaning in the struggle to roll the rock up the hill. Mountain climbers might agree. They may climb a mountain because it's there, but more importantly, because they enjoy the challenge of pitting their skills against the mountain, and for the reward of reaching the top. The climbers may even repeat this again on the same or another mountain.

The mountain climbers probably study the weather, the terrain, and the equipment. They likely work out to build stamina and endurance. They probably do this with a team to improve safety and provide assistance to each another. Climbers do what they can to reduce risk, but the outcome can never be assured.

None of this is true for our Greek guy. He has no one, nor is he challenged or developing intellectually, emotionally, or physically. There is little doubt that he'll get the rock to the top, as he's proven over and over again. He has no need to build up stamina because his task never changes, the rock never gets bigger or heavier, the hill never gets steeper. And when he gets the rock to the top, no one cheers him, no one recognizes his accomplishment. And no one else uses his accomplishment for any other purpose.

Unlike the mountain climber who might share his knowledge with another climber, might discover something new on a mountain never climbed before, or might give someone a vicarious adventure in a retelling of the climb, Sisyphus' accomplishment goes nowhere. For all these reasons, the mountain climbers have meaning and Sisyphus does not.

Dr.'s Morten Hansen and Dacher Keltner, professors at the University of California, Berkeley, co-authored a report outlining "Eight Ways to Find More Meaning at Work", itemizing many of the

factors I named with the climbers. Although their specific focus was the workplace, the eight characteristics fit any activity we spend time on. As I read their list you can mentally check any which give your life meaning:

1. Makes a contribution to something beyond yourself, has purpose or value to others
2. Provides opportunities for gaining new skills or knowledge
3. Provides a sense of accomplishment or recognition affirming your work's value
4. Provides status or respect, a way to affirm your worth
5. Provides opportunities to exercise power or exert authority
6. Provides a sense of belonging to a community, a social benefit
7. Provides a sense of agency, or a belief that what you do matters or makes a difference
8. Gives you autonomy, the freedom to be your own boss or make decisions on your own

[http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/eight_ways_to_find_more_meaning_work#]

There are probably more sources of meaning than these eight and some may be more important to you than others. But the authors claim if you don't have *any* of these in your life, then your life probably lacks meaning and you're probably not very happy. If just one of these was felt especially deeply, that may be enough to give your life meaning.

Because you are here in a religious community, I'm guessing that you find some of these sources here or you came here to find them. I think we offer opportunities to find all eight of these characteristics. Our mission is to make a difference in people's lives. If we don't, then we're failing our mission. Fortunately, you tell me when some word or activity makes a difference, so I know we're not failing.

Did you notice that the Berkeley authors did not include money as one of their top 8 criteria for meaning? Money may be a baseline that's necessary to buy food, clothing, and pay the rent, but it can't bring fulfillment by itself. We know, too, from our own volunteerism that meaning can be found without a monetary return.

A research study designed by psychologist Dan Ariely and presented in a 2012 TED Talk, looked at the connection between meaning and payment in the work we do. He held experiments with workers who completed jobs that they learned afterwards were unnecessary. Even if the person enjoyed doing the work at the time, the fact that it was dismissed after changed how they felt about the work.

Eventually, the quality of the work suffered. Paying for the work didn't improve the outcome. If the work wasn't useful, it had no meaning, the workers lost interest, and performance suffered.

[www.ted.com/talks/dan_ariely_what_makes_us_feel_good_about_our_work?language=en]

Ariely found the primary factor in giving a job meaning was that it mattered. Even repetitive jobs like that of Sisyphus could be meaningful if it made a difference to someone else. You wouldn't volunteer as an usher or sound tech here if you didn't think it mattered. You wouldn't be a garbage collector, President, teacher, or stage actor if it didn't make a difference. And, you wouldn't contribute to the Economic Justice Coalition so that others can find work that matters and pays a living wage if you didn't think your contribution mattered.

Another author, Roman Krznaric, offers five dimensions of meaning in his book, *How to Find Fulfilling Work*. He lists as number 1. Earning money. That's the baseline. He follows that with:

2. Achieving status
3. Making a difference
4. Following your passions or interests
5. Using your talents or skills

He's added two new items – following your passion and using your skills. I agree these add personal fulfillment because ideally, we want to like what we do and jobs that we are totally unqualified for can make us miserable, as well as our bosses.

I remember when I first started working at *National Geographic* before I graduated from college, I was asked to use a calculator to total up the Photo Lab technicians' hours on different projects entered on their time sheets. The different projects were then charged for those hours. This was in the Dark Ages, before computer tracking made the job obsolete.

If you know me, you know numbers and I am not on friendly terms. At the end of my first week I went home in tears because I couldn't get the weekly numbers to add up to 40 hours. The job had a purpose beyond me, the people were great to work with, but I was awful at it and I had no passion for it. I felt like Sisyphus with a thankless, futile task. Thank the gods I never had to do anything like that again.

I was fortunate in my earlier career, and now as your minister, that my work gives my life a great deal of meaning. I know many of you work, have worked, or will work at jobs that make a difference, that contribute to the common good, but also to individual good. UUFA's mission also makes a difference in people's lives. What you do here matters.

And, when we're out and about in the community, we can make a difference there, as well. When we're on the receiving end of other people's work we can show them their work matters by expressing appreciation, giving respect, and using their contribution. We can support local businesses that pay fair wages to their employees. We can encourage UGA and other employers to pay living wages and treat workers well. We can stand on the side of love to help workers. The hey day of unions that Woody Guthrie sang about may be over, but the worker rights that Martin Luther King Jr. died for are not. We can continue to seek justice and equality in the workplace.

We know work and the activities that fill our lives give our lives meaning. When no work is available or the work is undervalued, we must act to change that as best we can. If we have no work or money to pay for life's basic needs, meaning becomes a luxury not available to all. And our Seven Principles don't allow us to sit idly by.

May we do all we can to give our own lives meaning. May we do all we can to insure opportunities for others to find meaning as well. We are interconnected and interdependent. Eliminating the punishment Sisyphus faced, an eternity of futility and hopelessness, benefits us all.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. Describe a time you did something particularly meaningful. What made it so?
2. How might your work/activities be a 'right livelihood' (helping more than harming others)?
3. What might you be working on now that will change the meaning your life holds for you?