

March 2 2025 Service
Unitarian Church of Montpelier

“Love Is A Verb: Living a Meaningful Life”
Ginny Sassaman

My favorite part of Thanksgiving dinner is when everyone sitting around the table shares something they are grateful for. This past November there were fourteen of us gathered at my sister Kathy’s house, including my ten-year-old grand nephew Jace. Jace quite formally announced he’d like to “thank the folks back in the kitchen.” My son Ben expressed gratitude for balance in life, specifically the balance between disturbing outside forces and nurturing family time.

Before dinner, Kathy and I had been telling our nine year old grand niece Mika horror stories from our long ago gym class days. For her gratitude, Mika enthusiastically blurted that she was thankful she had been born when she was, so she didn’t have to go to such terrible gym classes!

I loved listening to all my family members. This is what gives meaning to the Thanksgiving holiday for me, the kind of meaning that makes me happy. Bring it on, like gravy over mashed potatoes.

The feel-good nature of meaningful actions and interactions is not limited to Thanksgiving. I know from both lived experience and positive psychology research that meaning is a fundamental building block of human thriving.

Meaning is so important to our well-being that Martin Seligman, the father of positive psychology, put it at the center of his recipe for living a flourishing life, “PERMA.” P-E-R-M-A. PERMA stands for positivity, engagement in life, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment.

An important note, though, is that meaning is only part of the grid. A life focused solely on meaning while neglecting positivity, relationships, etc. would not be happy.

I was lucky to study happiness with Tal Ben-Shahar, a legend in the positive psychology world. Tal stressed that human happiness lies at the intersection of pleasure and meaning. Both are necessary. Too much meaning without pleasure is a rat race. Too much pleasure without meaning is hedonistic. It gets back to balance, as my son observed.

At Thanksgiving time, I was definitely out of balance. I had spent most of October canvassing in Pennsylvania and North Carolina, which provided a great deal of meaning. There was positivity in those experiences too, but it was on the back burner. Even at home, my pre-election activities took most of my time and focus. I was okay with the imbalance then because I thought I would have plenty of fun times after November 5th

Instead, the election ramped up my meaningful activities as I immediately sought ways to ameliorate the coming devastation.

Thanksgiving Day was an emotional oasis. Still, my sister was concerned enough about my well-being to give me some advice. “Ginny,” she said, “You do know that you can’t save the world, right?”

Now Kathy is not only the oldest of six, she is also the Reverend Doctor Kathryn Ellis, a retired Unitarian Universalist Minister and a retired therapist. Her words carry some weight with me!

“I do know that,” I replied. “I know it’s a big messy complicated world, and always has been. However,” I insisted, “I still believe I must do the best I can to make a difference.”

But honestly, a couple months out from that conversation, I have to say my sister was right. My *brain* knows I can’t save the world, but my *heart* hasn’t fully accepted that reality. These days, Kathy’s words give me comfort. When current events leave me feeling too frightened, grief stricken and/or overwhelmed, it calms me down to tell myself, “Remember I can’t save the world.” That relieves the pressure of trying too hard.

Something else my sister told me nearly two decades ago has been on mind a lot lately. Kathy had read the book, *The Fourth Turning: An American Prophecy - What the Cycles of History Tell Us About America's Next Rendezvous with Destiny* by William Strauss and Neil Howe. She thought I should read it too. Strauss and Howe wrote that human civilizations go through four cycles repeatedly: a high, an awakening, an unraveling, and then a crisis – the *fourth turning*, always a perilous moment in history.

Strauss has since passed away, but Howe recently published a new book which argues that we are in the fourth turning now. Whoa. What will that mean? What is going to happen? We can’t know the answers, but we can be sure that there will be many meaningful opportunities, whether we want them or not.

Already I feel like meaning is being showered upon me daily, whereas I have to be very specific and deliberate to create positivity. Colored lights, walks in the snowy woods, bubble

baths, yoga, meditation, music – and, being with friends and loved ones. I know that joy, fun, and self-care – mine and YOURS – are not luxuries. They are necessities to save ourselves and whatever part of the world is ours to save.

A quote circulating on social media from columnist Dan Savage nicely captures the value of pleasure in “fourth turning” kinds of times. He wrote, “During the darkest days of the AIDS crisis, we buried our friends in the morning, we protested in the afternoon, and we danced all night. The dance kept us in the fight because it was the dance we were fighting for.”

Savage’s reflection brings me back to the PERMA framework for thriving. In addition to positivity and meaning, what we perhaps need most now *and in all times* is the R for relationships. That is, love. All kinds of love. Savage wrote that *we* buried the dead, *we* protested, *we* danced. In relationship. No doubt, with a *lot* of love.

We certainly need each other in the fight against fascism, for many reasons. Last Wednesday evening, during a virtual town hall, Representative Becca Balint stressed that authoritarians want us to feel isolated and therefore more easily defeated. She urged all of us to find ways to be connected, to be in groups, to not go it alone.

In this congregation we have each other. Which is indescribably precious, since we may be in a time even more ominous sounding than “the fourth turning”: the collapse of civilization.

That possibility was first brought to my attention in 2017 by another Unitarian Universalist minister whose words carry a lot of weight with me – Reverend Joan. She suggested I read the book: Who Do We Choose To Be: Facing Reality, Claiming Leadership, Restoring Sanity by acclaimed social scientist Margaret Wheatley. It was not an easy read.

According to Wheatley, *all civilizations* go through six stages before falling apart. We are in stage six. We are in systems collapse right now. What does that mean on a practical level?

For one thing, Wheatley suggests that it is futile to try to prevent this natural process. She cautions us to look clearly at reality. For example, for those of us who hope that “disruption and chaos” will at least lead to “healthier, more humane and life-affirming ways of living on this planet,” Wheatley cautions: “But we can’t get there from here without traversing the falling apart stage. We cannot simply leap to new ways of being; first we must prepare for disintegration and collapse.”

Well, I don’t like that. But in a way, I find both Wheatley’s hypothesis and the idea of a fourth turning to be oddly liberating. I mean, it’s one thing for me to think I can maybe possibly save the world when it comes to influencing who people vote for. But the massive shifts that seem to be happening now, that Wheatley and Strauss and Howe describe, are something else entirely. That kind of influence is well above my pay grade.

So what *can* we do? One of the things Wheatley suggests is forming “Islands of Sanity” where we “create the conditions for our basic human qualities of generosity, contribution, community and love to be evoked no matter what.”

I think our church is just such an island. In fact, these days UCM feels so important to me, that despite my fears about what might happen to social security, I am upping my pledge this year.

Choir feels like its own island of sanity, a smaller community of love. Maybe Vermont is an island? Maybe there are many islands, maybe we’re living in an archipelago where we can live lives of love, meaning, and joy.

So much is swirling around us. But whatever is happening, we still face day to day choices. The question is really the same no matter when we live: how can we best use our time on planet earth? But in this time of crisis, for those of us whose sense of purposes includes helping others as best we can, what might our options be?

My North Carolina trip gave me some inspirational examples. I arrived in that state less than a month after the incomprehensibly devastating damage to northwest North Carolina by Hurricane Helene. Trying to respond to destruction on that scale seems like a localized version of coping with systems collapse. How could any individual best help?

I think my friend Marty's answer was brilliant. He lives in Hickory, about an hour east of Asheville, just outside the destruction zone. Marty and others in his neighborhood started something called "Love Is a Verb." Their group had one profound mission: doing laundry. Remember, Asheville had no running water or electricity for nearly a month. So every day, a team member drove a truck from Hickory to two homeless shelters in Asheville, one for veterans and one for women and children. The Love Is a Verb driver dropped off clean laundry, and reloaded dirty laundry to take back to Hickory. Day after day, Love Is a Verb did laundry. They didn't try to do everything for everybody. Just, laundry for two specific groups.

I also stayed with my childhood friend Jeannette, who lives an hour southwest of Asheville, just outside the disaster zone. Before she picked me up, Jeanette texted a simple but moving request: could I buy as much baby formula for sensitive stomachs as I could find? Helene had devastated not only the grocery stores but also the major grocery distribution center so there were serious food shortages. My friend didn't ask me to fix all the shortages – just this one piece. Baby formula for sensitive stomachs.

I've also been inspired by a group I follow online called Beloved Asheville. Beloved Asheville is made up of seemingly tireless volunteers who labor day in and day out to build new homes for flood victims. This excerpt from one of their Facebook posts may inspire you, too:

“As the sun sets over Swannanoa, we close another heartfelt day rebuilding homes after the hurricane. ... With every nail hammered and brushstroke made, we are reminded of the resilience and beauty of this community. It's not just about the walls going up or the floors being restored; it's about the love and care poured into every detail. This is what rebuilding with and for the community looks like—by love and through love. This work is not just construction; it's the restoration of hope, strength, and belonging. Together, we're not just rebuilding houses; we're building futures. “

Talk about meaning! And positivity! And loving relationships! And not trying to save the world – just one family and one house at a time.

By the way, in the PERMA grid for human thriving, the other two letters stand for E, engagement in life and A, accomplishment. I think Beloved Asheville is a great role model for those traits as well.

I want to close by sharing a piece from J.R.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* The character Frodo anguishes,

“I wish it need not have happened in my time.” To which the wise Gandalf responds, “So do I ... and so do all who see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us.”

We similarly may wish that whatever is happening – an oligarchy, the collapse of civilization, climate devastation – need not have happened in our time. But unlike Frodo, none of

us has to do the work alone. Like the meditation we did earlier, it starts with one's own self. But our greatest strength – and happiness – lie in community. Together, as the popsicle art in the windows reminds us, strong is what we make each other, to save at least some corners of our beautiful world.

May it be so.