

Chapter 11

The Meaning of Life

Some subjects have become so clichéd and goofy that, perhaps, the only way we can discuss them is by being just as goofy. Given that, we might as well get this “Meaning of Life” thing out of the way. It has become a preoccupation with my “boomer” generation, especially those on the wealthy and listless end of the spectrum. Unfortunately, with so many involved in this latest “Grail Quest” it has turned into a running joke for a variety of professional commentators, as in late night comics, cartoonists (guru on the mountain) and, last but not least, jaded social scientists (like me). The bargain basement humor dished out by all of the above springs from the obvious futility of looking for something that either doesn’t exist or, if it does, exists in so many forms that none of them is worth finding.

Of course, this hasn’t deterred an entire industry from gushing forth to promote a variety of paths, usually spiritual, toward achieving the desired result. Most involve the teachings of various swamis, gurus, shaman or ancient religious scholars (preferably from the mysterious east) to help us in pursuit of the ultimate goal, which, apparently, is finding “inner peace through enlightenment”. Indeed, if you’ve got a few bucks in your jeans you can attend select gatherings with these holy people or spend time at monasteries, ashrams or back to nature retreats where you can meditate, fast, and primal scream at each other. And no doubt you will emerge feeling peaceful and enlightened, even if you are still confused about what the meaning of life is.

Well, if your voyage has run aground and you see nothing but ignorance on the horizon you need go no farther. I am here to answer the question. Life does have meaning and I am about to impart to you this secret of the ages - get ready, here it comes - drum roll please - the meaning of life is... sex, intercourse, getting it on, the horizontal mambo, or whatever your favorite terminology is. I’m not joking. We are living creatures that have existed in one form or another since the primordial soup. Evolution has brought us to our present incarnation and the reason we made it here is because we are ardent and successful procreators (a less than ideal word choice but it reads better than the more popular alternatives). In fact, we are the offspring of millions of years of ardent procreators.

As science informs us, ad nauseam, a species survives because having a large and varied population of ardent procreators prepares them for whatever changes are occurring in their environment. It's a bit more complicated than that with minor mutations in each generation creating variability throughout the species, and natural selection choosing members of the species whose variations are best able to help them survive, and prosper, in a changing landscape... but they still need a strong desire to procreate or their special variation is dead in its tracks. We have done that. Arguably, as the dominant species on Earth we have done that better than all other species since day one. We are the best procreators ever.

Now you know why every time you turn around procreation is staring you right between the eyes. It is used to sell every product, every activity... it understates or is blatant in everything we read or watch or talk about; music, dance, literature, television, movies, gossip, even the news, why else should we have to endure night after night of lurid details when some beautiful young woman (usually white and blond) is kidnapped or raped or murdered. Far greater tragedies are taking place every moment of every day and we don't hear of them because they aren't sexy. Why do you think the good guy always has to get the good girl in the movie? If the evil, ugly, little guy got to leap on the blond virgin it would revolt us to the bottom of our chromosomes. Why do you think trillions of dollars are spent every year on our personal appearance? Why is what car we drive, or what neighborhood we live in, or what money we make, or who our family is, so important - sex appeal. It is the world's largest consumer product... by far. We are absorbed by procreation. And why not, that is how we got here, and that is how the next generation will get here.

There are flies in the ointment. Occasionally cultures attempt to hide this particular aspect of our animal nature. When I was young sex was dirty and we weren't allowed to see it, read it, or even talk about it. Sex was bad, except for married couples making babies, and it wasn't to be enjoyed. That would be sinful. Victorian morality, cultures outlawing hormonal drives, nurture condemning nature; it was a dark age and I'm glad it faded while I could still get in on the good stuff. But Victorian morality was just a blip on the screen compared to what we are dealing with now.

Sex has been the meaning of life from the beginning of time until... until I was born, or, more specifically, until my parents generation and my generation combined to change the world and make it far less predictable and safe. Now there are more people on Earth than the Earth can support, at least in the lifestyle we want it to support, (I hope you read my "Overpopulation" essay) so the meaning of life is changing and cultural imperatives are providing so many new meanings for life that we are adrift, confused, stupefied (to borrow from Harry Potter).

In the good old days achieving success in life was about producing children and seeing them grow and prosper - and eventually produce children of their own. Now you have to accomplish something else. In fact, the children you produce may actually be contributing to a problem. I'll bet you don't want to hear that. So what now? What is becoming the new meaning of life?

I know the answer, again, (I'm a know-it-all - but my wife still puts up with me) so here goes... the new meaning of life is - another drum roll please - whatever you want it to be. Sounds weak, I know, but it works. In our highly sophisticated, technological world you now have the ability, and freedom, to create a comprehensive individual reality. You can decide on - or invent - your own truths and build them into your environment. Whether your particular truth, and the special environment you create to support it, exists within four walls, a computer hard drive, or a chemical formulation, it is your choice and, furthermore, you have the ability to overlay this special reality onto the entire world and make it as real and as much a part of your life as you need it to be. With relatively few resources you can totally submerge yourself in this constructed reality and virtually shut out all competing realities.

Everyone does this already and always has on a small scale. Fantasy is a part of everyone's life; the Walter Mitty in us is alive and well, however, new technologies are magnifying the scale. The ability for each of us to seek out and fulfill our personal needs within that fantasy is growing. And it's happening at the same time as our attachment to family and community is weakening. Never has life been more impersonal and anonymous. Every day you are constantly being reminded how few people you really know, and really know you, in this busy crowded world. Do you seek out a community to be part of, or create one? It is now your choice. Why go to all the effort and personal vulnerability of finding a love-of-your-life partner to sacrifice for and create and raise children with in a world that doesn't need more children? Why not just find someone you can enjoy having sex with who has a compatible fantasy or, at least, one that doesn't conflict with yours? Look around, the answer may be closer than you think. It's not an original idea.

If you question my sincerity in believing the meaning of life to be, "what ever you want it to be", you would be wrong. It is not a facetious way of saying that life really has no meaning. Even if I do believe we have evolved to a point precariously close to habitat saturation life still has value, perhaps more so than at any other time in our existence. New technologies have raised the learning curve and given us more knowledge, a greater understanding, and a vision of the infinite diversity - limited only by our imagination - that encompasses the human condition. From this we have learned to see the potential for joy and satisfaction inherent in every human being. Life has never been more precious.

Having and raising babies may have been what we were created and designed to do by evolution but we have evolved beyond the bounds of evolution. We have reached a state where we can feed and nurture our imaginations, and construct realities that satisfy individual needs however sublime or driven. We still can't ignore each other. We remain intimately connected because threats always exist, at every level of society, which require co-operative action to overcome. Yet, who is so all knowing that they can sit in judgment over a life lived within itself, and say that it has no meaning. Think of the freedom gained in such a life. The only bounds are within your ability to nurture your imagination. If you are truly looking to find something meaningless or selfish, check out the people who understand this situation and continue to encourage child production as a means of promoting their religion, or skin color, or cultural identity. They are by far the greater threat to a secure and successful life for future generations.