

What Really Matters

A sermon by Rev. Fred Small
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Before our daughter Lucy entered our lives, my wife Julie and I used to kayak the Maine coast for weeks at a time. Camping on remote, undeveloped islands, sometimes we wouldn't set foot on the mainland for days. As we paddled through sun and rain, across tide rips and fog-shrouded channels, often our sole companions were seals and porpoises, cormorants and ospreys.

In wilderness, whether on land or water, life becomes very simple.

Time on my wristwatch becomes relevant only as a measure of available light. The dilemmas of email—Do I answer this message now, later, or never? How do I craft a reply with just the right balance of humor and seriousness, deference and insistence, candor and discretion?—these daily dilemmas yield to more practical questions.

Can we paddle hard enough to make headway against so fierce a wind?

Will we make camp before nightfall?

Will the tent hold up in a hurricane?

In the wild, the most innocent misjudgment can have fatal consequences. Nature does not negotiate. It does not compromise. It is completely unsentimental.

But I'm rarely frightened by nature's absolute power. I am grateful for its bracing clarity. It forces me to pay attention. It reminds me what really matters.

Last July, Lucy went to her first sleep-away camp. Granted a week's liberty for the first time in six years, Julie and I set out on a five-day, forty-mile hike over the Mahoosuc Mountains in western Maine.

Although we're both experienced backpackers, neither of us had undertaken an expedition this challenging in decades. The first two days were difficult, but by the third day our legs were becoming accustomed to the rigors of the trail.

That afternoon, as we ascended East Bald Pate Mountain, the sky turned gray, then black. Just as we reached the summit, storm clouds loosed their burden. Wind drove the rain so hard it rattled like hailstones against the granite. Jagged pitchforks of lightning stabbed the earth. We listened to count the seconds before the thunder, but there were no seconds: lightning and thunder exploded at the same instant. We were in the belly of the tempest. Scrambling for the meager shelter of dwarf alpine spruce, we huddled in awe of the storm's titanic beauty and mortal danger.

We knew what really mattered. Life. Love. Beauty. Staying dry.

People visited by death also know what really matters.

When Paula D'Arcy was 27 years old and three months pregnant, she was traveling on a Connecticut highway with her husband and 18-month-old daughter when a drunk driver crossed the divider and struck their car at 97 miles per hour. Her husband and daughter were killed. Somehow D'Arcy was spared.

"I inhale and I am a mother and a wife," she wrote, "I exhale and there is utter darkness and I am a grieving widow with no child to hold. It feels as if someone has hurled a hot brick against my chest and my hands cannot take it off. Nothing can take it off. Life has become hideous and I am powerless."

It took years for D'Arcy's spirit to heal. But slowly, miraculously, out of the agony of her loss emerged a radical liberation.

"For the first time in my life," she wrote, "I was not persuaded by the false importance of a single thing. The knot that had tethered me to illusive shadows had been cut, and in its place was an interior clarity worth possessing. An early light. Grief's single question, What really matters? illuminated a great dark. Few things really matter, and those that do, matter dearly. . . . By deciding what really matters," D'Arcy declares, "we take a first step toward awareness. We question what we've been clinging to and notice how we are relating to life. Am I experiencing life directly, or am I only experiencing life through my thoughts and beliefs? Do my thoughts bring me happiness and a sense of peace? Is there something else, something beyond the surface of things?"

What more important question can there be than what really matters? Why should we wait until death, disaster, or heartbreak rends our world asunder to ask it?

Here, this morning, in this sanctuary, I invite you to contemplate that question: what really matters?

Some religions tell you what really matters. Sacrifice, they might say. Or surrender. Service. Submission. Dāna. Dharma. Karma. Jesus. God.

Maybe they're right.

But as a Unitarian Universalist minister I will never tell you what really matters. Because I know that you know. However buried or silenced, your knowing, your truth, your wisdom live in you. Each of us has only to remember and ask. What really matters?

Not to your family or your friends or your employer or your school—to you. In the heart of your heart, in the soul of your soul, what really matters?

You should find in your order of worship a 3x5 card on which I invite you to write down a few words in response to that question. If you need a card or something to write with, please raise your hand and an usher will bring it to you.

You can be completely honest because we're not going to collect the cards. They're for you to keep if you wish.

And please write on just one side of the card. We're going to use the other side for something else.

I'll invite the bell and give you a couple of minutes to reflect and to write. (*Bell sounds.*)

(*Bell sounds again.*)

As she was healing spiritually, D'Arcy asked herself another question: To whom has my life belonged? Not to whom it *should* belong, but to whom has it actually belonged: who or what has controlled and defined my life by the demands it has made and to which I have acquiesced.

D'Arcy's answers were truthful and telling.

Number one: The telephone. (This was a few year's back. Today some of us might have to answer in all honesty: email. Or Facebook. Or texting.)

After the telephone in descending order followed:

My child
Appointments
My career

My church
My friends
My television
My need for approval
My guilt

On the back of your 3x5 card, on the left-hand side, I invite you to make your own list. To whom or to what has your life belonged?

Be as honest as you can, however noble, ignoble, or trivial the truthful answers may seem. Please just use the left-hand half of the card because we'll do one more thing on the right-hand half.

Once again, I'll invite the bell. (*Bell sounds.*)
(*Bell sounds again.*)

D'Arcy was troubled by the answers honesty compelled. So she asked herself a new question and made a new list:

To whom do I offer my life?

This time her list was shorter.

Number one: God. Number two: myself. Number three: my child.

To whom or to what do you offer your life?

I invite you to write down the answers to that question on the right-hand side of your card, or in any other space that remains.

To whom or to what do I offer my life? (*Bell sounds.*)
(*Bell sounds again.*)

I invite you not merely to offer but actually to give your life freely and joyfully to that which is worthy of your life.

You know what that is.

And now you have it on a 3x5 card.

"[E]verything depends—" says Paula D'Arcy, "everything depends on whether or not we have the will to see directly, and then to love what must be loved."

Amen and Blessed Be.

Benediction:

The breeze at dawn has secrets to tell you.

Don't go back to sleep.

You must ask for what you really want.

Don't go back to sleep.

People are going back and forth across the doorsill
where the two worlds touch.

The door is round and open.

Don't go back to sleep.—Rumi