

## FAITH AND PURPOSE

### Minister's Reflections by Rev. Dr. Ed Piper

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Waynesboro (VA)

December 13, 2009

In March of 2005 an inmate named Brian Nichols overpowered a deputy while he was being escorted to a courtroom hearing in Atlanta. He used the deputy's gun to kill a judge and two other people in the courtroom and fled the scene. During the next 24 hours he killed another law enforcement officer and then disappeared again. As hundreds of police searched desperately for him, he took a young woman named Ashley Smith as a hostage and tied her up in her apartment. And then what could have become an even more violent situation took a very different turn. Ashley gradually gained his sympathy and trust. He released her from her bonds, she fixed him pancakes for breakfast, and she began to read to him from the Bible and from a book titled *The Purpose-Driven Life* by Pastor Rick Warren. Eventually, Brian Nichols allowed Ashley to leave the apartment and was taken into custody without further violence. He was later convicted of murder and sentenced to life in prison without parole.

Even though I disagreed with Pastor Warren's decision to recite the Lord's Prayer during the Inauguration ceremony for Barack Obama, the impact that his best-selling book had in resolving that crisis situation peaceably speaks volumes about the power of his message. The heart of Warren's message is that the purpose of each person's life is determined by God himself. "God never does anything accidentally," he says, "and he never makes mistakes. He has a reason for everything he creates. Every plant and every animal was planned by God, and every person was designed with a purpose in mind. . . . If there was no God, we would all be 'accidents,' the result of astronomical random chance in the universe. You could stop reading this book, because life would have no purpose or meaning or significance. There would be no right or wrong, and no hope beyond your brief years here on earth." [pp. 23, 25]

Rick Warren argues that the highest purpose we can have is to be a **servant**—serving God, serving others in need, serving one's faith community. Then he describes the motivational paradox that lies at the core of evangelical Christianity: those who serve God's purposes are assured of eternal rewards. "When fulfilling your purposes seems tough," he says at the end of

his book, “don’t give in to discouragement. Remember your reward, which will last forever.” [p. 319] Apparently, that possibility was enough to convince Brian Nichols that his tumultuous life could still serve a divine purpose : witnessing to others in prison for the rest of his life.

A sense of purpose is integral to the meaning of a person’s life. It involves a life-long balancing act between self-interest and concern for others that begins in early childhood. During infancy and toddlerhood, it’s all about satisfying the child’s own immediate needs. Eventually, the child’s captivity to the present is transcended by his or her understanding that behavior can be directed toward future goals. A sense of purpose builds on a child’s faith in herself that we call **confidence** and a trust in others that her efforts will be recognized, which was the focus of my “faith” sermon last month. Martin Seligman, the author of a book titled *The Optimistic Child*, is sharply critical of the “self-esteem” movement in American education. He is especially critical of the state of California’s program to promote self-esteem as a goal unto itself. Seligman contrasts “feeling good” with “doing well.” “The feeling of self-esteem,” he says, “is a by-product of doing well. Once a child’s self-esteem is in place, it kindles further success. . . . The premium we put on feeling good is peculiarly modern. Aristotle had a timeless view: Happiness is not an emotion that can be separated from what we *do*. Happiness is like grace in a dance, not something the dancer *feels* at the end of a good dance, but an inalienable accompaniment of a dance well done. . . . If we, as parents and teachers, promote the doing-well side of self-esteem, the feeling-good side, which cannot be taught, will follow. What California (and every state) needs is not children who are encouraged to feel good, but children who are taught the skills of doing well.” [pp. 33-35]

During adolescence and early adulthood, the evolution of a sense of purpose takes on a different character, but the balancing act between serving self and serving others continues. Speaking at the commencement ceremony at Iona College in 1985, then-Governor Mario Cuomo said, “They will have to decide soon the ultimate question—whether or not to live for *something*, or simply go from experience to experience, concerned about nothing more than what’s in it for them. . . . They’ll have to deal with the most fundamental question of all: *Why* do we make the effort? *Why* do we work? *Why* do we try?” [quoted in William R. Murry, *A Faith for All Seasons*, pp. 22-23]

To be quite honest, many young adults pursue careers that they think will offer the path of least resistance toward self-gratification. Only after they have experienced disappointment or lack of fulfillment will they begin to ask what they **really** want to do with their lives. Their sense of purpose turns into the search for a **vocation**, which is derived from the Latin word for “calling.” One of the wisest guides in this endeavor is Parker Palmer, who has written a little book titled *Let Your Life Speak*, which he borrowed from an old Quaker saying. “Vocation,” he says, “does **not** mean a goal that I pursue. It means a calling that I hear. Before I can tell my life what I want to do with it, I must listen to my life telling me who I am. I must listen for the truths and values at the heart of my own identity, not the standards by which I *must* live—but the standards by which I cannot help but live if I am living my own life.”[pp.4-5]

“If I am to let my life speak things I want to hear, things I would gladly tell others, I must also let it speak things I do **not** want to hear and would never tell anyone else! My life is not only about my strengths and virtues, it is also about my liabilities and limits, my trespasses and my shadow. An inevitable though often ignored dimension of the quest for ‘wholeness’ is that we must embrace what we dislike or find shameful about ourselves as well as what we are confident and proud of.” [pp. 6-7] “Vocation does not come from a voice ‘out there’ calling me to become something I am not. It comes from a voice ‘in here’ calling me to be the person I was born to be, to fulfill the original selfhood given me at birth . . . . It is a strange gift, this birthright gift of self. Accepting it turns out to be even more demanding than attempting to become someone else! Parker Palmer admits, “I have sometimes responded to that demand by ignoring the gift, or hiding it, or fleeing from it, or squandering it—and I think I am not alone.” [pp. 10-11]

The balancing act between self and other continues throughout life. Sadly, many adults never manage to develop a sense of purpose that goes beyond their need for self-gratification. “A world-famous conductor once came to direct a concert with one of Europe’s most prestigious symphony orchestras. At the rehearsal the day before the performance, the conductor taught the members of the orchestra a new and innovative interpretation of the piece to be played. The brass section was to play louder and more forcefully than ever before. The percussion section

was to beat out a hard and deep rhythm. The strings were to well up their sound. During the rehearsal, the piccolo player could hardly hear her own notes. She thought to herself, ‘Despite his great reputation, this conductor doesn’t know what he is doing. He is ruining this fine piece of music. My normally strong notes are totally lost over the loud, pounding sounds the rest of the orchestra is making.’ Disgusted, she stopped playing her part. In but seconds—ever attuned to the subtle nuances of the entire orchestra—the famous conductor cried out, ‘Stop. Stop playing now. Where is the piccolo? Where is the piccolo?’” [Wayne Dosick, *Golden Rules*, pp. 68-69]

How often have you felt like the piccolo player, your individual efforts overlooked or under-appreciated? If we pursue our dreams in isolation from others, we are bound to experience isolation and even depression. By combining our efforts with others who share our goals, we merge our individual sense of purpose with a wider or higher purpose. As Wayne Dosick says in his book about teaching values to our children, “Some of life’s most significant, enduring, and sweetest moments find their purpose and their meaning in the midst of community. Faith communities can play a crucial role in harnessing the collective good will and sustaining spirit of others. Whether we view our higher calling as a response to a divine voice “out there,” as Rick Warren believes, or to our own inner voice of compassion for our fellow humans, the experience of serving others can provide some of the most fulfilling moments of a lifetime. When I recall the most rewarding experiences during my ministry here at this Fellowship, many of them are memories of working side-by-side on a service project for the common good—either the good of our Fellowship or the good of the wider community of which we are a part.

But there’s more we can do to satisfy our sense of purpose. Soon we will be joining more than 25 local churches and civic organizations in an interfaith program here in Waynesboro that provides a free lunch for the poor three days a week at Second Presbyterian Church. This is part of our vocation, our calling to service beyond self. Though we may not seek the promise of eternal life in reward for our efforts, we will know the deep satisfaction of serving a higher purpose, celebrated in these lines from George Eliot’s poem:

Oh, may I join the choir invisible of those immortal dead who live again  
In minds made better by their presence; live in pulses stirred to generosity,

In deeds of daring rectitude, in scorn for miserable aims that end with self,  
In thoughts sublime that pierce the night like stars,  
And with their mild persistence urge [humanity's] search to vaster issues.  
So to live is heaven: to make undying music in the world . . .

[“The Choir Invisible,” quoted by Murry, *A Faith for All Seasons*, p. 141]

## **DISCUSSION**

**HYMN # 121 “Forward Through the Ages”**

**CLOSING WORDS # 456 [led by Lay Leader]**