

“Something To Live For”

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May

First Parish in Wayland

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For many with progressive values and a vision of an inclusive America, this week has been horrifying to watch. Amidst the political and social turmoil, like many of you, I have been following the news, reading article after article. And yet, as the details of policies and press releases, protests and celebrations flood my inbox and social media feed, I have also been reaching for steady ground beneath my feet. So today as our minds are spinning with the details of conflicts and news items, I want us to take a few moments to consider the ground upon which we stand. The values that anchor us. The purpose that gives a sense of direction.

More than a week ago, I chose today’s sermon title and topic. It comes from a music lyric that I heard on the radio: “We all need something to live for.” When I heard that lyric, my first thought was “yes” and my second thought was, “and that’s why people come to church.” (Or to temple, the mosque, or any other spiritual community.)

The search for meaning, for purpose, for a sense of direction about how to live is part of why we gather. It’s part of being human. *We all need something to live for.*

The depth of this need for meaning is the subject of the recent book, *When Breath Becomes Air*. The book’s author, Paul Ka-lan-i-thi was diagnosed with fatal lung cancer at the age of 36. A neurosurgeon by profession, Kalanithi brings a deep understanding of the brain and its role in who we are. A lover of language, he writes in beautiful prose. As a student of philosophy, he deftly probes questions of life, death, or meaning.

Writing from this rich intersection of science, literature, and philosophy, Kalanithi shares his experience of searching for meaning in his patients’ lives as well as in his own. Reflecting on brain surgery, he writes,

Before operating on a patient’s brain, I realized, I must first understand his mind: his identity, his values, what makes his life worth living, and what devastation makes it reasonable to let that life end.

When Kalanithi became a patient, he too wrestled with what made his life worth living. Trying to decide what to do, he pleaded with his oncologist to tell him the statistics for how long he had left to live. She refused. Rather, her “oft repeated refrain” counseled him to find

his values. Regardless of how much time he did or did not have left—what mattered most to him?

Kalanithi explores this longing of patients for survival statistics in [an essay](#) that preceded his book. He writes:

What patients seek is not scientific knowledge doctors hide, but existential authenticity each must find on her own. Getting too deep into statistics is like trying to quench a thirst with salty water. The angst of facing mortality has no remedy in probability.

Perhaps you have also experienced this kind of existential crises of meaning. Maybe like Kalanithi you have found yourself facing your own mortality. Or, the mortality of one you love. Or, maybe your angst arose from another anxiety—the loss of a loving relationship, uncertainty about your employment, or questions about whether this is all there is?

Once such moment for me came as I approached college graduation. Standing on the cusp of adulthood, I felt uncertain about what to do next. *What would be the purpose of my life? What would make life meaningful?*

For so long, my purpose had been defined by evangelical Christianity. Life's purpose, I had been taught, was service to God. To Jesus Christ. But as my faith in this God, in the saving power of Jesus the Christ, faltered, I wondered anew—for what do I live?

When my son was born several years after college, I felt as if there was suddenly a floor beneath my feet. Lying near him in the darkened hospital room, I listened for his breath. For the sign of his life. Caring for him. Loving him. Keeping his breath flowing. This became an unshakeable purpose.

Lately, I find myself thinking again about existential questions—questions of purpose and meaning. I'm sure it is partly related to the transition of my son to college this year. I am learning to let go as he reaches for fuller responsibility of his own life. But it also has a lot to do with the election. For what do I live in a deeply divided society? For what do I live when the stakes are so high for so many? When the litany of issues is so long? When the steps towards positive impact seem so uncertain?

Faced with an uncertain future, it feels as if there has been a mass diagnosis of disease, of dis-ease, in the wider society. Immigrant lives, Muslim lives, women's lives are all being targeted. The warming planet is denied as large pipeline projects are restarted. The free press is denounced and government employees officially silenced.

And yet, I also read and hear the jubilant voices who celebrate the return of law and order. Of moving towards securing our nation against terrorism. Of protecting jobs lost to other nations. And I am left wondering about their dis-ease.

Did I fail to notice their joblessness? Their anger of being left out of another world, which often ignored or looked down upon them? Did I fail to understand their experience of life in dying towns or of a life surrounded by military families sacrificing their limbs and loved ones to war? What have I not understood? What does my own experience as a white, highly educated, relatively wealthy person preclude me from seeing?

And in these tensions of perspectives, this range of dis-eases, I have felt the existential angst of uncertainty. What does the future hold? What is the prognosis? What is the path forward from here?

We all need something to live for. For what do we live?

Kalanithi writes of meaning in terms of human connections saying, "Meaning, while a slippery concept, seemed inextricable from human relationships and moral values." (31)

I believe Kalanithi is right: human relationships and moral values ground meaningful living. There is a reason my existential questions fell away when I held my son and heard him breathe.

What then does it mean to live meaningfully . . . now . . . here? In this time and place of division? Such division may not pose an immediate threat to our mortality, but the floods of information, of changes, and challenges do remind us of the limits of an individual life.

None of us can read all the articles, track all the actions from the government, or digest all the opinions from right and left, liberal and conservative, radical and neoliberal. None of us can be certain of the precise outcome of particular policies or of the best path for resistance or positive change. We do not have definitive statistics. Faced with an uncertain future, we must find our own meaningful paths. We must know our values and *live* them.

Each of our days contains a range of mundane responsibilities. We eat and sleep, dress and brush our teeth. We take the kids to school or commute to work. Or both. We pay the bills. Again. We check our email, scroll through Facebook, and read the news. We go to the doctor, the dentist, the drycleaner. Our lives are populated with such tasks. Such efforts to sustain our life and our lifestyle.

And yet, amidst the routines and responsibilities of our lives, what do we live *for*? What are the values that help us sift through multiple demands and choose how we spend our time, our money, our energy? Who are the people, the communities, with whom you spend your time and give your attention?

Such questions are not just for the philosophers. They are the questions we all need to clarify in ourselves...especially in times like this with the social and political landscape erupting in clashes of values and goals. For what do you live . . . now!?

These are questions for each of us as individuals, but also for us as a community. I believe places like First Parish exist to both help us find answers as well as to *be* a part of building a meaningful life through human relationships and shared values. Long before there was email and social media, cars or freeways, running water or even the United States of America, this community of First Parish gathered in 1640 to help the European settlers of the Sudbury Plantation find their something to live for. Two hundred and two years ago this month, this Meetinghouse was dedicated as a place to gather in community and be reminded of their faith and their values. To this day, we meet here—a community united by a covenant that expresses the purpose of our shared life.

Listen again to *why* we are here and *how* we promise to be together:

*With open minds and loving hearts, we gather to search for meaning,
to care for one another, and to work together for a better world.*

Meaning may be a slippery term, but it does have something to do with human relationships and moral values. It has something to do with caring for others—bringing a meal, listening to a story, writing a card. It has to do with helping to raise children—our own or those we teach or otherwise counsel and support. It has to do with paying attention to the experiences of others in the world . . . those with whom we live or worship as well as those with different religions, racial identities, national origins, or voting choices. And meaning has to do with working *together* for a better world. It's standing beside a friend at a soup kitchen or a protest. It's showing up for the planning meeting or taking the time to make a call. It's about remembering to be kind and to notice the beauty in the world.

We all need something to live for. For what do you live? The future is always uncertain and our lives mortal—whether or not a fatal diagnosis reminds us of this or not. So what will we do to meaningfully live . . . however long this may be?

As we face the barrage of news and acts that violate our values of seeking a more compassionate and just world, let us remember what makes our lives meaningful. There is no certain prognosis. There is only the oft repeated refrain to know our values. Know what you live for. Know the vision of a better world for which you strive. Know the kinds of human relationships you would like to foster. And *live with purpose. We all have something to live for.*

So may it be.

Amen.