



Unitarian Universalist
Small Group Ministry
Network Website



Existentialism For Today?

Starr King Unitarian Universalist Church, Hayward, CA, 07 May 2019, 7:15 PM

CHALICE LIGHTING

1 min

There is something infantile in the presumption that somebody else has a responsibility to give your life meaning and point... The truly adult view, by contrast, is that our life is as meaningful, as full and as wonderful as we choose to make it.

Richard Dawkins

SILENT MEDITATION / CENTERING

2 min

The first sound of the gong brings us to silence. Please take time to center yourself, and temporarily push aside whatever might be preventing you from participating fully in **tonight's** session. The second sound of the gong returns us to each other's presence.

OPENING WORDS:

1 min

... man is free, in so far as he has the power of contradicting himself and his essential nature. Man is free even from his freedom; that is, he can surrender his humanity.

Paul Tillich

CHECK-IN (2 ROUNDS)

36 min

Please share some thing(s) about your life since last we met. If you feel comfortable about it, mention something that may have changed your relationship to living an integrated, whole life.

INTRODUCTION:

10 min

Merriam-Webster defines existentialism as “a chiefly 20th century philosophical movement embracing diverse doctrines but centering on analysis of individual existence in an unfathomable universe and the plight of the individual who must assume ultimate responsibility for acts of free will without any certain knowledge of what is right or wrong or good or bad.”

The following material is from the website *All About Philosophy*,

<https://www.allaboutphilosophy.org/existentialism.htm>

Existentialism ... is centered upon the analysis of existence and of the way humans find themselves existing in the world. The notion is that humans exist first and then each individual spends a lifetime changing their essence or nature.

In simpler terms, existentialism is a philosophy concerned with finding self and the meaning of life through free will, choice, and personal responsibility. The belief is that people are searching to find out

who and what they are throughout life as they make choices based on their experiences, beliefs, and outlook. And personal choices become unique without the necessity of an objective form of truth. An existentialist believes that a person should ... choose and be responsible without the help of laws, ethnic rules, or traditions.

Existentialistic ideas came when there was a deep sense of despair following the Great Depression and World War II. There was a spirit of optimism in society that was destroyed by World War I and its mid-century calamities. This despair has been articulated by existentialist philosophers well into the 1970s and continues on to this day as a popular way of thinking and reasoning (with the freedom to choose one's preferred moral belief system and lifestyle).

An existentialist could be a religious moralist, an agnostic relativist, or an amoral atheist. Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Sartre, and Camus are credited for their works and writings about existentialism. Each basically agrees that human life is in no way complete and fully satisfying because of suffering and losses that occur when considering the lack of perfection, power, and control one has over their life. Even though they agree that life is not optimally satisfying, it nonetheless has meaning; thus existentialism is the search and journey for true self and true personal meaning in life.

What existentialism finds most objectionable is the arbitrary act--that is, when someone or society tries to impose or demand that their beliefs, values, or rules be faithfully accepted and obeyed.

Existentialists believe this destroys individualism and makes a person become whatever the people in power desire; thus they are dehumanized and reduced to being an object. Existentialism then stresses that a person's judgment should determine what is to be believed rather than arbitrary religious or secular world values.

QUOTES TO PONDER

10 min

What is meant here by saying that existence precedes essence? It means first of all, man exists, turns up, appears on the scene, and, only afterwards, defines himself. If man, as the existentialist conceives him, is indefinable, it is because at first he is nothing. Only afterward will he be something, and he himself will have made what he will be.

Jean-Paul Sartre

Existentialism does not offer to the reader the consolations of an abstract evasion: existentialism proposes no evasion. On the contrary, its ethics is experienced in the truth of life, and it then appears as the only proposition of salvation which one can address to men.

Simone de Beauvoir

What I really need is to get clear about what I must do, not what I must know, except insofar as knowledge must precede every act. What matters is to find a purpose, to see what it really is that God wills that I shall do; the crucial thing is to find a truth which is truth for me, to find the idea for which I am willing to live and die.

Søren Kierkegaard

Man cannot endure his own littleness unless he can translate it into meaningfulness on the largest possible level.

Ernest Becker

Human freedom involves our capacity to pause between the stimulus and response and, in that pause, to choose the one response toward which we wish to throw our weight. The capacity to create

ourselves, based upon this freedom, is inseparable from consciousness or self-awareness.

Rollo May

He was free, free in every way, free to behave like a fool or a machine, free to accept, free to refuse, free to equivocate; to marry, to give up the game, to drag this death weight about with him for years to come. He could do what he liked, no one had the right to advise him, there would be for him no Good or Evil unless he thought them into being.

Jean-Paul Sartre

As soon as there will exist for everyone a margin of real freedom beyond the production of life, Marxism will have lived out its span; a philosophy of freedom will take its place. But we have no means, no intellectual instrument, no concrete experience which allow us to conceive of this freedom or of this philosophy.

Jean-Paul Sartre

Sometimes people don't want to hear the truth because they don't want their illusions destroyed

Friedrich Nietzsche

One is still what one is going to cease to be and already what one is going to become. One lives one's death, one dies one's life.

Jean-Paul Sartre

I have crossed the seas, I have left cities behind me, and I have followed the source of rivers towards their source or plunged into forests, always making for other cities. I have had women, I have fought with men; and I could never turn back any more than a record can spin in reverse. And all that was leading me where? To this very moment.

Jean-Paul Sartre

To assume that one's existential task is completed when the individual is brought into right relation with society, that is, when the individual has been socialized, is to absolutize society and confuse society with God.

Merold Westphal

Take it moment by moment, and you will find that we are all, as I've said before, bugs in amber.

Kurt Vonnegut

Knowledge of that which concerns us infinitely is possible only in an attitude of infinite concern.

Paul Tillich

I have come to believe that the whole world is an enigma, a harmless enigma that is made terrible by our own mad attempt to interpret it as though it had an underlying truth.

Umberto Eco

If something burns your soul with purpose and desire, it's your duty to be reduced to ashes by it. Any other form of existence will be yet another dull book in the library of life.

Charles Bukowski

We have no Great War. No Great Depression. Our Great War's a spiritual war ... our Great Depression is our lives. We've all been raised on television to believe that one day we'd all be millionaires, and movie gods, and rock stars. But we won't. And we're slowly learning that fact. And we're very, very pissed off.

Chuck Palahniuk

The proof that the little prince existed is that he was charming, that he laughed, and that he was looking for a sheep. If anybody wants a sheep, that is a proof that he exists.

Antoine de Saint-Exupery

Regardless of the staggering dimensions of the world about us, the density of our ignorance, the risks of catastrophes to come, and our individual weakness within the immense collectivity, the fact remains that we are absolutely free today if we choose to will our existence in its finiteness, a finiteness which is open on the infinite. And in fact, any man who has known real loves, real revolts, real desires, and real will knows quite well that he has no need of any outside guarantee to be sure of his goals; their certitude comes from his own drive. *Simone de Beauvoir*

People demand freedom of speech as a compensation for the freedom of thought which they seldom use. *Søren Kierkegaard*

Convictions are more dangerous foes of truth than lies. *Friedrich Nietzsche*

Song: Make Your Own Kind of Music (Mamas and Papas) 2 min

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GzGN-GU7xdY&list=PL0XlgnAK_XBUySxH-ykpll-sIWtbFVPpn&index=78>

PREPARATION FOR GROUP REFLECTION 1 min

BREAK 10 min

GROUP REFLECTION / FEEDBACK 36 min

Two rounds. Choose one or more of the following suggestions to share with us your views on existentialism and similar philosophies.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION ON EXISTENTIALISM

1. Existential theory describes four dimensions through which we experience the world: Awareness of self as continuous in time and space; the natural world and environment; relationships with other people; and spiritual dynamics. Which of these are the strongest or weakest for you, and how does your use and consideration of these dimensions help determine the choices you make in life.
2. In existential theory, there are four basic problems we all confront: Meaninglessness, Death, Freedom, and Isolation. Describe how you experience and handle one or more of these struggles
3. Did any of the quotes affect you particularly, either positively or negatively? Explain your reaction as if you were a client of an existential counselor.
4. Have you read any books or seen any films that you realize now were existentialist in nature? Describe the character or plot elements that illustrate these ideas.

SONG: When My Morning Comes Around (Iris Dement) 3 min

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HWDuW1mpP7M>

FUTURE TOPICS, SERVICE PROJECTS 5 min

The Earth Day celebration went well, and was very well received.

These are the 2019-2020 Soul Matters themes:

What Does it Mean to be a People of...

Sept: Expectation

Oct: Belonging

Nov: Attention

Dec: Awe

Jan: Integrity

Feb: Resilience

March: Wisdom

April: Liberation

May: Thresholds

June: Play

SESSION FEEDBACK 2 min

EXTINGUISH CHALICE / CLOSING WORDS 1 min

If I take death into my life, acknowledge it, and face it squarely, I will free myself from the anxiety of death and the pettiness of life - and only then will I be free to become myself.

Martin Heidegger

MAKE YOUR OWN KIND OF MUSIC (Barry Mann and Cynthia Weill)

Nobody can tell ya There's only one song worth singin'
They may try and sell ya 'Cause it hangs them up To see someone like you
But you've gotta make your own kind of music Sing your own special song
Make your own kind of music Even if nobody else sings along
You're gonna be nowhere, The loneliest kind of lonely
It may be rough goin' Just to do your thing The hardest thing to do
But you've gotta make your own kind of music Sing your own special song
Make your own kind of music Even if nobody else sings along
So if you cannot take my hand And if you must be goin' I will understand
You gotta make your own kind of music Sing your own special song
Make your own kind of music Even if nobody else sings along
You gotta make your own kind of music Sing your own special song,
Make your own kind of music even if nobody else sings along.

WHEN MY MORNING COMES AROUND (IRIS DEMENT)

When my mornin' comes around, no one else will be there
so I won't have to worry about what I'm supposed to say
and I alone will know that I climbed that great big mountain
and that's all that will matter when my mornin' comes around
When my mornin' comes around, I will look back on this valley
at these sidewalks and alleys where I lingered for so long
and this place where I now live will burn to ash and cinder
like some ghost I won't remember
When my mornin' comes around
When my mornin' comes around, from a new cup I'll be drinking
and for once I won't be thinking that there's something wrong with me
and I'll wake up and find that my faults have been forgiven
and that's when I'll start living
When my mornin' comes around.