



Auckland Unitarian Church  
Love beyond belief

## The Meaning of Life

Clay Nelson 18 June 2017

When I came up with the title for this sermon, I was in one of those moods. Perhaps, it was an upcoming birthday that had me in a reflective state of mind, but beyond that it was off the cuff. I had definitely not thought it through though, as I made the title a statement, like I had clue to what the meaning of life is, instead of a question. So, if you came this morning thinking you would leave with the definitive statement as to the meaning of life, I apologise. You will leave disappointed.

But I will say that not having a definitive statement leaves me in good company. Plato to Monty Python have given it a go, but not only philosophers and comedic geniuses, theologians, religious and political leaders, psychologists, scientists of all stripes, sociologists, and mystics from all cultures throughout history have as well. I suspect that when evolution produced the first humanoid with a frontal cortex, she asked, “Now what? Why am I here?”

The range of answers is wide and varied.

Plato argued that the meaning of life is in attaining the highest form of knowledge, which is the Idea of the Good, from which all good and just things derive utility and value.

Socrates’ student, Aristippus of Cyrene, a hedonist, believed happiness is life’s purpose. It is found in pleasure. He preferred immediate gratification to the long-term gain of delayed gratification; denial is unpleasant unhappiness.

Zeno the Stoic taught that the meaning of life is freedom from suffering and our emotions lead us down that path and are to be suppressed.

Folks like John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Adam Smith found meaning for existence through labour and property.

Fredrich Nietzsche, a nihilist, argued that life had no meaning. Albert Camus asserted that the absurdity of the human condition is that people search for external values and meaning in a world which has none, and is indifferent to them. He called on people to be nihilistic heroes, living with dignity in the face of absurdity.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century saw radical changes in our concept of human nature, thanks to scientific and technological advancement, two world wars, and the Great Depression. Various approaches to answering the question arose.

Pragmatic philosophers suggest that the practical, useful understanding of life is more important than searching for an impractical abstract truth about life. William James argued that truth could be made, but not sought. To a pragmatist, the meaning of life is discoverable

only via experience.

Theists still abound in the modern and post-modern age. They believe God created the universe and that God had a purpose in doing so. Theists also hold the view that humans find their meaning and purpose for life in God's purpose in creating. Theists further hold that if there were no God to give life ultimate meaning, value and purpose, then life would be absurd. Nietzsche and Camus, who considered God to be dead, would agree.

The existentialists hold that each man and each woman creates the essence, the meaning of their life; life is not determined by a supernatural god or an earthly authority, one is free. As such, one's ethical prime directives are action, freedom and decision.

Secular humanists, in reaction to the theists, determine human purpose without supernatural influence; it is the human personality that is the purpose of a human being's life. Humanism affirms our ability and responsibility to lead ethical lives of personal fulfilment that aspire to the greater good of humanity. Humanists find meaning in promoting enlightened self-interest and the common good.

Logical positivists find no meaning in even asking what is the meaning of life. Only the individual can interpret what their life means.

This is just a sampling of answers to what is the meaning of life, for instance, I haven't mentioned the answers all of the world's religions have to offer. But, I would not want to leave out the shortest answer to the question. Any of you who have hitchhiked around the galaxy with Douglas Adams know that the answer is 42. It took a giant supercomputer seven and a half million years to answer the question. Since I only have another ten or fifteen minutes I doubt I can come up with a better one.

Instead I would like to ask why has the search for meaning kept humanity awake at night since the time we first became conscious and self-aware? Why is the question constantly nagging us?

Certainly, part of the answer is we are the only living creatures, as far as scientists are aware, who knows we will die someday. We may not know the when, where, why or how, but there is no doubt about our eventual demise. That certain knowledge generates anxiety, if not fear. It also raises the question of how to give meaning to the life we have before we are consigned to history. We need to believe there is some purpose to it all, unless we have committed ourselves to the nihilist's world view. That they might be right is one of our secret dreads.

We want to leave some mark on the world that says this life with all the joy and suffering it entails mattered. But we have all seen that picture of the Milky Way with an arrow point to a small white dot on one of the outer arms of our galaxy that is 3000 light years from its centre. The caption reads, "You are here". It certainly deflates any self-importance we might feel.

Feeling inadequate, we keep asking the question hoping that some ultimate authority will give us the answer of how to live a life worth living; that puts the lie to our insignificance.

Without that authority, we are left to our own devices when we have to navigate our way through the myriad of decisions we have to make each day. What should I do? Should I do

this particular thing or that particular thing? It is as if one were at a crossroads, facing four possible options, and one thinks, what is the right thing to do? What is the right step to take?

Many of us have a GPS on our phones and/or in our cars now—global positioning systems—that interface satellites with maps to locate where we are and how to get from where we are to where we are trying to get. In a clear, pleasant, mechanical voice it talks to you, saying things like, “Left turn approaching, 200 metres.” Or, when you take a wrong turn, it says, “Recalculating route,” and sets you right back on track. And when you get to your destination, it says, very satisfyingly, “You have arrived.” A GPS is all we are asking for when we raise the question about what is the meaning of life. Is that too much to ask for when seeking spiritual guidance? A clear answer to what is the meaning of life that tells us to make this particular choice or gives us clear directions for where we should go and how to get there.

But as appealing giving up responsibility for life choices may be it turns out we make meaning as we walk along. There is only choice: the choices we make, their consequences for our lives and relationships, what they say about us, and to what extent they enable us to live to the fullest of our capacity.

Michael Leunig captures this truth in his poem called *The Prayer Tree*, he writes:

While we stumble in darkness  
the heart makes our meaning,  
And offers it into our life and creation,  
That we may give meaning to life and creation;  
For we only give meaning,  
we do not find meaning,  
The thing we can't find is the thing we shall give  
To make love complete, and to honour creation.

That's right: We don't find meaning, we give meaning.

When I worked at the Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento there were banners around the sanctuary. On each was a symbol of a great religion or philosophy or science that has offered meaning to people from time in memoriam. But my favourite was the last one which was blank as if it waited for me to give it meaning.

There are days when the choices seem clear and easy to make. The stars are aligned and I feel confident about my direction and where I am headed. Then there are the days where I start out confident but unexpected obstacles arise or I take a wrong turn and feel hopelessly lost. The worst days are when I have no clue as to what choices to make and am immobilised, unable to take the first step. How I long to ask Siri to show me the way.

But I'm not really totally without resources on such days. I may not have GPS, but I have an inner compass. We all do.

The compass needle doesn't point southwest to indicate that you should turn southwest and then switch to due south when that's the better way to go.

The compass simply shows us in what direction lies the earth's North Pole. The point of the needle is drawn toward the north because it feels a magnetic attraction to north. That's all the compass does for us. North is the only thing it reveals. What we do in relation to that knowledge is up to us. We can move directly toward it, we can turn in the opposite direction and walk south; we can keep north in the corner of our eye as we move in an easterly direction. You can tramp upstream along a winding creek bed that meanders first this way and then that, but always moves generally in a northerly direction.

If we were to understand "north" as a spiritual metaphor, what does north signify? And if the compass's needle is also a spiritual metaphor, what is it in us that is drawn to the north?

Bring to your mind a time when you felt spiritually grounded, when you felt that your actions flowed from a sense of being at home in yourself, being at one with your best self and your truest values. Can you play a scene out in your imagination, a scene in which you are spiritually centred? What happens to your breathing as you remember or imagine this? How do you feel in your body? In the scene in your imagination, what is the quality of your interaction with others? What's the feeling in the room? What emerges from your choices or your interactions?

This might begin to give you a sense of your "true north." The question may not be, "Should I choose A, or B or C," but rather, "What happens when I move and speak and consider the situation from a place of my deepest spiritual centeredness?" Another good question is: "What kinds of choices enable me to stay more spiritually centred, more attuned to my true north?"

A compass places greater responsibility for awareness and choice in our hands.

We may think of discernment as all about making the important decisions in life—changing jobs, having a child, getting married or ending a relationship, etc. But the path of discernment is more about developing an awareness of our inner sense of truth, an inner feeling of rightness or wholeness, a capacity to sense our deeper yeses and our deeper nos. This is the compass needle within us.

As we develop an awareness of what greater or lesser well-being feels like, as we learn to distinguish when we are moving toward or away from that well-being, we develop a foundation for truer choices. We find north by becoming attuned to a sense of sacredness or wholeness—within both ourselves and others. When we lose that sense of our true north, or feel cut off from it, when we can't sense in which direction our wholeness lies, the choices we make may not be informed by what is best for ourselves or others.

So, I leave you with a different question than what is the meaning of life? Instead, what meaning will you give life?