

The Search for Meaning

A Message by James R. Newby

Text: Micah 6:8

I love the word *discernment*. It is a word that Quakers frequently use when trying to understand what Spirit is saying to us, and what the Inner Light is encouraging us to do. It is a word that is used when seeking to understand life direction and what our purpose in this life is. It is a word that describes the focus of any Clearness Committee. As Friends, we believe that we can be led by the Spirit of God in the here and now, and through the process of discernment we can learn what that leading is to be.

The process of discernment is greatly enhanced by the use of queries, which is another strong Quaker emphasis. By asking questions, Friends believe that we can more fully discern God's will for our lives, a practice that we believe is better than reciting creeds that were developed outside of our cultural context and were written centuries ago.

This morning, I want to speak on one of my favorite topics, *our search for meaning*, or, *our search for a purposeful life*. Last week I spoke about *Hope*, and used as our main text the Apostle Paul's words from Romans where he encourages those early Christians to "Rejoice in Your Hope." One of those I quoted was Andrew Delbanco who wrote: "We always live at the brink of this chasm of meaninglessness where with just a nudge we might tumble into melancholy and despair." He then writes about how we can maintain our hope even when all seems meaningless. And so I return to a topic this morning that I return to regularly, much like I continuously return to the topics of *transformation* and *beloved community*. I believe that *the search for meaning* is central to understanding our life together, the *hope* for which we long, and the spiritual growth which results.

If your life is anything like mine, it is a constant search for meaning and purpose..."Why am I here?" and "What purpose do I

have?" We are seekers trying to discern who we are and what our true purpose is.

As most of you know by now, one of my favorite authors is Frederick Buechner. In his classic book, *The Sacred Journey*, Buechner shares how each of our various experiences of journey are centered in search: "We search for a self to be. We search for other selves to love. We search for work to do. And since even when to one degree or another we find these things, we find also that there is still something crucial missing which we have not found, we search for that *unfound thing* too, even though we do not know its name or where it is to be found or even if it is to be found at all." My search for meaning in life has much to do with my search for what Buechner calls, "that unfound thing." And the choices I make in my search are guided through the asking of queries:

First, is love and care a part of the choice I am making? Purpose and meaning can be found in the many great and small acts of love and care that we do for one another. A friend sent me the following,

"Note to Self." "What is my purpose in life?" I asked the void. What if I told you that you fulfilled it when you took an extra hour to talk to that child about his life," said the voice. "Or when you paid for that young couple in the restaurant. Or when you saved that dog in traffic? Or when you tied your father's shoes for him? Your problem is that you equate your purpose with goal based achievement. The universe isn't interested in your achievements...just your heart. When you choose to act out of kindness, compassion and love, you are already aligned with your true purpose. No need to look any further."

This Meeting has formalized this concern in what we call the *We Care Committee*, a committee that is sensitive to the needs of those within our Meeting, and offers ministry opportunities for those who would like to help with the needs of others. *Is love and care a part of the choice I am making?*

A second query that is helpful in my discernment process about meaning, is this: Is the choice I am making one where Truth and Integrity are present? Friends, Truth and integrity are very

important to us as Quakers, so important that integrity is one of our testimonies. *Integrity* is our most important testimony because all of the others *are based on it*. If I make a choice where my integrity is compromised and where truth is absent, I can assume that such a choice or choices are not a part of a God-centered, meaningful life.

This query is especially relevant to our situation today. We are living in a time where truth has been compromised, conspiracy theories run rampant. In many ways we have gone through the looking glass. To quote Lewis Carroll, *"If I had a world of my own, everything would be nonsense. Nothing would be what it is, because everything would be what it isn't. And contrary wise, what is, it wouldn't be. And what it wouldn't be, it would, you see?"* It was the Quaker historian Timothy Snyder who wrote in his book, *On Tyranny*, that *"Truth is the first casualty on the road to tyranny."* *Is the choice that I am making one where Truth and Integrity are present?*

Third, is the choice I am making one that promotes the cause of justice and righteousness in the world? God's first requirement as expressed in Micah 6:8, and as I just read, is "to do justice." I believe that God is a God of justice, and that we are called to expose *injustice* and work *for justice* whenever and wherever we can. This is why Quakers have a testimony on equality. If people are treated unequally, then *injustice* prevails. A part of our purpose in life involves choices that lead to acts of justice and righteousness for all people, *including Haitian immigrants in Springfield, Ohio.*

Finally, is the choice I am making one where Beauty and a sense of Awe find expression? As I remember the story, when he first set his eyes on the Alps, Baron Friedrich von Hugel exclaimed, "I didn't want to *climb* them. I didn't want *own* them. I didn't want to *mine* them. All that I wanted to do was to adore them." And describing the Redwoods in California, John Steinbeck wrote in *Travels with Charley*, "From them come silence and a sense of awe." God is present in all that lifts my spirit into a sense of awe. Life experiences

that put our souls in a place where we know true spiritual beauty, whether it is found in nature, in persons, or in listening to the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, is to connect with the Living God. In the sense of awe that results, I feel connected to the Inner Light of God and experience a sense of purpose in my life.

Discernment...Seeking to understand meaning in life and my purpose in it, which, by the way, is forever unfolding. It is a life-long process. Wherever I am in this process, however, my spiritual quest for purpose and meaning will most certainly involve, *love and care, truth and integrity, justice and righteousness, and beauty and a sense of awe.* All are universal values that can be incorporated into every person's unique search for meaning and purpose.