

The Meaning of Life: Is it Found in Religion?

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Blurb: In pursuit of the answer to how we find the meaning of life we will exercise the fourth Unitarian Universalist Principle: “We covenant to affirm and promote a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. And yes, there will be a quiz.”

How off-putting is it to come to and hear someone talk about some little, obscure issue like ... THE MEANING OF LIFE? Hey, that could even be a title for a movie – especially something wild and absurd like a Monty Python movie. Yes, on one hand, “The Meaning of Life” is a cliché. Some people give up even trying to understand it – so they make a joke of it – THE MEANING OF LIFE! In our reading today we heard various views, both flippant and serious, by prominent and not so prominent people as to what life is, or what life means.

But on the other hand, although we joke about it, like we joke about so many uncomfortable topics, we know – deep down – that we have just one life. We know we are using it up, day by day, year by year – and just what the heck is this life about? Is there a purpose to our finding ourselves here, now, on this little blue planet, in a cold universe dotted with nuclear furnaces? That is the cosmic reality. Where do we, where do our individual lives that mean so much to us, fit in. If we can grasp the meaning of life we will understand why we are, and why we are here, now.

So, here is your chance. You were warned that there would be a test. This test comes at the beginning of the talk, so you can not get a bad grade for not paying attention. Please, without “google-ing” on your smart phone or asking your neighbor, answer this fundamental question by completing one of the two sentences on this sheet: “Life is ...” or “Life is like...” This could be your opportunity for philosophical immortality.

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[Write all or some answers on paper chart. Review and comment on some.]

Let’s face it. Human beings, from the earliest archeological evidence, are concerned with the meaning of life. From exploration and digging in all parts of the globe we know that people pursued the *meaning of life* and its reverse side – death. It is remarkable how virtually every culture, no matter how remote from other cultures, came to concern itself with the big questions – where do I go after my physical body is finished? Where was I before I inhabited a body. Our human ancestors, disconnected from each other in all parts of the world, often spent great resources on making the dead, especially the well-to-do dead, comfortable in whatever place

they were headed. As confirmation of the seriousness of their beliefs – people were accompanied in their graves by spouses, servants, horses, jewelry, and were provided with food for the journey. We have observed the evidence of these practices in Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia, Asia, North and South America, and beyond. Even today some people talk of the grave as a temporary resting place until they are raised from the dead and taken to a mystical place in paradise.

Human conceptions of life have not changed that much over the years. We come to accept the idea that life must have meaning – but – WHAT DOES IT MEAN? Does all of this physical complexity – cells, DNA, living beings, minds, roses, jellyfish, all nature – exist for NO REASON? In view of the lack of answers from the natural world, human kind has felt that a supernatural world is needed. Supernatural justification is employed to answer unanswerable questions. The great theologian Paul Tillich wrote: “My religion is the answer to the question of which I am.”
[repeat]

Religion is defined in many ways. I submit that a person’s deepest and most thoughtful response to the question of what life means can be a definition of her’s or his religious perspective. But if any one religion actually answers the big questions, and provides a satisfying and rational answer to the question of the *meaning of life*, then why are there so many religions and branches of religions. A global religious survey has counted over 10,000 distinct religions. The Christian religion itself has over 33,830 denominations.

I discovered a fascinating page on the Internet. It seems that the State of Texas executes a lot of people. They clearly hold the U.S. record. So far in 2013 almost half of all U.S. executions have been in Texas. (In total executions since 1976 Virginia is in second place, even ahead of Oklahoma.) Anyway, the Texas Prison Bureau proudly maintains a web page that lists all the people the State of Texas kills. It lists their name, their number, their photo, their crime, and some biographical material. You can click on their last words, the very thing they want to say in the moment before they know they will be killed. I read through many of these final statements feeling choked up. To me, these last words, in the sober moment just before they make their final exit, could be a clue to how they see the *meaning of life*. One guy’s last words, for example, were, “Warden, let ‘er rip.” Another one, Texas Prisoner #999467, Richard Cobb, said: “Life is death. Death is life.” Now there is a perspective on life that ended up defining Richard Cobb’s life. Life is Death. Death is Life. Richard was executed on April 25.

In thinking about this, I have been looking at the many perspectives on the meaning of life. People adopt beliefs based on their own personal perspective of *the meaning of life*. A person’s perspective, and the resulting belief – call it religion if you like -- defines their lives. Let’s look at a few --

- *Life is just a prelude to death. Get all you can and spend it fast because we’ll all be dead anyway, so it doesn’t matter.*

- *Life is a test. We are being judged, and we will be judged finally at the end of life, or on "judgment Day," to determine how well we did on our life test. If we did well we will be eternally rewarded. If we did poorly – no reward. Maybe even eternal punishment.*
- *Life is just a pursuit of fun, good food, comfort, and cheering for my team.*
- *Life is about escaping from life's inherent boredom and finding excitement. Risks, however dangerous, are better than living a humdrum existence.*
- *Life has NO meaning – so what?*
- *Life is an opportunity to contribute to making the world a better place. Such people enjoy trying to make the world a better place, futile or not.*
- *Life is an amazing and rich experience. Somehow we are derived from star stuff and we are enmeshed in a wondrous and mysterious web of existence. We don't know why we are, we don't know why there is something rather than nothing, but we are enjoying the ride with all of its bumps and challenges.*

Each of these perspectives on life has its own upside and downside.

- If you see life as a just a prelude to death you will spend your life focused on death. Seems like a waste of life.
- If you see life as a test you will spend your life just trying to pass the test. Such people are likely to live a life of frustration – constantly trying to achieve unattainable perfection.
- If you see life as just the pursuit of fun you are in for heavy disillusionment when the fun – inevitably -- runs out. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC) is reporting a remarkable increase in suicide among adults 35-64 years of age. According to the CDC report: "From 1999 to 2010, the age-adjusted suicide rate for adults aged 35-64 years in the United States increased significantly by 28.4%..." It's at about age 35 and onward that the fun runs out and the routine, the cares and the frustrations of life set in.
- If you see the meaning of life in finding excitement and taking risks, at some point one asks what is the meaning of living from thrill to thrill? Becoming habituated to thrills can be a great source of frustration. What can I do to top this?
- If you see life as having no meaning, and you could care less, you are a candidate for misanthropy and nihilism.
- If you see life as depending on faith in some outside, supernatural source, you can come to doubt that source when things go wrong.

These perspectives on the meaning of life, un-moderated, can all lead to the big three Ds: disillusionment, depression, and despair.

Closing –

Obviously, by process of elimination, I am attracted to the two positive perspectives:

- *Life is an amazing and rich experience. We don't know why we are, we don't know why there is something rather than nothing, but we are enjoying the ride with all of its bumps and challenges.*
- *And, Life is an opportunity to contribute to making the world a better place.*

I see a big difference between the meaning of life in a general sense, and the meaning of an individual life. Life, in the general sense, may be a cosmic accident. Or, maybe not. We just do not know. But our individual lives can, and do have meaning. We, each of us, are the ones who give our life its meaning. We have the wonderful opportunity to awake from our torpor and say, “yes, life is a rich opportunity to love, to be loved, to explore, to learn, to be amazed, to feel, to touch, to taste, to experience life’s highs and lows.

If one believes that life has no meaning, life may have no meaning. On the other hand, if we are able to discern the meaning of our own life, our perspective may point us to – as Socrates described it – the “examined life.” By examining our lives, by looking for its meaning for us, we have nothing to lose. We might find peace and equilibrium.

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