

Our Pathways Into Deep Meaning
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given by
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I. Introduction:

I expect I'm not the only one here who has experienced what might be called "spiritual thirst"—and one that has not been completely quenched. At the heart of my own thirst has been a thirst for meaning. By that I mean --in the first place-- a thirst for experience that fills me up with a sense of meaningfulness, experience that feels deep and rich, that makes me feel fully and gladly alive. But I also mean a thirst for answers to questions like, "How should we live our lives?" And "Where lies our greatest fulfillment?" And perhaps even more sweeping questions like: "What, ultimately --if anything-- is this universe we live in about?"

My main approach to seeking answers to such questions has been to try to be attentive and faithful to the evidence—in particular to the evidence presented me by my own experience. In 58 years, I've had many and diverse experiences, but it is particularly a few powerful experiences of a spiritual nature --experiences that have inspired and guided my life's work—that have challenged me to make sense of them.

One of these experiences was just this past spring, and I'm here to discuss with you some valuable clues it seems to me to provide concerning those important spiritual questions of meaning.

But before we get to that recent visionary experience of mine, let's prepare the way by going a bit deeper into the idea of meaning as we experience it.

II. Meaningful Experience:

It is, indeed, the *centrality of experience* that I would like to underscore first. Meaningfulness is something that simply *has* to be experienced, or what use is it? You can show the most incredible beauty to a corpse, or to a computer—but what's the point? It simply doesn't register as anything meaningful.

What would be meaningful about hearing a Brandenburg concerto, or seeing a colorful sunset, if their beauty left us cold? What would be meaningful about gathering together with our families, if it evoked no love to fill our hearts? What would be meaningful about having a brilliant insight, if there were no exclamation point at the end of our "Eureka!"?

When we talk about “what gives our lives meaning,” therefore, we have to be talking about our “experience of meaning.” What’s meaningful has to register inside us in a way that we experience as mattering.

So if we ask, “what is the meaning of our lives?” I would say that the first place to start is to ask, “Where in our lives do we find deeply meaningful experience?”

Of course, we’re all finding meaningfulness to one degree or another all the time. We might rig up a meaning-ometer for everyone, like the focus groups do with audiences watching some politician’s speech, and we’d see that everyone is continually moving back and forth along a continuum running from feeling flat and without meaningfulness down into the depths of deeper meaning.

Along that path leading out of the mundane into deeper meaning, we might note three levels.

One would be the ongoing level, the places where —on a day-to-day or month-to-month basis— we feel more rewardingly and richly alive. Maybe it’s a morning ritual of taking one’s tea on the patio, looking off to where the sun is rising over the mountains, and feeling a sense that it is a blessing to be alive for a new day.

A second would be those experiences whose meaningfulness feels so powerful that a deep level they shape the course of our lives and our view of what life is about. Perhaps some life-transforming insight that frees one from destructive patterns, or an experience of intimacy that changes one’s one’s heart.

And then there is a third level. Here the depth of meaningfulness seems to go beyond extending a continuum toward simply “more” and rather to open up into another realm imbued with a special feeling of sacredness. These experiences —transcendent, they might be called, or mystical—seem to suggest that the world as we usually see it is not all there is. Polls taken in this country suggest that experiences of this sort are pretty widespread.

One interesting thing about our experiences at all these levels, with their meaningful “This is what life’s about” feeling, is that it seems that, in some sense those deep meanings are always there. Our ability to *connect* with them may come and go, but it seems that the experience is always ours for the taking.

Take for example an experience I had recently listening to the opening movement of Beethoven’s 7th Symphony. I’ve heard it a number of times. But for some reason, on this particular occasion, it touched me at a level of profundity way beyond anything I’d experienced previously. As I listened to Beethoven’s music, a visual image was conjured up in my mind—an image of “winged majesty,” an image of some beautiful divine force. It was a deeply spiritual space I entered, one that I felt certain Beethoven had entered before me and used his music to convey. Whether or not I am right about Beethoven’s vision, my own response was to music I’d heard many times before. The music, in some

sense, always offered me such a meaningful experience, but it was only on this occasion that I entered it.

Or another example. The night my first-born child was born, I went home about dawn and took in the mail. I was still aglow with the experience of meeting my new infant son, and so still too excited to sleep -- so I opened up my just-arrived *Newsweek*. There I read a story about a major disturbance in Bangkok, Thailand, in which some man had been lynched by a mob. I felt deeply moved –disturbed—at the story: what I recall saying to myself, giving expression to the deep meaning I saw in that story, was that “this man they killed was once somebody’s *baby!*” An idea that’s obviously true, but whose meaningfulness –the importance of every life!-- I experienced that day with unusual depth. The events of my night had opened my heart to recognize, at a deeper level, what the sense of meaningfulness transformed from cliché into important truth.

Which leads me to wonder about our relationship with meaningfulness in our lives: what is it that opens us up to it? And what is it that closes us off from it? Those questions are part of what can help us lead lives full of meaning.

I regularly walk in my neighborhood, which is at the foot of a range of mountains called the Sandias. I see the Sandias all the time, even out my livingroom window. One day, I see the Sandias differently. I see their great beauty, and I’m struck with what an incredible, gorgeous planet we live on! How glorious!

It’s always there.

But *what* is always there? Is the “It” that’s always there simply the *opportunity to respond* in a certain way? Or is it the *beauty* that was always there on the mountain, waiting for me to see it?

It’s that old “eye of the beholder” question: Are the “deep meanings” just something we *invent*? Or, when we’re really alive, do we *discover* them?

This question has felt important and engaged me for years. My recent visionary experience has moved me off the fence on that question. I’ve come down on the side of there actually being important values built into our reality—and what moved me was what I saw, and experienced, about what I call *our pathways into deep meaning*.

Let’s look at some of these pathways, which seem to be among the most important for people in their lives. Are any of these where **you** find your own most richly meaningful experiences, where you are filled with a deep sense of “Wow, this really matters”?

Have you ever been transported by an *encounter with beauty*, like the great naturalist, John Muir, who described after his first encounter with Yosemite: “Nearly all the upper basin of the Merced was displayed, with its sublime domes and canyons, dark

upsweeping forests, and glorious array of white peaks deep in the sky, every gesture glowing, radiating beauty that pours into our flesh and bones like heat rays from fire.”

Have you ever felt the richness of life open up to a new level through an *open-hearted connection with other people*—by falling in love, or by holding in your hands your just-born child, or by looking around the Thanksgiving table at the people closest to you, or by feeling in your heart something real and heartfelt corresponding to the abstraction “the brotherhood of man”?

Have you ever achieved a sense of being spiritually alive by getting into the flow of your own *creativity*, feeling things come together, under your hands, in just the right way? Or by marveling at the fruits of the creativity of someone else—the dramatic unfolding of a narrative by Dostoyevski, for instance, or the crystalline structures in which Bach expressed his passions, or the noble human ideals embedded in a Michaelangelo sculpture?

Have you ever gained a specially glowing sense of meaning from *living with integrity*—from living in a way that aligns your walk with your talk, or from living from the core of who you really are, being true to yourself?

Have you ever had an experience of *transformative insight*, a realization so powerful that it changed you—insight into the guts of your own life, perhaps? Or some insight that integrates illuminates some important part of the complex landscape (natural, socio-cultural, historical, etc.) in which we live our lives?

Is there some other pathway that’s been especially important to you?

III. The Strange Convergence of the Pathways

In the world we live in, simply calling attention to the importance of our experience of meaning might be of some value. So much of our attention is directed to the external trappings of our lives that it could be useful merely to furnish a reminder that it is inside ourselves where the quality of our experience of meaning must nourish us.

But I want to take this an important step further, and for this it’s at last time for me to tell you the story of my recent breakthrough. It is, first of all, a story about a surprise I experienced by traveling down that pathway that I called above “living with integrity.”

For the past couple of years, I had been focusing a lot of my life on an educational institution in which I was a teacher. It was a brand new career for me, and I felt fortunate to be able to try out this new adventure at a school that impressed me greatly with its quality, its dedication to fine and humane values, and its integrity. As a rookie and a new guy, I took the stance toward the school of: “Please teach me. I respect your knowledge and experience. I’m going to try to fit in as a good team player and learn how I can best contribute.”

Then the institution did something to me that, it was clear to me, was dishonorable and dishonest. I was shocked. For a brief moment, I feared I would be devastated. But then something else besides devastation happened: I was moved back into a deeper place in myself than the one from which I, in my ingratiating rookiehood, had been coming from. In this new situation, I discovered a great opportunity to act from that place, dealing with the people in the institution in a way that was imbued with some of the powers of my true self and deepest convictions. I spoke truth to people who had chosen, in one realm at least, to buy into fraudulence. I acted from my larger, and more loving self with people who'd chosen to be their smaller, more defended selves.

As I moved from this place of deeper integrity, I noticed that something significant shifted with regard to my whole spiritual condition. My engagement with people became more open-hearted; my sense of beauty became intensified (I began hearing music, for example, at a deeper level); my connection with my wife as a lover became fuller; my capacity to perceive, in creative ways, the vast web of interconnections of cause and effect in our incredibly complex world took off into new realms.

I became spiritually much more alive.

Over the course of my life, there had been two or three previous eras of my entering into a vaster and deeper spiritual place. One of these was brought about primarily by my having opened up to a deep experience of open-hearted love and how it sustained me through great fear. On another occasion, the pathway into the experience had involved a recognition of the sacred beauty of earth's living systems, and of the natural creature at the core of each of us. And now, on this most recent occasion, the way in seemed to involve my following the path of integrity.

In this present spiritual unfolding, it was an unexpected discovery that crystallized into a breakthrough moment. What I discovered was this: although my different episodes of spiritual deepening had happened from entirely different directions, ***they all seemed to lead toward very nearly the same place!***

Another striking thing I noticed was that even though it was by moving far down ***one*** of the pathways that I had come more deeply to spiritual life, ***the further down any one of the paths I went the more all the others seemed to open up to me!***

This way the different pathways seem to "bleed" into one another reminded me of something I'd noticed when I was much younger. When I fell in love, the flowers seemed markedly *more beautiful*.

I had an "all roads lead to Rome" impression of the structure of this spiritual terrain. In other words, I had a feeling that there was a vast space toward which all these different paths into deep meaning ***tend to converge***. The more I opened my eyes to beauty, the more I opened my heart to love, the more I came from the core of my being, the more I devoted myself to the path of righteousness, the more I opened my mind to

encompassing insight, the more I saw the beauty of it all... All these dimensions worked synergistically, infusing my whole being with a spiritual energy filled with an overflowing sense of meaningfulness.

It was as though there were some intense “heat source” embedded down at the fundamental level of our reality, and the further down one moved spiritually down a pathway –whatever pathway—the more infused all of experience became with that radiating heat.

It was as if the further one went down any one of these pathways –beauty, or love, or integrity, or insight, etc.—the more they disclosed themselves as *aspects of the same thing*.

Indeed –and this is the core of the thing-- at this moment of unfolding breakthrough insight, I grokked what this “same thing” might be. I could perceive a pattern, a common element, that united these apparently diverse pathways, that seemed to be the heat-source that radiated that spiritual quality infusing each kind of experience with a kindred meaningfulness.

What they all seem, ultimately, to be about is *wholeness*. “Wholeness” is about things fitting together. **It’s about interconnectedness. It is, at its core, about things be rightly ordered—in harmony, in an ideal unity.**

To see how this is so, we can look at a few of those pathways.

Beauty, for example –whether that of the rose, or of a Bach fugue—is a form of wholeness in that beauty lies in giving perfection and wholeness of form to the substance of our world.

Love, too –whether between lovers or friends or for all humanity—connects with wholeness in the way that the bond of love knits people together in a life-enhancing way.

When we speak of a person’s **integrity** –whether of the moral sort of walking one’s talk, or of the sort that’s about being true to oneself—we declare that person to be whole, “all of a piece”?

The basis of morality, too, is a vision of wholeness-- **righteousness and justice** being about adhering to those principles that would order the human system into an optimal kind of whole?

Insight –which is about seeing connections—creates greater wholeness in our awareness by disclosing to us some new dimensions of the complex interweaving by which our world is knit together.

This pattern –the idea that our pathways to rewarding meaningfulness converge toward wholeness—could be elaborated with some depth and complexity. The point I

want to stress now is that this connection seems to provide a clue of great significance about those questions I began with: the question about meaning in our own lives, surely, and maybe also the one about the cosmos beyond us.

IV. Human Meanings and the Nature of our Reality

At the very least, it would seem to tell us that ***what gives us our greatest fulfillment is the recognition and the creation of wholeness***. In other words, our greatest delight lies in seeking out, and in fostering, those ideals of wholeness and perfection that have underlain most of humanity's enduring values and spiritual traditions. Truth, beauty, goodness—apparently all avenues into our experience of deep and positive meaning—are in this light not just “values” but are domains in which we find our greatest reward.

The question of whether this connection between wholeness and our fulfillment tells us anything important about the reality beyond us is a much slipperier one.

But I might start by noting that, in our apparent deep connection with wholeness, there seems to be an irreducible element of mystery.

For example, it's not clear to me that the naturalist, evolutionary perspective by which I usually try to understand the link between our nature and the world around us is adequate to explain this connection.

It is easy to see, in evolutionary terms, why we would be structured to get pleasure out of eating and sex—out of, in other words, those activities that are necessary for our survival. Mere mechanism can account for why, quite naturally, we find it rewarding to satisfy such necessary instinctual drives. And it seems easy enough to explain a man's being delighted by the sight of a beautiful woman seems easy enough to explain—taking pleasure in that kind of beauty feeds desire and desire drives behavior. But can we explain, in the same way, why we get such pleasure from the beauty of a rose, or a mathematical equation, or a sonnet?

I'll tell you: so far I've found people who have asked this question, but none who have succeeded in answering it. The only one I've come across who claimed to have answered it is Freud, who declares with certainty that the pleasure we take in a sunset is just a sublimation of our frustrated sexual drives—which makes one lament how profoundly this spiritual man steadfastly rejected his spiritual dimension.

Mere mechanism—mere reductionism of the world into mere pieces assembled into wholes by mere accident—does not seem adequate to explain all the important evidence of human experience.

Intellectual honesty, it seems to me, requires even the most knowledgeable and most brilliant among us to behold our reality with a sense of awe and wonder, with a

sense of mystery and maybe miracle at the very foundation of our reality. We exist! Time and space exist! Are not these, in themselves, a kind of miracle and mystery?

There seems, in any event, some mysterious aspects of our seeming to be, by nature, wholeness-seeking creatures.

Where things really get most mysterious for me –where what I see really doesn't seem to fit onto my usual map of the world—has to do with that “heat source” of which I spoke, that sense of a deeper whole toward which the pathways seem to be converging. In a few moments in my life, of which one was this spring, I've felt I've glimpsed something Whole that's beyond our ken, that envelopes us, that is of great beauty and worthy of our love, that is sacred.

I'm somewhat mystified about what to make of this sense of wholeness, but I know that it's representative of the spiritual experiences of countless others.

The deeper we humans go down any of these pathways, apparently, the more does our consciousness get suffused with this wonderful sense of a wholeness more mysterious than our solely rational and naturalistic maps can capture. Recall John Muir's language about the landscape of Yosemite where he discovered a “beauty that pours into our flesh and bones like heat rays from fire,” a landscape he described as covered with a “spiritual glow.”

In one of those moments of mine that went far enough down the pathways to give me gooseflesh, but not so far that words seemed completely inadequate, I experienced a “Wow!” from watching spring come up the mountain to where we then lived in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley. “The earth here wants to create a great forest,” I wrote in giving this vision flesh in words. “What a beautiful and mighty living thing I saw, reclaiming its domain.” The earth here was something more than is dreamt of in my usual natural philosophy, something more sacred and whole.

Whenever I've encountered a truth that felt deeply true, it has seemed infused with a spirit emanating from some deep and beautiful web of interconnectedness.

But can that sense of a wonderful underlying wholeness be trusted? The very wonderfulness of that vision might lead us to suspect that maybe it's just one more case of believing what one wants to believe

Yes, maybe. But I'm struck by this: that the kind of vital wholeness suggested by the apparent convergence of those pathways fits with what the mystics have told us. Through the centuries, and across cultures, Wholeness has been at the core of the mystics' visions. It seems that the mystics might best be seen as people who have traveled down these pathways and reached the trailhead.

From their extraordinary –their most rich and wonderful—experiences, they have reported experiencing a Oneness permeated with beauty and love that is –the mystics

seem certain—the fundamental truth of our cosmic reality, and the key to our fulfillment.

That certainty in the mystics' testimony brings up another facet of our experiences of deep meaning. The mystic's conviction is not, I'm convinced, mere intellectual cop-out or wishful thinking. It's a function of the nature of the experience.

If the sense of wholeness came as *just another way of seeing*—like how the world looks double when we cross our eyes, or how distant night lights get all fuzzy if we focus up close—this mystic vision would not carry much weight. But the reality is that these moments command our allegiance because of their special experiential quality: ***they bring with them the sense of their undeniable truth!***

The undeniability of the inexplicable was part of the pivotal experience of my own life. It was when I got the insight that's at the core of my first book --The Parable of the Tribes—which is about the meaning of the human story of these last 10,000 years. That moment felt not like me thinking, as usual, but like me receiving a truth from some sacred source beyond me. The idea of such revelation had no place in my rationalist framework, but such was the bone-shaking, numinous quality of the experience that I felt it would be a betrayal to deny that part of the truth that experience seemed to present me with.

To one degree or another, this is an experience common to us all. The further we go down these pathways—the deeper our love, the more mind-blowing the insight, the more inspiring the beauty—the more the experience comes with a self-confirming sense of its rightness and importance.

Through the quality of our experience, life teaches us which moments should most command our attention and our credence.

So, even if my own mystic glimpses comprise but a few moments scattered across my 58 years, something in the character of those experiences compels me to give them weight far out of proportion to their mere clock-time.

The way this experiential quality declares the importance and truth of what those moments disclose reminds me of what an acupuncturist friend of mine says. She says that when she's put the needle in precisely the right point, there's a *zing* feeling, an electricity, that declares she's found the spot.

Likewise the deeper we go down any of these pathways to deep meaning, the more we sense that we have hit some vital target, and that we've come upon some part of the answer to the meaning of our lives that is not just something we made up, but seems rather ***embedded in the body of the world***. That the beauty is not just in the eye of the beholder, but is indeed given there in the mountain and the rose. Even if we cannot adequately integrate all these realizations into a wholly rational framework.

Thus it is that not only individuals, but entire cultures, have organized themselves not around the myriad mundane moments of human existence, but around those searing moments of epiphany—moments of the grokking of great wholeness—that declare, “This is what life’s about!” Whether under the Boddhi tree, or by the burning bush, or just sitting on the patio drinking one’s tea and feeling blessed to be alive—these are the guideposts that we are wise to guide our lives by.

Accordingly, even though I cannot hold onto my perception of the whole most of the time, and even though I continue to wonder about the truth of it, I’ve committed myself to living as best I can in accordance with what my visionary moments have disclosed. I’m imagining that it’s like those “Magic Eye” pictures —that our usual way of looking at our reality shows a bunch of random-looking squiggles, but there’s that moment when one’s vision shifts and suddenly the surface of the page disappears into the discovery of a new dimension of depth, revealing some previously unsuspected, stunning figure somehow embedded in the squiggles.

My commitment to that only-sometimes glimpsed deeper dimension entails a leap of faith, but not only a leap: I am also committed to staying grounded in the empirical realities of our experience.

Regarding my own experience, I intend to cultivate those pathways by which I’m best able to reach deep meaning. But beyond that, I’m also eager to engage with others —with you—exploring those places in life where we feel most fully and gladly alive. At the least, we can enrich our lives by focusing on those dimensions where we’re nourished best. Sharing our experiences along these pathways can help support us in pursuing what matters most in life.

But beyond that, our explorations may bring us a deeper understanding of the big picture. By investigating the paths that lead to deep meaning —by mapping our experience of the sacred—we may learn more about the important spiritual truths of our existence.