

A free and responsible search for truth and meaning. For me, of the seven UU principles, this one is most problematic. (Am I even allowed to say such a thing?) This search can be intellectually stimulating, interesting...even fun...but if such a search is taken in such a manner, does it lead anywhere worthy of the journey?

Might such a journey lead us to a place that Christian Wiman described in this morning's reading, with "nothing to hold on to but our pride, drowning clutching at nothing (Christian Wiman, My Bright Abyss, p8)"?

He says, "How astonishing it is, the fierceness with which we cling to beliefs that have made us miserable, or beliefs that prove to be so obviously inadequate when extreme suffering – or great joy – comes....(Ibid.)"

Of course, a free and responsible search for truth and meaning is only one of our seven principles yet, it is arguably our most action oriented one. The other principles are, for the most part, value statements. But the search for truth and meaning is what we do. We're all on this search, this quest to find truth and meaning. This principle also implies a destination; that truth and meaning are things out there waiting to be found.

Truth just might be enshrined on a shaky foundation dependent upon and influenced by our very limited knowledge, cultural agreements, context, perspective. It is quite possible that the search for truth may simply be an intellectual exercise that leads nowhere.

And then there's meaning....it sounds like a good thing, something worthy of a search. Yet Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Zizek thinks of it as a form of denial. He writes,

The temptation of meaning: When something horrible happens, our spontaneous tendency is to search for a meaning. It must mean something. [For example,] it's better when you are in the middle of a catastrophe to feel that God punished you rather than to feel that it just happened...that it's not just some terrifying blind force. If God punished you, it's still a universe of meaning. (Astra Taylor, Slavoj Zizek, Examined Life)

Maybe this orientation is pragmatic. Maybe it helps us deal with the catastrophes of the world. Or, again, maybe it's denial. Denial, in a way, helps us deal with things too.

"Form is emptiness. Emptiness is form." This paradoxical statement is taken from the Buddhist Heart Sutra. Much has been said about these two sentences. People have likely written books about them. One interpretation is that our minds have a tendency to conceptualize experience, give them forms which become a barrier between ourselves and reality. And although these

forms, concepts are not real in and of themselves (i.e. empty), we become attached to them as they give us, among other things, the appearance of safety.

Might truth and meaning, or at least our search for them, be concepts, forms, attachments; things that we overlay on a reality where there might be no truth, no meaning. Might these be attachments that give us the appearance of safety...that is, at least for a while...that is, until life crashes into us from out of nowhere?

If one is agnostic because one can't see around the corner to know if there is or isn't a God, what else might, or might not, be around the corner? Meaning? Truth? Reasons for why bad things happen to good people?

Don't take this the wrong way. This is not nihilism. Nihilism is finding meaninglessness, yet demanding meaning. It's not finding truth, yet insisting upon it. It is not finding reasons for things, yet needing them.

Dostoevsky's novel "The Brothers Karamazov" is about four brothers. Two of the brothers drive most of the action yet the book is really about how the other two brothers (Ivan and Alexei) who respond the action.

Ivan, the older of the two, is the dashing, brilliant, intellectual seeker. Ivan has it together. He has direction...plans. Alexei is a novice in a monastery. He doesn't quite know what he's supposed to do with his life

Ivan looks at life rationally, scientifically...he is a seeker of truth and meaning. He is looking for reasons to love the world. Yet the more he looks, the less he finds. Why do bad things happen to good people? Why is there suffering? Why does evil exist? He searches for reasons, explanations. He brings all his abilities to bear on the subject, no stone is left unturned. In the end, he finds no reasons to love the world; he finds no explanations. And ultimately he finds no truth or meaning; yet he clings to the necessity of them. And "Clinging to this nothing ... drowning clutching at nothing (Christian Wiman, My Bright Abyss, p???)" he descends into nihilism, insanity...hell on earth.

At the monastery, the directionless Alexei is told by his saintly mentor that his calling to God lies outside the safety of the monastery. He has to leave and then his mentor dies. Life crashes into Alexei and he is in crisis. He breaks down. "What does it mean?" he asks himself.

Unlike Ivan however, he climbs out of his abyss in the opposite direction. In the middle of the night, at his lowest point, he has an experience. He surrenders. He goes outside, "his soul, overflowing with rapture...[gazes up at] the vault of heaven, full of soft, shining stars." He

throws himself down on the bare earth, arms out, embracing the earth, watering it with his tears and without reasons vows to “love it forever and ever (p312).”

“It,” in this case means not only the earth, but everything and everyone. To love all without reason. The reasons aren’t necessary. They are superfluous. He says to Ivan, “To love with one’s inside, with one’s guts....to love life above everything in the world.” And Ivan asks him incredulously, “ ‘Love life more than the meaning of it?’ ‘Certainly,’ responds Alexei, ‘love it regardless of logic...it must be regardless of logic, and it’s only then one will understand the meaning of it.’

And that is the point!

Alexie shows that meaning isn’t something to be searched for and found, it is something to be understood, from the inside out, with one’s guts. Meaning is a verb, not a noun. Meaning isn’t a thing out there in the world one can cling to, an overlay, and attachment, an explanation, a reason for things...and searching for it does not lead to finding.

By removing our insistence upon a search for meaning, truth, reasons etc. we can put down a huge weight. The wisdom of Jesus comes to mind when he said “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light (Matthew 11:28-30).” Love life, all of it, more than the meaning of it.