

Is Their Meaning to Life?

“How to gain, how to keep, how to recover happiness is in fact for most people at all times the secret motive of all they do.”

William James

Caveat

Subjects related to whether or not we believe there is meaning to life encroach upon areas where our most cherished and deeply felt beliefs reside. These subjects can be rife with subliminal judgment and as a consequence they can be literal minefields of discrimination. It's a healthier, happier place when we recognize we can rise above the embattled arenas of emotionally charged opinions that well-meaning others have stuck in our head. Learn, listen, reflect, and observe without succumbing to mental conflict.

Personal Evolution

A large part of the personal growth each of us must make in order to gain a happier state is in learning to suspend judgment and allowing ourselves the freedom to investigate life with an open mind. How else can we learn things outside the box of our existing reality? How can we access new and better ideas to improve our lives if we pre-judge things as unworthy, unacceptable, or worse? The walls of our prejudice are real. It is not easy to see the boundaries we've imposed upon ourselves, but they absolutely exist. And that's true for all of us.

The more evolved we become, the less frequently we will be offended by different points of view. It is only our ego that takes exception, gets insulted, or is irritated by conceptual positions that seem to be in conflict with our own. It is fine to have opinions, although if we suspended many of them we'd probably be better off. When we hold opinions we should not allow them to be so etched in stone that we cannot neutrally reflect on other perspectives. This is especially important where contrary points of view are sincerely made and based on thoughtful consideration.

Is There Meaning?

Few things have the power to impact one's sense of value, and hence one's happiness, like the question “Is There Meaning to Life?” The mere asking of this question points directly to the issue of one's personal spirituality, or lack of same, and/or one's religious observance, convictions, social obligations, and so forth. These highly sensitive elements of who we are have great influence over our automatic response system.

From my perspective, those without a sense of meaning in their lives are adrift on the fickle sea of public opinion. This is not a statement about religion, but it is a statement about one's own spirituality. Those without meaning are without an anchor properly set in safe moorage. When the sea changes of our external life combine with the tides and currents of our unresolved insecurities we are in danger of capsizing. There are times in all of our lives where the winds of diversity blow and howl about us. Yet, where there is confidence born of meaning we are able to hold fast and avert disaster. Without a sense of meaning we are lost.

When our life is bound up in the external world and we've not developed a pure place of peace and calm within us, and adversity produces pain and suffering. This understanding is mirrored in an interesting message from the Dalai Lama:

“Pain is inevitable, suffering is optional.”

Left unaddressed the loss and lack of meaning in our lives can degenerate into our losing all reason for living. A sense of meaning is critical for a good life.

Viktor Frankl was perhaps the best known psychiatrist of the last several decades. His memoir, *Man's Search for Meaning* has riveted generations of readers. Within this particular book, of the 30 he wrote, Frankl describes his life in the Nazi death camps. Before the camps were liberated by Allied forces, 27 out of every 28 persons so interned would die. Every person was confronted with their own likely death, every day. This unimaginably horrible and dramatically stressful environment spurred the genius of Dr. Viktor Frankl. Frankly was to observe again and again throughout his life that without meaning we are not fully human. Without meaning we slide into animalistic proclivities, losing grip on the most uplifting of human attributes. Like Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha) twenty-five centuries earlier, Frankl argued that all of us will encounter suffering, but what it does to us is our decision.

Insecurity

Psychiatrists are well aware that Americans appear to be less emotionally secure than their European counterparts, even though they enjoy a more financially secure environment. This seems to be because Americans have more of everything tangible but have less meaning in their lives. Notwithstanding America's collectively high religious participation, there is a subconscious fear amongst a great many of us that life may have no real meaning.

Where there is a lack of meaning in people's lives it is frequently covered over with a desire for power. Our ego believes that if we have power then others will respect us. This chain of thought continues with the belief that when others show us increased respect we must have greater value. It is a fundamental tenet of

psychology that most of us garner our sense of who we are, and our sense of personal self-worth, through *what we think others think about us*. It is not what other people think about us that so powerfully affects our sense of self-worth, it is what *we think* others think about us that is so forcefully impactful.

The most primitive form of the will to power, other than the obsession with physicality, is the will to money. Money is the subliminal source of power. For those desperate to prove their value, both to themselves and to others, the accumulation of wealth is subconsciously seen as the most direct route. Most of us will have also observed the reverse of the possession obsession. Take away a man's source of income and you may see something akin to the collapse of his personality. A man's feeling of self-worth is typically a function of his ability to earn. This is not necessarily so for women, but it is rapidly coming to this juncture.

Although it is politically inappropriate to say it, up until just a few decades ago women tended to traffic on their looks, men on their pocketbook. Men sought the "trophy" wife as confirmation of their prowess. Women tended to seek the security of a man's wealth and the influence of his position. Many men feeling monetarily inadequate stormed the gym to put on muscle, believing this was the second best way to attract a trophy woman. These tendencies still continue, notwithstanding the huge gains in education and employment made by women in particular. So, what's the point? If one looks at this situation with some honesty, we observe that those who are *obsessively* focused on wealth and physical appearance are essentially insecure. This insecurity is a strong indication that these personality types have no real sense of meaning in their lives.

Those who have become *obsessively* focused on wealth and physical appearance are essentially insecure. There is no sense of meaning in their life.

Insecurity is Fear

This is not meant to offend. The intent here is to face up to an underlying truth. Insecurity is a form of fear. Fear is not a source of meaning; it is the opposite of love. When we operate from a place of fear, we can get things done alright, but it does not engender peace, and it is definitely not the source of happiness. Do we dare ask ourselves why we really do what we do? Are we able to honestly and sincerely confront ourselves? Would a powerful conviction that there was greater meaning in our lives help to sort through this kind of thing?

The human brain is so structured that we are more easily motivated by fear than we are by the desire to improve. All of us are motivated by fears to a greater or lesser degree. Are we brave enough to ask what fears are having the greatest

influence in our lives? They're not always easy to recognize. Most of us are so used to suppressing our fears we don't look at them. In fact, most of us refuse to admit, even to ourselves, that there are subliminal fears controlling much of our behavior. We are so used to justifying our behavior to ourselves that we frequently do not even know why we do what we do. Let me share a personal story to illustrate this point about self-delusion.

Hypnosis

Almost four decades ago my wife and I sat in John Mackey's living room. John was a close friend, and we were in the habit of spending a good deal of time together. John was a scientist with doctorates in both physics and mathematics. (Years later he would go back to school and get a law degree) Many nights we came together exploring ideas about science and religion. The camaraderie was palpable, upbeat, and the atmosphere conducive to open communication and thought-provoking discussion. On this particular evening my wife Maureen commented that she had been trying to give up smoking with little success and was considering going to a hypnotist. John's wife Lana gave John a knowing look and shared with Maureen and I that John was actually a trained hypnotist. This was a real surprise as he had never mentioned this before. John then shared with us his concerns over the startling developments that had sometimes taken place with subjects under hypnosis. He had been seriously shaken by a few of these events. After several years of experience he quit practicing altogether and determined to not let others know of this past skill so he would not be called upon to perform parlor tricks.

John allowed himself to be talked into assisting Maureen but only if all of us were present. As it turned out Maureen was a good subject. Three nights in a row John put Maureen under three times each evening, allowing her to recall all but a few minutes of the half-hour or so she was experiencing deep relaxation. On the third, night two additional friends, David and Peggy Wilson were there in company with the four of us when Maureen commented that, while she was enjoying the restful aspects of each hypnosis session she was certain that she could remember everything that transpired and confided that she had actually never really been fully hypnotized.

Discussion ensued about how to best demonstrate to Maureen, once she was awakened from a session, that she actually had been hypnotized. If in fact, she had been. Under hypnosis Maureen was told that when John said the word "blue," after she was fully awake, that she would feel thirsty and ask Lana for a glass of water. The first swallow would taste like orange juice the rest of the glass would taste like normal water. It was a somewhat silly but a fun experiment. After being told to come completely awake, Maureen was again certain she had not been fully hypnotized and could remember everything that had taken place.

Actually, she could, except for the specific time when John had given her special instructions about the water and then asked her to block it out of her conscious mind.

Sometime later amongst the small talk that seems to be self-generating when good friends get together John mentioned the color blue quietly without the rest of us even noticing. Maureen turned and asked Lana if she would be kind enough to bring her a glass of water. Alerted by the request, the rest of us pretty much froze waiting to see what would happen. Lana asked Maureen why she didn't just get a glass of water herself. Maureen leaned over and began to rub her ankle saying she had a cramp. Lana got the water. Maureen took her first sip and immediately spewed it back out. She was shocked. What had Lana done to the water? Lana said she had done nothing. John encouraged Maureen to take another sip. Now it was water. Maureen was shaken and embarrassed. When she was told why what had happened had happened, she simply did not believe it.

Maureen was convinced we had all come together and rigged something on the lip of the glass to change the first taste of water. When asked why she had insisted that Lana get her the water she had a ready answer. It was Lana's house and Maureen had a cramp in her ankle. None of us could convince her otherwise. Maureen's subconscious mind had given her sequenced instructions of what to do but her conscious mind had come up with a completely reasonable rationale to explain the why of it. The reasons Maureen gave were not the real reason why things happened the way they did but she absolutely believed it. Not only was she not convinced that she had been hypnotized and told to ask for the water, but she was actually close to convincing the rest of us with her reasonable explanation. I was somewhat sobered to realize that my wife's mind had literally caused a cramp in her ankle in order to justify why when she felt thirsty she would ask Lana for a drink rather than get it herself.

We all agreed to do another experiment, but only after having to convince John to hypnotize her once more. He was concerned that he might inadvertently cause Maureen some downstream emotional damage. Maureen assured him she was fine and truly wanted to go through the process again.

The lights were dimmed, we were all relaxed and comfortable, most of us curled up in chairs or on a couch with shoes off. Once again Maureen went into a deep trance. John instructed her that at some point after she was awakened he would say a code word, which she would now block out consciously, but upon hearing the word later she would gather up my cowboy boots and put them on. Not satisfied that this was odd enough John instructed her to put the boots on the wrong feet. Once again Maureen was awakened and was completely convinced

she could remember everything that took place during her trance like state. And, again, she did recall everything that took place except for the direct subliminal instructions John had given and caused to be blocked from her conscious mind.

John waited almost a half-hour before giving Maureen the code word in the flow of a normal conversation. The Wilson's and I actually missed him do it and hadn't even noticed Maureen casually slipping my boots onto her feet. When John asked Maureen why she had put my cowboy boots on it snapped all of us to attention. Maureen replied her feet were cold. John asked why she put on my boots and not her shoes. She said they were larger and warmer. He asked why she put them on the wrong feet. She responded in dead earnest that "Terry is always telling me to quit turning my feet in towards one another or I'll breakdown my ankles, so I put his boots on to warm my feet and put them on the wrong feet to make sure it kept my feet turned outwards." I was stunned. Maureen was totally convinced that the reason she gave was honest, truthful, and completely rational. The rest of us knew she had done what she did because of a post-hypnotic suggestion. There was nervous laughter amongst us, but in truth we were all pretty shocked.

Maureen's conscious mind had complied with her subconscious promptings, but it had also produced a reason for why she was doing what she was doing. She believed the explanation fabricated in her own mind and she was pretty darn convincing in her explanation. Maureen would eventually realize that she was fooling herself, but it was not easy for her to simply discount the reasons she had come up with. So, what can we learn from this?

As the years have accumulated I have remembered this event again and again. Maureen and I would discuss it many times before her death, questioning ourselves as to why we do what we do. It became clear to us that we all participate in self-delusion to some degree. There are many applications for the strange insight gained from this singular event. But more than anything else I have found myself left with a series of questions. How often are we fooling ourselves? Can we dig deep enough to know the real truth for our responses to various situations? Do we really want to know, or are we more likely to tell ourselves comforting lies?

Sexual Excess

In addition to mankind's excessive focus on money and fitness, our unresolved desire for meaning is sometimes transposed into the will to pleasure. In this regards, Frankl states:

"Existential frustration often eventuates in sexual compensation. We can observe in such cases that the

sexual libido becomes rampant in the existential vacuum.”

A lay person’s translation of the above might be that when we fail to believe that there is meaning to life, we either become deeply depressed, or we launch into activities powerfully attractive enough that they direct our attention away from what is really going on.

It is worth repeating that where there is lack of meaning in one’s life it is frequently offset by a desire for greater power. This is a sobering thought. The obsessive pursuit of wealth and physical fitness says a lot about us. Of course, money is not bad, and neither is good health and physical fitness, but the obsession with either or both of these is a clear indication that one is subconsciously insecure and seeking external validation of their worth.

Special Note: Whenever you hear someone saying “I don’t care what others think;” or something to that affect, they are actually attempting to deny their underlying motivation. Secure people have no need to make such a statement. Only when one is feeling insecure about something do they feel the need to say such a thing.

How do we gain an unassailable security? One based on internal values not the fickle shifts in public opinion?

Time Alone

How many people are literally panicked to be by themselves with nothing to do for any length of time? To be in a situation where there is no immediate mechanism of distraction terrifies a lot of us. That is, if we care to admit it to ourselves. When left alone without a book, television, radio, or something to distract us, we must actually BE with ourselves.

Do you relish the opportunity to just sit for a couple of hours, comfortable with nothing more than your thoughts? Most people do not. Most people are bored with themselves and secretly may not like themselves all that much. This leads to other questions: Would you really enjoy being close friends with you? If not, why not? What might you do in these regards to shift your feelings to a better place? What thoughts that you routinely think need to be improved upon?

Many of us are so busy keeping ourselves busy that we lust over the freedom to just be. We are continually speaking to the need for having time for just us. And yet, when the opportunity to “just be” finally arrives, we tend to get a bit disoriented. We don’t know what to do if there is nothing specific to focus upon. Women seem to be slightly better at suspending action for brief intervals. Women

are generally quicker studies at meditation and better able to just lie on a beach doing nothing for a while. Men on the other hand, tend to have more trouble with inactivity.

Men subliminally define themselves through actions and results. And, for the most part, men need to find something to do in order to quickly distract themselves from themselves. We guys are so typically caught up in identifying with what we do and what we've done that suspending focus is sometimes impossible. As a group, we're pretty darn good at distraction activity. That can be something as simple as talking sports to mindlessly watching television. Left entirely to ourselves with nothing much to do but be with our own thoughts, is not *just* a bit disorienting, it can be disquieting to the point of frustration and irritability. In my experience, the only real exception to this fear of being alone with nothing to distract us from ourselves is when one has cared enough about this issue to learn how to think more deeply, meditate, and become friends with our very self. Not a high priority for the average western male.

Women may be better at sitting quietly without distraction, but neither men nor women are generally able to suspend thought and just sit for any length of time. The problem is our ego-mind takes over and runs amok. In the East they call this tendency, "monkey-mind." The simple truth is that the vast majority of us spend our lives distracting ourselves from considering the deeper questions and thinking deeper thoughts. We avoid quiet reflection because we find it both confusing and disquieting. Most of us are afraid to just be because this is exactly when questions like, "Is there meaning to life?" bubble up from our subconscious and frighten us with their implications. Other than undistracted quiet time, there are few motivations to direct us to considering the all-important issue of, "Meaning, and its correlative question: "Who Am I."

When a death arrives, or a crippling accident of some kind, they usually demand we stop the constant distraction and consider more deeply the meaning of it all. But even then, how many people do you know that will go way out of their way to find a reason to not attend a memorial service? Aside from self-absorption, what does that say about a person in this situation? Can't face death perhaps? And why would that be? No underlying belief in the meaning of it all? Another exception to our tendency to avoid the deeper questions is church, synagogue or temple attendance. But even then, most of us secretly view regular religious observance as more of a social obligation than an opportunity to think and feel deeply and communicate with our source, our creator, God. Of course, there are those among us who truly do relish time to commune with themselves, usually in a natural setting of some sort. God's cathedrals as it were.

The majority of us will at least acknowledge some desire, or yearning to watch the sunrise, the sunset, visit a quiet forest glen, or be one with God and Nature from a secluded beach, the deck of a sailboat, or almost anywhere we can quiet our internal voice and commune with spirit. All of us want a sense of meaning in our lives but when we are afraid that there really are no satisfying answers we are most likely to avoid the matter. It is almost axiomatic to observe that without foundational meaning, we are simply lost. We know this. That's why we avoid focusing on uncomfortable questions.

Meaning Requires Spirituality

When I first outlined the classroom presentation upon which this is based, I thought I would be able to avoid the use of the "God" word. Clearly, it is a highly charged term with different emotional associations for people of divergent backgrounds. To speak of God is to convey concepts at a spiritual, philosophical, emotional, and psychological level. And, although you may not think so, the word "God" means different things to different people.

This is something of a conundrum as an atheist may have, and probably does, a very different God paradigm than might a Christian Scientist, or than does a Roman Catholic, a Protestant, Greek Orthodox, Buddhist, Muslim, Hindu, New Ager, Evangelical, Mormon, and so forth. Nevertheless, to honestly and openly discuss the basics of happiness and its most important correlative (the importance of meaning in one's life), and then to disregard the spiritual aspects of human experience, is to ignore the elephant in the room. That's like pretending spirituality doesn't have anything to do with our personal happiness. It does. We know it does. Scientific research has proven this point again and again. We can deny it, but some form of spirituality is a vital component for virtually all of humankind. When we ignore it, the price is dear.

It has become clear to me that some form of spiritual underpinning is essential for ultimate confidence that there is significant meaning to life. By that I mean, every single one of us needs to find a spiritual center. And, whereas it is not absolutely necessary for one to attend a formal service of some sort, it is typically a more practical approach. If we claim spirituality whilst saying we are not religious, we may more easily fail to align ourselves with a set routine of spiritual focus. Far better to align oneself with a group suited to your emotional and spiritual progress and become fully participative. Spirituality requires devotion. The routine of regular service attendance helps us form improved habits.

Knowledge Increase

Science has provided us with a large cadre of ever increasing information. In the ancient world the sum total of all the information available to mankind doubled approximately every 500 hundred years. Notwithstanding the educational

slippage of the Middle European period, better known as the Dark Ages, by around the middle 1800's new information was coming at us at such an accelerated rate that we saw all the discoveries and scientific knowledge of mankind doubling every 100 hundred years. This was followed by a huge steepening of the knowledge curve as the total unique data of mankind began doubling in fifty years, then twenty, and finally every five years. Once the internet arrived and had become the effective communication tool that it is, the curve steepened once more. We now have good reason to believe that the total aggregate knowledge of the world is doubling every ten months!

Technologists continue to industrialize new scientific discoveries thereby providing us with a constant flow of newly developed goods, particularly in the world of electronics. However, neither science nor technology is able to answer the great philosophical questions that have intrigued all societies on earth during all periods of time. The great questions are generally considered to be: Who am I? Where did I come from? Why am I here? Where am I going?

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There are many other important questions to be sure, but these four seem to be *the* critical ones upon which everything else rests. Underlying these questions is the unspoken, but clearly inferred question: Is there meaning in life? Or perhaps, stated differently: What purpose underwrites our existence? For some, the answers to the great questions seem to be that we are simply a transitory sentient being comprised of materials made in the core of stars and that there is no purpose for our life. This point of view says essentially: We're going to die and physical death ends our existence. In other words, there is no meaning. Vladimir Nabokow, the author of the once controversial book *Lolita*, sums up this position thus:

“The cradle rocks above an abyss. Common sense tells us that our existence is but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness.”

Common sense may tell Vladimir Nabokow that there is no meaning or purpose in life but that does not reflect the common sense of most people. According to recent surveys over 90% of the world's population believes in Deity. In addition, more than 50% of scientists polled say they believe in God, or some definition of God that would reflect the underlying intelligence that science itself is now revealing as present throughout the universe.

Science, Religion and Spirituality

Science should no longer be viewed as an enemy to spirituality. Spirituality does not require religion, but that is the avenue most will choose, at least initially, to expand personal spirituality. Science, religion and personal spirituality, are finding reconciliation and real peace in the hearts of many, and that group is growing. True enough science and religion remain in conflict at the level of the zealots in either camp who see their private belief system as threatened by the other. These are they focused on what is wrong, rather than what is right about the other camp's point of view.

Do not buy into the science verse religion conflict. Rise above it. Open your mind and your heart. Dare to examine the essential beliefs that underlie your thinking and don't worry so much about what you believe others are thinking and believing. Focus on your own growth and development and let others do the same. Help one another as you can, but decline to engage in battles of opinion, they are rarely productive and frequently destructive. Recall that it is important for us to be focused on the positive, not searching for what's wrong with someone else's point of view.

Virtually every study done by psychologists where religion or spirituality are reviewed report that those involved in spiritually focused activities are physically and emotionally healthier than those who are not. In Dr. Martin Seligman's (1998 president of the American Psychological Association), statement from his book entitled *Authentic Happiness*:

“Religious Americans are clearly less likely to abuse drugs, commit crimes, divorce, and kill themselves. They are physically healthier and they live longer...Most directly relevant is the fact that survey data consistently show religious people as being happier and more satisfied with life than non-religious people.”

We are unlikely to ever know HOW everything in the universe works, but we can apply our understanding of WHAT works to the benefit of our personal lives. Everyone is benefited by introspection and a reverence for things greater than themselves. We all have a deep down desire for some element of spirituality. Even the dedicated narcissist, although they are more likely to fake it. Honesty dictates we recognize that sincere spirituality yields major dividends to the practitioner. It does not make any difference whether you are a scientist, an intellectual, philosopher, psychologist, or any other label you wish to brandish. You ignore spirituality to your great loss. On the other hand, just how you define spirituality and what it consists of is your choice.

Keep in mind that one does not have to understand how things work in order to benefit from them. How many people know how a microwave oven works, or how their DVD player operates? Most folks do not know how these things work, although millions know how to use them. The same could be said of spiritual practice. Why it works have psychologists baffled. Whether it works or not is no longer a scientific question. Spirituality makes a huge difference in the quality of one's life.

It is probably helpful to recognize that there is some form of hierarchy in the universe. Most of us can grasp that energy becomes physically material through some process. Science tells us that light-energy does sometimes progress into becoming subatomic particles. Subatomic particles, typically quarks, come together to bind into atoms. Atoms are very small, in fact, there are approximately a billion atoms in the period at the end of this sentence. That's small. Yet we know that atoms collect and compound themselves into molecules. Molecules seem to have a tendency to combine and become basic elements. Sometimes they aggregate and become living cells. It appears to be at this very point in the evolution of energy (some may call it "spirit") that energy either lives, in the classic physical sense, or is formed as inert mass.

We know that arms and legs exist. We know that cells exist. We know that atoms exist. We know that sub-atomic particles exist. And we know that below these particles all is energy. What does it mean? I don't know. Yes I do have ideas, but no I do not know. On the other hand, no one knows why gravity works the way it does. We do know that gravity works in certain and specific ways, and we can predict with absolute accuracy how things will be affected by the gravitational influence of mass. In a sense, spirituality is a bit like that...we can see that it can be a powerful influence for good and we can share our opinions on the why of it all day long, but the truth is we do not know the why of it, we only know that it does affirmatively impact all those with a balanced mind. Those suffering deep emotional scars and serious psychological problems tend to be lacking a sincere desire for improvement. At this stage of their evolution they have subconsciously decided to dwell in a state of suffering for whatever reason they have given themselves at some point.

If you are willing to face the great questions, then you are likely already involved in meditation practice, religious study, church, synagogue, temple, mosque attendance, or some form of spiritual endeavor. All of these spiritually focused approaches are effective as avenues through which to garner greater meaning in one's life. Most religious institutions are organized around their ability to provide answers to the disturbing whys and wherefores of our lives. However, as education levels rise and more people feel compelled to ask deeper questions,

some of the more dogmatic religious groups find it hard to support rigid spiritual interpretations.

There is much confusion in the religious world. Christianity alone has hundreds of different organizational bodies, many claiming different doctrinal positions. For the most part, each one of these “churches” takes the position that their interpretation of Holy Writ is the correct view. For the western world, Holy Writ usually means the Bible, but there are differences of opinion regarding even what constitutes those prophetic writings.

For most of us, our religious denominational affiliation was determined by our parents. We’ve generally accepted what we were taught at a young age and most will feel comfortable and secure in this place. On the other hand, there are determined investigators who seem driven by the nagging fear that no one really knows who we are, where we came from, why we’re here, and where we are going. We can always ignore the deeper questions. But eventually we figure out that the most obvious alternative to seeking spiritual enlightenment is the same position that paleoanthropology espouses: “There really are no answers to these questions because we are only evolved animals sitting atop the food chain.” According to this view, we have no particular purpose other than to live, breed, and die. Hence, there is no meaning to life.

There are those who are truly atheists, or at least honestly agnostic. Many of these are perfectly wonderful people, highly educated, thoughtful, and sometimes a good deal further along emotionally than many religionists. On the other hand, the agnostic position has always been an attractive one for the emotionally guilty, those wanting to suppress conscience and justify actions. After all, if there is no higher moral authority, one is free to do virtually anything without pause, provided one does not openly violate society’s laws...or at least get caught at it.

Peck’s Phases of Growth

The typical way out of the religious - spiritual dilemma for most people is to simply not think about it. Others sidestep critical thinking by glibly claiming they believe in spirituality but do not believe in religion. Whereas this is a valid position for a growing number of committed spiritualists, for most it is simply a clever twist of terminology. According to author psychiatrist M. Scott Peck, there is a common pattern or evolution of spiritual maturation as follows:

Scott Peck’s Phases of Spiritual Growth

Stage 1:	Chaotic, antisocial
Stage 2:	Formal, institutional
Stage 3:	Skeptic, individual

Stage 4: Mystic, communal

Stage 1 represents our earliest stage of growth. Children are naturally self-focused and manipulative. Many never grow out of this developmental stage, they simply fail to graduate into social responsibility, the keenly narcissistic fall into this category, as do many of those in prison. For those wearing atheism as a cover for activities inconsistent with social fairness, they have not actually progressed and are still firmly rooted in Stage 1.

Stage 2 is where many of us accepted our parent's religious affiliation and evolved some concept of God. We likely felt spiritual promptings to some degree and saw God as the source of good and fairness. It is about this place where we develop fear of the judgment of God. Viewing God in terms of judgment and reward is where most begin their spiritual path. If stuck here, we remain as children, never gaining the greater insight that leads to the peace and happiness that exceeds all understanding. Fear is actually the polar opposite of Love, and a highly manipulative approach to spirituality.

When Stage 3 arrives as the result of honorable thinking, it is often because one challenges the goodness of God and fails to find meaning in life, i.e.: "How could a loving God allow all the unfairness in the world?" Many traversing the avenues of higher education get caught here. This is not an accident. Greater knowledge raises more troubling questions and many shrug their shoulders, quitting the pursuit of a broader grasp of the universe and our place in it. Eventually those in Stage 3 tend to evolve to...

Stage 4 is where enough of the more disturbing questions about faith are addressed to the seeker's satisfaction. There are few thoughtful, honorable, atheists that make it to the threshold of death without reconsidering the question of "meaning" within the context of life. The more one's life develops in the direction of love and compassion the more likely that a person will move through Stage 3 and arrive to a place of spiritual confidence.

Scott Peck's clinical experience demonstrates that there are people stuck in all three stages of spiritual development. Some are blessed to find the greater peace and happiness that only Stage 4 can provide. Some may be put off by Dr. Peck's use of the term "mystic," in his Stage 4 explanation, as they observe correctly that this word is the root of "mysticism." Prejudice abounds surrounding the use of this term. The renowned psychiatrist explains his use of the word mysticism, thus:

"Mysticism," a much maligned word, is not an easy one to define. It takes many forms. Yet through the ages,

mystics of every shade of religious belief have spoken of unity, of an underlying connectedness between things: between men and women, between us and the other creatures and even inanimate matter as well, a fitting together according to an ordinarily invisible fabric underlying the cosmos”

Peck’s explanation sounds a lot like the concepts of entanglement, the root mysticism of Quantum Mechanics.

Agnostics and Atheists

In my analysis, based on the research provided from multiple studies those that are numbered in the atheistic-agnostic group seem to break into three broad based categories:

- (1) Those claiming atheism due to governmental edict: North Korea, Cuba, China, and communist states generally;
- (2) The intellectual elite, who take the position that the biochemical evolution of life forms has pushed God into the realm of mythology; and,
- (3) The criminal and seriously disenfranchised of all societies, whose justification for violating law is their belief that there is no higher moral authority. (Prisons are filled with these people.)

It is interesting to note that in each of the world’s most populous countries a different belief system dominates. For example, China is atheist by government edict; India is predominantly Hindu, America is largely Christian, Indonesia is 94% Muslim. Christianity is the largest religious affiliation amounting to 33 percent of the world’s total population. Muslims are the second largest religious group. Muslims account for approximately 21 percent of the world’s population. The third largest religious grouping falls under the collective moniker of Hindu, accounting for about 13 percent of the world’s population. Buddhists are the fourth largest religious grouping accounting for 6 percent of the earth’s total population. The remaining 12 percent of the globe’s population is comprised of a mix of other religious organizations and affiliations. The National Geographic *States of Faith* article, in December 2007 issue, says:

“In the 20th century, seismic political forces altered the geography of religion when communist regimes declared millions of new atheists, and Europe’s Jews were dispersed or killed. Now the ground shifts again: Christianity is on the rise in Africa, China, and Russia, while Islam grows in Europe.”

All religious institutions are considered faith-based groups. However, even serious atheists must conjure considerable faith in something, i.e.: science, military power, money, influence, etc., in order to believe whatever it is he or she has decided to believe. Belief in science to the exclusion of everything else is still just a belief system. Almost anyone can point out that science is incapable of “proving” some of humankind’s most basic of experiences. For example, the emotion of love has been experienced by most, but it is impossible to put love in a test tube and prove its existence. From a strictly scientific paradigm one would therefore be forced to say there is no such thing as love because science has not been able to prove its existence. And remarkably enough there are a few who actually take this position. But, if you take this position you must then admit there is no such thing as happiness either.

Maps Verses Territories

The study of world religions from an historical point of view does little to give one much confidence that mankind has a solid grip on the great questions. However, individual study, prayer, and deep reflection on the great wisdom literature and the scriptural works of different religious disciplines, is another matter entirely. Remember, to learn about something is a mental or thinking function. We are then gaining information upon which we will usually form an opinion. However, to immerse oneself in the experience of spirituality is to understand it from an entirely different point of view. The two processes are akin to studying a map verses exploring the territory.

One might study the John Muir trail for example, learn the distances, consider the effort required to walk, carry, and camp, and then come to a conclusion as to the value of the actual experience. This would be in contrast to walking the deep forest glade, smelling the pines, crossing the streams, hiking the mountain trails, breathing the fresh clean air, seeing the mountain peaks reflected in the high clear lakes, spending nights in quiet reflection huddled close to a campfire. The first learns the turn of the trail by projected experience, the second by the doing. The first thinks he or she knows the experience to be had, the other knows. One process embraces all the senses including thought and emotions. The other is opinion based on thought alone.

Thoughts thought upon to the point of some form of conclusion progress to become opinions. Opinions replayed enough become beliefs. But thought alone is a function of thinkingness; it is not a validating experience. Experiences that involve the senses and the doing of some sort are immensely more satisfying to us. To know something experientially provides us with strong internal confirmation - in other words, the proof of the pudding is in the eating.

Learning about pudding is a very different thing than eating it. Discovering meaning in your life is an intensely personal experience; literally no one else can do it for you! It's something like explaining pudding to someone who has never eaten it. You can discuss the texture and taste of pudding, you can memorize recipes and become an 'expert' on the ingredients, but until you eat it, everything is purely conjecture.

The pudding example might be analogous to the bible scholar who has gone to seminary, can quote chapter and verse for all manner of subjects, knows the map, can quote the recipe, but has never walked the trail or tasted the pudding. One cannot study themselves into spirituality, although it may help in one's preparation. One must take the plunge and experience what it is like to go deep within, to be open without prejudice, to turn down outside distractions and listen for the spirit, to quietly mediate and await the answers to reveal themselves. This is walking the trail. This is the tasting of the pudding. Everything else is learning the map or studying the recipe. To evolve we must be prepared to both study the map and explore the territory.

The majority of people have probably had spiritual promptings at one time or another. Usually rather than follow these prompting on to the obtaining of greater knowledge and enlightenment we get sidetracked by the world, lose focus and become hopelessly mired in our work-a-day circumstances. Most of us, without really thinking about it, immediately give more credence to the outside world of our expected experience than we do the inside world of our translated experience. Perhaps that's because most religious participation consists of studying the map. Good but not great. True spirituality is found in the tasting of the pudding, living the deeply reflecting experience, walking the talk.

A Personal Understanding

My father was an educated man, schooled in the sciences, mathematics, history, and English. He claimed to be an atheist, although in actuality he was more of an agnostic. My father did not attend any form of religious activity, nor did he study any kind of religious material. My mother was also well educated; she was a generic Christian, not dogmatic or doctrinally focused, but definitely dedicated to honorable principles and regular church participation. My only sibling, a sister 6 ½ years my senior, is a brilliant woman. In addition to being one of the most wonderful women I have ever known she holds double masters and double doctorate degrees. Her religious leanings are Judeo-Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, and Shamanistic. I share this personal information as background to the next four paragraphs.

In my reality, there is powerful and significant meaning to each of our lives. To believe we have no eternal destiny is actually in direct conflict with the intuitive

understanding each of us have felt strongly at some time in our life. Turning one's back on the belief that there is significant meaning to our existence literally forces one to tamp down what our subconscious quietly tells us to the contrary.

I believe there is immense meaning and reason for being; probably much more than one can appreciate through traditional ways of learning. I did not gain my witness as to the meaning of life entirely through books, lectures, or church attendance, although they may all serve a worthy purpose. Rather, I received a personal and powerful spiritual witness that there is indeed extraordinary meaning to our lives. This undeniable witness of the spirit has come in many ways and at different times, but most potently within deep meditative (prayerful) states that result in what is now frequently referred to as an OBE, out of body experience. Shocked?

Many with children have surely experienced how they can play the strings of our heart so completely that we may sometimes find ourselves embarrassed by tears when there is no reason to be crying. I cannot explain this kind of love, but I know that it is real. I cannot address this intensity of experience with any kind of rational argument, but I have felt it move through me with great power. It is thus with deeply moving spiritual experience; you may not be able to explain it in terms understood by those who have not felt it, but there is no question that it is authentic.

Those extraordinary and uniquely mysterious revelations we may be privileged to have are beyond all language, yet in my experience they are completely genuine. In many ways, the unfolding of my most intimate spiritual moments still feel more vivid than anything that has transpired in my physical life. Therefore, speaking from direct experience, I offer my witness that there is purpose in our existence. And I've come to recognize that the meaning of life is absolutely saturated in love and beauty. I further testify that WE are the critical component and reason for everything in our physical world.

So again, why all this discussion about spirituality in an essay about meaning? Because the vast majority of us will at least partially define "meaning" in terms of a religious association or path of spirituality with which we can identify. And, this is good, provided we are careful to not allow our prejudice to misdirect our thinking into becoming critical of other's spiritual path. Criticism and judgment do not constitute spirituality. In fact, they are generally the very opposite.

The great religious leaders, those whose works and words have withstood the test of time, whether they be called Mystics, Lamas, Sages, Philosophers, Magi, Prophets, Apostles, Priests, Gurus, or Swamis, have each taught that the outside world does not hold our happiness. We are to seek happiness, the meaning of

life, and the kingdom of God, deep within our very selves. It is not out there somewhere outside of us, it is within.

In order to discover greater meaning in life and experience the enduring peace of happiness, we must shift our focus to one of profound gratitude. In order to do this we must suspend our immediate tendency to judge. (Criticism by another name) Once we learn to accept things “as is,” we’ll discover the capacity within us to truly love. This means we’ll want to forgive everyone for whatever it is we are holding against them. As we forgive others, we are automatically releasing our self-criticism. Then, and only then, are we able to love ourselves.

When we are doing good the Law of Attraction will unerringly return good for good. Focus on helping others and set aside life’s melodrama. It is only then that we begin to realize that the meaning of life is creation, love and happiness. Love is the power of creation. Happiness is the result.

Forgiveness and gratitude are the foundation of happiness. Period. Full stop. That is as simple and complicated as it is. Unless we forgive everyone of everything for the entirety of our lives until the present, we are stuck in a misery of our own choosing.

The MEANING of life is love and happiness. Love is the power. Happiness is the result.

verbum sat sapient est