



**North Shore Unitarian Church**  
... discover meaning together

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*A sermon by The Rev. Stephen Atkinson, Minister*

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## WHAT? SO WHAT? NOW WHAT?

Sometimes I feel a little like a movie star. You know, how I keep assuming that something that I'm doing or have lived through is *obviously* interesting and relevant to *everybody*. So I pull out my anecdotes to spice up my sermons and feel gratified when you laugh or cry on cue in empathy with *me*. And then *you* thank *me* afterwards! But, who am I kidding, this is no small part of why I wanted to *be* a minister! So, here I am star-struck with myself thinking that, not just an anecdote from my *life*, but the weird process of writing a *sermon* might hold some interest and relevance for you.

You see, awhile back I came across an old guideline about how to approach writing a sermon. It says that every good sermon should answer three questions: "What?" meaning what is the basic point you want to get across. Then, "So what?" meaning why do you want to make this point, why here, why now, what makes it important. And, last, "Now what?" in other words, what are you calling upon people to *do*, what is the response, how can people act now that they've got your point? As I read that again I started to think it was a good way to approach *living*. Doesn't every day offer us many opportunities to ask and, at least some of the time *answer*, these three questions?

Some people are blessed to be able to ask and answer these questions as a natural way of being; they live in a constant state of openness to what life will bring, to what it means and to what it asks of them. You who are such souls, whether you see yourselves this way or not, are deeply thoughtful, spiritual or meditative; you live not by impulse or by reaction, but *in response*. You live mindfully, both *in* the moment and *aware* of it at the same time – making just enough space between those two to know there are questions to be answered.

Most of us move between degrees of awareness and deadness – which can be as subtle as habit, or distractibility, or obsession; because of these we get only some of the information some of the time. When a moment is noticeable enough, we do stop to ask the questions, "What? So what? Now what?", and respond from the best part of ourselves that we can, at least for as long as seems necessary, and then we frequently slip back into the easier ways of habit.

There are others of us who ask and answer these questions a little too quickly. Meyers-Briggs testing is one of many ways to make useful generalizations about personalities and styles; it's often used in corporations and

seminaries! Someone has put together a humorous description of how people with different Meyers-Briggs types pray. I haven't seen the set of all of them, but I do know the one for *my* type. It goes something like: "Oh Lord, Thou art Great and – oh look! A butterfly!!" Now, that's a bit *too* open to asking, "What? What?" And I've been known to settle for the simplest answer to "So what... does this mean?" and the easiest answer to "Now what... should I do?"

There are other problems we can have in dealing with these questions. Some hint of awareness is trying to get through to us. (*flat, neutral*): "What?" We don't really want an answer; we hope whatever it is will just go away. "What? Oh, *that!*" The way our world is these days, the demands on our attention are so often unimportant that we miss the times when they are. Consider a woman having a tendency to heartburn who knows that if she pops a Tum and just waits awhile, it dies down. Then, one day, the heartburn feels a little odd; she pops a Tum, but it doesn't go away when she expects it to. She chews another Tum, and then notices the oddest sensation in her left shoulder. She rubs it a minute, takes another couple of Tums, but it still doesn't go away. And then she starts feeling short of breath. Wouldn't now be a good time for her to stop and really ask, "What... is happening to me?"

Sometimes we ask the question while resisting the answer. September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 was the first day of classes the year I returned to university full-time. That day I discovered that university students tend not to watch the news at all, let alone in the morning. I was watching the footage of the World Trade Center actually collapsing, but had to get to my first class; a friend of mine was already there, so I sat beside him and told him what was going on. "What?" He kept saying, "What?" as though I were speaking a foreign language. His mind couldn't accept the answer. Oddly enough, that was a multi-media class called "The Power of Images", and there we all were that day, unable to believe what we were seeing because the images were *too* powerful. During the class, I kept thinking the prof should just abandon the introductory lecture and roll a monitor into the classroom: it would have been the most powerful lesson she ever taught.

If we actually ask the question, "What?", and get an answer, we don't necessarily move on to "So what... does this *really* mean?" The woman with the heartburn might recognize that she's experiencing symptoms like a heart attack, but still say, "Can't be. I'm too young... I'm lean... I exercise 5 times a week." More than two decades ago – I emphasize the length of time because people can grow, you know? – the man I had been seeing for almost a year confronted me about what he saw as a big problem in my behavior. My response? "So what? All my friends are the same. It doesn't have anything to do with you. So what?" Asking in that tone says you don't want an answer. It says, "Shut up! Go away. I don't want to know what you mean." I totally missed the blessing that he was offering me by telling me the truth.

Even if we get past “So what?”, whether we’ve answered it accurately – “These symptoms mean I’m having a heart attack” – or inaccurately – “The opinion of this man who’s seen me almost everyday for a year is meaningless” – if we get past “So what?”, we confront the question, “Now what?” This is the next chasm to cross between information and realization. Again, the woman with the heart attack: “Should I go to the hospital? No, I’ll just lie down a minute; I’ll be all right.” And me: I didn’t like the message, so I shot the messenger. I broke up with him.

Life offers us every day *many* opportunities to answer these three questions, but we don’t always want to deal with them. This is called denial. To avoid such questions and their accurate answers is to deny reality, and to deny reality is to choose not to live, but to be dead, or at least deadened.

Denial is a reaction or emotional defence that we usually associate with outright, full-blown addiction. The kind that everybody else can see immediately, but the addicted person claims doesn’t exist. For this reason, historically, denial was considered a very ‘primitive’ defence by psychoanalysis. It only happened in very disturbed people. But denial can be much more subtle than that.

In fact, the early analysts who described the process, including Freud, were themselves in deep denial – for instance, about women and the fact that women develop entirely differently from men. So the early analytic theories about women were bogus because the analysts themselves were in denial about female experience. Why was that? Because their whole culture was in denial about female experience. That’s how subtle denial can be – we can *all* share it to the point that the truth disappears from almost everyone’s consciousness. Then, it’s not just very disturbed people who are in denial – it’s our whole culture.

I see Canadian culture emerging from denial pretty quickly; how could it not when we face crisis after crisis. There is good news in the bad news. We break out of our denial of our history and representatives of our First Nations speak in harmonized voices in Parliament. We finally weigh our garbage, and some cities ban bottled water. We measure the arctic ice cover, and previously unthinkable environmental initiatives are placed on the table for large-scale implementation. Some want us to move faster in better directions, but we must admit it is very difficult. Even though we can act independently, we’re to some degree hog-tied by what surrounds us; we really don’t want to drive SUV’s, but we can’t take part in the soccer carpool unless we do. We want to eat organic food, but it’s so expensive, or worse we want to eat locally grown food, but it’s hard to come by. Just try buying Canadian made clothes! It’s a dilemma.

And those important problems can seem relatively small when we’re beset by questions and resistance more intimately. Our deepest relationship might feel dead; nothing real has happened between us and the one we love for far too long; we don’t know what the problem is, or we know but we don’t know what it

means, or we know what it means, but we can't face making a decision. Or we know that *we're* the problem, but we don't know why or what to do. We either continually fail to do what we must, or we keep doing what we mustn't. We don't know what to do about *ourselves*. It is so tempting to give up; to avoid; to deny.

Yet, there is hope, for what happens over and over is that someone or something at just the right moment gives us a chance to ask these questions, and this time a window opens in us to reality, to truth, to life. I told you about the man who said what I didn't want to hear and couldn't hear; for whatever reason, a few months after ending it, I came to ask myself, "What... What is the problem?" Something brought me around and I knew that he'd told me the truth. That made me see what I had been doing, and the fear of facing that led me to seek to change.

Moments like these are spiritual awakenings in us, which isn't to minimize that they are also psychological breakthroughs: there's a clear cognitive component – we start to think differently; there's a perceptual shift – we start to see things differently; and then we find a new way to deal with life. If we have only that breakthrough, still wonders begin to occur. But there can be more.

If we allow the awareness to sink fully in, spiritual changes can start happening quickly. We can be opened to a new level of interacting with the universe – with oneself, with others; the meaning of life can shift and that can alter our relationship with all that we find ultimate.

My awakening brought me back into contact with spirit, but I wasn't the same; in fact, for awhile, I tried returning to previous spiritual ideas and practices, but I realized quickly they weren't right for me anymore; my whole being rejected them. As the Bible parable goes, I was receiving new wine, and the old vessels were inadequate. Instead, I found a new and much larger conception of Reality and thereby a very different way of being part of All That Is. As I had evolved as a person, so had evolved my ability to see and relate to the Goodness in all the Universe. And it has not stopped evolving.

Does that mean I'm free of denial? No way. I still lose perspective and direction; I can get stubborn and attached to what's bad for me. I can be baffled by what's going on in me, yearn to know the answer and resist the truth all at the same time. What's different now is that it doesn't have to be this way, and that I know it won't remain this way forever.

Now, some days I ask "What?" and know what's what. On good days, I ask "So what?" and understand what's important and why. On really good days, I ask "Now what?" and take the right action.

May it be so, as often as necessary – for all of us.