

Vestry Visions

We have many talented and thoughtful members. My friend Mason Olds is among them. I asked him to write something following conversations we have had about Sartre.

Unitarians, Existentialism, and Morality

In 1945, Jean Paul Sartre gave a lecture in Paris attempting to explain his understanding of Existentialism. He began by drawing a distinction between essence and existence. If you think of a time before there was a paperknife, there must have been a being, a man who thought it would be nice to have a paperknife. He conceives of it and makes it. In this case, he contends that essence precedes existence.

Likewise, in western religious thought, we find a similar type of reasoning. God conceives of humans and then he creates them. So here also essence precedes existence. But Sartre challenged this line of reasoning. He reasoned if God doesn't exist there was at least one being who came prior to his essence, a being who had not yet been defined, namely man.

Sartre explains: "Man first of all exists, encounters himself, and surges up in the world — and defines himself afterwards. "Humans begin as nothing and must make themselves into what they wish to become. A man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself. That is the first principle of existentialism."

Now to turn to the present. If we read our daily newspaper, we cannot help but feel some anxiety about what's taking place in our nation and world. We have much confusion about what are the facts and what are "false facts." Sartre would say that each of us must look within ourselves, decide for ourselves, and act for

ourselves for the answers to the momentous problems confronting our state, nation, and world. They are too important to turn over to others to provide the answers, for it is through our private acts that we define ourselves.

Each of us has the obligation to make ourselves. We are not already fully made. We make ourselves by the choices of our morality, and we cannot but choose.

Thank you, Mason. Hopefully, our choices and our actions will reflect the love that defines us. Happy New Year!