

“The Object of the Game”

**a reflection
by Rev. Bill Gupton**

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Heritage Universalist Unitarian Church
Cincinnati, Ohio**

Imagine you had only one chance, to tell someone you loved them. Imagine you had but one opportunity to say aloud, that which is most important to you – what you would most wish to impart to others – what you would want to offer to world, if you knew that, today ... were your final day.

I come to you this morning with such a sense of urgency. No, I'm not dying – at least as far as I know – not dying, at least, any more than each of mortal creatures us is always dying. Yet I find myself compelled to preach this morning – to *live* this morning – as if it were my last.

Perhaps you have noticed the quote at the top of your order of service: “Each day, I pray for reality to blow all the detritus off my plate, so I can pay attention to what really matters,” written by a colleague of mine, Rev. Forrest Church, who is dying of cancer. Well, for this past fall and winter, to varying degrees, with varying degrees of success, I sought to live my life by his words, paying attention to what *really matters*. I deepened my spiritual life, and focused on the many, many small blessings of life. I gained perspective.

And then, after five months of sabbatical, on my very first morning back with you, I received – *we* received – a shocking and painful reminder of why it is important to give our full attention, to what really matters – a reminder of just how fragile, how brief and precious, is our time together on this earth. The brutal murder of Esme Kenney shocked us all – and, for me, put to the test many of the lessons I believed I had learned on my sabbatical.

Since that awful morning, I have learned of other deaths in our community, and of grave illnesses – each of which fuels the “fierce urgency of now” that I feel as I stand here today. It has often been said that any given preacher really only has one sermon – that each individual minister, has but one, true message, which he or she is called to share with the world. Through the blessing of sabbatical – for it was, indeed, a blessing, to be able

to set aside time, and reflect on what is most important to me – through that spiritual work, and through the difficult events that have happened since – *that* message – my message – has become more focused. Clarified. Stripped to the bare essentials.

And so it is through this lens of that I speak today – and share with you my one, most important, message. It is a message of hope and good news – make no mistake about that. It is a message that has long been preached – many times, by many people far wiser and more articulate than I. It has been preached, probably, for as long as there have been people – perhaps as long as human beings have given words to their thoughts on the most important subject of all: life, and death.

It is a message that was preached by Jesus, when he told his followers, “Consider the lilies of the field – how they grow. They neither toil nor spin ... but even Solomon in all his glory was never arrayed like one of these...”

It was preached from the pen of my UU colleague, Rev. Elizabeth Tarbox, when she wrote the poem I shared with you a few moments ago: “Live now. In each moment, expect a miracle.”

It was preached by the Hindu leader Kalidasa, in the third century, when he said, “Look to this day, for it is life – the very life of life.”

It was preached by the choir, just a moment ago, when they sung of the “glorious music of life,” and reminded us to “dance to it, sing to it, love and cry and dream to it ... For those who listen deep ... surely they will hear the sounds of heaven.”

The message I preach to you today is the same as the message of the great Unitarian philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson, who wrote in his journal, “These roses under my window make no reference to former roses, or to better ones. They are ... what they are. They exist with God, today. There is no time to them. There is simply the rose. It is perfect in every moment of its existence... [Yet] *we* postpone, or remember. We do not live in the present, but [rather] with reverted eye lament the past, or – heedless of the riches that surround us – stand on tiptoe to foresee the future.”

Heritage – this is my message: Consider the lilies. Consider the rose.

For me, one of the most meaningful ways this message has ever been expressed was by Emerson’s dear friend, our iconic Unitarian iconoclast, Henry David Thoreau. Consider *his* immortal words: “Why should we live in such a hurry and waste of life? We are determined to be starved before we are hungry. I wish to live deliberately – to front only the essential facts of life. I wish to learn what life has to teach, and not – when I come to die – discover that I have not lived... I wish to live deep, and suck out all the marrow of life.”

This past summer, my own best friend read those words at his father's funeral – honoring a man who had lived in just such a way ... who had lived by those words as much as both my friend, and I, have tried to.

Yet, as profound and poignant as all these various words are, sometimes words are the very stuff that gets *in the way* of living. That is why, earlier, I asked you to step into the silence – to, as Adrienne Rich put it, *bestow* yourselves to silence, or a more severe listening.

I'd like to see a show of hands. Who found that difficult? Intensely, almost painfully, difficult? ... You are not alone. When we “pull back from the incantations,” as she calls it; when we lay aside all the myriad ways we “insulate ourselves” from life's power, in the words of this morning's first reading – we do, indeed, enter into a kind of free-fall – yet it is *there* that the “spiritual quest begins.” In Rich's words, “No one who survives to speak a new language, has avoided this.”

And so, from the depths of silence, we inevitably return – to language. But in my case, the new language I have returned to – as a result of my recent experiences, as a result of the free-falls to which I have given myself over – is a much simpler, some might even say, more simplistic, language. I prefer to think of it as the ancient sages of India did. They realized that human beings remember best in short, tidy words or phrases, that can serve to call us back, again and again, to the wisdom that we have learned, when we find ourselves straying from the path – when we realize that our monkey mind has taken over from our better intentions.

Thus, over the course of this year, I have been piecing together something I am calling my “Mantra List.” (As an aside, one of the things I had more time to do, during my sabbatical, was watch movies – and one of the movies I most enjoyed was “The Bucket List” – a movie which both influenced this sermon, and led me to develop my own kind of list – the “Mantra List”):

Suck out all the marrow of life. Look to this day. In each moment, expect a miracle.

Of course, there are other ways to put it. The Romans summed it all up in two very simple, very powerful Latin words: *Carpe diem*. SIEZE the day.

SIEZE! What a great verb! What a great image! What would our life be like, if we truly SEIZED this day? This moment?

And then there's my current favorite: “Live, like you were dying.” I have to say that I am more than a bit amazed (and not a little chagrined) that one of the primary ways I have come to summarize what I “learned” on my

sabbatical – and the way I am now striving to *live* my life – is the title of a country music song – but there it is...

I mentioned a couple of weeks ago my experience at the “Life Success” seminar – an intense, four-day retreat of deep personal examination and sharing. By the end of that retreat, complete strangers knew me well – they knew my fondest hopes and dreams; they knew my deepest fears and failings. And in that knowledge, they chose, for me, a theme song – a benediction – words to live by: Bill, they said to me, you need to learn to “Live, like you were dying.”

How right they were. For this man who has more than six thousand songs on his iPod, of which probably no more than six are country music – *how right, they were.*

Though I began my sabbatical with many goals – both professional and personal – the focus of my efforts became an assessment of my first 50 years on the path of life – and a road map, for whatever time remains.

“It is difficult to understand the sum of a person’s life,” says the narrator of “The Bucket List” – and here, if you haven’t seen that wonderful movie, I ask you to imagine the unmistakable voice of Morgan Freeman – “It is difficult to understand the sum of a person’s life. Some people will tell you it’s measured by the ones left behind. Others believe it can be measured by faith. Some say by love.

“[Still] other folks will [tell you] – life has no meaning at all. Me, I believe that you measure yourself, by the people who measure *themselves*, by you.”

Freeman intoned those words at the beginning of the movie. Near the end of the film, his resonant, reassuring baritone returns, telling us, “When he died, his eyes were closed – and his heart, was open.”

Not bad stuff to aspire to, I’d say. Let’s add it, to the Mantra List: *Open your heart.* Look to this day. Suck out all the marrow of life. In each moment, expect a miracle. *Carpe diem.* Live like you were dying...

That – is the object, of the game. Ah... Perhaps you were wondering when, I would get around to, *the game.*

I’m one of those people who *loves* games – card games, strategy games, word games, board games. One of my favorite games, when I was growing up – one I used to play, over and over, with my step-brothers and step-sisters, every time I visited my father’s house – was a Milton Bradley game, rather presumptuously called, The Game of Life.

It was fun to play, fast-paced, not too challenging for a child – as the packaging proudly proclaims, “a family game.” At the time, I never noticed

the irony in the *object* of the game: Put simply, To end your life, with the most money.

Of course, I didn't think about it in those terms when I was a kid, but that really is the object of this game. If not, literally, to end your life with the most money, then at least, to *retire* with the most money – for in truth, to be a family game, the manufacturers have left out both those messy moments that bracket our journey in this life – birth, and death. Come to think of it, they also left out that even messier time – adolescence.

No, The Game of Life starts, apparently, at about age 18, when the player must decide whether or not to go to college. From there, his or her fortunes are determined by a combination of choices made, and sheer chance – as the player winds through the path of life, buying a home, earning a paycheck, having children (or not), investing in the stock market (or not), buying a yacht or writing a best-seller, climbing Mount Everest or helping the homeless.

In these respects, it is a very realistic game. One moves back and forth between the mundane, and the momentous, on a journey shaped by both chance and choice. But is it just me, or is there something a bit unsettling about the *object* of the game? Shouldn't something called “The Game of Life” have a loftier goal, than the amassing of wealth? What was I learning about life, all those years ago, when I raced to reach the “Day of Reckoning,” as the square is not-so-subtly called on the game board – with the most money?

The great irony of this little board game, is that – just perhaps, hidden within it – is the answer. What if we could only win, by *losing*? What if we could only gain our life, by losing it? Almost obscured, and usually overlooked, near the end of the game board, is a square – reserved for the player who loses all his money and goes bankrupt – that reads, “Retire to the country and become a philosopher.”

Now that sounds pretty good to me!

But why wait until the end of the game? In the game that we are each playing – each of us, each day – why not spend more time on those squares that say things like “Give money to charity”? “Help homeless children.” “Go fishing.” Why not spend more time skydiving, rocky mountain climbing – loving deeper, and speaking sweeter? That is the object of the game.

And it is *my* object, today – it is why I am here, actually. Why I choose to put on a tie, early in the morning, when I would rather sleep late – why I choose to talk to some people I care deeply about – talk about, as Forrest Church says, “what really matters.”

There's one more thing. I have something to ask of you – something to ask you to commit to do. Something to ask *us* to commit to do, together. Something we can hold one another accountable for, remind one another of, over and over again, when, as we will inevitably do, we forget.

Let's resolve – here and now – to open our hearts. To look to this day. To seize this day. To suck out all the marrow of life. In each moment, to expect a miracle.

To *live*, like we were dying.

That is the object of the game...