

Our Year of Living Seriously

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Reading “Living With Intent”

(Excerpt) Mallika Chopra

The concept of intent has been part of my family story for as long as I can remember. Our champion of intent was mass, my grandmother. She held an unshakable belief in the power of wishes, prayer, and magic. [She knew that her thoughts and desires shaped the world, and indeed she had a remarkable ability to create her own reality.

In 1954...several years after India gained independence from the British Empire...the first ever prime minister of India was visiting [my family's] city. Like everyone in the village, [My grandmother] was abuzz with anticipation and spent weeks thinking about which sari she would wear, how to fix her hair, whether she should wear flats or heels. [The Family] teased her about her obsession and warned her not to get her hopes up; in that crush of people there was simply n way the prime minister would notice one women's sari...She remained undeterred. “Not only will [he] notice me, she assured them, “He'll personally give me his blessing.”

The day finally arrived and [they all] ventured out into the street at four a.m.... to secure the family's spot for the parade...as the motorcade slowly approached the spot where [my grandmother stood in her eye-catching brilliant pink sari, the prime minister] waved from the open window of his limousine. ...My grandmother stood silently, her palms together...in the traditional Namaste greeting.

And as if she willed it, [the] car stopped, the prime minister got out and walked ...to where my grandmother stood. He put his hands together in a sign of respect, removed the rose from his lapel and... handed it to her. He then returned to the car and departed...my grandmother's eyes sparkled and she looked at my grandfather and winked.

There is a fifty-year-old man; lets call him Greg, who goes to a place where the railroad tracks go under the highway in Findlay every week. He delivers toiletries and a bit of food to the homeless folks who live there. He used to live there himself but he now lives in subsidized housing and he's been clean and sober for 13 months. He's bi-polar and receives disability insurance, which you may know is not very much money, but what little he gets is shared with the people under the bridge.

Greg's story is not atypical. Since he was a teen, he has been in and out of jail, rehab, and the hospital. Now that things are better for him, he's trying to pass it along. Mallika Chopra, author, and daughter of Deepak, calls this living with intention. She believes that as we embrace small changes in our own lives, they translate into changes in the world and eventually humanity at large.

When we live with intention, we are acting in accord with our deepest values, or what I call, living seriously. Chopra writes, “Intents aren't merely goals. They come from the soul, from somewhere deep inside us where we get clarity on our heartfelt desires for happiness,

acceptance, health, and love. By thinking about our intents, cultivating and expressing them, we create the climate in which they're more likely to happen...intents also need to be nurtured, to be given time to come to fruition."

I've called this church year "Our Year of Living Seriously." Through May, I am challenging all of us to live with intention. Each month we will consider a different aspect of our lives in which we might add more intentionality. We'll look at such things as living "Seriously Thankful," "Seriously Unitarian Universalist," and "Seriously Compassionate" just to name a few.

We will also be adding a component of giving back or paying it forward to the community. First, I'd like to describe serious living in more detail. You may remember back in June when I lost a close friend from seminary. Many of us reflect upon our own lives when someone dies and we often promise ourselves to do better. I began to examine whether my actions and values were in alignment. While I try to walk the talk, I decided there was plenty of room for improvement. I'm guessing we can all do better.

As the global community becomes smaller and what affects one affects all, it is more important than ever that we take our liberal values seriously. We have the responsibility to respond to issues that affect our families, communities, and basic human dignity and that means living with intention 24/7.

Living with intention is not a new concept. Most wisdom traditions and religions have it in one form or another. It might come in the form of prayer or meditation for instance. Author Mallika Chopra, raised Buddhist, struggled with how intentions could be brought to life.

Author and spiritual advisor, Eckhart Tolle told her that rather than asking, "What do I want?" We should be asking, "What does the universe want from me?" Or "What can I give the universe?" In some cases, the answers seem obvious. Perhaps Gandhi, MLK, Mandela, Sister Theresa, and Susan B. Anthony could most likely sense what they could give the universe. Perhaps they were always destined for grand intentions and actions. Yet, history tells us that their egos were kept in check. Tolle stresses it is important that our desires for personal fulfillment and attention do not get in the way.

You've met people like this. Capable of incredible things but in another setting you would never guess who they were! One of my best friends encountered one of these folks a couple of years ago at the bottom of the Grand Canyon. She was on her 11th or 12th hike in so many years and getting settled in at Phantom Ranch, the only lodging available below the rim. Before dinner, looking up admiring the beauty of it all, another traveler walked up beside her and greeted her. They spoke briefly and she mentioned that she planned to come again the same time the following year. The man said he would love to be down there again that soon, but he had a one year work assignment that would be taking him away from home. Before they could talk more, it was time for dinner, and they went their separate ways. Later in the evening as all the lodgers mingled, she found her new acquaintance with his travelling companions; his twin brother, Mark Kelly, and his sister-in-law, Gabby Giffords. Scott Kelly then introduced himself. He was the astronaut who would be making an historic one-year mission to the International Space Station. The mission was especially important because NASA would collect a deal of data by studying both twins –

one on the space station and one on earth. The research would be essential for future space travel and colonization. I'm told he was quite unassuming and matter of fact. But while he was on the mission, something happened according to Kelly. He wrote, "The more I look at earth... the more I feel more of an environmentalist...[and] as the atmosphere is concerned, and being able to see the surface, you know, I would say [some]...areas...look kind of sick...One of the things I've learned by living up here...if we can dream it we can make it so. So I hope to do more when I get home in helping protect earth." Kelly heard and saw what the universe needed. He looked literally and figuratively beyond himself. Of course, we can't all have life-changing experiences like this. Not to worry.

Tolle said greatness could be found in everyday activities like yours or mine too. You may worry that the small things you do aren't enough, but they are as important as the grand actions. When we give our full attention to whatever small thing we are doing at the present moment, when we are fully aware of our interactions with other human beings, people change, the world changes. We connect on a deeper level.

So, you do not need to be internationally recognized for our intentionality to be important. However, looking to others for inspiration has its merits. Consider Shimon Peres. He embraced every action that might lead to peace and lived every moment with intention. He was asked once what his greatest achievement was or what would be his greatest achievement in the future. He replied that there was a great painter who was asked which picture was the most beautiful he had ever painted and the painter replied, "The picture I will paint tomorrow." "That is also my answer," said Peres.

So, what will you paint tomorrow? That is what we ask ourselves during our year of living seriously. What does the universe want us to paint or need us to paint? It need not be any great revelation, no mystical magical event- or maybe it will for you- who knows. If you want to go out in the woods and meditate, or go to a Monastery for a few days, more power to you. An alternative might be the six strategies that Chopra formulated to help us begin to look for ways to live with intention and take our lives more seriously.

They are Incubate, notice, trust, express, nurture, and take action. Now I have just begun to work on these things so rather than give you examples on how to start each strategy, I thought it might save you some time to share what hasn't worked so well.

First, Incubation is quieting your mind and allow the clutter to escape. Using your laptop, cellphone, and watching CNN at the same time seems to somehow interfere with this.

Noticing is to pay attention to your thoughts and actions that seem to give your life purpose and meaning and make you and others happy. Noticing other people's mistakes, lack of style, or mediocre cooking is not this kind of noticing!

Trusting is believing the messages the universe is sending you and having confidence in your inner knowing- what feels right. Although it feels really right at the time, your inner knowledge is most likely not telling you to eat half a gallon of Breyer's peanut butter chocolate ice cream in one sitting.

Expressing is either writing down your intentions or sharing them with someone to make them real. Keeping them a secret makes it easier to leave unfulfilled. Screaming, "I'm going to kill you," is not an appropriate intention.

Nurturing is to allow yourself time to find your way, make mistakes, even meander a bit. Trying and failing is part of the process. One meal is not long enough to try to eat healthy and then give up.

Taking Action is just what it says. Once you've found the intention, take steps to make it happen. Start with the easier ones for motivation. No comments on this-I haven't gotten this far yet!

Now that you know what I'd like for us to do, perhaps I should explain why it matters. The best answer is the Hasidic tale of the death of Rabbi Zusya. Rabbi Zusya was waiting to be judged by God. He grew nervous thinking about his life and how little he had done as we waited. He began to imagine what God was going to ask him. "Why weren't you Moses?" "Why weren't you Solomon?" "Why weren't you David?" But when God appeared, the rabbi was surprised. God simply asked, "Why weren't you Zusya?"

You see, serious living, intentional living is simply becoming the person that the universe calls us to be.

I hope you will take on this challenge and begin a year of serious UU living everywhere, every day. The universe needs us. May it be so.