

Worthy Of The Sacrifice

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Last Sunday, the 21st of April, marked the eighth anniversary of the death of my friend and mentor, Joseph. He was just 71. I first met Joseph through my work cataloging and appraising fine art and antiques, which I did before ministry. Joseph was an expert and dealer in Asian art and I would consult with him on Asian art objects that fell outside my own knowledge or expertise.

Because it is customary to include a consultant's CV or resume in an appraisal, I knew Joseph also had degrees in pastoral counseling and religion, had worked in chaplaincy and as a spiritual director. And so, when I finally resigned myself to at least exploring my call to ministry which wouldn't let up despite my best efforts to ignore it, I asked Joseph if he'd take me on as a directee in spiritual direction to help me discern my calling. He generously agreed.

Joseph's own religious journey had taken him from the Mainline Protestantism of his youth to Christian Fundamentalism to Islam and eventually to Buddhism. His diverse background afforded him a wealth of resources to draw from and refer to as he listened to me and we discussed my own path. He taught me meditation, and at my request, gave me basic instruction in Buddhist concepts and psychology.

He was my consistent cheerleader throughout seminary. At least half the books in my professional library are books he gave me from his own. He offered unflinching support through the UUA's arduous ordination process, and in my eventual ministry. He would read any paper, application, or sermon I sent him and provide timely, honest and insightful feedback born of his deeply lived life.

Now, lest I give you the wrong impression, Joseph wasn't perfect. Like every human being he had flaws, some of which I was aware of personally and others I learned about from his friends and associates at his funeral, which were shared in a spirit of empathetic affection rather than judgment or gossip. Indeed, when considered in its totality, Joseph's life, though arguably too short, was worthy of the sacrifice.

Now, you may be wondering, "Sacrifice? What sacrifice?", imagining perhaps you missed something in my remembrance of my late mentor. But, rest assured, you did not. For I did not mention any sacrifice unique to his life. The sacrifice I

speak of is that which has and continually gives and sustains our own lives, all of us. As Joseph Campbell, the noted scholar and writer on myth observed, “Life lives on lives...Everything that lives lives on the death of something else. Your own body will be food for something else. Anyone who denies this, anyone who holds back, is out of order. Death is an act of giving.” This essential truth of our existence, Campbell asserts, has been met over time with horror by some and resignation by others.

Those horrified by this have often literalized imagery and symbolic stories of primordial gardens and heavenly realms or states to which it is our life’s or many lives work, to return. Whereas those resigned to the reality that life lives on life, have often reduced all life to little more than a competition for survival, winner take all. The one ignoring, in Campbell’s words, “Out of perfection nothing can be made” and the other content to forgo the experience of life, both the pain and the pleasure, in favor of mere existence.

Still, somewhere between horror and resignation lies another possible response. A response pointed to in a brief prayer I often say to myself in silence before each meal,

“Bearing in mind we live our lives at the expense of other life, may we be worthy of the sacrifice.”

The prayer was written by Joan Goodwin, a UU religious educator. In these few words is contained both an affirmation of the reality of existence and an aspirational response to that reality.

And so if we affirm that life, all life, is lived at the expense of other life, the aspiration to therefore be worthy of that sacrifice, invites the question, what does it mean to live a worthy life?

Is it simply to believe and behave according to a specific set of prescribed ethics or morals?

Is it to be an upstanding, law-abiding, productive citizen?

Is it to accept and preserve the traditions and social norms of one’s society or culture?

Well, I don’t know about you, but if so, then I’m in trouble. For my personal record on these is kind of spotty. I mean, I’m a gay, pro-choice, carnivore who is known to, at times, exceed the posted speed limit.

Conversely, is living a worthy life to reject or reform the prevailing ethical and moral codes?

It is to challenge and tear down systems of oppression and work for a more just local, national, or global society?

It is to critique and/or toss aside the traditions and social norms of one's society or culture?

Well, maybe. But don't forget many people on opposite ends of the political and religious spectrum are convinced that it is they who are the ones rejecting, reforming, challenging, tearing down, critiquing and tossing aside such things in their aspiration to live a worthy life.

Perhaps we should approach the question differently then. For as Joseph Campbell notes,

“We are all born as animals and live the life that animals live: we sleep, eat, reproduce, and fight. There is, however, another order of living, which the animals do not know, that of awe before the mystery of being ... that can be the root and branch of the spiritual sense of one's days. That is the birth - the Virgin Birth - in the heart of a properly human, spiritual life.”

Now, don't get tripped up on Campbell's use of the term, “Virgin Birth”. Campbell is not speaking literally here, he's talking about a spiritual birth...a break with our animal instincts, in which we not only simply exist, but experience living with the capacity to reflect on and assign meaning to it. The concept and understanding of Virgin Birth as a spiritual birth, essentially being born into the fullness of our humanity, if you will, is not unique to the Judeo-Christian tradition with which many of us are familiar, but has parallels in numerous other traditions including eastern religions. The stories of such births, regardless of the tradition from which they come, according to Campbell, tell us that the depth of your life and breadth of your life is much deeper and broader than you conceive it to be.”

With Campbell's insight in mind, the question of what a worthy life is shifts from trying to figure out and settle on the right to -do list to execute over a lifetime to choosing whether or not to fully embrace our humanity, that is, our capacity to live beyond our animal instincts, to explore and experience the breadth and depth of what it means to be a human being. This, Campbell asserts in our reading this morning, is “what we are really living for...the experience of life, both the pain and the pleasure.”

Thus living a worthy life, a life worth dying for, is not a matter of justifying your existence, but of claiming your life as a human being, fully.

We lay claim to our life as a human being when we cultivate and tend to our inner life. Now, the tending or cultivation of an inner life is sometimes derisively equated with self-indulgent navel gazing. But they are not the same thing. Navel gazing is about separating oneself from or escaping the essential reality of life. The inner life we cultivate and tend in order to claim our humanity, by contrast, immerses us in the essential reality of life.

In cultivating or tending to our inner life we live into the name we've given ourselves, homo sapiens or wise man (person). Wisdom, the ancients remind us, begins when before the mystery of being, we bow in wonderment and resolve to surrender to, not solve it. The inner life, then, in contrast to much of our outer existence, which we share with all other life, does not concern itself with gathering data, consuming facts, and making plans. Its challenge and reward is not a clever resolution of life and its many paradoxes, but a poetic engagement and appreciation of them.

As Emerson wrote, "The poet alone knows astronomy, chemistry, vegetation, and animation, for he does not stop at these facts, but employs them as signs. He knows why the plain, or meadow of space, was strewn with these flowers we call suns, and moons, and stars; why the great deep is adorned with animals, with men, and gods; for, in every word he speaks he rides on them as the horses of thought." And so it is through our inner life we engage what we feel but cannot express with our rational mind, including, what we call meaning.

Indeed, scholar, therapist, and author of *Care of the Soul*, Thomas Moore observes, "When people talk about finding meaning in life, they imply that they can figure things out and set them right. But meaning that makes life worth living may be nothing more than a moment's realization, a sensation, such as the touch of your baby's skin, or a sudden breathtaking appreciation for your home, or the passing thrill when you are reminded of your love for your spouse- meaning may be an epiphany rather than an understanding." And surely Talia, from our story for all ages, who on one her mornings alone surprised herself, so the story goes, with the decision to plant an almond tree, would agree with Moore.

Our inner life opens a pathway to meaning we feel but can't often explain, especially when the outer world is bleak. Consider in the midst of the Nazi occupation of her homeland, Anne Frank wrote, "It's difficult in times like these: ideals, dreams and cherished hopes rise within us, only to be crushed by grim reality. It's a wonder I haven't abandoned all my ideals, they seem so absurd and impractical. Yet I cling to them because I still believe, in spite of everything, that people are truly good at heart."

Even the noted philosopher Albert Camus, known for his assertion that it is absurd to continually seek meaning in life when there is none, wrote upon reflection of an experience that “refreshed” him, “Although it was the middle of winter, I finally realized that, within me, summer was inextinguishable.”

Closer to home, one of the reasons we ritualize and share our joys AND sorrows each week is because our lives are visited daily by both. Often these move us in ways or carry meaning for us that is not always clear. Sometimes all we can do is acknowledge them. This is wisdom.
This is being human.

“Life lives on lives.” wrote Joseph Campbell. Affirming this reality, Joan Goodwin prays, “May we be worthy of the sacrifice.” There are many things one can do outwardly that may very well earn one the admiration of others, perhaps even a lasting legacy of having been a “good” person. But a life worth dying for is one that is lived, fully. For we who by no choice of our own find ourselves both alive and human, living life fully means embracing that, “other order of living, which the animals do not know, that of awe before the mystery of being” that we may live into being the homo sapiens we claim to be.

May it be so.
Amen and Blessed Be