

The Meaning of Life – Success? Relationships? Religion?

Rise & Shine, February 9th

Hebrews 11:1-3

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the people of old received their commendation. By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible.

Questions:

1. If someone asked you “Where do you find meaning?” how would you answer?
 2. Is it misguided to find meaning in work over relationships? Relationships over religion?
 3. When is a time that you experienced a spiritual awakening?
 4. Why do you think people are seemingly losing meaning in their lives?
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In the News

The Question That Explains Almost Everything

If you want to understand a human being or the human condition, what is the single most important question you should ask?

Most religious people would probably ask, "Do you believe in God?" In these politically divided times in America many may think the question, "Do you support Donald Trump?" would do the trick. Others might include "Do you support abortion rights?" or "Do you support gay marriage?"

As important as all these questions are, in attempting to understand human beings, especially large groups of human beings -- i.e., their society -- the most important question to ask is "What in life gives you the most meaning?"

The reason is this: After food, the greatest human need and human desire is meaning. Psychologist Viktor Frankl posited this in his classic work, *Man's Search for Meaning*. While Karl Marx saw humans as primarily motivated by economics; Sigmund Freud saw humans as primarily driven by their sexual drive; and Charles Darwin saw us as primarily driven by biology; Frankl's assertion that humans are primarily driven by meaning rings most true.

As regards economics, poor people who have meaning can be happy, but wealthy people who lack meaning cannot be. As regards sex, people who do not have a sexual life (such as priests who keep their vow of chastity; many widowed and divorced older people; and others) but have meaning can be happy. Sexually active people who do not have meaning cannot be. As regards biology, there is no evolutionary explanation for the need for meaning. Every creature except the human being does fine without meaning.

The problem, however, is that just as the need for food has no inherent moral quality, the need for meaning has no inherent moral quality. Meaning can be found in evil just as it can be found in good. Nazism provided millions of Germans with as much meaning as helping the dying in Calcutta provided Mother Teresa. Killing the "Christ-killer" Jews gave some medieval Christians as much meaning as saving Jews gave some European Christians during the Holocaust.

Traditionally, people have found meaning in their lives through community, family, or religion. As for community, a vast number of Americans – of every age – have lost ties to any community. This is a major reason for the epidemic of loneliness that afflicts so many Americans (and so many others) at the present time.

In terms of family, more millennials are living at home than ever (largely due to economic reasons), but they are marrying later and having kids later (if they have children at all) rendering the meaning of family different, if not less important.

Perhaps most troubling to churchgoers, three-quarters of baby boomers describe themselves as Christian while only half of millennials do, with 40% identifying as spiritual "nones." This leaves work as the primary source of meaning for many people. And others find little or no meaning at all.

However, anyone who has experienced a spiritual awakening knows that life isn't meaningless. Spiritual awakening doesn't have to be a big moment of conversion or a sense of being born again. Often it is a sense of "rightness" about things when looking up at the sky and sensing something benevolent in it, a harmonious atmosphere. Or sometimes it is a feeling of a kind of radiance filling the landscape around us, emanating from the trees and fields. We can sense meaning flowing between us and other people – as a radiant connection,

a sense of warmth and love. We feel glad to be alive and feel a wide-ranging sense of appreciation and gratitude.

In our highest and clearest states of being, we perceive a meaning that we sense is always there and that somehow, we previously missed. When our awareness intensifies, and our senses open there's a sense of returning home – to meaning. The question is then, how we can help the millions of Americans struggling to find meaning in life to “wake up.”

Romans 12:1-2

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

1 John 1:1-3

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us— we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.

Prayer for the Future of the Human Race (BCP p.828)

O God our heavenly Father, you have blessed us and given us dominion over all the earth: Increase our reverence before the mystery of life; and give us new insight into your purposes for the human race, and new wisdom and determination in making provision for its future in accordance with your will; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*