

PREFACE: WHEN MEANING BECOMES A QUESTION

Does life have meaning? Before the question is asked, we live in a state of innocence. But once the question becomes a question, once we ask whether life is meaningful, there is no turning back. The possibility that our lives may be pointless leaves us naked and vulnerable. All of us seek a life of meaning and purpose, but finding such a life is difficult.

Thoreau was wrong when he observed that most of us lead lives of quiet desperation. Most of us, I think, lead lives of denial. Like children passing a graveyard, we hold our breath as we pass the shadow of meaninglessness that darkens our lives. The image evoked by the nineteenth-century preacher Jonathan Edwards in his sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God”—being held precariously by a string over the vapors and fires of hell—becomes for us the feeling that we are dangling over an abyss of meaninglessness. Denial is better than the alternative: if the heights are frightening, don’t look down. How could we go on living if we were to admit that life is utterly meaningless?

For those who have experienced meaninglessness, words of explanation are unnecessary. For those who have not, words of explanation are insufficient.

“Why?” is a simple, childlike question. Someone dies, a friend has a baby with a birth defect, or we read about a devastating flood in Indonesia, and we ask “Why?” Harold Kushner’s 1981 best seller *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, written after his three-year-old son was diagnosed with a deadly degenerative disease, was a heartfelt response to the question. In such cases, we are not so much seeking a scientific explanation or cause as asking for a reason or justification. Without an ability to answer “Why?” such catastrophes remain unassimilated and without meaning.

If the *why* question emerges in response to specific losses or tragedies, it also arises when we look at our lives as a whole. Does my life, with its joys and sorrows, loves and betrayals, add up to something meaningful? If called upon to justify my life, how would I answer? What would I say if I were to write my obituary? Was my life meaningful because I lived in conformity with God’s law, because I made a billion dollars in the stock market, or because I found a cure for cancer? When the urban commuter on her daily drive to her cubicle confesses that her life seems meaningless, she is not responding to a specific event or tragedy; she is saying something about her entire life experience. Questions about the existence of God and life after death are, at root, questions about meaning, the presumption being that if they exist, our lives are somehow meaningful.

How do people go about answering the question of whether their lives have meaning? How do they find meaning in their lives? These are the questions I pursue.

Many popular books attempting to answer the meaning question adopt a single, authoritative approach. Thus, for example, people identify the elements of a purpose-driven life in scripture and Christianity. In contrast, *The Search for Meaning* studies the range of options people have used to invest their lives with meaning. As we shall see, the question of meaning does not have just one answer. How people discover purpose, how they define a “meaningful life,” and how they go about attaining it differ from one person to the next and, indeed, for the same person depending on age and circumstances. The way meaning enters the life of a Native American may be radically different from the way it arose in the life of a scientist working on the Manhattan Project. The question “What is the meaning of life?”—implying as it does a single answer—conceals the many ways meaning reveals itself. Because people invest their lives with meaning differently, my study does not offer or advocate a single answer. Rather, it takes a step back to examine the *various* ways people have gone about answering the question, whether mythical, philosophical, scientific, or other.

In so doing, *The Search for Meaning* addresses two audiences. First, it speaks to those who are engaged in a personal quest for meaning. We all want to answer the *why* question, just as we all want to forge a life with purpose and meaning. For some of us, the answers provided by traditional religions no longer work or, worse, seem to work only for the most extreme and fanatical believers in our midst. As a result, many are looking for new ways both to understand and to answer the question of meaning. The history of meaning discloses both old and new examples of and tools for finding meaning in our lives. Second, the book addresses students who want an introduction to the study of meaning. Meaning is a central and defining question in both religion and philosophy. More than

that, it is a key to understanding major currents in Western thought. By examining how people have invested their lives with meaning, we come to see how they answer other questions in their lives as well. “Why?” is asked of events and lives, but it is also, for example, the foundational question in ethics: Why do this rather than that? Why be good? Meaning is thus a vehicle for introducing students to the fundamental epistemological, ontological, and axiological dimensions of religion, philosophy, and ethics.

Addressing students may seem incompatible with addressing those engaged in a more personal, existential search. The student’s interest in knowledge appears at odds with the pilgrim’s desire for enlightenment. But, as will become clear in this study, pragmatism and postmodernism have undermined this conventional division between objective and subjective knowledge. They have shown us how even the most objective study is infused with personal interests and biases. As an introductory text, *The Search for Meaning* offers accurate and authoritative descriptions of the various approaches people have used to find meaning. But as a postmodern work, it also openly acknowledges that the impetus for the study is a personal quest. Setting aside the pretense of uncontaminated objectivity, the book readily admits references to *I* and *me* and *us* and the more personal, engaged commitment those words suggest. I hope this approach will enable both of my audiences—students and seekers alike—to see the intimate relationship between scholarship and personal interests more clearly.

VIOLATING A LAST TABOO

To admit that a text in religion or philosophy also expresses personal interests violates both academic and cultural boundaries.

Talking openly about meaning and meaninglessness is one of the last taboos. The question of meaning makes us uncomfortable.

I discovered this several years ago. Over lunch with a group of software and electrical engineers, someone asked me what I was currently reading. I hesitantly mumbled in reply that I was reading about meaning, as in the question, "What is the meaning of life?" An embarrassed, awkward silence followed. Interspersed between casual conversations about politics, morning traffic, and housing prices, my words had suddenly, unintentionally conjured up a ghostlike presence, which everyone felt but no one was comfortable talking about. Once the question was asked, we couldn't pretend it hadn't been uttered.

Like talk about other taboo subjects, talking about meaning both repels and attracts. Conversations about meaning and meaninglessness sound grandiose and audacious. If my companions had been less polite, I can imagine their saying, "You're going to tell us the meaning of life. Yes? Is that it? And while you're at it, how about a cure for cancer and a unified theory of the universe as well!" Our era is distrustful of and uncomfortable with high-sounding abstractions that tend to begin with capital letters, such as Truth, Reality, and Meaning. Speaking of these things elicits the same awkwardness many of us feel when we attend a funeral. We may follow the solemn rituals and evoke the timeless prayers for a better life beyond death while secretly wondering to what or to whom we are praying and doubtful that anything exists on the other side of the grave. We are nominalists despite ourselves: *meaning* is a name or category, but we can't help wondering whether it really denotes anything substantial, as the word *horse* denotes the animals that run in the Kentucky Derby.

Evoking the question of meaning also repels us because those who possess a sense of meaning too often seem fanatical. It would appear that, as W. B. Yeats observed, “The best lack all conviction, while the worst/Are full of passionate intensity.” The terrorists who flew into the World Trade Center uttering the words “Allah is Great” were filled, I am sure, with a sense of meaning and purpose. They did not question whether life was meaningful; indeed, an intensely meaningful life led them to murder and death. If living a meaningful life means fanaticism, then who can blame us for falling silent when someone broaches the subject of whether life has meaning? The meaningful life, no less than a life without meaning, has its dangers.

For the engineers with whom I was talking, there were also philosophical reasons for the taboo. The question of meaning is not immediately practical in the same way as a question about relieving traffic congestion, increasing sales, or accessing our e-mail remotely. These are the sort of pragmatic *how* questions with which our age is most comfortable. In contrast, we are uneasy with the more contentious *why* questions evoked by the challenge of meaning. Tactical questions are easier than strategic questions: determining the means of getting from Topeka to Seattle is easier than explaining why getting from Topeka to Seattle is important. What’s more, efforts to resolve the *why* questions seem interminable and subjective, because there is no agreed-upon or measurable basis by which to validate an answer. Without verifiable facts and measurable data, our answers are based on arbitrary feelings or opinions. I say life is meaningful, someone else says it’s meaningless, while many others—including my silent companions perhaps—would say that the question itself is altogether useless, because inherently unresolvable. Our

vocabulary for speaking about and resolving the question of meaning is limited and halting.

Finally, if talk about meaning is useless, it's also embarrassing and subversive. To ask "Does life have meaning?"—and, even more so, to offer an opinion on the subject—is enormously self-revealing. To say "I wonder if my life means anything in the end" is to invite concerned friends to ask whether you are depressed or unhappy. "Is everything all right?" they will ask. The language of doubt itself assumes that life should be meaningful; meaninglessness, after all, is the absence of a more normative meaning. Similarly, to ask whether life has meaning is subversive because it implies that the meaning we are *supposed* to find in life—as defined by parents, Church, career, culture, and politics—is found wanting. To ask whether life has meaning is to challenge and subvert the legitimacy of the answers others provide.

Alternatively, to say "Yes, I think life has enormous meaning and purpose" is to risk being labeled a Pollyanna or a member of a privileged minority unacquainted with poverty and injustice. Asking a question about a historical fact or what Plato said about art or virtue does not suggest the same level of intimacy and personal engagement as the question of meaningfulness. We are reluctant to talk about meaninglessness and meaning because of what it may reveal about us. Like comments about sex and money, I can't say much about whether life has meaning without saying something about my own experience. And so, fearful of exposing ourselves to others, especially in connection with such an intimate yet critical subject, we remain silent.

If we are thus repelled by speech about meaning and meaninglessness, on the one hand, we are nevertheless drawn to it, on the other, almost like a biological urge. "Is life meaningful?" is an

essential and inescapable human question. We are less human when we fail to ask it. What if the universe is meaningless? Wouldn't that change everything? Isn't the concept of meaninglessness an abyss beyond which we cannot imagine? On a popular level, the persistence and tenacity exhibited by opponents of evolution express an unwillingness to accept the meaninglessness implied by the proposition that we are here for no better reason or higher purpose than random selection. If the greatest fear of liberals is fanaticism, the greatest fear of conservatives is meaninglessness. Once asked, the question of meaning is inescapable, and the answer—however we may answer it—never seems settled. We go along merrily from day to day until someone close to us dies unexpectedly in an accident. One's efforts to create a happy family end in betrayal and divorce. One is young and vigorous, and then old and infirm. Experience would seem to compel us to be utterly without hope, but then someone says, "I love you," or holds your hand. Martin Luther King Jr. emerges to confront injustice. The Boston Red Sox win the World Series against the Yankees in the seventh and deciding game. Miracle of miracles! Suddenly, the world seems whole again, full of grace, full of meaning and purpose.

The question of meaning—or, more accurately, the search or nostalgia for meaning—preoccupies much of nineteenth- and twentieth-century philosophy, literature, and theology. One thinks of the lineage stretching from Nietzsche to Hemingway, Sartre, and beyond; indeed, it is difficult to think of a prominent twentieth-century writer for whom meaning has not been a defining question. The very prominence of these authors and the fact that so many gave them a hearing testify to the longing of the age to which they spoke. What's more, questions of right

and wrong, the existence of evil, and the need for redemption are secondary to the question of meaning. What do these questions signify if the universe itself is meaningless? Even if we are reluctant to talk openly about meaning, we are nevertheless drawn to read and note the talk of others—from a safe distance—just as people who avoided speaking about the taboo subject of sex in the 1960s were secretly thinking about it and reading Masters and Johnson's *Human Sexual Response*. People both want and don't want to talk about the presence or absence of meaning.

WE ARE AMPHIBIOUS CREATURES, BETWIXT
AND BETWEEN

The Search for Meaning is predicated on two assumptions. First, the meaning otherwise available in our culture—including that offered by historical and institutionalized religions—is no longer persuasive, and, second, living without meaning is unacceptable. This book thus looks at the landscape in between, a place where we are comfortable neither with what seem the false or hypocritical answers provided by culture nor with a life lived existentially in an otherwise meaningless here and now. In both cases, we yearn for something more.

By confessing to the first assumption, we simultaneously confess an experience of deculturation and join the ranks of those whom Colin Wilson called “outsiders” in a book that was an overnight sensation when it was published in 1956.¹ For whatever reason, we are in league with those exiles for whom the itch for meaning and purpose is not soothed by sports, a career in the ascendancy, or the achievements of our children. Even if all our wishes came true, we'd soon become bored, satiated, and

discontented with our lot. Adam and Eve, after all, were malcontents even in Eden. No entertainment, no degree of affluence, no relationship can silence the small, insistent voice saying, “What’s the point?” We and everyone we know will die and fade from memory. The earth is only a futile and insignificant dot in the expanse of time and space that is the universe. Like Tolstoy, I wonder how people can live knowing the futility of life and the indifference of the universe. Can we live happily only so long as we deny the question?

Of course, like many others, I looked to religion for answers to such questions in my youth. Sin, salvation, accepting Jesus as my “personal savior,” and earning “eternal rewards” all had something to do with the answer, although I was never quite sure how. Christianity provided great solace and comfort for others; it just didn’t work especially well for me. Attending a seminary served only to provoke more questions. Eventually, I became an outsider to Christianity, as well as to American culture, and increasingly I could take nothing for granted about my beliefs. “Question authority” was the mantra of my generation. My beliefs about the world and about what was real and false thus became an impediment to faith. And, too, I must confess, I didn’t feel particularly sinful and in need of salvation, or at least not the type of salvation one gained by believing in Christ. If I didn’t do “bad” things, it was not because I thought I was going to burn in hell if I did. All of this is to say that I did not find in Christianity an immediate or simple answer to the question of meaning.

While finding conventional Christianity inadequate, I did not—like many others—abandon the search for meaning along with my juvenile understanding of religion. I began looking elsewhere for examples of how people invest their lives with

meaning—or, perhaps more accurately, I began to acknowledge that meaning might have sources other than Christianity and the historical religions. As a consequence, I often, though not exclusively, define religion functionally as any set of symbols and rituals that provide a sense of life meaning and orientation, regardless of whether they are drawn from traditional religions, philosophy, psychology, or aspects of an otherwise secular culture, such as sports or popular entertainment. The question of meaning signifies a religious search, but it is also a philosophical, psychological, and mythical search, to the extent that each of those disciplines asks similar questions about what constitutes the good and meaningful life, even if they answer those questions in fundamentally different ways. I have chosen to discuss the question of meaning outside traditional religious categories—at least initially—simply because for some people the conventional religious symbols and categories no longer have currency. (I define religion ontologically and thus more conventionally—and see what difference that makes—in chapter 8.) However legitimate or even true it may otherwise be, the conventional theological language of sin and salvation, predestination and grace, may fall on deaf ears. In a secular, technological culture, people may stumble toward a sense of life meaning without necessarily seeking it in conventional religion. Many seek to be “spiritual” without being “religious.” The question of God and the question of meaning are thus distinguishable: people can find meaning without looking to a conventional deity. This book is accordingly about a search for meaning rather than a search for God.

In *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael begins his adventure by describing how, in the drizzly November of his soul, he finds himself “involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses and bringing up the rear of

every funeral I meet.” In a similar fashion, I have found myself pausing involuntarily over passages in my reading and conversations about meaning and purpose. The book that follows is the result. Others may be drawn to the business pages of the newspaper or to the calculations of quantum physics, but if, like me, you are drawn to questions of meaning, then this book is for you. Because we can’t take the world for granted, because we find ourselves wondering why there is something rather than nothing, we insist on an answer to the question “How do people—and, in particular, how do I—invest life with meaning?”

Paths and journeys are familiar images in accounts of spiritual searches, including the search for how people invest their lives with meaning. Meaning is not only something we once had but have now lost; meaning is also something toward which we are always moving. In that movement, we can always benefit from a good guide. Accordingly, I acknowledge the good guides on whom I have relied, and who are referenced in my notes and bibliography.² In their company, we are no longer solitary, isolated exiles; on the contrary, we are more like apprentices at the beginning of a great adventure, novitiates of a great mystery. What the French mountaineer Gaston Rébuffat (1921–85) said about becoming a climber applies equally well to a study of meaning:

I often think of [the master guide] Moulin and how he initiated me. I have now made rather more than a thousand ascents in all seasons. I sometimes have the feeling that the mountains are my domain, and yet, each time I break through the invisible barrier, although I “feel” very good, I am always aware of a slight trembling inside. As Moulin “knew” all those years ago, I “know” now. But even if I had climbed every mountain by every route, I should never know everything about this world I love. I shall be always on my way.³