

Getting a Life
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When we obsess about trivial things or waste time in other ways, our friends might say to us, "Get a life!" But what kind of life is worth getting? The new book by John Alexie "Lex" Crane provides some answers. *Love, Sex, and the Human Condition: Getting a Life* is a slim volume containing two dozen essays. The title of the first essay is "Why Not Enjoy Life?" The title of the final essay is "The Way to Bliss." In between there are gems such as "We Are Needy Indeed," "The Liberation of Sexuality," and "Learning to be Free."

I met Lex Crane for the first time last month at the recent Pacific Southwest District Assembly, though he was preceded by his reputation. He is on the board of trustees of the four-year-old group called Unitarian Universalist Mystics.¹ I feel a kinship with others who identify as a mystic, so I was eager to meet him. Today we honor the insights of a Unitarian Universalist mystic. A month from now, we will honor the insights of atheists. Is Unitarian Universalism a great religion or what?

Lex is a perceptive, buoyant person. I suspect that he is incapable these days of being swamped by the storms of life; he is that buoyant. Lex is not prone to using ten words when three words will do. He wraps each word with humor, empathy, gentle needling, and sometimes all three of these at once.

In years past, Lex has worked as a teacher, radio announcer, retail salesman, land surveyor, bartender, spot welder, soda jerker, market surveyor, jackhammer operator, and ditch digger. He also spent time working in the copper shop in a shipyard, in a machine shop, and in the construction trades. He served in the U.S. Army during World War II in both the South Pacific and in Europe, was severely wounded during the Battle of the Bulge, then later received a disability discharge. For many years he was a licensed counselor, as well as a Unitarian Universalist minister.²

¹ See www.uumystics.homestead.com.

² p. 174

Before I zero in on Lex's insights regarding happiness, ambition, and achievement, I will share a few of his words on other topics in order to whet your appetite for the book. He says, "Those acts and attitudes are moral that encourage trust and mutual confidence between people. This is the fundamental purpose and meaning of morality at its best. It encourages creative encounter between humans, and this has far reaching implications for promoting the quality of life among us."³ Wow! I cannot remember a more original, spare, and elegant definition of morality. "Those acts and attitudes are moral that encourage trust and mutual confidence between people." At the budget review meeting here after the service, may we listen and speak from a place of encouraging trust and mutual confidence between people.

Regarding community, Lex Crane writes, "We're conscious of the fact, most of us, that a sense of community is missing from our lives, and we yearn for it. But that's only one side of the matter. It also is a general characteristic of the human creature that he or she is ambivalent. We have within ourselves not only a yearning for community, we have also fallen into the habit of wanting a great many other things as well, and many of these are corrosive of community . . . We are also inclined toward the enjoyment of the tangible rewards of our impersonal, intensely productive, mass, urbanized, computerized, technological, swift-moving, television-centered society. The question is not how to go about creating community. We know very well how to do that. The question is, what are we willing to give up to gain it?"⁴ At the budget review meeting here after the service, may we listen and speak from a place of giving up precious dollar resources in order to gain precious resources of community.

In terms of death, Lex Crane writes, "We ought to learn not to be frightened of [death]. It is as natural as breathing or being born. To be sure, sometimes it comes as an unwelcome enemy and must be fought; but sometimes it comes as a helpful friend and should then be greeted with gratitude and affection – with love . . . Jesus used to say that if we were really going to be ethical people, in the highest sense of the term, we ought to learn to love even our enemies . . . What love means in connection with enemies is that we accept the fact that they exist and that their

³ p. 45

⁴ p. 49

existence is as valid as our own. They really do exist, and they have aims, purposes, and functions just as we have that they are trying to fulfill. No amount of wishing, no amount of fear or hatred on our part will press them out of existence. We simply must accept them and understand them, understand why they behave as they do, doing what we can to persuade them to behave well toward us. We need to understand that they exist just as we do, and they must behave in accordance with the nature of their being . . .

“However,” Lex Crane writes, “loving our enemies doesn’t mean that we always and invariably let them do as they impulsively wish. Sometimes love demands that we oppose them vigorously, that we do what we can to prevent them from doing harm to us or to others. We have a responsibility to love not only our enemies but also our friends and ourselves. This is the way it is with death as an enemy. We ought, at our highest and best, to be able to love, in this way, even death. We ought to respect it, understand it, admit the validity of its existence, and not just instinctively grow hostile and afraid in its presence, not always feel compelled to run from it or fight it, nor once it has come and gone, to hate it for obeying the laws of its existence. We should learn to love even death, whether as friend or enemy.”⁵

As we remember the deaths of loved ones, may we learn to love in an ever wider circle of embrace. At the budget review meeting here after the service, may we listen and speak from a place of loving self, friends, and enemies in an ever wider circle of embrace.

Regarding self esteem, Lex Crane writes, “The level of personal worth we experience depends on the ratio between our achievements and our ambitions.”⁶ In a parallel way, the level of worth or self esteem a congregation experiences depends on the ratio between its achievements and its ambitions. However, there is a danger. Given modest ambitions, any person or any group can be an overachiever. Monte Vista Unitarian Universalist Congregation, however, has ambitions which are not modest.

⁵ p. 157 and p. 158

⁶ p. 42

I understand that for years the mission of the congregation has been “to bring together religious liberals to foster the principles of freedom, brotherhood and sisterhood, moral integrity, and human dignity; to respect each other and [to respect] the right of individual conviction to see the truth regardless of its source or direction; and to maintain a church organization that will provide the opportunity for each person to practice and proclaim these principles.” This is a solid and progressive mission, and from 2004 to 2007, a strategic plan helped to make this mission come alive. Thank you to the strategic plan task force and to everyone who worked to bring the mission to life.

It is time to generously fund the mission through our pledges of financial support. The overall economy may be slowing down, but my sense is that Monte Vista Unitarian Universalist Congregation is speeding up. With all affection, I will add this: The MVUUC race car sometimes spins its wheels and weaves around the track. The car may need a destination that is more emotionally engaging than fostering the principles, even if those principles include freedom, brotherhood and sisterhood, moral integrity, human dignity, mutual respect, and the individual’s search for truth and meaning. What can we find here that we cannot find in a civic organization or club? What are we willing to give up to protect and polish what we find here?

Turning hopes and dreams into reality takes enthusiasm, coordination, and money. I have increased my pledge from \$1,500 to \$2,000 for the coming year. I encourage you to increase your pledge, as well. The invitation to pledge generously goes for non-members, as well as for members. In fact, I am a non-member. I am a pledging “friend.” If you are a non-member who attends services or participates in other congregational activities, I encourage you to help lay leaders to budget wisely by pledging. The dollars you contribute are helpful whenever they arrive, of course, but it is valuable to know that we can count on their arrival.

My \$2,000 pledge to Monte Vista Unitarian Universalist Congregation plus my pledge to the Church of the Larger Fellowship plus my contribution to the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee plus my contribution to the Unitarian Universalist “Association Sunday” still fall short of my goal of contributing five percent of my income to support Unitarian Universalism. When I graduated from seminary two years ago at age 50, my student loan debt totaled \$45,000.

By my own contributions and the contributions of supporters, I have paid off \$20,000, leaving a student loan debt of \$25,000. My point in mentioning these details is that we all have financial constraints, and we all must use our best judgment in deciding how much to pledge.

I conclude with destiny. The pledges of financial support for the next fiscal year which have been received to date do *not* limit destiny because the congregation's destiny is still unfolding. In classical Greek philosophy, thoughts lead to deeds. Deeds lead to habits. Habits lead to character. Character leads to destiny. I believe that you do encourage trust and mutual confidence between people. I believe that you do care about loving in an ever wider circle of embrace. I believe that you are an ambitious bunch. Your plans are not modest. I believe you would rather fall short of ambitious goals than to achieve modest success.

Character leads to destiny, whether we speak of the character of an individual or the character of a congregation. The road between deeds and destiny is long enough for a few twists and turns. There are enough intervening steps to allow for destiny to shift in mid course. Thoughts lead to deeds. Deeds lead to habits. Habits lead to character. Character leads to destiny. I look forward to participating in the unfolding of your destiny. May it be so!