

What Gives My Life Meaning?
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Several years ago, a day or two after New Year's, I took a flight from Los Angeles to San Francisco. The trip is short, lasting an hour and fifteen minutes. The airplane was a giant wide-bodied machine with seats for over two hundred persons, although that evening the passenger section was nearly empty.

Flying excites me. Although I have been on many airplane flights, I still find the experience of looking out the window fascinating. From my memory of maps, I try to pick out landmarks. When I am flying, I always remember I am having an experience that, until just a few years ago, no human being in history could have had.

That evening, several years ago, I selected a seat in the back next to a window. The flight was nearly empty; there was only one other person in the back right-hand side of the airplane. This woman had the seat in front of me. No one else on the plane could see the back of the right engine except this woman and me.

At the Los Angeles airport, many flights take off over the Pacific Ocean. As I watched from the window, we rose smoothly into the air, the lights of the city giving way quickly to the darkness of the water.

Then, suddenly, there was a bright yellow flame outside the window. As I watched, a stream of fire rushed out of the right engine of the plane. Only the two of us could see it. The woman in the seat in front of me began to scream. "Oh my God!" she cried, "Fire! The plane is on fire! Oh my God! We're going to crash!" Other passengers turned and looked back at the woman and then at me, with questioning expressions on their faces. Because I had the same view, they expected me to either confirm or deny the woman's statements.

Different thoughts raced through my head. The minister part of me wanted to reassure people that everything was all right. I saw myself standing up and saying, "It's okay. It's just that one engine is on fire. Everything will be fine. Just relax. Calm down." However, it occurred to me that I did not know whether it was all right. It could be that the woman was correct. It could be that we were going to crash. If this was so, it did not seem appropriate to spend the last moments before we hit the water trying to calm her down. I should not try to frustrate her expression of feelings. Let her scream, I decided. Maybe all of us should be screaming.

The plane stopped its climb. The cabin began to fill with the smell of smoke. A small sign in front of me that said "SEAT CUSHION WILL FLOAT" began to take on new meaning. I started to make a mental note of the location of the extra seat cushions.

Throughout our lives, we all receive both small and big warnings about the sacredness of each

moment:

- The death of a friend or relative reminds us of the value of each hour.
- Injury or illness forces us to think about what is important.
- Milestones like the beginning of a New Year remind us of the passage of time.

Each of us deals with this awareness of human limits in our own way. One way we cope is to turn to religion. We hope that religion will help us come to grips with the meaning of our lives and life itself. We hope that religious thinkers might give us insight into how our lives, our work, and our small part in the universe have meaning and significance.

As a minister, I can report that many clergy and theologians find this expectation intimidating. Indeed, we sometimes feel dishonest standing up in pulpits or writing books, knowing that we are not nearly as wise as people hope we are. Clergy have studied the history and traditions of religion. We have gained experience in the management of a religious community. We have developed skills in public speaking and religious arts. We have training in helping others explore their own questions and become familiar and comfortable with their own feelings. However, we do not have any hidden, special knowledge about the meaning of life. We do not know much more than most persons about the topic. Religious leaders struggle as hard as everyone else does trying to figure out how to live life fully.

Still, although I do not have any secret information about the subject of giving life meaning, I do have guides that I use in my own life. This morning I want to share with you a list of the floating seat cushions to which I cling, to give my life significance.

First, relationships with family members are important. Most of us have mixed feelings about our parents, our brothers and sisters, our spouses, and our children. Part of the meaning of my life, part of my task in the universe, is to work on those relationships. As a husband and parent this means attending to the relationships with my wife and children. At other times, it means taking a trip to see my sister or brother or stepmother. At still other times, it means writing a letter or making a phone call. It may mean sharing my home when family comes to visit. Working on my relationships with my family is a lifelong project. It is part of the significance of my life.

Second, relationships with friends are important. In one survey, researchers asked a cross-section of persons how many friends they had--not relatives, but close friends. The most common response on the survey was zero. That is to say, 25 percent responded that they had no close friends. The second most common response was one close friend. Others marked two, three, or four. And no one had more than seven close friends. I understand this. [The study was based on surveys of 1,467 in 2004, part of the General Social Survey by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago.]

Being friends is scary. We can get hurt if we open ourselves to others, allow ourselves really to be with them, let them know who we really are. Yet throughout my life I have found a few

people with whom I can relax and let down my defensives. These friendships are part of what gives meaning to my life.

Third, learning is important. My impression is that human beings are here on earth to learn. It has something to do with the same evolutionary process that got us to this point in human development. We create universities and institutes for research and we put telescopes in outer space. The task of every human being is to help carry forward the search for knowledge. Participating in the growth of human knowledge, if only in a small way, gives my life meaning.

Fourth, cycles of the earth are important. There is meaning in the sequence of the seasons: the spring flowers, the summer rain, the earth, the autumn leaves, and the winter snow, are manifestations of the divine. For me it is a prayer to visit a garden in spring, or sit in a forest in summer, or take a walk along snowy paths in January. The splendor of the seasons gives meaning to my life.

Fifth, speaking and acting against injustice is important. I believe that hunger and homelessness are wrong. The destruction of the environment is wrong. The death penalty is wrong. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are a mistake. When I write a letter, send a check, attend a demonstration, or work in an election process, I am participating in life in a meaningful way. When I support and encourage others who work to live out their values, I am participating in life in a significant way.

Sixth, creative expression is important. I find value in plays, poetry, and novels. I find merit in painting and sculpture. I find worth in music. Art expresses the range of human emotions from laughter to tears. Whatever form it takes, I find that art is a justification of human existence. In art, we are at once subject and object. We are at once poet, actor, and audience.

Seventh, being present in the moment is important. For example, the attitude I bring to the labor I do gives it much of its meaning. A Buddhist priest puts it this way:

While washing dishes one should only be washing the dishes, which means that while washing the dishes one should be completely aware of the fact that one is washing dishes. At first glance, that might seem a little silly: why put so much stress on a simple thing? But that's precisely the point. The fact that I am standing there and washing these bowls is a wondrous reality. I'm being completely myself, following my breathing, conscious of my presence, and conscious of my thoughts and actions. There's no way I can be tossed around mindlessly like a bottle slapped here and there on the waves.

A passage by the Jewish Philosopher Martin Buber makes the same point using different words. He wrote:

I have given up the religious, which is nothing but the exception; I possess nothing but the everyday out of which I am never taken. . . . I know no fullness but each mortal hour's fullness of claim and responsibility.

Being present gives meaning to my life.

Eighth, a sense of the divine is important. Karen Armstrong, in her book *A History of God*, writes "One of the reasons why religion seems irrelevant today is that many of us no longer have the sense that we are surrounded by the unseen."

I feel surrounded by and a part of an all-encompassing unseen unity. This unity is larger than me, larger than my family, larger than my nation, larger than the human race. My belief in a unity, a connection with the larger life around me, is my answer to greed and despair. Many people call this unity God, but the name is not important. I believe that even healthy non-theistic people, whether they are aware of it or not, have a feeling that life connects them to a larger cosmic force. The connection to something larger than me is important.

To return to my experience in the jet plane over Los Angeles, the pilot's voice came over the loud speaker. His voice had that reassuring Texas accent that all airline pilots have cultivated. "We've had the compressor on one of our engines go out. Just to play it safe, we will be returning to the Los Angeles airport and changing planes." The frightened woman in the seat in front of me quieted down. A few minutes later I could see the runway and feel the wheels touch the ground. We taxied safely back to the terminal.

Small events like the malfunction of an airplane engine or the beginning of the New Year can encourage us not to postpone the things we want most out of life. They can encourage us to appreciate life at its fullest and celebrate every moment of the many miracles that are around and within us. They can encourage us to evaluate our priorities and get back to basics. Material possessions are not important. Status is not important. Filling a stereotyped role is not important. Rushing to catch a train is not important. Getting even is not important. Power and control are not important.

What gives my life meaning? Relationships with family, relationships with friends, learning about the nature of life and the universe, feeling part of the cycles of the seasons, acting against injustice, observing or engaging in creative expression, being present in the moment, and being aware of a large unity: these give meaning to my life.

Every moment is a sacred moment. If we do not feel this, it is because petty distractions engage us. However, we can break out of our busy days and create meaning in our lives.

As I waited for the next flight at the airport, I took a walk outside. I found myself looking intensely into the sky, really seeing it, experiencing it fully. I looked up into the sky, over the rooftops, feeling a cosmic thrill, an intense awareness that there is a whole universe of beauty, a natural world full of wonders with which I had in the rush of events almost lost touch.

That evening something inside me revived and renewed a vital link. It said, "Look up. It is a good universe out there, one I should cherish and enjoy. There is on this earth a whole, rich, beautiful world, a good world, which exists right alongside all the tensions and struggles of life. It waits for me to honor and savor it."

In this New Year, there will be suffering and troubles as each of us searches for our own meaning. There will be misunderstandings and mistakes; there will be fear and tragedy. However, there will also be moments of love that will sustain us and make the struggles worthwhile.