Readings

(1) Constantine Cavafy, the early 20th century Greek/Alexandrian poet, describes the process and the journey out of which the stuff of Abundant Life emerges. The journey, he suggests, is the answer in large measure. He uses images from Homer’s Odyssey. Ithaca is the home of the hero Odysseus; the Lestrygonians were cannibals; the Cyclopes, whom we perhaps more easily recall, are the one-eyed monsters.

Cavafy’s poem titled “Ithaca” includes these lines:

When you start on your journey to Ithaca,
Then pray that the road is long,
Full of adventure, full of knowledge.
Do not fear the Lestrygonians
And the Cyclopes and the angry Poseidon….

… pray that the road is long,
That the summer mornings are many,
That you will enter ports seen for the first time
with such pleasure, with such joy!
Stop at Phoenician markets,
And purchase fine merchandise,
Mother-of-pearl and corals, amber and ebony,
And pleasurable perfumes of all kinds,
Buy as many pleasurable perfumes as you can;
visit hosts of Egyptian cities,
To learn and learn from those who have knowledge.

Always keep Ithaca fixed in your mind,
To arrive there is your ultimate goal.
But do not hurry the voyage at all.
It is better to let it last for long years;
And even to anchor at the isles when you are old,
Rich with all that you have gained on the way,
not expecting that Ithaca will offer you riches.

Ithaca has given you the beautiful voyage.
Without her you would never have taken the road.
But she has nothing more to give you.

And if you find her poor, Ithaca has not defrauded you.
With the great wisdom you have gained, with so much experience,
You must surely have understood by then what Ithacas mean.

(2) I often return to the words that Nelson Mandela spoke here in June of 1990, right here, as he spoke to a group of anti-apartheid activists from across the country. He invoked the prophet Isaiah,

“Those who wait upon God [and feel free to translate if you wish – Those who embrace the spirit of Life and Love and Justice – those who embrace the sanctity of their own souls and of others] Those who wait upon God shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint…." (Isaiah 40:31)

(3) Unitarian Universalist theologian James Luther Adams, who taught at Harvard Divinity School for so many years, emphasized two dimensions of the religious life. First is the spiritual life in the priesthood of all believers, so important a part of the Protestant Reformation. In addition, without God-talk, he spoke of activism with a summons to each of us to join the “prophet-hood of all believers.” He wrote these provocative words: “The meaning of life is fulfilled only by those who enter into the struggle for justice in history and in community.”

“THE MEANING(S) OF LIFE”
Rev. Bruce Southworth

Life’s Spiral – Vehicles of Beauty, Goodness, and Holiness

My last semester of college I took a course titled, “The Meaning of Life.” I might have received an “A”. I don’t remember exactly, but it feels good to say you got an “A” in the Meaning of Life.

And over the intervening years, it is clear to me that living a life of meaning is far more challenging than the delight of that course.

The eminent philosopher Robert Nozick was our professor, and he surveyed a variety of the world’s religious traditions with dash, provocation and bravado… always pushing us to delve deeply and to think clearly about the stories, narratives, values, and interpretations being offered. The course was part of not only my intellectual journey, but also my spiritual growth with its initial compelling glimpses of Buddhism and Taoism among many other paths of meaning presented for scrutiny.
Nozick for himself writes about the “spiral of activity” – of thought, action, reflection, and wonder, whereby we grow, deepen, connect, and find joy. We become a “vehicle of truth, beauty, goodness, and [even] holiness.” All this resonates with my upbringing as a Unitarian Universalist.

The Journey

In exploring the meaning of Life, Constantine Cavafy’s poem “Ithaca”, from our readings, echoes the philosopher’s spiral and tells us that we find meaning in the journey – not primarily the destination.

pray that the road is long,
Full of adventure, full of knowledge…
Pray…
that you will enter ports seen for the first time
with such pleasure, with such joy!…
learn from those who have knowledge…. 
do not hurry….

The poet offers to us – we who are leading our precious lives – offers the heroic journey. He suggests in this story of cosmic and human creativity that we are characters in a story of hope – a story that we write, with our choices leaving their mark on ourselves and others.

To his summons, I add a reminder that rocks, whirlpools, seductions of the world, and our own forgetfulness are part of the truth of the magnificent journey of growth and change.

So, the philosopher and the poet (and I feel their pull) proclaim a central, big idea – the journey, the explorations, the adventure, with all its spirals, which may itself become a heroic journey – a journey toward wisdom.

“All real living is meeting.”

However, but, in addition, what does Cavafy tell us about Odysseus’ loyal wife and partner, Penelope, who awaits him, as he encounters the detours and snares of return? Beloved of each other, truly, but Cavafy’s muscular, masculine, perhaps sexist romanticism of adventure neglects love and friendship. So, a line or two about companions on the journey would expand the spiral of meaning.

So, as powerful as the image of the journey is, I would also add in the spirit of Martin Buber, “All real living is meeting.”
Looking into the Meaning, or Meanings of our lives, I do begin with these two affirmations about the journey of wisdom and the companions who transform our individual journeys into the “real living” of “meeting.” Meaning arises in the intersection of our many separate journeys (countering the idolatry of self so evident, for example in our days of egocentric political discourse).

*Commitment to Bigger Things*

To these two, I add a third big idea, namely that such a journey becomes even more meaningful to the extent that we, you or I, also connect with the Creative source of all Life, of Nature, or to God in us and around us.

With or without God, commit to something bigger than yourself that blesses the world and others in that process. Commit to a partnership with Creativity, to Creative Living, and Love and Justice!

To summarize for a moment: We have – at least I offer – then these three elements intertwined – spiraling – as candidates for a life of meaning:

1. appreciative awareness of the joy (and wounds) of the journey itself,
2. the encounters and relationships with others, and
3. connecting with transcendent Creativity, … all of which suggests to me that I am something of a fox.

*Hedgehogs and Foxes?*

A fox? I return to another Greek poet, this one named Archilochus who lived about 2500 years ago, and a fragment of his work includes these lines: “The fox knows many things; the hedgehog knows one big thing.”

This fragment of poetry was picked up by Isaiah Berlin in an essay in which he divided all writers and thinkers – and I suppose all humans – into two categories saying,

There exists a great chasm between those, on the one side, who relate everything to a single central vision, one system, in terms of which they understand, think and feel – a single, universal organizing principle in terms of which... all that they are and say has significance – and on the other side, those who pursue many ends, often unrelated.

Foxes know many things. The hedgehogs know one big thing with a central controlling vision. Perhaps, it is God, or Jesus, or Allah, or the Tao, or Gaia, or perhaps it is music (like the extraordinary genius of Prince who died last week), or art, dance, activism, education, research, healing, or so many other arenas – a consuming calling or passion.
For me, it seems as if much of the time I am a fox. I know and juggle many things: meaning is in the voyage itself, in the meetings of deep personal, human encounter, and in the allegiance to a sacred Creativity.

On the other hand, most surely, like the hedgehog, I embrace at the deepest levels a sense of what one poet calls “the dearest freshness deep down things” (Mathew Arnold): a mystic sense that intuits a divine Creativity at work in nature, but also at work within each of us if we encourage it.

It astonishes and sustains me that so much beauty surrounds us, that so many possibilities await each of us, and that tenderness, kindness and affection blossom so often.

Trust: One Big Thing?

The one big thing is a vision of the sacred nature of reality, and for me, it is compelling enough to offer comfort despite loss, grief, heartache, and tragedy.

By our love, we bring God, justice, love, consciousness into the world as co-creators, and what else is necessary? (And if not God, Love remains trustworthy.)

I return to a poem by Philip Booth titled “First Lesson” that describes the wider view as he speaks of a swimming lesson he was giving his daughter, but also of so much more:

Lie back, daughter, let your head
be tipped back in the cup of my hand.
gently, and I will hold you. Spread
your arms wide, lie out on the stream
and look high at the gulls. A deadman’s
float is face down. You will dive
and swim soon enough where this tidewater
ebbs to the sea. Daughter, believe me,
when you tire on the long thrash
to your island, lie up, and survive.
As you float now, where I held you
and let go, remember when fear cramps your heart what I told you:
lie gently and wide to the light-year
stars, lie back, and the sea will hold you.

I, too, have experienced, trust, and believe that the sea holds, Life holds, and on those days my faith is strong that meaning lies in honoring our connection to all that is. [I was reminded of this image a couple of weeks ago when Irene was speaking about things falling apart.]

Many Options for Hedgehogs

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The hedgehog knows one big thing, and that varies with so many of us seven billion oddballs on this planet.

For some, it is the powerful story of the people of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and of moral vision.

For some it is the wisdom of Jesus, to love our neighbors as our selves.

For others it is the declaration of Islam that original sin is forgetfulness of our divine connections with each other and creation; forgetfulness not depravity - anchored in Allah, the divine of which we are a part.

It is a commanding source of meaning for almost two billion fellow travelers on our globe.

And there are many other big picture/visions/faiths, and among those powerful in our midst is that of Humanism – a summons to honor the worth and dignity within each person, to grow, to become fully human and alive, creative, free and serving. embracing wonder of for each day, honoring reason, refusing the temptations to tribalism, and giving thanks for the gift of Life – a vision played out in so many ways.

_Spiritual Suicide_

A caution: What is the most powerful, big picture, reality, story commanding billions of people in our time?

It may well be a powerful materialism, consumerism, a culture of shopping, which Ernest Becker once labeled as a desperate attempt to evade the consciousness that we shall die.

We know that ours is the so-called most religious nation in the developed world, but we also know how easily Affluenza seduces, distorts, and degrades our lives.

Given this sad reality of stuff and more stuff, we here seek and offer counter-cultural visions of compassion and justice. And we do so with or without God.

_Many Options for Foxes_

The truth is that so many of us, as Unitarian Universalists, are like foxes: the world is rich, mysterious, wonder-filled, overflowing with symbols, language, and stories of faith that beckon and entice us. This is a big tent that includes all seekers of truth, grounded in a this-worldly, co-creativity with Nature.
In this Naturalism, theistic or humanistic, honoring of the blue-green hills of earth, our Mother, in all its mystery and power, we simply offer an ongoing invitation to all the foxes to explore each day this spirited vision that gives meaning. To be sure, for some of us here, Naturalism – with us being the Universe-coming-to-consciousness – “out of the stars we have come” – is the main, big thing – a story that gives meaning to our human lives beyond our own species, but it is neither creed nor dogma as it affirms life-enhancing values.

*Tensions and Connections*

For all of us whether hedgehogs or foxes, there is always the decision between savoring the world (enjoying it) and saving the world (improving it).

There are the tensions between simply being in the world, on the one hand, with appreciative awareness for its glory and its wounds, and on the other hand, doing, acting, shaping, and creating ourselves and the world anew.

What helps sustain a fox? Some of the simple things that I speak about week after week are small things that make a big difference.

For example, I think of a man whose situation and commentary are part of the daily, mundane character of the world – the kind of thing a fox latches onto. The man in worldly terms was not a great economic success, in fact quite hard up. He frequents several soup kitchens, and one day while sitting at one says, “This place here is pretty, but like I said, the place downtown is nice too. I like going there because they always have coffee. It’s nice to have something warm to hold onto on a cold day.”

Then a friend nudges him a little with an elbow, “Is that all, Lou?” and Lou blushes.

“Well, there’s this woman there,” he conceded,” and sometimes she likes to – oh, I don’t know – she likes to baby me a little.” Then Lou shrugs, “You got to shop around.”

And it is kindness, not sex, that he means. Connection – encounter – shared humanity.

We too need resting places, don’t we? For us too, there is the need to shop around at times because we find kindness, warmth and meaning from many sources. When the ancient absolutes of patriarchal religion have blessedly given way, the life of a fox may be rather restless. The life of a fox may be ours in all its sustenance.

*Warnings for Hedgehogs and Foxes*

The hedgehog – believers in a unifying big picture – also comes in all shapes and forms. The danger is fanaticism – fundamentalism – when we check part of the
sacred power of reason at the door, or ignore the summons of the heart to love one another no matter how we articulate our religion or relation to God or not.

The fox who knows many things equally lives with the danger of any careless embrace of irrationality or of condoning hurtful paths in the name of tolerance. In truth, some paths do diminish human dignity and our sacred potential, and they need to be challenged. With that caution, the rewards of pluralism can be profound.

*With or Without God*

The hedgehog in me does seek to serve that Creativity that is in us, around us, that awakens and sustains. What an incredible journey we share, as we bring something trustworthy/sacred to the world by our love and become the universe consciousness of itself. Isn’t that enough? Or is it?

On the other hand, the curious fox in me gathers stories, like one told by Alan Watts about the creation of the world – poetic stories that point to the larger things. He is explaining to a child why God is not lonely.

“You see,” he said, “after God had used up all the materials to make the heavens and the sun and the planets and the moon, the animals, the birds and the fish, he still wanted to make human beings. So she divided herself up into billions of pieces and put some in each person that was made or would be made. That way each time a person meets another person, there is a spark of warmth and joy inside.

“This is God delighting at the different ways God has grown to be and loving the meeting of each part.”

The meaning – or meanings of our lives are like that: mysterious and paradoxical, yet real, awaiting our journey. And how goes it with you? Are you a hedgehog or a fox? Is yours a central, commanding faith, conviction, path? Or many paths? With or without God?

I think of a woman discussing her two gardens that she had planted side by side in the Fens area of Boston near the old Victory gardens established in World War II. The woman has beautiful flowers in one, row after row. In the second are lush vegetables, row after row. She says, “I have two gardens. One for my soul; one for my stomach. She points to the second one and says, “That one over there is for my vegetables…. Both are for my friends.”

Not for herself alone does she live. Hers is a journey of love – for the Earth and her friends – a sacred journey without mention of God.

*Co-Creators*
Sometimes, I do forget the one big thing, if only for a while: that all life is connected, evolving and that we are called to be co-creators. Sometimes I think my way back to that faith. Sometimes it is the many little things, the many different experiences and truths that bring me back, and I remember that “all real living is meeting.”

Our journeys are individual, unique, and quite dissimilar with regard to personal history and circumstances; we shall learn different things, many of which shall be wonderful. The journey to Ithaca also, I am most glad to say, can begin on any day.

The one big thing – our role as co-creators, bringing Creativity, bringing more Love, into this corner of the universe – and the many little things that give us – at least me – meaning in Life are part of a spiral journey with ongoing encounters with Truth, Beauty, and Holiness. For me… both/and.

The meaning… the meanings of Life… in the “struggle for justice in history and in community”… in meeting each other, in our companions… and in wonder beneath the light-year stars….

Whether one big thing, or the daily encounters, wounded and blessed, we are co-creators in a story of hope that you write each day.

I join the poet and pray for you that the road be long and filled with adventure, knowledge and wisdom.

Lived wisdom… experiences …. Knowledge of basics…. Basics?

Life is a gift…. Our days are brief…. Give thanks.
People are precious…. Caring counts ultimately.
Honor each other and creation. Embrace the journey.
Give and share and serve matters greater than yourself with humility and awe….

Basics:

Think and question and act and build community….
Love yourself… and beyond that, love others and the world… and Creation….
We need each other, and the world needs us….
If you do these things, even some of these things, the meaning you shape will be a blessing, and it is enough.