

“Giving Your Heart Away, Finding Meaning”

*A Sermon by
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Unitarian Congregation of Taos
Taos, New Mexico
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Opening words: No. 662, *Strange and Foolish Walls*, A. Powell Davies

No. 661, *The Heart Knoweth*, Ralph Waldo Emerson

Reading: *The Meaning of Your Life: Finding Purpose in an Age of Emptiness*,
by Arthur C. Brooks (2026) , , , selected lines from pp. 239-41

Hymn: No. 34, “*Though I May Speak with Bravest Fire*”

Close of sermon: *Let your life be a pilgrimage that opens your heart and mind . . . buen camino!*

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Consider this morning a story about a man—let’s call him George—who believed he was being held back by circumstances from a life with more power, more prestige, more money. His disappointment was deep. As was his despair. He was suicidal. It was a sad situation, to be sure, yet a sadness that—perhaps absent the suicidal aspect—probably has come to many of us.

Consider what you might have said to him, to comfort him in his despair. I suspect that most of you have standards for what constitutes a meaningful life. Think for a moment about whether you judge yourself more strictly than others.

As a test of sorts, consider if you're familiar with, well, Frank Capra's 1946 Christmas classic [*what's its name? . . . anyone*], *It's a Wonderful Life*—I hope you remember it—starring Jimmy Stewart as George Bailey, Donna Reed as Mary Hatch, and Lionel Barrymore as Mr. Potter. I remember watching it numerous times, always feeling so good when George Bailey finally kissed Mary Hatch, I could almost hear her say, “Well, it's about time!”

Do you remember Clarence Odbody . . . angel second class, working to earn his wings, helping George Bailey get through his serious crisis over being worthless, over being unable to leave town to make a name for himself, like his brother, like his friends in the big city, to do there in the big city, where he's never lived before, what he is nonetheless absolutely certain will *undoubtedly* give his life meaning. And what does Clarence do? He reminds George of all the good he's done . . . he could see what George couldn't!

Amazingly, the movie makes us feel good, it cajoles us to come on in, and then, with our own self-doubts tucked away for a bit, it serves up the *truth*,

telling us just this: *with some help . . . with a Clarence or simply all by ourselves, most of us have the ability to confront the fundamental givens of life.*

These givens include love, aliveness and joy—all the standard theaters for the best parts of our lives. But there's more. The “givens” also include ways of feeling, such as difficulty, uncertainty, limitation, fragility and mortality. Even when one of these is at hand, it is a comfort to know that most of us are a lot more robust and resilient than we think—we can choose how we will respond to these “givens.”

Over the stretch of time immemorial, authors and philosophers and, more recently, social scientists have shown us that a life *never* touched by these givens is hard to imagine. And hard, too, to make such a life into an interesting story. And why is that? Perhaps because a story's only cathartic, it's only helpful to us, if we can see people in the story making a go of a life touched by these givens, the good ones and the difficult ones . . . and yet still making a go of a *real* life.

Recall that Clarence appeared to George Bailey while George was on the river bridge, surrounded by cold and snow, about to jump into the icy water far below. Think of George as a person engaged in a real life, a being who exists in time. People making a go of a real life are people who exist in time. Such real-life

people are continually being molded in their actions and relations, they are a work in progress, they are forever unfinished business . . . which means they don't get stuck--or at least not too often. They are people who, when they suffer, suffer as the inevitable result of their willingness to be open to the world and their capacity to care, love, hope, appreciate, and aspire.

[*hesitate*] So that's 1946 . . . eighty years ago . . . have people's lives changed so much that George Bailey has nothing to show us that could possibly be valuable now? Or is it the other way around?

Perhaps the longevity of a story, the constancy of a story's appeal, means that its message has been tested over a long time . . . and found to be true and worth remembering. *And that's why it's still here!*

Our search for meaning--the very thing George needed—should be a search for truths that have stood that test. Our author, Arthur Brooks, is fearful that our current ways of being, in 2026, have left the *meaning* out of our lives. To be sure, it's tough to step outside of our own lives, to judge them. Brooks tries that for us . . . he looks at us, and he believes that too many of us are chasing reputation at the expense of authenticity . . . too many hunger too much for social validation . . . too many feel trapped by a feeling that we need to be forever performing, forever living up to a too-high, a too-unattainable standard for meaning . . . too

many lives have turned into push-and-pull choices between belonging and abandonment, between conformity and isolation.

Is this correct? Does this say to us that we're losing the meaning of our lives? . . . Well, let's look for something that's been around even longer than George Bailey, so we can see another life, to see if it too might cast a light on the lives we have right now. Let's look at a story—a real life one—that's been tested for meaning for almost 500 years. [*Here my source is "How to Live—Or—A Life of Montaigne in One Question and Twenty Attempts at an Answer," by Sarah Bakewell (2010).*]

In the sixteenth century, Montaigne, a French nobleman, wrote his *Essais*. They stand now as a resource for how he chose to live, and they will help us know what we should look for in our search for meaning.

In the two years between his 35th and 37th years, Montaigne, suffered the deaths of his father, his brother, his first child, and then his wife. He also almost died himself, from a fall from his horse, one that left him unconscious for an extended time and later led him to write, not too surprisingly, an essay exhorting us now to worry about death. In dying, he now realized, you do not encounter death at all, for you are gone before it gets there.

He recalled that, after his fall, he was able to give answers to what had happened, as if he were a “wide-awake soul,” he wrote, but in fact the answers “were idle thoughts, in the clouds, set in motion by the sensations of the eyes and ears; they did not come from within me.” His experience went far beyond his earlier imaginings about dying, he had floated into death with hardly a conscious thought, seduced by it. You die, he wrote, in the same way that you fall asleep, by drifting away, you hear others’ voices “on the edges of your soul.”

He lived for another 23 years, writing his essays after recovering from his fall, having seen how quickly life moves and, so all the more, he was encouraged to search for meaning.

His writing explains that he had lost interest in the exemplary thoughts of the great philosophers about how to live and how to die . . . they found it hard to leave the world because, having tried to control life, they also tried to control death, espousing ways to do it bravely.

Montaigne was now more interested in the thoughts of ordinary people—*they* were the ones who regularly lived and died bravely, *they* were the ones who knew no philosophy at all. Nature took care of them, they put their hands in the soil, they hunted for food, they fished for food, they were busy with real lives, their lives taught them to think of dying only when they were dying.

They were busy with real lives, they were ordinary people . . . they lived in their right brains, resolving **complex** problems, ones that reached approximations, ones that gave them a sense of what they needed, of what made sense, ones that did not seek final answers through **complicated**, left brain thinking. Their lives were not prescribed by technology, but, rather, they were fashioned as very personal works of art.

Fast forward now 300 hundred years, to the nineteenth century, to Leo Tolstoy. At the age of 51 he felt like George Bailey—suicidal. He was outwardly successful, the most celebrated author of his time, had published *War and Peace*, had been nominated for the Nobel Prize, was living in aristocratic luxury. He had relied on his writing to give his life meaning, but, having failed there, he had tried science, but there too meaning was absent. He fell into deep despair.

He tried one last strategy. He ran away from the most sophisticated of people to a small Russian village filled with uneducated, simple farmers. He watched them work, talk to one another, and pray. They seemed untroubled by the crisis that tormented him. What he learned from them was that, although they too wondered about the meaning of life, they did not insist on finding neat answers somewhere. Instead, they sought, and found, an understanding of life beyond what any intellect could articulate. Tolstoy called this “**irrational knowledge**.” As we

know, what he saw in this village did indeed open up his capacity for deep meaning.

It appears that there's something about a simpler life that helps people to find meaningful ways of being. That all of my examples here today are examples of authors just happens—precisely because they left behind their work to show us the way . . . and thus to be tested over time. But still, you ask, is this a fairly representative sample? I think so.

My reading earlier today from Arthur Brooks' book, *The Meaning of Your Life: Finding Purpose in an Age of Emptiness*, published this year, talks of strivers—type A people, those who have gotten gold stars on their school work and life's work, and who, among all those who earnestly seek standards of meaning in their lives, have found all the conventional, but relatively insignificant ones, such as their salaries, their benefits, their perks, their reputations. Strivers are people who have learned to apply their analytical and logical skills to what are described as *complicated* problems—that is, the kind humans handle in their left brains—along with all the science and technology and engineering and mathematics afoot in the twenty-first century, all the things that are clear and straightforward.

These are all things that need to be done, at one level, but when they occupy too much of our lives, our lives become increasingly unfulfilling. There has

been an explosive growth in the amount of *complicated*, left brain thinking, and functioning, in our lives. Just think of your phone and your computer and your car and whatever else fills up your day, including social media. Brooks argues that taking the phone (substantially) out of your life can, all by itself, allow you to become *more involved* in your feelings, and thus to appreciate more readily where your “caring” should be focused, *more open* to compassion and caring, *more open* to an active engagement with life and, as well, an ability to cope with suffering.

More open to meaning, the very thing that cannot be simulated.

Here, consider Keanu Reeves’ movie entitled [*anybody with an idea here?*] “The Matrix,” for a first-hand look at the hopeful climax: Keanu’s flying off through real clouds into real space, finally escaping the computer simulation that had gobbled up, *literally*, any chances for a real life. For those seeking a more-down-to-earth experience, yet making the same point, look into Martin Sheen’s movie, “The Way.” There, he and his son, Emilio Estevez, hike the difficult Camino de Santiago in northern Spain, learning as they walk of the beauty of a *real life*, one lived outdoors, in nature—all in all, an astonishing balm against an increasingly difficult world.

The meaning in *real lives* is to be found in the kind of *complex* undertakings that go on in our right hemispheres—the making of art and music, the recognizing the sensations and lived experiences that teach us about love and

compassion and sorrow and abandonment and fellowship . . . and about which way to go to resolve difficulties or desires that will certainly arise.

As Montaigne and Tolstoy and even the angel Clarence suggest, these are the hallmarks of right brain lives. The kinds of things that people used to do, throughout their lives, living on the land, being outside, watching the stars, the weather, talking with their neighbors, making plans to be together, to gird their social groups with celebrations and more intimate get-togethers—ones where people show up, *face-to-face!*

You're in your right brain when something moves you inexplicably, even if it seems silly . . . or when you know intuitively that something exists but you can't adequately describe it . . . or when you are called to do something with your life—something bigger than yourself, but can't say what it is . . . or when you are beguiled by something that reminds you of your suffering, like a sad song that connects with your heart.

Giving your heart away means knowing your own personal values and pursuing, as a calling, a work life for which you feel a transcendent summons—one that serves society, or people, or a person—a life that in turn gives you meaning. To be sure, there are transcendent activities that are something other than how you make your living—here, consider the beauty of volunteering to help

charities, or non-profits, or caring or helping others, or caring for your loved one or loved ones. Being needed by someone, and responding genuinely to that need, is itself a real value in personal relations . . . this back-and-forth exchange is a tremendous fuel for feeling meaningful.

To finish, let me return to George . . . though a slightly different one, this one's George Eliot . . . the pen name for the nineteenth century author, Mary Ann Evans, whose major opus was *Middlemarch*, a book demonstrating pointedly—yet delightfully—all the difficulties faced then by women, who were roundly denied openings in society and all its ventures. She wrote this: ***“If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel’s heartbeat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence.”***

Amen.

