

WHO AM I AND WHAT IS MY PURPOSE?

by Rev. Kit Ketcham, Jan. 2, 2005

What did you want to be when you grew up? When you were about 8 or 9 years old, what were your career plans? How close did you get to your childhood fantasy of who you might be, what your dreams for yourself were?

We chuckle sometimes at the fantasies we had for ourselves as children. But when we examine them more carefully, we may see that even then we were trying things on, trying to discern our true nature and what that nature meant for us.

We humans are self-conscious by nature. We watch what is going on in the world around us and we wonder: what would I do in that situation? could I accomplish what that person did? do I have any interest in going this direction or that direction? It seems to be a major life activity for our species: self-examination, exploration, interpretation of our self-discoveries.

No other species, as far as we know, has humankind's interest in self-knowledge. It seems to be a characteristic of human consciousness--to discover and then to assign meaning to that self-discovery. Even an infant seems to have the capacity for this; watch a baby interact with its parent, discovering what its selfhood might mean, learning to ask for food, comfort, smiles, from the adults who care for it, largely by the use of its personality.

We learn some good habits and some bad ones as children trying to figure out who we are. We mistakenly take as gospel the good or bad opinions of parents, siblings, teachers, friends, and use these bits of information to develop theories about ourselves. But whether our theories are well-informed or not, we all ask the same questions, from the day we're born till the day we die.

Who am I? How do I know who I really am? Can I trust what I hear from others? What are the methods that will help me discern my true nature? What does it mean that I am human and how does human nature fit into the scheme of things? How do I cope with my true and human nature? And once I have figured it out, what do I do with it?

As a youngster, I received the same advice you all received from well-meaning adults--"just be yourself, honey..." My dad also added those sage words from Shakespeare's Hamlet: "this above all, to thine own self be true, and it will follow as the night the day, thou canst not then be false to any man."

I agreed completely. But who the heck was "myself"? And how did I go about figuring it out?

Some things I knew without question: my Scandinavian heritage was certain. I was a girl, whatever that meant. I was smart. I was a preacher's kid. I was big, not particularly athletic, and an oldest child.

Then there were the things others told me about myself: my parents were proud of my wanting to be baptized at age 6, so I must be religious. People laughed at my cute remarks, so I must be funny. People sneered at my not-so-cute remarks, so I must be weird. I was bigger than most of my friends, so I must be fat. I didn't have a boyfriend in high school, so I must be ugly.

But I did have doubts about what others told me. Sometimes their beliefs about who I really was didn't tally with my experience. Sometimes I was so confused that I gave up and gave in to their perceptions. Okay, they think I'm clumsy, I'll quit trying to do cartwheels. My self-image was often shaped by others' opinions about me.

Of course, practically everyone is confused about their identity as an adolescent, and I was no exception. In despair, one day in college, after having spent a good deal of time pondering why friends thought I must be _____, I resorted to a technique that has served me well ever since. I made a list.

I listed the things I knew for sure about myself. I listed the things I loved to do and the things I hated to do. I listed the things people seemed to assume about me. I listed the things that I thought nobody knew about me. I looked at this list for a long time. And then I crossed out the things that people assumed which were erroneous. I put question marks by those I thought might be the result of others' thinking, not my own. When I was done, I thought I had a pretty good picture of who I was, as a college freshman.

Little did I know, as I scanned this tallying of characteristics, that it was only the beginning, that my whole life could be spent in discovering who I was and that everything I discovered about myself had layer upon layer of additional mystery and meaning to be uncovered.

What it meant to be a girl, for example, meant one thing when I was 11 and trying desperately to hide the fact, embarrassed by my changing body and the suggestive remarks I heard from boys.

What it meant to be female looked entirely different from a young adult perspective, when I was interested in dating and marriage. As a young wife hoping to get pregnant, I learned about aspects of femaleness that I had never before encountered. As the mother of a son, my femininity took on new meaning, and then as a single parent of a teenager, both of us interested in dating, I had to re-think what my femaleness might mean in that context.

Meaning-making never stops. As children, we learn standards of behavior, right and wrong, cool and uncool, from adults and other kids; we compare those standards to what we want, what we have learned about how the world works, and we adopt or adapt or discard those standards.

Our understandings of our selfhood are always growing and changing. We employ many tools in this process. Remember when you were a teenager and a friend passed you a questionnaire which was designed to tell you whether you were sexually “cool” or not.

The questions might vary slightly, depending on your gender--the boys reputedly had a questionnaire that was much racier than the girls', but having seen the girls' version, I doubt it could be much more raunchy! Whether the test measured how pure you were or how interested in impurity you might be, we answered the questions avidly in hopes of discovering something new about ourselves.

We've used astrology, tarot, runestones and other somewhat metaphysical tools. We've investigated various tests--the Meyers Briggs to find our personality traits, the Strengths Deployment Inventory to discover our leadership skills, the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory, to see if we were psychotic. And from all these we've gained a certain knowledge to add to the perspective we were gaining on ourselves.

In addition, we began to see that there were things we were NOT. Some of them seemed to be connected to what others told us about ourselves (I still cringe at the stories I hear from people who were told they weren't musical or artistic--I think that human beings are intrinsically musical and artistic, whether they can carry a tune or draw a straight line).

Yet we knew we were different from others in some ways. Perhaps we knew we were not heterosexual. Perhaps we were not white. Perhaps we were differently abled. Perhaps we were atheists. Perhaps we experienced crushing depression or heard voices. Perhaps we disagreed strongly with public policies. Our thoughts seemed to go different directions from others'. We puzzled over these differences and sometimes kept them secret.

As young adults, on the strength of what we thought we knew, we took jobs or continued our education. We entered the work world or became fulltime parents, in the belief that this was what life would always be like for us. And for many of us, this became problematic.

Sometimes our soul-searching was precipitated by world events. For my generation, the Vietnam War was a flash point. These days, parents wounded by the Vietnam experience try to help their children cope with Iraq and Afghanistan.

The assassination of John F. Kennedy shattered the dreams of a postwar Camelot; subsequent administrations even today have illustrated the questionable ethics of our elected leaders. We idealistic young folks, many of us sheltered by our World War II and Vietnam generation parents, had to come to terms with human evil.

For the first time in our lives, we had to confront human evil on a worldwide and national basis, but we also had to acknowledge that we ourselves, as human beings, were susceptible to the same weaknesses that all humankind shares: greed, rage, disease, oppression of others.

We struggled to understand what it meant to be human, supposedly made in the image of God. Were we born good or evil? Why did we make the choices we made? Why was it often so hard to choose good? What did heredity and environment bring to bear on our human nature? Were we responsible for the consequences of our own behavior or should we blame it on our parents, our teachers, our friends?

Could we hide from the awful realizations of the despair that could visit human beings? We often tried, using and abusing drugs, alcohol, tobacco, relationships, money, to protect ourselves from the reality of our growing unhappiness.

Our anguish over our human nature and how it would affect our lives became front page news in the 60's and 70's, and even today, in our protests around global economics and foreign policy. Our struggles to understand "who we are and what is our purpose" have profoundly affected human society, ever since.

Twenty or thirty years ago, the phrase "midlife crisis" was invented to describe a growing phenomenon in human beings of a certain age and cultural background. A popular song evoked sympathetic pain in many of us: "Is That All There is?" We could see our youth disappearing, old age looming in the distance, and the territory between looked pretty grim.

What had been the purpose of all that education and training? Many of us hated what we were doing or we were bored silly with work that had once been exciting and meaningful. We began to take stock. Some of us left marriages that had fallen apart. Some of us sold everything and moved to a new state or city to start over. Some of us became alcoholics or drug addicts. Some of us went back to school.

Women, particularly, rebelled against the trap of social expectation and a new feminism sprang up. But as we women railed against masculine oppression, many of us began to realize that men were as trapped as women were by social expectation.

The question “what is my purpose” took on new life. Existential philosophers had told some of us in college that life had no purpose, that it was absurd. Some religious teachings advocated self-sacrifice or denial of one’s desires and hopes. Economists and financiers seemed to be in favor of lots of people making lots of money, espousing ways to beat the system, make a buck, ace others out.

We tried one thing and another. Some things worked better than others. We were not content, but we scrabbled on, taking pleasure and satisfaction where we could and discovering gradually the pieces we needed to complete the puzzle of our lives.

Dag Hammarskjold once wrote: “I don’t know who or what put the question, I don’t know when it was put, I don’t even remember answering. But at some moment I did answer Yes to Someone or Something. And from that hour, I was certain that existence is meaningful and that, therefore, my life in self-surrender, had a goal.”

What has constituted that moment for you? When did you answer Yes? Or have you--yet? What has made your life meaningful so far? What has your life’s goal revealed itself to be--so far?

Not all of us have reached that moment in our lives. Some of us are busy with school and children and homes and have little time yet for experiencing the call to our life’s goal. Some of us are only dimly aware that life has anything to offer beyond getting up in the morning, going off to work, drawing a paycheck, paying the bills, and going to bed at night. Others are on the brink of major life changes, perhaps in response to an unanswered call.

Millions of human beings are of necessity so invested in their daily survival that they have no energy to commit to the question of their life's purpose. For many, life's purpose is simply to survive their daily poverty and deprivation. And certainly victims of recent natural disasters have had their lives reduced to a struggle to survive.

Yet each human being, I believe, has a purpose, a calling, an inner flowering of beauty that lies dormant until the moment of saying Yes.

In May Sarton's poem, "Now I Become Myself", Ms. Sarton says..."All fuses now, falls into place from wish to action, word to silence, my work, my love, my time, my face gathered into one intense gesture of growing like a plant..."

George Bernard Shaw says..."Life is no 'brief candle' to me. It is a sort of splendid torch which I have got hold of for the moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before passing it on to future generations."

Where are you in your life? Have you figured out who you are? How are you doing it? Are you able to take time to do it? How can we, as your religious community, help you in this life task? How can Unitarian Universalist principles help you discover yourself? Can we teach our children how to discover themselves?

And what is your life's purpose? What is your calling? Are you called to be a faithful partner? The parent of well-raised children? An excellent teacher, counselor, plumber, contractor, artist, student? What is your calling beyond the many roles you play?

How do your many roles in life (partner, worker, parent, child, friend, minister) dovetail with what you know to be the Authentic You, the You who is true all the way to the core, the You whom you have discovered over years of soul searching? And can you help our children to answer their life's calling?

In this new year of 2006, with its new challenges and blessings, what will we learn about ourselves and our callings?

We must do what we can to answer our call. We are here today because others answered a call. Future generations are relying on us to fulfill our potential, for in doing so, we make it possible for them to fulfill theirs.

Six years ago, New Millennium fears and celebrations, fueled by Y2K predictions of potential disaster caused a worldwide questioning of human purpose. As the fireworks exploded around the globe at the stroke of midnight Dec. 31, 1999, I was awed by the sense of connection I felt with those I was watching on television.

Dancers in Bali, the Eiffel Tower erupting in fountains of stars, German singers, African drummers, Pacific Northwesterners reveling in the release from dread that predicted disasters, we were all connected in a human network of Hope. And we were united in our awareness that this planet and its inhabitants are truly all one. I felt, for once, truly hopeful that this year, this decade, this century, this millennium, peace will come. And it will come because we have all answered the question that Dag Hammarsjold mentions with a resounding Yes.

I have asked more questions than I have answered today. They are questions we all have different answers for, in their specifics, but our process of discernment tends to be similar.

Many of us know exactly who we are and what is our purpose. Others struggle with this self-knowledge. Knowing this, can we reach out to each other for support and help in our life's journeys? Can we offer understanding and validation to each other, no matter where we are on the journey, and can we accept the uncertainties that we invariably will experience, as we create our community of others who, like us, are certain and uncertain, knowing and questioning, acting and holding back?

Let's pause for a time of silent reflection and prayer.

BENEDICTION

Our worship service, our time of shaping worth together, is ended, but our service to the world begins again as we leave this place. Let us go in peace, remembering that who we are as human beings has tremendous impact on this world. May we respond with joy to the calling of our life's purpose and may we share that joy with one another. Amen, Shalom, Salaam, and Blessed Be.