

With the Best of Intentions
FUSIT Summer Service – 09/03/20236
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Opening Words from Chapter 8 of Alice in Wonderland by Lewis Carroll

Alice has the following dialogue with the Cheshire Cat:

Alice: "Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?"

Cheshire Cat: "That depends a good deal on where you want to get to."

Alice: "I don't much care where—"

Cheshire Cat: "Then it doesn't matter which way you go."

Alice: "...so long as I get somewhere."

Cheshire Cat: "Oh, you're sure to do that, if only you walk long enough"

Reading on Intention – by Anonymous

Today, we gather to reflect on the topic of intention, a powerful force that can guide us towards living a meaningful and purposeful life. As Unitarians, we believe that every individual has the capacity to shape their own destiny and create a positive impact in the world through their actions and intentions.

Intention is the starting point of every action we take, and it is the energy that propels us forward towards our goals. When we set a clear and positive intention, we create a pathway towards achieving our desired outcomes. We tap into the power of our minds, hearts, and spirits to align ourselves with our deepest aspirations and values.

However, it is important to note that intention alone is not enough. We must also take action towards manifesting our intentions in the world. We must be willing to put in the effort, take risks, and face challenges along the way. But with a strong and clear intention, we can find the strength and resilience to overcome obstacles and stay committed to our goals.

Moreover, it is important to approach our intentions with a sense of openness and flexibility. While we may have a clear vision of what we want to achieve, the path towards our goals may not always be straightforward. Life is full of surprises, and we

must be willing to adapt and adjust our intentions as needed. We must be open to learning from our experiences, embracing new opportunities, and shifting our focus when necessary.

Finally, let us remember that intention is not just about achieving personal success or satisfaction. It is also about using our gifts and talents to serve the greater good. As Unitarians, we are called to act with compassion, justice, and integrity in all aspects of our lives. We must strive to align our intentions with the principles of love, kindness, and respect for all beings.

I told you that this reading was by Anonymous. I will now reveal that the author was Chat GPT, an AI bot. I suppose that I could have had Chat write the sermon, as well. I hope that I can do better.

Sermon

How many of you are active in a small group ministry?
How many of you use the Soul Matters packets as the basis for your conversations?

I facilitate the Tuesday evening Small Group and we most often use Soul Matters materials as a jumping off point. You might remember that the January 2022 Soul Matters packet on Intention - What Does it Mean to be a People of Intention? For some reason this packet struck a chord with me and I have been mulling it over ever since.

In our opening words Alice, of Wonderland fame, was on a journey as her life transitioned from one place and one situation to another. Her journey was not planned - it was not intentional beyond the decision to follow the white rabbit. Many of us have been on journeys like that, although hopefully not so chaotic. Each of our life journeys are unique, but they all have three components in common - a past, a present, and a future.

I want to explore a bit about my life's journey thus far and the role that intention has played in where I am right now - my present. Hopefully, we will find some common ground, some connections for the comment period to follow.

Let's start with a definition of "intention." Soul Matters tells us that the Latin root of intention is *intentus* - "to stretch out, lean toward." By the 17th century English law defined intention as "state of mind with respect to intelligent volition."

So what is the difference between an intention and a goal? Our friend, Chat GPT, tells us that “intentions provide a broad sense of purpose and direction, while goals offer specific, achievable targets that contribute to fulfilling those intentions. You can think of intentions as the "why" behind your actions, and goals as the "what" and "when" that help you realize your intentions. Both are valuable in personal development and can work together to create a balanced and purposeful approach to life”. Thank you, Chat.

I recently reconnected with my high school roommate and best man at our wedding 58 years after having little contact. We caught up on our lives and talked about our boarding school years; after all it was our 60th reunion. How did we each wind up at St. Paul’s in 1959? Neither the country kid from rural New Hampshire nor Jewish kid from affluent Westchester County intended to go away to school. In each case it was our maternal grandfather who redirected our previous public school educations towards boarding school. And for each of us, those actions changed our lives in almost every way. You might say that our grandfathers were the ones with intentions, not us. Just recently Owen, our 7-year old great grandson, asked me what a boarding school was and how I got there. It was such a foreign concept to him. I guess he may have a point.

St. Paul's School was and still is an Episcopal school. We were required to attend chapel six times a week. I was raised in a typical New England Congregational Church and paid little attention to the religious part of my life. I attended Sunday School, but could not have told you what I believed. Neighbors were Roman Catholic and had to memorize passages to pass their catechism classes, but that was foreign to me. Members of our church did not seem to be closely following the behaviors that the minister spoke of weekly. At St. Paul’s I found a religion were what you were to believe was written down and regularly recited as the Nicene and Apostle's Creeds. I fell in love with the formality of it all and the concreteness of the dogma. I made the intentional decision to be confirmed as an Episcopalian. I did not go to St. Paul’s intending to change my religious affiliation, but I took advantage of the opportunity.

At some point during my time at St Paul’s I decided that I wanted to be a veterinarian. I took extra science classes and spent summers working for a local vet. My grandfather sent me to St. Paul’s so that I might go on to Yale, where he had gone. He was not happy when I applied only to Cornell. That intentional decision – to come to Ithaca – opened up all kinds of life changing opportunities, including meeting and marrying Pat and starting a family, but going to Vet School was not one of them. Cornell told me twice

that I did not have the grades to get in. The intention to become a veterinarian came to an end.

You may know that I spent my professional life caring for other people's children, primarily in residential care. How did I go from wanting to be a veterinarian to what became my career? It may surprise you to know that it all started on this very block in downtown Ithaca. It was never my intention to work with kids, much less kids in the juvenile justice system. But it was always my intention to do my share to provide for the financial well-being of our young family. It was that intention that led me to take up on an opportunity from a neighbor at Schwan's Trailer Park out on Hanshaw Road to work at the Ithaca YMCA's Camp Adventure one summer. A few of you old-timers may recall that the Ithaca Y used to be at the corner of this block, at Buffalo and Tioga. After a summer at camp I continued as an advisor to the Ithaca High School Hi-Y Club that met down the block. Working with teenagers was appealing to me, but little did I know at the time where I was headed.

Continuing on with the important influence this particular city block had on my life's journey, how did Pat and I wind up here at First Unitarian? After we were married at Sage Chapel we continued on with Pat's family's Presbyterian faith, first at First Presbyterian here in Ithaca and then at a radical (it was the '60's after all) Presbyterian church in Burlington, Vermont. I was active in both churches, ushering and teaching Sunday School. After six years of being non-churched in Putnam County we started intentionally looking at churches when we came back to Ithaca in 1977. We wanted a place to help us raise our three kids. The Presbyterian Church no longer suited our needs and we wandered in here one Sunday and stayed. Here we found not only a place with a vibrant Religious Education program, but also the opportunity for real community. Only one of the kids took advantage of RE, but we kept coming back anyway. With all of the ups and downs over the years we are still here.

You may have noticed that I have made liberal use of the words "intention" and "intentional" throughout my remarks. You may have also picked up on my use of the word "opportunity" and that was intentional, if I may say so. As our friend Chat GPT warned us, "Life is full of surprises, and we must be willing to adapt and adjust our intentions as needed. We must be open to learning from our experiences, embracing new opportunities, and shifting our focus when necessary." Ain't that the truth!

Each of us can attest that life is certainly full of surprises. Some of those life surprises might also be life crises. In Cornell training years ago I learned that the Mandarin

character for Crisis is closely associated with the character for Opportunity. With crisis comes opportunity, if you are intentionally alert.

What does it mean to be intentionally alert? I have five responses:

- 1) Intentionally show up. There will be no opportunities if you do not show up.
- 2) Intentionally be in the Present. If you are too far in the Past or too far ahead of yourself in the Future, you may miss opportunities in the here and now.
- 3) Intentionally pay attention. Be alert for opportunities that present themselves.
- 4) Be intentional about taking risks. Jack Taylor used to often tell us that true growth in all of nature does not happen at the comfortable center, but at the leading edge, out there in the risk zone. Looking at that concept another way, Rev. Margaret used to point to the space between stimulus and response. Viktor Frankl points out that “In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.”
- 5) Intentionally practice gratitude and appreciation for the opportunities that come your way. That would include opportunities for service such as volunteering in our RE Program (plug, plug).

Frequently the phrase “with the best of intentions” prefaces some unexpected and unpleasant result. Let’s turn that phrase on its head and lead with the best of our intentions. May we all have the best of intentions!

As unusual as it might be, I would like to end with an anonymous prayer - no, not this time by our friend Chat GPT:

A Prayer of Good Intention

Dear Lord,
 So far I’ve done all right.
 I haven’t gossiped,
 haven’t lost my temper,
 haven't been greedy, grumpy, nasty, selfish, or overindulgent.
 I’m really glad about that.
 But in a few minutes, God,

I'm going to get out of bed.
And from then on,
I'm going to need all the help I can get.

Thank you. I look forward to your comments.

Closing Words

The Best Day in the Year by Ralph Waldo Emerson

Write it on your heart
That the every day is the best day of the year.
He is rich who owns the day, and no one owns the day
Who allows it to be invaded with fret and anxiety.

Finish every day and be done with it.
You have done what you could.
Some blunders and absurdities, no doubt, crept in,
Forget them as soon as you can, tomorrow is a new day;
Begin it well and serenely with too high a spirit
To be cumbered with your old nonsense.

This new day is too dear,
With its hopes and invitations,
To waste a moment on the yesterdays.