

The Meaning of Life

May 1, 2010

Subject: The Meaning of Life

The age old question.

Will Durant (1885 – 1981), an eminent philosopher, was once approached by a stranger who said he was going to kill himself unless Durant could give him a reason to live. Durant did his best, but apparently did not convince the stranger. He walked away and was never seen again.

This experience caused Durant to thoughtfully ponder the meaning of life. He sent out a letter to 100 individuals of different persuasions inquiring:

- What are the sources of your inspiration and your energy; and
- What is the goal or motive-force of your toil, where you find your consolations and your happiness, where, in the last resort, your treasure lies?

First, before we consider some of the answers given, we will examine areas in which there are impediments to the meaning of life. Then, we will read select responses from the 100 letters sent out. I will conclude the common themes of the responses. At the conclusion, I will divulge the meaning of life to me.

The Problem and Religion

If a person's faith is shaken or lacking, life is narrowed down to merely biology.

How can one believe in the greatness of man when reduced to this thinking?

The Problem and Science

Reduced to biological means, the organism which is a human, who has ideas is merely deluding oneself. The human is just one species among a billion, a passing experiment of nature.

The Problem and History

Aristotle said, "All things have been discovered and forgotten many times over." While this is not true of technology, etc., it is true of humans.

The Problem and Utopias

The scale and grandeur of construction and progress are equaled by the scale and terror of destruction and war.

The Suicide of the Intellect

With focus on "the sky", humans can afford to be pessimistic about the Earth, as they are waiting on eternal bliss. Hopes are placed where human knowledge cannot reach them. Science does not offer consolation. Thought disintegrates all societies and ultimately destroys the thinker himself. The intellect can be the worst enemy of optimism.

Responses to Durant's Letters:

The following excerpts were what I found of note.

H.L. Mencken (1880 – 1956) (an American journalist, essayist, magazine editor, satirist, acerbic critic of American

life and culture, and a student of American English):

“What the meaning of human life may be I don’t know: I incline to suspect that it has none. All I know about it is that, to me at least, it is very amusing while it lasts...it is evidently possible for a man to be a pessimist about the world and yet a tolerably cheerful fellow in his life...[those] who have learned ethics is not as a divine commandment but as a matter of social convenience”.

John Erskine (1879 – 1951) (American educator and author):

“The only choice is in the kind of life one would care to spend one’s efforts on. I believe the divine element in man is whatever it is which makes us wish to lead a life worth remembering, harmless to others, helpful to them, and increasing our own store of wisdom and peace.”

Charles Beard (1874 – 1948) (an American historian of the first half of the 20th century):

“...we have moments of exaltation when we feel the thrill of the prodigious and hear the call to high action...technology has given us a power over nature which enables us to provide the conditions of the good life for all the Earth’s multitudes...faith in its potentialities keeps me working at it even in the worst hours of disillusionment.”

John Cowper Powys (1872 – 1963) (British novelist and lecturer):

“For himself and in himself he can rediscover the secrets of faith, of hope, of happiness. Personal experience of the mystery of Nature and the mystery of

Life brings back faith in the freedom of the will, faith in the powers of the soul, faith in the mystical interpretations of existence. To restore to one’s individual life a certain secret liberty of thought and feeling...it still remains possible that death may awaken us.”

Andre Maurois (1885 – 1967) (French author):

“Why search for the meaning of life outside of life itself?...if the King remains, as always since my birth, invisible and silent, I shall doubt his reality; but I shall not doubt life, or the beauty of the moment, or the happiness of action...nothing exists except victory and life.”

Will Rogers (1879 – 1935) (Cherokee cowboy, comedian, humorist, social commentator, vaudeville performer and actor):

“...don’t have an ideal to work for. That’s like riding towards a Mirage of a lake.”

Ossip Gabrilowitsch (1878 – 1936) (a Russian-born American pianist, conductor and composer):

“My personal happiness I find in two things – art and my family. Should anyone be so narrow as to judge the world by what happens to be his personal good fortune or ill-luck?”

Vilhjalmur Stefanson (1879 – 1962) (Canadian Arctic explorer and ethnologist):

“...the feeling that if anything is worthwhile is may be the increase and diffusion of knowledge...If no one has

found a meaning for life, neither has anyone demonstrated that life has no meaning.”

Admiral Byrd (1888 – 1957) (pioneering American polar explorer, aviator and a recipient of the Medal of Honor):

“...action is healthier than thought...even philosophical questions can be answered only by doing things. All thought that does not lead to action, said Goethe, is a disease”.

Carl Laemmle (1867 – 1939) (founder of Universal Studios):

“What keeps me going?...it is work. I get a tremendous kick out of seeing my ideas take form and bring concrete results...My children, one one grandchild, my other relatives and my friends are my consolations and my happiness...I feel sorry for the scientists and philosophers who have thought themselves into a deep pit...I know I would have no goal at all if I were not an optimist...I would rather remain a hard working businessman and be as happy as I am than become the world’s greatest sage and accept all the sourness and hopelessness which seem to go with too much abstract thinking.”

Ernest M. Hopkins (1877 – 1964) (Dartmouth President)

“I cannot imagine anyone’s questioning the worthwhileness of life, for instance, if an occasional day like this is available to him...Neither scientific analysis nor a multitude of words will describe...(He goes on to describe the sky, the clouds, nature, nice weather, music, etc.)...but these are not less real because they

cannot be analyzed, diagnosed, and explained.”

Adolph Ochs (1858 – 1935) (American newspaper publisher and former owner of *The New York Times* and *The Chattanooga Times*)

“I am more than an animal, and that this life cannot be the end of our spiritual nature.”

From Durant: “*More and more it stands out that a man must combine action with thought in order to lead a life that shall have any unity and significance.*”

Jawaharial Nehru (Indian statesman who was the first (and to date the longest-serving) prime minister of India, from 1947 until 1964)

“...Then came Mr. Gandhi...I discovered that I had at last found what I had long sought. It was in action that I found this – action on behalf of a great cause which I held dear...I have a feeling that the future is full of hope for humanity and for my country and the fight for freedom that we are waging in India is bringing us nearer the realization of this hope...Action itself, so long as I am convinced that it is right action, gives me satisfaction.”

C.V. Raman (1888 – 1970) (Indian physicist and Nobel laureate in physics recognised for his work on the molecular scattering of light and for the discovery of the Raman effect)

“...The desire to labor, to achieve and to help others to do likewise, these are the motive powers which have kept me going. I find self-control and not self-

indulgence to be the real source of happiness. In the last resort, to win a victory over oneself is a greater thing than conquering the whole world.”

Mohandas Gandhi (1869 – 1948) (the pre-eminent political and spiritual leader of India during the Indian independence movement)

Striving for full realization keeps me going. My consolation and my happiness are to be found in service of all that lives, because the Divine essence is the sum total of all life.

John Hayes Holmes (1879 – 1964) (a prominent Unitarian minister and pacifist, noted for his anti-war activism.)

I think it is the sense of my creative capacity...that gives me the strength to live...I try to think when I have felt most happy because most alive...in the experience of love, in hours of crisis, when symphony or opera has caught my soul...I have had some vision of the spirit...when I have prayed, or tried to pray, and heard faintly within myself some answer.

Mary E. Woolley (Former President of Mt. Holyoke College)

At the basis of this increasing significance is religion. I think that if it were not for that I could not “go on” for I am more conscious of the suffering of the world, more troubled by it. I cannot quite understand how a human being can face life without a belief in a Supreme Power, a Personality with whom communication can be a real thing...Jesus...His life an inspiration showing how a human life may be lived in kind if not in degree. So I come back

to religion as that which keeps me going!

Gina Lombroso (Daughter of Cesar Lombroso, the psychologist, and wife of historian Gulielmo Ferraro)

The real reason of being is love. Love which ties us one to the other, while living, which ties us to those who have left us.

Helen Wills Moody (1905 – 1998) (American tennis player)

By working steadily on the thing that I like, I can remove from my mind momentary spells of sadness or irritation or anger, and afterwards feel happy and *almost* peaceful. For me, life is interesting, entertaining, happy, if only I can have some activity for the restlessness that is in my heart. I want that activity to be careless, never finished, and I would like to have it almost all times dominating my thoughts. I would like to have a “one-track” mind”. I want to be restless. I want always to be in action, and to be trying for some kind of beauty and perfection.

Owen C. Middleton – Life-Term Convict 79206, Sing Sing Prison, NY

Life is worth just what I am willing to strive to make it worth. Confinement in prison doesn't cause unhappiness, else all those who are free would be happy. I do not know to what great end Destiny leads us, nor do I care very much. Long before that end, I shall have played my part, spoken my lines, and passed on. How I play that part is all that concerns me. That prison can not take away from

me my part, lies my consolation, my inspiration, and my treasure.

Response from Durant (Excerpts):

Let us not take the astronomers too seriously; they do not whence our planet came nor whither it is bound, when it began or when it will cease to be; in truth they are as great guessers as the philosophers. As for the geologists, their exuberant cartography of the earth before history is only a charming play of fancy; they cannot be sure of their extinct continents and seas; and perhaps the fossil strata have tumbled themselves about just to deceive these puzzled readers of the rocks. They do not know how old man is, or whether the “ice age” really existed, or whether it put an end to civilization. The physicists do not know what matter is, nor the biologists what life is, nor the psychologists what consciousness is; their brave dogmas are passing... We must learn to be skeptical even of our scientists.

The most depressing sight in our civilization is not poverty but the apparent deterioration in the moral fiber of the race.

Nevertheless, a subtle degeneration, not so much in morals as in character, seems to have begun in our people.

The stupid are commanded to reproduce their kind.

Democracy goes to pieces because “there is always a majority of fools.”

You will see that I am granting you a great deal – that life has no meaning outside of its own terrestrial self, that the individual has not immortality, and that

every civilization, as surely as every flower, decays. I perceive that within the limits set by them I have still much room to find significance for my life and race, and even a moderate content.

The meaning of life, then, must lie within itself; it must be independent of individual death, even of national decay; it must be sought in life’s own instinctive cravings and natural fulfillments.

The simplest meaning of life, then, is joy – the exhilaration of experience itself, of physical well-being; sheer satisfaction of muscle and sense, of palate and ear and eye.

Even if life had no meaning except for its moments of beauty, that would be enough.

I refer to the attachment of mates or friends who have gone hand in hand through much hell, some purgatory, and a little heaven, and have been soldered into unity by being burned together in the flame of life.

There is ample recompense for that in the unconscious consciousness that someone is interested in you, depends upon you, exaggerates you, and is waiting to meet you at the station.

Perhaps a good deal of this pessimism comes from thinking of ourselves as individuals – as complete and separate entities. I note that those who are cooperating parts of a whole do not despond; these isolated thinkers, who stand aside from the game of life degenerate through the separation.

For to give life a meaning one must have a purpose larger than one's self, and more enduring than one's life.

The meaning of life lies in the chance it gives us to produce, or to contribute to, something greater than ourselves. It may be any group that can call out all the latent nobility of the individual, and give him a cause to work for that shall not be shattered by his death.

Contentment can be to have a task which consumes all one's energies, and makes human life a little richer than before.

To win, at last, approval.

A man should have many irons in the fire.

He should be able to find nourishment for his content in any one of these, even if all the rest are taken away.

It is only leisurely people who despair.

Summary

Some common threads in the responses:

- Action – lack of engagement causes despondency
- Family/friends/love are important for happiness
- Doing work you love – whether it's a job or a hobby
- For some, a sense of spirituality is important; for others, not having faith can cause them to live life to the fullest they can, since "this is it".
- Achievement to one's satisfaction gives meaning to life
- Helping others gives one worth

- Don't put all of your eggs in the science basket, lest it ruin your faith or hope
- Be content without material possessions; circumstances could cause you to lose them.

What about for me?

The meaning of life for me boils down to the following things.

First and foremost, at the risk of sounding sappy, is love. Not just romantic love, but the love of family and friends and the human race in general (the latter being the challenge).

Second, being a good friend. I like to be known as a good listener, someone who can be counted on when times are tough, someone who will call to find out how you are doing.

Third, being someone who is kind and compassionate. There are few greater joys than to have someone say, "You are a kind person." I want to be known as a person who gives myself to others, especially at my own expense (to prove sincerity).

Fourth, intellectual pursuit. This is a never-ending process, obviously. I feel most alive when I am engaging my brain. Not only must I seek knowledge, but I must share it in the hopes that it will stimulate thought and introspection in others.

Finally, having passion for something is paramount. Without passion, life becomes a series of chores, errands, and repetitive movements. For me, art, poetry, photography (there's nothing like going on a photo hunt to places where

my favorite subject matter can be found), hiking, and philosophy.

Notice that the meaning of life for me has nothing to do with career success. There was a time that I judged my self worth according to what title I had and how much money I made. I always fell short. Each time I got promoted, I simply compared myself to a peer who was further ahead. Trying to prove to myself that I was worthy of respect is what prompted me to get my Master's degree – not goal setting. Circumstances have humbled me and taught me the greatest lesson in life – having people you love who love you in return, who you are and what you do to help others is much more important than anything else.