Reading.

*Before you tell your life*
*what you intend to do with it,*
*listen for what it intends to do with you.*

*Before you tell your life*
*what truths and values*
*you have decided to live up to,*
*let your life tell you what truths you embody,*
*what values you represent.*

Sermon:

Welcome to our month long exploration of what it means to live a life of intention. Today, I expect to just scratch the surface of this theme of intention, for it is broad and deep and speaks to us of qualities such as mindfulness, awareness, and meaning. Living a life of intention means cultivating thoughtful attention to who we are, to the dreams we hold for ourselves, an attention and mindfulness about our words, our choices, our actions. To be intentional in how we live, in who we are, requires developing our skills of attention and awareness.

Now at the same time, when I got to writing about intention, I could not help but think of the old proverb -- the road to what?! -- “The Road to Hell is Paved with Good Intentions.” And who among us has not lived or experienced the truth of this statement at least once in life. So, how does this proverb relate to our theme of intention?

On the one hand, this proverb has been used to draw a distinction between intention and action. Another way I have heard the proverb said is, "hell is full of good meanings, but heaven is full of good works.” This reminds us that we can hold all the best intentions, but if our actions don’t reflect those intentions, or if we never follow through on our intentions, then frankly, they are not worth much.

There is also another way to look at the proverb, and that is to say that good intentions alone are not enough. We talk a lot about covenant here at UUCP. This is because Unitarian Universalism
is a covenantal religious tradition. What this means is that it is not the same belief that draws
holds us together, not creed or dogma or even the same language or images we use to
express our belief that holds us together. Rather it is the promises we make to each other for
how we will live together in community, and encourage each other in growing and sharing and
loving. This is what binds us together -- these promises for how we will live together in com-

In addition to the covenant we say every Sunday, we have a longer covenant that is more specific
about how we treat one another and how we navigate and communicate. It is called the CoVe-
nant of Commitment to our Congregation. One piece of the covenant says that we will assume
good intentions of each other. This is important in times of disagreement, to begin from a place
of assuming that each person is coming to an interaction with good intent. It’s important when
things are going poorly in a relationship to begin with assuming each person is coming with good
intent. It’s not always the case, but generally speaking people do want to be helpful and good --
so good intent is something we should expect and do our best to bring to each interaction.

Now, here is the tricky thing. Good intention and good impact are not the same things. Some-
times, despite our good intent, we hurt others, cause pain, make someone angry. Have you ever
had an experience like this, where you have had the best intentions and somehow what you did
went totally wrong, was heard in a way other than you intended, or clearly hurt someone even
though no negativity was intended? Have you ever been hurt by someone, maybe so hurt you
even walked away from the relationship, but you also knew the person didn’t mean to cause
harm? In my experience this happens all the time.

Imagine you are standing in a park enjoying a beautiful day and some stranger runs up close to
you and throws a frisbee right in your face and bloodies your nose. Ouch! And you say “Hey,
what’s the deal.” And the person says, “What do you mean? I wasn’t trying to hit you, I was
throwing to my friend.” You insist the person should take responsibility, even apologize for
what happened, but the other person just keeps saying, “I don’t know what to tell you. That
wasn’t my intention. Why are you so upset?”

Okay, that’s an extreme case. But the point is that even if our intention is good, if we end up
hurting someone, we need to learn from that experience and own responsibility for the impact.

My husband and I used to run into this a lot in the kitchen, especially when we were first
together. He and I would be cooking and I would see him do something I would never do, so I
would suggest maybe he do it differently. Guess how that comes across? Not so well. My in-
tention is good -- to be helpful, to show him a better way to do something (ok, even I hear the
judgment in that). Problem is, it doesn’t matter my intent, because it comes across like I don’t
think he knows what he is doing, or that his way of doing things is wrong, even if in the end it is
just different. I’d like to think that I’ve gotten better at this over the years -- but honestly you’d
have to ask him.

This is a pretty minor example, but in the course of a relationship (or in a community) if you can
never get to the point of understanding and taking responsibility for impact, regardless of inten-
tion, and trying to learn from the situation, you run into trouble.
So having good intentions is important, but they are not the end of the story. Sometimes we do hurt each other not out of bad intent but simply out of ignorance. And sometimes, just like in my kitchen confession, we think we have good intent, but really there is judgment or some other intention behind what we do. This ability to see beyond our own intentions to the impact our actions or words are having, and being open to learning and growing from that interplay is powerful. This approaches the space that Parker Palmer is describing when he writes:

“Before you tell your life what you intend to do with it, listen for what it intends to do with you. Before you tell your life what truths and values you have decided to live up to, let your life tell you what truths you embody, what values you represent.”

Beyond the idea of good intent, is a deeper religious understanding of living with intention. This form of intention is not just about being helpful or doing good, it is about being intentional in our efforts to grow in understanding and wisdom, to develop greater compassion, to be more present and aware in our lives. These are intentions we hold that connect to sacred values like appreciating the gift of life, growing in our understanding of life and meaning, being more attentive and present to ourselves and others. This is about allowing this gift of life the chance to teach us about ourselves. And we can’t do this in a vacuum. This kind of intention isn’t born just in our own minds. It isn’t born just of our own perception. It is as Parker describes it -- an interplay of listening to our lives, of becoming aware of our own intentions, but also being attentive to how the world is responding to us and shaping us.

As we begin our exploration of intention this month, we too are talking about a more complex understanding of intention than notions of good intent/bad intent. After all, how do we set our intentions? It’s not just from a want or wish list of our own creating (or as sometimes happens, someone else’s want or wish list), but by listening to our lives, and listening for what our lives may be trying to tell us about who we are and the values we embody.

When we seek to do good, yet are always creating more difficulties around us, what is this saying to us? When we try to live out a path that someone else set for us (for example, our parents, our partner, society), and we find ourselves in pain, unhappy, frustrated or angry, what is this saying to us? When we say we value one thing as highest, but the way we spend our time or our money indicates something else comes first, what is this telling us?

When today’s Worship Associate, Gary Ezzell, and I were talking about this topic of intention, we got to talking about the reality of self-deceit. We can delude ourselves into thinking that our intentions are good, when truly we have some other motive, or are playing out some previous pain, and cannot or choose not to see the harmful implications of our actions. But when we listen to our lives, really listen, then we are taking in not just we what we are telling ourselves about our own intentions, but also paying attention to the impact they are having. We are paying attention to what our life and loved ones and circumstances are telling us about what we are doing.
We are talking about taking the time to pay attention to and listen to our lives, not just our thoughts. Taking time to create a space of openness in our awareness, to reflect on what life is trying to tell us, show us, about who we are, about the values that are most dear to us. We are talking about delving into the creative interplay that becomes more of a conversation, than just our own self-originated ideas of intention. An opportunity to discover more clearly what values and gifts we embody, what life intends for us. In this way, this path of living with intention is not just about being more aware of our intentions, but really is a path to a deeper understanding of our authentic selves and that capacity to know and share and be who we are more fully.

May this month be a rich and deep exploration of living with greater intention.