



Yom Kippur 2011

“PURPOSE”

Only Connect
by Trudy Elins

As always, I started by doing some research on the topic. Rabbi Peter is not the only one who can Google “Purpose of Life.” But I found several very apt quotations to help me and to share with you, and Rabbi Peter was kind enough to provide a few more.

#1 “Purpose is your reason for being, your answer to the question, “Why do I get up in the morning? When you live on purpose, your life will be filled with meaning and joy.”

As a recent recruit into the rising army of the unemployed I have given this a lot of thought lately in terms of how it will direct my job search. Plus, who couldn’t use a little extra meaning and joy? And if I can answer the question of why I really get up in the morning, well, our cats will be astonished to learn that it isn’t for their dining satisfaction.

To be honest, this topic isn’t something I felt compelled to explore a great deal in the past. Growing up in the sixties, going to college in the early seventies, when others were navel-gazing in pursuit of life’s meaning, and trying to divine their divine purpose, I didn’t see the point. Life was fun! It was all ahead of me! I was eager to just get on with it. But as I age, and there is a bit more to look back on than ahead to, I find myself searching for more meaning in the past, if only to inform my present. I don’t know if it is going to reveal my life’s purpose. But as I reflect on my life, it does seem to show me some patterns that are resolving themselves into a theme. “*Only connect!*” E.M. Forster wrote in Howards End. “*Live in fragments no longer. Only connect...*”

#2 Purpose - The object toward which one strives or for which something exists; an aim or a goal: The reason for which something is done or created.

I’ll cover the obvious first. As my friends know, I am a single mother by choice. As the biological clock grew deafening I decided to have a child on my own. I did this after intense self-examination, lengthy research, and no small amount of therapy. When I finally made the decision to proceed, it took more mental, physical and emotional determination than I ever imagined in my wildest dreams. But I had spent so long thinking about it, waffling over it, examining every aspect of the decision to be a single parent that once I had committed I brought a purposefulness to that mission unlike anything I had ever done before—or probably since. Couples who go through the typical progression of marriage, home and children probably think about when to become parents. And I am sure they love their kids just as much. But I can’t imagine that they bring the process to the same level of self-reflection, self-doubt, hope and panic as those who go through this on our own. So I can honestly say that being a mother to my

wonderful gift of a daughter is one of my life's highest purposes and that I have certainly put in the time and effort to discover that truth.

#3 - "Living on purpose requires you to discover what makes you unique; your talents, passions and values."

Here's an example of what my friends find unique or at least exceptional about me. In 1976, fed up with tending bar at Mr. Flood's Party in Ann Arbor, Michigan, I fled the U.S. and eventually fetched up like a piece of human driftwood on a beach along the Sinai Desert. I was living in a grass hut and while there was a community of sorts, at the time of this story I was alone on the beach except for a stray camel or two—and a random man walking along, who, as he got close, stopped and said, "Hey, aren't you the bartender from Mr. Flood's Party in Ann Arbor Michigan?" Or how not one but two men in a row whom my friend in Florida dated through Match.com, both strangers to her and to each other, turned out to have grown up with me. Believe me, I could go on.

Now synchronicity is a phenomenon, not a purpose, but its extreme prevalence in my life has probably had a lot to do with who I became. Because connections are not just what happen to me or around me. Connections are what I am all about. To me, the casual conversation with the waiter or sales clerk that becomes a lengthy discussion about anything from politics to podiatry and ends with the discovery of our shared home town and an exchange of emails is what gives each day its sweet surprise. When people say that New York is an impersonal place I beg to differ, because I know that everywhere I go, I may have the delight of running into someone I know and haven't had the chance to catch up with lately.

When I was twelve, I took my first shopping trip to downtown Rochester by myself. At that time, it was the commercial hub of the city. As I waited for a bus home, an old woman came up to me and begged me to save her from a nearby businessman who she said was trying to kill her with the x-rays from his head. For some reason, instead of running away or shouting for the police, I told her to stand behind a nearby pillar until the bus came, saying it was probably lead-lined, and then to get on the bus and scootch down so the metal would shield her. She gratefully complied. When I got home and told this story to my mother, she informed me with a sigh that this was only the first of what would be many such interactions throughout my life and that strangers would always come up to me and tell me all kinds of things, including their life stories. When I asked her why, she said, "Because, like me, you have the mark." "What mark?" I asked. "The mark that says you will listen," she said.

#4 – Epicurus wrote: "Of all the means which wisdom gives us to ensure happiness throughout our lives, by far the most important is friendship."

I'm a collector, and people are what I collect. My fabulous friends do everything from lay bricks to run multinational corporations and I'd like to think they would all get along at a party. I tend to keep them forever. I feel blessed, if I may use that word, in the number and quality of friends and connections that I have made in this world. And nothing gives me more pleasure than connecting people I know to their mutual advantage. It is a wonderful thing when this friend can give that one a job, or this acquaintance can take care of that one's need.

It is important to me to make time to stay in touch, be honest and loyal and fair – to be present for people. Of course, I haven't figured out how these things add up to a living, but they seem to sum me up pretty well.

#5 – Voltaire offered these words of advice: Tend your garden.

What he meant was that after all our time philosophizing and contemplating life's eternal truths, we need to get on with our day-to-day, mundane lives. For me, this message has a literal sense. I have two window boxes, which I obsess over as if they were the gardens at Versailles. As they are my only earthy real estate, I stuff every imaginable sort of flower into them: annual, perennial, wildflower, formal little buds. It goes against every rule of container gardening. I'm always cramming in new blooms that I find on my travels. It is a glorious riot, and it makes me incredibly happy to see it all out my windows every day. Sometimes I don't have time to water enough. Sometimes I tend the deadheads, sometimes I don't. And so, not everything survives my indiscriminate and sometimes careless love. It takes a lot of responsibility to tend my flowers, my relationships with friends, my daughter's needs, my own needs.

Yom Kippur is a time of introspection that offers an opportunity not only to reflect on my purpose, but is a reminder to check in, to think deeply about the people I walk through the earth with. Who might I need to ask for forgiveness? We are good people; we don't hurt others on purpose. So we don't always know when we need to ask forgiveness. Only reflect! Only connect!

And finally– Pericles wrote: What you leave behind is not what is engraved in stone monuments, but what is woven into the lives of others. My parents are buried in Cape Cod, in the Jewish corner of a lovely little cemetery in Yarmouthport. I visit them every year. Their gravestone is simply marked with their names and dates. But what I know is how their lives were woven into mine and into those of the many people they meant so much to—my father with his lifelong public service, my mother with her tremendous gift for friendship and hospitality. I like to bring stones and shells from my mother's favorite beach, do a little gardening, then sit at their feet and tell my daughter stories about them, share memories of our Cape Cod summers, and reflect on the memories Jolie and I have made together.

Near my parents' graves is another that I visit. I never knew this man. He's not another stranger that I talk to, but I happen to love his grave and when I die I want one like it. I realize now that it symbolizes the purpose I have found and that it is the way I can continue this part of my life's work. He has no headstone. Instead he has a beautiful and very inviting bench, engraved with the irreverent words "Joel's Schmooze Bench" and a lovely poem about how he loved company and good talk and wants people to visit and chat there. I love the idea that people, perhaps even strangers with no knowledge or memory of my brief "hour upon the stage" will take a moment to stop and sit, and maybe share their sorrow or a laugh or even better, both.