

# **“What Are We Here For, and How Do We Do That?”**

A Sermon Delivered by the Rev. Ken Sawyer  
at the First Parish in Wayland, Mass.  
on September 15, 2002

Well, here we are. What for?

Well, today's the day of the picnic. The company in the pews is delightful, and so is the music. It's peaceful here, and no one can reach us by phone, I would hope. Maybe we brought our children to Sunday school.

But we might step back a ways and ask the bigger question, why is the church here at all, that we can attend it? What is it for?

We could step back even farther and ask the even bigger question, Why are we here on this planet? What for?

I want to reassure long-time members that I have not had a radical change in my theology over the summer. I don't believe any of us was put on earth for some purpose. I assume human existence is a chance biological event, devoid of any cosmic intention. Likewise your own life, likewise mine.

For me, the “What for?” isn't a search to discover some higher power's plan for us, it's a search to make meaningful lives for ourselves, lives of purpose and pleasure, lives that meet a human yearning – an instinctual religious need – for lives that count, lives that cohere, lives that rest on some strong inner sense of what matters.

By the way, the task is not all that different in practice if one does believe in a creator's plan for the universe and for us within it, as many people do, including some of you, I believe. One is still left to try to discern what that plan may be. And so we all share in the quest to make meaningful lives for ourselves, to decide what we are living for, whatever we think the cosmic setting may be.

These are days that highlight that quest. For one thing, we are in the midst of the Jewish Days of Awe, nearing culmination in Yom Kippur. It is a time of reflection, repentance, atonement, and rededication to living as we think we should.

For another thing, we have come through a year, culminating last Wednesday, that gave abundant cause to think on our mortality, and in that light to consider what makes for meaningful, satisfying living in what limited time we may have here on earth.

It is a quest that each of us must undertake for herself or himself, though most of us here have learned that it strengthens and informs us to do so in community, where we learn from each other, celebrate each other's advances, give solace and support to each other when the venture grows grim.

The community itself and all of us in it are blessed with religious resources to sustain and support us, from the scriptural wisdom from people of all ages and nations, to the latest creative efforts of contemporary scientists and scholars, pundits and poets.

We'll spend the years together sorting out for ourselves our personal ways of finding the right mixture or balance for our individual lives, choosing or blending among the ways that lives are invested with purpose – in service to others, for example, within our own families, with others in the larger community, even worldwide; or in the creation

of beauty, or of knowledge, or of greater justice. Some people's hard lives are invested with meaning just by their perseverance in adversity.

And I think all our lives take on purpose and promise by the degree to which we give ourselves over to love, to a self-transcending caring for and about others. Indeed, our Universalist heritage would say that that is the plan, that God is love, and living in the spirit of love is what our lives are for. The Unitarian heritage would not disagree exactly, but placed its own special emphasis on ethical behavior. Fulfilling one's duty is what life is for.

And how do we do any of that? Every day, in ways large and small: in the greeting to a new neighbor or person at work; in a painting or poem; by political action; with contributions to causes you favor; by confronting the racist slur, the mean ethnic joke, the discriminatory practice; by spending time with the family.

By coming here. By being part of a community that links your life to the lives of others, people of differing outlook and ages; that engages your life in the thoughtful, committed hope of a more kind and just world, and tries to achieve it; that unites our spirits in worship for their tending, for their healing when needed, and for their vivification.

And how do we do that? Well, on one level, the answer is to be found in the announcements in the order of service and in the church newsletter. But I want to answer on an even more basic level. The first half of this sermon had lots of words of the sort that my predecessors were wont to capitalize the first letter of – Meaning, Justice, Love and the like. To be reconnected to the importance of concepts like that is what we're here for. But how we do that, how we become a community that supports such high-minded aspirations, gets us down to the nitty-gritty. It gets me thinking about Ron Popeil.

That's right, Ron Popeil, a name that will mean nothing at all to many of you, but a man whom many others of you know very well from his many appearances on television selling products for the kitchen. His most recent and most spectacularly successful such product is the Showtime Rotisserie, a half-hour ad for which you can probably find on some station before this day is over, if you have a mind to go looking.

Even those of you who don't watch infomercials, as they're called (and the practice of half-hour TV ads is so common that my computer spellchecker did not blink at the word), may have read the article about Mr. Popeil in the New Yorker magazine two years ago (10/30/00). I confess I loved the article. But you have to understand, when I was a teen, I lived about ten miles north of Asbury Park, New Jersey. That's where Mr. Popeil developed his talent at selling kitchen products, working a booth on the boardwalk.

I probably saw him. I remember the booth. If it wasn't he, it was one of his extended family, many of whom developed and sold products that sliced and diced and made potatoes ready to be turned into French fries. Teens like me, we went to Asbury Park all the time, and it was a hoot to watch the guy work the crowd as he sliced vegetables and sold his wares. I probably saw Ron Popeil in action, before he became very, very successful.

According to the New Yorker article, one of the causes of Popeil's success is his obsessive research to find the best product to meet some kitchen need he's identified. I feel obliged to note that after reading the article, I did watch the infomercial for the Showtime Rotisserie, we bought one, and it's great.

But perhaps you wonder, Why would I mention Popeil? It's not even annual fund-raising time, when I might think how to use boardwalk sales techniques to generate generous pledges. No, Ron Popeil comes to mind at the start of the church year because of how he sells the Showtime on TV. He shows how it works. That's how the family had been selling products since back in Asbury Park.

"When Ron Popeil ... pitched, say, the Chop-O-Matic, his gift was to make the Chop-O-Matic the star. It was, after all, an innovation. It represented a different way of dicing onions and chopping liver: it required consumers to rethink the way they went about their business in the kitchen. Like most great innovations, it was disruptive. And how do you persuade people to disrupt their lives? Not merely by ingratiation or sincerity, and not by being famous or beautiful. You have to explain the invention to customers-- not once or twice but three or four times, with a different twist each time. You have to show them exactly how it works and why it works, and make them follow your hands as you chop liver with it, and then tell them precisely how it fits into their routine, and, finally, sell them on the paradoxical fact that, revolutionary as the gadget is, it's not at all hard to use.

"Thirty years ago, the videocassette recorder came on the market, and it was a disruptive product, too: it was supposed to make it possible to tape a television show so that no one would ever again be chained to the prime-time schedule. Yet, as ubiquitous as the VCR became, it was seldom put to that purpose. That's because the VCR was never pitched: no one ever explained the gadget to American consumers--not once or twice but three or four times--and no one showed them exactly how it worked or how it would fit into their routine, and no pair of hands guided them through every step of the process. All the VCR-makers did was hand over the box with a smile and a pat on the back, tossing in an instruction manual for good measure. Any pitchman could have told you that wasn't going to do it."

During the half-hour infomercial, Popeil shows how to use the Showtime Rotisserie to cook a chicken, a pair of chickens, a salmon steak, and a rib roast. Shows. You don't just buy a product, you buy one you can go right to using.

I was inspired. Because I know that if you are new here, First Parish may seem something like a VCR to you. And sometimes people can feel that way even after attending for several years, especially if they don't come very often. Heck, there are probably aspects of church life even I haven't caught on to yet, and I've been here a while.

Of course, you have all figured the most basic facts, because here we are -- services start at 10, and you found a place to park. You have probably observed that here we begin each service with the lighting of a chalice flame (usually by a layperson or family who celebrate or acknowledge some value or event), we sing hymns (maybe only a few of them familiar to you, though some have tunes you recognize), we rise to sing the hymns as we are able as soon as the organist starts to play, we have a wonderful Music Director and choir (who perform beautiful music, much of it traditional), we take a collection (though it isn't clear how much you might contribute), we listen to a reading or two (but usually not from the Bible), we pray together (although to whom it's often not clear), and we share important personal news. Eventually we listen to a sermon that seems to last about twenty minutes, usually on a topic you wouldn't have predicted. Laughing seems to be okay, and crying, too, at least on the part of people in the pews.

Before the hour's over – an hour that seems to go on for seventy minutes sometimes – we sing a hymn in the midst of which we all turn to sing to the back of the room. Most Sundays, but not all, the children come for the first 15 minutes and there's a story or message. Holidays they stay longer. Signs are posted at various places downstairs as you arrive saying where the children should begin the hour.

Yep, that's what we do, though none of these ways is required of a Unitarian Universalist congregation, and in some places they do things differently. The readings at our Weston church are biblical, and in Framingham they don't take a collection (but I still hope you'll keep coming here).

Attire at services varies. It is appreciated if people don't chat during the service. Whether it's okay to chat during the prelude is the most contentious issue we have at First Parish, which I guess is a good sign that it's not something bigger, though some people do have their strong feelings about it; we muddle through by encouraging people to try to restrain themselves, but with only middling success.

After the service there's a time to socialize downstairs. There's a table there personed by a member of the Newcomer Committee who has packets of information, answers to your questions, and a way of signing up to get the church newsletter. There is also a guest book in the front hall. You can sign either place without incurring any obligations. Once you're ready to recognize this place as your religious home, we hope you'll sign the membership book, which any of the ministerial team can find – Erin, the associate, Vera, this year's intern, or me.

None of the three of us is charge, by the way, not even all three of us together. There's a governing board called the Parish Committee, and its chair is our church president, Marilyn Wallin. But I confess, the ministers are in charge of the worship, so if you hate the hymns one Sunday, don't call Marilyn to complain, call whomever preached that day.

I hope you find happier ways of getting involved. We have a bunch of committees, and that's a great way of meeting people, as are our study groups and activities like the choir. A new pamphlet briefly describing all the committees is in production. It's an easy church to get yourself involved in if you want. But you don't have to do more than you want.

What I do hope you'll do is join in the spirit of this place, and stay in that spirit if you are no longer a newcomer here. It's a spirit of acceptance and respect, friendship and support, among people who agree not to agree on much that other religions have firm and fixed opinions about. We are Christian and Buddhist and Jew, atheist and Pagan, and mostly our own personal religious pastiche. That's Unitarian Universalism for you, that and the common interest in living our lives with love and creativity in the search for greater truth, peace, and justice.

That religion may take some getting used to, and some accommodation. To paraphrase an earlier quotation, "Like most great innovations, it [can be] disruptive. And how do you persuade people to disrupt their lives? ... You have to explain the invention to customers. You have to show them exactly how it works ... and, finally, sell them on the paradoxical fact that, revolutionary as the gadget is, it's not at all hard to use."

In fact, I hope all of us find First Parish easy to use, this year and ever, a source of joy and inspiration, companionship and support on our quests after meaningful lives. That's what it's here for.