

Leading Causes of Life
2) Purpose and Meaning: Coherence
Luke 4:17-19, 9:1-2
September 6, 2009

In *Undaunted Courage*, Stephen Ambrose describes the pivotal day when Meriwether Lewis, William Clark and their tiny band of explorers sent their large keel boat back down the river to St. Louis. The boat had carried all of their supplies, weapons, and ammunition. It had served as a secure refuge from attack. Now it was gone and they were headed west, toward the Pacific Ocean, alone. That night in his journal, Lewis was reflective: “The picture which now presented itself to me was a most pleasing one, entertaining as I do, the most confident hope of succeeding [sic] in a voyage which had formed a darling project of mine for the past ten years, I could but esteem this moment of my departure as among the most happy of my life.”

Had I been with Lewis, I likely would have been frightened. All his visible means of support, all security, all contact with the world had just sailed down the river. “And yet he called it the happiest day of his life. It’s almost as if he knew it was his defining moment—the convergence of his particular gifts with a challenge that required those gifts. It’s almost as if Lewis knew, in that moment of radical abandonment and radical trust, the purpose of his life.”ⁱ

Meriwether Lewis had a sense of purpose for his life. He possessed one of the leading causes of life: coherence. Coherence is a sense of meaning and purpose in life. When we live with coherence, all the varied pieces of our lives seem to be integrated. We are able to live a master narrative that gives definition and meaning to our lives.

In Luke’s Gospel Jesus shares the master story that gives coherence, meaning, and purpose to his life. He claims the mission of the prophet Isaiah as his own. Listen to it again from Eugene Peterson’s, *The Message*: “God’s Spirit is on me; he’s chosen me to preach the Message of good news to the poor, Sent me to announce pardon to prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, To set the burdened and battered free, to announce, ‘This is God’s year to act!’” This was the purpose that kept him focused even though his hometown folk could not accept it and that very day banished him from Nazareth. His mission kept him centered when religious authorities questioned his motives and sought to trick him. This purpose kept him grounded as the crowds pulled him away from prayerful solitude to seek his healing touch. He was made to proclaim the hopeful message of God’s love, to break the chains binding persons imprisoned in illness and oppression, to share a sense of freedom and hope. This was his purpose, the meaning of his life. It kept him going when the forces closed in around him and tried to stop him. He

felt so strongly about his mission he was willing to die rather than let it be compromised.

Jewish psychiatrist Viktor Frankl was sent to concentration camps during WWII. During his imprisonment he noticed a difference between those who were more likely to survive and those who succumbed to the unimaginable horror of the camps. He later said, "This was the lesson I had to learn in three years spent in Auschwitz and Dachau: those most apt to survive the camps were those oriented toward the future, toward a meaning to be fulfilled by them in the future." One day as he witnessed yet another murder, he realized there was absolutely nothing he could do to stop the atrocity. But he could reach within himself and reframe the way he reacted to it.ⁱⁱ

Living with a sense of purpose enables us to choose life. Even in the face of major obstacles, having a coherent meaning can ground us and keep us oriented when other things try to distract us from our goal. A sense of mission keeps us focused on the big picture and oriented toward the future.

Last week I gave the homework assignment of writing your own six-word mission/purpose statement. There's a graffiti board in the Fellowship Hall for sharing them! This is my statement: "Love God. Follow Jesus. Midwife disciples." Loving God keeps me grounded and focused. Following Jesus gives me a set of principles and a course of action to guide me. A specific role to which God has called me is assisting in the birth and growth of students of Jesus.

What gives coherence to your life? What gives meaning and purpose to your living? I invite you to do this exercise. You might be surprised how life-giving and renewing it can be to have a solid sense of purpose and meaning.

My family has been following the space journey of Astronaut Jose Hernandez, a colleague from the University of the Pacific. Jose was one of four children in a migrant farming family in Mexico. He didn't learn English until he was 12 years old. He spent much of his childhood on what he calls "the California circuit," traveling with his family from Mexico to southern California each March, and then working northward to the Stockton area by November, picking strawberries and cucumbers at farms along the route. They returned to Mexico for Christmas, and started the cycle all over again come spring.

Jose completed high school in Stockton and earned a degree in electrical engineering from the University of the Pacific. He received a full scholarship to the graduate program at UC Santa Barbara. In 1987 he began work at Lawrence Livermore Laboratory. He co-developed the first full-field digital mammography imaging system, proven useful for detecting breast cancer at an earlier stage than present film/screen techniques.

When he was a senior in high school, Jose was hoeing a row of sugar beets in a field near Stockton. He heard on his transistor radio that first Hispanic-

American had been chosen to travel into space. That was the moment Jose said, “I want to fly into space.” It is something he’s been striving for each day since then. He was selected for training as a mission specialist as a member of the 2004 astronaut candidate class.

Last month after a week of delays late Friday, August 28 Jose left earth on the Discovery Space Shuttle for a 13-day mission to the International Space Station! They are delivering supplies to the station, including a Colbert treadmill. NASA held a contest to name the treadmill. Stephen Colbert of Comedy Central had his viewers suggest that it be named after him – and they won!

Jose sends messages in Spanish and English from space through Twitter. His first “tweet” read, “Settling in and realizing my dream....Micro G(ravity) is great. Finished setting up the computers and ready for bed! Don’t need pillow!” They are scheduled to return to earth on September 10. Jose’s mission was “I want to fly in space.” All the events of his life have been integrated to enable him to fulfill his dream, to travel from the farm fields of Central California to the depths of outer space!

Many of us will not be given a mission with the stature of Jose’s. However the manner in which we conduct the lives given to us can make a major difference to those whom we encounter. That’s what matters most. Jesus called his disciples to increase the life of those entrusted to their care by casting out negative forces, offering a healing presence, and speaking a word of hope.

Barbara Brown Taylor has said, “The lives God is calling us to are the ones that we are living right here, right now, under these present circumstances. Whether you are a sophomore trying to decide on a major or a brain surgeon at the top of your profession, you have everything you need to respond to your divine call. You have what each of us has: one whole life to live on this earth, with tasks in it that we may choose to do well or poorly, and with people in it whom we may lift up by our presence with them or put down by your absence from them, even though we are standing right in front of them.

“Every night when we lie down to sleep, there is either more life in the world because of us or there is less life in the world because of us....Our purpose is to increase the abundance of life in this world.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Every day we can do something to contribute to the life of another. It may be through a letter, a phone call, a kind word, a caring gesture. In this way we find purpose for our own lives and others experience meaning as well.

Admiral Joe Fowler ran the San Francisco ship yard during WWII. In 1954, a young dreamer named Walt Disney asked him to lead the construction of Disneyland. After ten years as General Manager of Disneyland, Fowler went to Florida to supervise the construction of Walt Disney World. His favorite words were, “Can do. Can do.”

Always looking forward toward the future, he was in his nineties when asked the secret of his long, productive life. With his strong voice and exuberant smile, he replied, “I wake up every morning asking what I can do for my fellow man today.” That is the spirit in which he lived and worked. It was the spirit in which he died just shy of his 100th birthday.^{iv}

That’s a life purpose worth living: Daily doing something for my fellow humans. May your God-given purpose add meaning and value to your life and all your living.

ⁱ John Buchanan, “Defining moments,” *Christian Century*, July 4-11, 2001, p. 3.

ⁱⁱ Gary Gunderson with Larry Pray, *Leading Causes of Life: Five Fundamentals to Change the Way You Live Your Life* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009), p. 89.

ⁱⁱⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor, “True purpose,” *Christian Century*, February 21, 2001, p. 30.

^{iv} James A. Harnish, “A Long Obedience: Self-Care for the Journey of Ministry, *Circuit Rider*, August/September/October 2009, p. 20.

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