

PURSUING PURPOSE

A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Ed Piper

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We are living in difficult times. The current financial crisis has once again called into question the competence and credibility of our national leaders. Once again the American public has been confronted with a situation that evokes fear and anxiety—a crisis that supposedly demands an immediate bipartisan response, but which also carries enormous consequences for the future. We are told that we don't have time to gather all the facts and consider alternative solutions. We must act immediately or else face dire consequences. Doesn't this have a familiar ring? Does it remind you of the headlong run-up to the invasion of Iraq? It isn't easy being an adult these days.

It isn't easy being a young person these days either. Nearly every day we hear frightening stories about potential threats to our children and youth: Internet predators, school violence, sexually transmitted diseases, lethal use of alcohol and drugs, and what continues to be by far the single leading cause of death among our young people: auto accidents. The natural reaction of most parents to these potential risks is fear and anxiety . . . and a desire to protect their children from every imaginable threat to their wellbeing. Unfortunately, parents' attempts to guide their children are nearly always met with resentment and resistance. The resulting generational friction is nearly as old as human history. Consider the following quote:

The children now love luxury; they have bad manners, contempt for authority; they allow disrespect for elders and love chatter in place of exercise. Children now are tyrants, not the servants of their household. They no longer rise when elders enter the room. They contradict their parents, chatter before company, gobble up dainties at the table, cross their legs, and tyrannize their teachers. [quoted by Debra Haffner, *What Every 21st-Century Parent Needs to Know*, p. 4]

These words were spoken by the Greek philosopher Socrates nearly 500 years before the birth of Jesus. The “chattering” to which Socrates objected now takes the form of continuous cell phone communication, and exposed buttocks have replaced crossed legs as the offending body part. But the underlying complaint is timeless: **Young people lack respect and direction in their lives.** Our young people for their part can rightfully accuse adults of being hypocritical: We condemn their youthful behavior even as we crave their youthful appearance.

This morning I want to talk about what we as adults—both parents and non-parents—can do to cultivate a sense of direction and purpose in our children and youth. And I want to continue the conversation by inviting both the concerned adults and young people who are here today to join Fran Clark and me for extended discussion next door in the RE house immediately following the service. Our goal is to open new channels of communication between parents and their children and among adults who care deeply about future generations.

Fortunately, we have more than media-fed hysteria to rely on. Indeed, we have facts that **contradict** the media-fed hysteria about our youth. On almost every indicator of risk-taking behavior, today's young people as a group behave more responsibly than recent generations of young people—**including their parents**. According to data collected by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention since 1991:

- Lifetime and current alcohol use are down, and binge drinking is down.
- Cigarette and other tobacco use is down.
- Teen pregnancy rates, teen birth rates, teen STD rates, and teen abortion rates are down. . .
- High school dropout rates are down.
- Rates of teens committing crimes—including homicide, rape, violent crime, and violent deaths—are all down. Fewer teens have even been in a physical fight compared to fifteen years ago. [Haffner, p. 15]

These are all encouraging facts, and yet . . . there must be more promise for the future of our young people than the avoidance of risk. Our wish for them must go beyond surviving the perils of contemporary life.

My hope for young people is a lifetime of purpose and meaning. What can we as adults do to encourage such a life? William Damon is a developmental psychologist who has spent much of his career studying the factors that contribute to a sense of purpose. He and his associates have interviewed hundreds of people whose lives illustrate the title of his recent book, *The Path to Purpose*. One of his most fascinating examples is Ryan Hreljac. “Ryan found his purpose in first grade . . . when his first-grade teacher told her class that children in Africa were dying because they couldn't get enough clean water to drink. Ryan became passionate about the idea of raising money to build drinking wells. He did extra chores around the house and saved \$70, but he found that this formidable (to a six-year-old) sum of money didn't go very far toward solving the problem. Rather than getting discouraged and give up, Ryan intensified his efforts. He collected funds from friends and people he knew and solicited further financial support from nonprofit organizations By 2007, the charitable foundation that Ryan and his family started—the Ryan's Well Foundation—had built 319 drinking wells in fourteen countries around the world. By that time, the foundation's Web site estimated that almost half a million people have gained better access to clean water as a result of [their efforts.]” [Damon, pp. 80-81]

Ryan's remarkable story illustrates many of the hallmarks of a purposeful life. He identified a long-term need that transcended his own short-term personal happiness. He persisted in the face of obstacles to his dream, thanks to support from his immediate family and organizations that shared his passion. In pursuing his cause, he developed practical skills in communication and network-building that can be applied to future challenges. As William Damon says, “Character virtues such as diligence, responsibility, confidence, and humility get a boost from the experience of making a commitment to a challenging purpose and seeing it through.” [p. 97]

Young people like Ryan Hreljac are exceptional in their sense of commitment. What can we as parents and other adults do to encourage a sense of purpose in our young people? The current issue of *UU World* magazine includes an article by Debra Haffner, who is a parent,

author, and ordained UU minister. She talks about what parents can do to nurture children with a strong sense of purpose and compassion, which is expressed in the Yiddish word *mensch*. Here is her advice to parents.

1. **Listen to your children.** “Showing them empathy helps them develop their own sense of compassion. All people want empathy, even children. They want to know that they have been heard and that you respect what they’re feeling. This can be done through nonverbal communication in your facial expression or by giving your child a hug or touch, but it can also be done by verbally letting your child know that he or she has been heard.” [p. 34]
2. **Learn from your children.** One of our parents told me a true story of a recent bedtime conversation with her young daughter, and gave permission for me to share it with others on condition of anonymity.
Bedtime routine tonight - same as always: stories, lights out. We say our "3 Good Things" (what we're thankful for etc.) I sing a couple lullabies. I kiss her goodnight. She pauses and asks, "Mommy, what does 'gay' mean?" I take a breath, explain it in 6 year-old terms (used to mean happy, now it means... we believe... but some other people believe... you may hear the word used in a mean way sometimes...) I'm thinking I've done a pretty good job. I ask, "So, where did you hear the word - at school today?"
"No, Mommy, it was in the song:"
Lullaby and Goodnight
In the sky, stars are bright
'round your head
flowers GAY
set your slumbers 'til day... sigh... I've learned my lesson - Always ask for context before giving an answer!
3. **Establish family rituals.** The story I just told also illustrates the value of establishing regular times for encouraging family members to express their gratitude for the blessings of life and their concerns about the world at large, “as well as seasonal observances such as your faith community’s holiday services or how you celebrate birthdays and report cards.” [Haffner, *UU World*, p. 14] Many UU parents have reservations about offering prayers to a God who is “out there.” When I lead a prayer, I will often begin with a “we” statement, e.g. “Let us . . .” or “We are gathered here . . .”
4. **Involve your children in community service.** Debra Haffner says that “Children can be taught that spirituality, ethical treatment, and social action are intimately connected, whether or not your family is ‘religious.’” [p. 35] Parents and other adults serve as models for young people in both positive and negative ways. What sort of model do you provide for volunteer community service? “According to [the book] *Millennials Rising*, “Children born after 1982 are closer to their parents, more respectful of their parents’ values, more likely to recognize the importance of education and community service, and more respectful of cultural norms. They are more likely to reject stereotypes by sex, race, gender, or sexual orientation.” [Haffner, *UU World*, p. 35] Our future is in their hands, and I for one am confident they will live up to their promise.

Let me close with a poem by Rainer Maria Rilke from his *Letters to a Young Poet*:

Have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves . . .

Don't search for the answers, which could not be given to you now,
because you would not be able to live them.

And the point is, to live everything.

Live the questions now.

Perhaps then, someday far in the future,
you will gradually, without even noticing it,

live your way into the answer.

[in *Life Prayers*, ed. by Elizabeth Rogers & Elias Amidon, p. 217]