

Making Meaning: The Stories of Our Lives

Jamaica Plain, December 2, 2006, Marshall Hawkins

This past October, I left my job as chaplain for Beacon Hospice and Palliative Care. After five years of visiting people who are terminally ill, I'm now in a process of reflecting on that experience. I thought I might share with you some of my thoughts from that process.

As we tend to do at the end of many things, I'm looking back on this experience, seeking some closure and wondering what it was all about. Wondering if I accomplished what I had set out to do in the first place.

It was a fascination with the Big Questions of life that had brought me to the work in the first place. Questions of meaning and purpose—a curiosity about how folks made sense of this lifetime we live. I thought maybe talking to people who were closer to the margins of life might provide some opportunities to discuss the meaning of the time in between those margins. And it did.

Now I'm wondering what I've learned. One unexpected learning was about the realities of working in health care and the incredibly fast pace of it. I scarcely had time to mourn a patient's passing and say goodbye to the family before moving on to the next patient—the unfortunate result of operating in a profit-driven system.

Piling up experiences does you no good if you never take the time to reflect on them. So in a way, those hundreds of conversations I've had with people still sit there, like a packages waiting to be opened, their meanings still unexplored. And this is my task now. To go back and look.

The situation is not that different from that of someone dealing with another kind of ending—the end of life. There are unopened packages there, too—experiences from a

lived life that remain unexamined. They still remain, with the potential to have their contents revealed.

And so I guess this is really what I wanted to talk with you about today—finding meaning in our lives by looking back on the things we've done and the people we've known and the things we've felt. It's important to do in any time in our lives. Because our lives are more meaningful and worthwhile when we are awake to them, when we are not unconscious about the choices we make and why we make them.

This Sunday we have entered the liturgical season of Advent, a time of longing and waiting. A time of quiet preparation before a new dawn. But before every new beginning comes an ending, and with every ending a process of meaning making.

We grow and learn through a two part process—action and reflection. They are part of a cycle, one leading back into the other. It is only through our reflections that our actions of the past make any sense. And it is only by acting that we make real what we come to believe through our reflections.

But how often it seems that our actions outpace our consideration of them. And the unopened packages pile up, patiently waiting to be looked at.

One way that reflecting and meaning making happen is very simple--through storytelling. In hospice work, chaplains often encourage people to engage in a process called life review—that is, telling stories from the past. It turns out that we come to understand the significance of our lives through narrative more than any didactic or literal way. This isn't just true at the end of life, of course—it's true anytime. But the importance of life review might be the gift that those who are dying can offer the rest of us.

I keep thinking of the line from the Gordon Lightfoot song that goes: 'If you could read my mind, love, what a tale my thoughts could tell.' Or we could say if you could read my

life, what a tale my stories could tell. We help each other read our lives by listening to and telling each other our tales.

The power of the story is how we make sense of ideas that are beyond our rational minds—ideas that are not logical or linear. We record the most important things about being human through stories. The sacred scriptures of the world's religions are mostly stories. Jesus' most profound teachings are in the form of parables. Great literature tends to tell us more about ourselves than any studies or psychology texts. Poetry, art, film—they are all cultural responses to our quest for meaning.

When I would train hospice volunteers, I used to show a clip from the movie *Gladiator*, starring Russell Crowe. In this scene, Caesar calls his top general Maximus into his tent following a victorious battle. He tells him that he has a terminal illness and that he wants the general to succeed him. He reflects with Maximus.

He says, "For twenty-five years I have conquered, spilled blood, extended the empire. Since I became Caesar, I have known four years without war. Four years of peace in twenty-five. And for what? I brought the sword, nothing more...."

"I am dying, Maximus. When a man sees his end, he wants to know that there was some purpose to his life. How will the world speak my name in years to come? Will I be known as the philosopher? The warrior? The tyrant? Or will I be the emperor who gave Rome back her true self?"

I showed this clip because it asks questions that I think all of us wonder about on some level—even if only subconsciously. We want to know that there has been some purpose to our living. What has been the result of our time here on earth? How will we be remembered? What difference has it made that we were here?

Perhaps this is why at the end of life we tend to value more those things which are truly most important. Everyone is different, but in general the details of daily life become more

trivial to those who are dying. Relationships seem to be more important. After all, material goods and our accomplishments are things that we can't take with us. But the ways we have touched others live on after we're gone. This is a lesson for all of us, no matter our age or our health.

Earlier, we heard the words of retired Unitarian Universalist minister Jack Mendelsohn. He asks questions we all should be asking: "How shall we live while we live? What uses shall we make of our free will?" He continues later by saying: "I wanted my life to count for something. I wanted my freedom and my faith to be embodied in works of love and justice." And so Jack decided to go into ministry. That was his answer of how to live.

We write the stories of our lives all the time with the choices we make—our decisions about how we spend our time and the things we do with it. But as we write, we need to periodically stop to read what we're writing, to take stock of where we've been and where we're going.

As we reflect we make meaning. And we each do it in a million different ways. I think of the iconic image of the wise guru on the top of a the mountain—the subject of so many characterizations. You know the scene. The questing seeker scrambles up the cliff to find the guru seated cross-legged outside a cave. And the seeker asks, breathless, I've come all this way to ask you, oh wise one, what is the meaning of life? Except that it doesn't work that way.

If there was such a guru at the top of that mythic mountain, I suspect she or he would end up doing a lot more listening than talking. Because whatever answers there are lie in our living our way through to them and then thinking about what we've done. A cycle of action and reflection.

Whatever our values are, whatever we consider to be most important in life, let us choose those things to guide our life choices. So as the poet Mary Oliver says, when it's over we

don't have to wonder if we have made of our lives something particular and real. We don't end up simply having visited this world.

There are a million different ways to live a life and a million ways to make sense of it. One of the joys of hospice work was the realization of how many of us there are and how different we are, how different are the ways we make sense of things. We don't have to be heroic to live meaningful lives. We don't have to do great things that make it on to the news. We don't have to save the world. Unless of course, saving the world is what we think our purpose is. I think it helps to be true to ourselves, to be awake for the events of our lives, to spend some time considering where we've been and where we're going.

I love an interview with author Kurt Vonnegut in which he describes his routine and the way he moves through the world. He said:

"I work at home, and if I wanted to, I could have a computer right by my bed, and I'd never have to leave it. But I use a typewriter, and afterwards I mark up the pages with a pencil. Then I call up this woman named Carol out in Woodstock and say, "Are you still doing typing?" Sure she is, and her husband is trying to track bluebirds out there and not having much luck, and so we chitchat back and forth, and I say, "OK, I'll send you the pages."

Then I'm going down the steps, and my wife calls up, "Where are you going?" I say, "Well, I'm going to go buy an envelope." And she says, "You're not a poor man. Why don't you buy a thousand envelopes? They'll deliver them, and you can put them in a closet." And I say, "Hush." So I go down the steps here, and I go out to this newsstand across the street where they sell magazines and lottery tickets and stationery. I have to get in line because there are people buying candy and all that sort of thing, and I talk to them. The woman behind the counter has a jewel between her eyes, and when it's my turn, I ask her if there have been any big winners lately. I get my envelope and seal it up and go to the postal convenience center down the block at the corner of 47th Street and 2nd Avenue, where I'm secretly in love with the woman behind the counter. I keep absolutely

poker-faced; I never let her know how I feel about her. One time I had my pocket picked in there and got to meet a cop and tell him about it. Anyway, I address the envelope to Carol in Woodstock. I stamp the envelope and mail it in a mailbox in front of the post office, and I go home. And I've had a hell of a good time. And I tell you, we are here on Earth to fart around, and don't let anybody tell you any different.”

That story just tickles me. That's Kurt Vonnegut's answer to why we're here. And I'm not going to argue with it. You might call it just farting around, as he did. Or you could say that he values spending time with people, living life at a slower pace, putting connections with others ahead of efficiency and so-called accomplishments. When he reflects on his life he might tell a whole bunch of stories of daily walks through his neighborhood, feeling part of a community and sharing something positive with those he meets. There's one model. [pause]

There is no mountaintop guru to tell us the meaning of our lives. The answers are already with us. I don't know what yours are. But I know that folks at the end of their lives tend to talk about people more often than their possessions. They talk about broken relationships and mended ones, and about those they love. They review events from their past. They tend not to sweat the details. Sectarian and political differences, which at one time seemed to be very important, somehow seem to be less so.

Perhaps these are lessons for us from a perspective that isn't ours yet. But knowledge of our mortality can offer us insight whatever our age. When we know that our time here is not forever, we can make the most of the time we do have. We pass through this world but once. Let us use this time well. May we be good listeners to those we love, encouraging them to tell their stories and reflect on their experiences. And may we also take the time to stop and consider where we've been and where we are going. Let us live our way to a meaningful existence. As we write our own stories, let us act on our values. And then, let us read our stories back to ourselves by reflecting on what we have done. Let us not have simply visited this world. As we are about to sing in our final hymn, let us say yes to life. That hymn is #6 “Just as Long as I Have Breath.”