

MEANING MAKING
Sermon by Rev. Blanca I. Rodriguez
Sunday, June 30, 2019
All Souls Church, New York City

I am very happy to be among you today. You are the congregation that ordained me as a community minister and blessed my work as a chaplain. One thing that's of great meaning to community ministers is that we feel called from within our own faith tradition to minister to people of any faith or of no particular faith. I have a core belief that while one's faith tradition is a part of one's spirituality, it is not all of it.

I see spirituality as an inherent aspect of being human. We can test this right now. Raise your hand, if you can think of one or two things that lift your spirits. Raise your hand if you can think of one or two things that bring your spirits down. Yes! You are spiritual beings. As scientist and theologian, Teilhard de Chardin, said, "You are not a human being in search of a spiritual experience. You are a spiritual being immersed in a human experience." And, because of that, we humans want very much to not let the human experience crush our innate spiritual beingness.

This being spiritual is hard to nail down though, right? I see it as a universally innate thing manifested uniquely in each of us depending on our culture, religious influences, our experiences and relationships, and, very importantly, the meaning and significance that we choose, I use these words deliberately, that we choose to give to our experiences. So, it's not about whether you are or are not spiritual; rather, it's about the particular way that you are a spiritual being.

So, when I introduce myself to patients, and offer spiritual support, what I am really saying in my heart, corny as it may sound, is that I believe in your capacity to make meaning in your life, no matter your human experience. I believe that you can be motivated by and then act toward some goal or purpose significant to you. I believe you can wholeheartedly connect to your authentic self, to others, and to whatever you regard as the sacred or the significant.

More concisely, spirituality is about making meaning, having purpose, and experiencing significant connections. It is intrapersonal, interpersonal, and also a transpersonal and transcendent thing.

Today, I want to address the making meaning part of spirituality. How do we make meaning in our lives, despite tragedy, trauma, personal "failures" or other difficult challenges that we often have little control over. Because the best theology comes from lived experiences and story telling, I want to share with you some of what I have learned from patients about making meaning.

As many of you know, I am a chaplain at New York Presbyterian Hospital in Washington Heights where I'm assigned to the organ transplant, medical oncology, and Surgical ICU units, as well as Spanish speaking patients anywhere in the hospital. This past year, I've also had the amazing opportunity to design and facilitate a ten-week trauma informed spirituality group at an NYP community program for women victims of domestic abuse who have young children.

What is immediately striking in listening to patients, is that no matter the background, the religion or non-religion, or the patient's particular life challenges, almost immediately the

patient will begin to ask: “why me” or “I don’t understand how this happened? “It makes no sense.” “This can’t be happening to me.”

Recently, I visited with a lung transplant patient, and she said the following within the first few minutes:

You know, this is my second lung transplant. I’m so blessed that I could get another set of lungs after my first transplant failed after three years. But, at the same time, I just don’t understand how this could have happened. I did everything the doctors told me to do. Wore masks, did not get near pets or sick children. Took all of my medications. This wasn’t supposed to happen! And, also, my husband and children are angry with me. I don’t know why. I don’t understand. How can this be?

At this point, the patient is now crying, angry, afraid and in obvious spiritual and emotional distress.

We become spiritually distressed when things don’t make sense and our bodily or emotional integrity is threatened or violated. As humans in possession of reasoning minds that can’t help trying to connect the dots, it is our nature to want explanations and predictability. We hate uncertainty, and we want coherence, that is, a logical and predictable connection between what we put into the world and what we get from it.

Whether we believe in a creator God or not, we all want to make logical meaning of what happens to us or in the world, as if we had made some kind of bargain with the universe or God in which we feel, consciously or not, that, “If I do a, b, c, then I should get x, y, z.” When we don’t get x, y, z, and x, y, z are really important to us, we panic or are devastated, and we look for the reason, the explanation. But life doesn’t always comply with neat answers, does it? The unexpected, the unfair, the cruel, the unbearable, and the scary do happen and no logical explanation makes sense or consoles us.

You see, as much as my patients or any of us try to find rational explanations that create some kind of coherent story that we hope will satisfy us spiritually, I’ve learned that rational explanations fall short, if even you get one. For example, a baby boy was born with fatal Tay Sachs disease after the genetic testing of the parents erroneously and negligently concluded that only one of them was a carrier for the disease when, in fact, both were. The parents thought it was safe to have a child. It wasn’t. The negligent lab and the biology of the parents explain the tragedy in a descriptive way. But this descriptive explanation doesn’t help the parents find meaning in the situation such as will transform their suffering into something else. What does?

Well, I agree with Viktor Frankl, whose book, *Man’s Search For Meaning* I read from earlier, and whose theory of making meaning was developed from his experiences as a prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp. His theory has been a framework for me in my chaplaincy work. Frankl wrote that despite undergoing what feels like unbearable suffering, we humans can still find that our human experience remains meaningful in three possible ways:

1. by the things we create and the deeds we do in our lives; that is, what we give to the world;
2. by the relational encounters and things that we experience in our lives, such as love, mercy, beauty, the arts, kindness, etc.; that is, by what we receive from the world; and

3. even when we are in an inalterable situation that we do not control, like being a prisoner in a concentration camp, we find meaning by the attitude we take in the face of suffering.

Frankl states that the last freedom we have left in an inalterable situation is our attitude towards the situation, the stance that we take in the face of tragedy or even evil, and the values that we stake our lives by.

Back to the parents of the baby with Tay Sachs, a terminal disease in which the baby is deaf, becomes blind, paralyzed, has seizures, and the baby's nervous system is destroyed. The life expectancy is five years. These parents created a loving home for their baby; they found ways to interact with him and to make him smile. They became stronger as a couple and wiser parents to their other child. The father's work in publishing a monthly guide for people with diabetes took on weightier meaning. Both parents were still angry at the lab, but they transcended their suffering by opening their hearts to creating new ways to be a parent and loving their child. The concept of the worth and dignity of a human life took on new meaning for them. They also took actions to help prevent this mistake from happening to other couples.

They made meaning that was profound and spiritually uplifting to them, precisely because of having to go through this exceptionally challenging situation in which they dared to love, with no holds barred, a child they knew would die by age 5. They would say that they are better people for it. I know that to be true.

Making meaning through what we create (give), experience (receive) and our attitude in the face of suffering reveals two dimensions about human nature very much worth noting. One is that we humans are aspirational and motivated creatures: we aspire to live a life that to us has purpose and is goal-directed and values-driven. In turn, having those purposes, values, and goals motivate us to create, to do, and to experience, and they shape our attitudes toward life.

And, two, making meaning through what we create, do and experience, and the stance we take in the face of the difficult, reveals a second dimension: that we want to be significant and of value to self and to others. We need purpose and the autonomy and efficacy to pursue significant goals, and we need to feel important and valued by others, to love and be loved. There, we find meaning.

Let me use a story here. I visited a patient with advanced pulmonary disease who just got the news that she wasn't a candidate for a lung transplant and could no longer live at home due to high oxygen needs. She was at the end of her life. She knew it. She told me that she was not afraid of leaving this world. Her only concern was that her husband and children would grieve her death terribly.

When I asked what allowed her to accept her situation, she answered that she had God in her heart and that to her God is love, pure and simple. Throughout her life, she said, she devoted herself to acts of love to others. Her most fulfilling experience was the 20 years she spent working at Catholic Charities with people with disabilities. She loved this work. She noted that this modern world makes it hard to spread love. People are afraid of strangers or don't trust them. But, that didn't matter to her. The stance she took on life was that she would spread love wherever she could for as long as she could. Not only was her life full of meaning, such that she was at peace with her impending death, but my experiential encounter with her was a source of inspiration for me. Her life was meaningful to her and to me, a stranger.

Now, a story from my work with women victims of domestic abuse. Let's call this woman Analisa. She had been in a relationship with a man who was emotionally and physically abusive. Her son had been exposed to the violence many times. At age 8, he told his mother that he wanted to commit suicide. This was the jolt that she needed to transcend her fears and fight for her son to have a reason to want to live. As awful as that experience was, she told us that she is grateful for that moment, because it gave her the necessary purpose, motivation and courage to leave her partner. That purpose to save her son gave her a sense of power she had never felt before. Now, every time she wakes up and sees her son sleeping safely in his bed she knows the meaning in her life. She is now a woman on a holy mission and nothing will deter her.

One final story. I was recently asked to visit an oncology patient having panic attacks. She explained to me that her panic attacks are probably due to the fact that her cancer has metastasized, she had just been operated on, is on another clinical trial with uncertain outcomes, she developed a severe allergic reaction to pain medication, and she is scared of everything. There was plenty of logical reason for her anxiety and panic attacks. We spoke about how understandable it is to feel panic when there is so little certainty and so much pain in her life right now.

I asked whether there was anything meaningful she could hold onto right now. Her answer surprised me. She said, "You know, the day after my surgery, I was lying in this bed moaning from the pain and crying with fear, and I could feel panic rising. But then I heard the patient next to me, who has the same cancer and had the same surgery as me, and who I couldn't see because the curtain was drawn, say to me, "Honey, it's okay. There, there, you're going to be okay. Don't worry."

When I asked what that meant for her, the patient said, "I was about to panic. I had nothing to grab onto, until I heard that voice and her kindness. She was a stranger to me. But she cared about me. That was enough to hold onto for the night."

If you get anything at all from this sermon, please know that your experience of empathy for a stranger in need, your deed of compassion to someone in need, and your attitude that you are never powerless in the face of another's suffering, could provide the meaning in life that that person needs at that very moment to keep her grip on life. We can all create or receive these meaning filled moments in which we say, "Because of this act of kindness toward me, I feel valued, and I know that the world is after all a place worth my suffering and worth my living in."