

IS THAT ALL THERE IS?

(Given by Roger Stricklin at Wildflower Church on Sunday Aug 1 2004)

Introduction

When I began my research for this sermon, I did the first thing than anyone does who wants fast, accurate, reliable information – I searched the Internet. I wanted to get some basic ideas, find some quotes to use – such as the ones we just heard. I just did a simple search – “the meaning of life.” Do you know how many hits I got on that search? Sixteen point seven *million*. This tells me two things. First, millions of people in our society feel a void within, a lack of direction or purpose – a lack of meaning. Second, perhaps more worrisome, millions of people are relying on the Internet to tell them where to find it.

Human beings are walking paradoxes - contradictions wrapped in skin. When we are young, we wish we were older. When we are old, we wish we were young again. When we are sick, we wish to be well. When we are poor, we wish to be rich.

These paradoxes chase us and nag us our entire lives. We humans, being at least partly creatures of reason, constantly question why things are the way they are, and how or if they can change. Is the nature of things determined by a god, a goddess, neither, both? Or maybe many gods and goddesses? Or none at all? Are our lives, from birth to death, a function of chance, of randomness, where nothing happens outside the sterile realm of probability? Or is everything predestined, dictated by capricious fate?

In ancient times, humans were taught from childhood how to behave, how to think, how to interact with society. In the face of threats to daily existence, of lives always on the edge of poverty, of chaos, fixed, uniform beliefs and expectations gave millions of humans certitude in life and comfort in the face of danger or death.

But we live in different times in this twenty-first century. At least in the Western world, life is locked in a new paradox. We find ourselves, in general, living in a time of unprecedented affluence. Most of us don't expect to experience poverty or social chaos. Many of us live better than nobility did in the Middle Ages. And yet, we face a new crisis – not political or social, but deeply personal – a psychological, even spiritual emptiness – a lack of meaning.

We, in these times, may feel free to think, to speculate, to move outside narrow, rigid belief systems, to pull off our theological straitjackets and ask the big questions. What is the meaning of life? And most importantly, what is the meaning of *my* life?

Amazing, isn't it? We live in a world packed with personal computers, SUVs, ATMs, cell phones, satellite TV, 300 channels and nothing's on, life spinning ever faster, more to do, more to buy, in a consumer culture that has become a parody of itself. And yet ... I don't even know why I exist. Do you?

A few months ago, I was watching the news show, *60 Minutes* – the segment done by Andy Rooney’s heir apparent. It is usually presented in a lighthearted way. But this one stuck in my mind. The reporter talked about something we’re all familiar with, Starbucks coffee. He researched how many different types of coffee and how many combinations with other drinks could be ordered from the latest menu. Any guesses? Over 3,000. Then, the reporter mentioned the phrase I still remember – “the tyranny of choice.” A well-turned phrase – we in America expect, *demand*, ever-increasing choice – not just with coffee, but with everything. Our obsession with endless options has affected everything from coffee to cars to clothes to marriage to ... well, religion. And yet, with more choice, more options, we actually find it more difficult to decide, to find peace, to determine what we are and why we are here, to fill that deep-seated emptiness, to find meaning and purpose.

If you don’t believe that millions are searching for that meaning, go visit a chain-type bookstore – Barnes and Noble, for instance. How many thousands of titles will you find in the New Age section, in the Religion section, in the Philosophy section? People are hungrily searching for other things to supplement or even replace traditional religion. This tells me that, even though many millions of people routinely attend weekly religious services, a large proportion of them no longer get enough out of conventional religion. In an increasingly technical world, more connected and interrelated than ever, we are strangely disconnected and isolated.

This feeling of world-weariness, of being jaded, is nothing new. I chose the title for this sermon based on the old Peggy Lee song, “Is That All There Is?” In this song, a very cynical grown woman thinks back over the major events of her life, remembering each episode with disappointment and bitterness. There is the fire that burns down her family’s home, her first circus, her first love. Each time, she reacts as a grown woman with the chorus:

“Is that all there is, is that all there is
If that’s all there is my friends, then let’s keep dancing
Let’s break out the booze and have a ball
If that’s all there is.”

How many of us have, at one point or another, felt exactly the same way? We may have gone through times lasting months or even years when our life seemed consistently disappointing, when we became bitter and cynical over the heartbreaking, even devastating, turns our life had taken. We may have felt like an acquaintance of mine years ago who was going through a trying time who said, “I want my headstone to read, ‘What a waste of my time.’”

Man’s Search for Meaning

There once was a man in Vienna by the name of Viktor Frankl. He was a highly educated man, very intelligent – M. D. and Ph. D. from the University of Vienna. A

psychiatrist by trade, he published his first professional article in 1924 at the age of nineteen. He had a family – mother, father, brother, sister, wife. He started work on a book. Then Nazi Germany occupied Austria, World War II erupted, and eventually, Viktor Frankl found himself imprisoned in a concentration camp.

Between 1942 and 1945, inmate number 119,104, known before 1942 as Viktor Frankl, survived confinement in four consecutive concentration camps – among them Auschwitz and Dachau. When he emerged at the end of the war, he had lost his book manuscript he started before he was arrested, he had lost his home, his mother, his father, his brother, his wife – only his sister survived the camps. In a very real way, you might say he had lost his life, as much as is possible without physical death.

Viktor Frankl was a driven man, though. In 1946, he published a memoir in German based on his experiences in the camps. This slim book, only about 120 pages long, was printed in the United States in 1959 under the title, *Man's Search for Meaning*. By 1984 the book had gone through 73 printings, a testimony to people's hunger for meaning.

My friends, this book may be short, but it is powerful. The author doesn't attempt to give a chronological account of everything, but just sketches scenes of his experiences. He speaks of his shock on his arrival at Auschwitz. He saw a German SS officer standing outside the train as it arrived, packed with inmates. The officer stood, his elbow cradled in his hand, flicking his index finger to direct each prisoner – you, left, you, right, you, left. Victor Frankl, along with about 10 percent of the prisoners, was directed to the right. It was only later that another prisoner explained to Frankl what being directed to the left meant by pointing to a fire-gushing chimney inside the camp.

More scenes from his experiences ... one of 1500 prisoners packed into a shed designed for 200. Eating nothing in four days but five ounces of bread. Being shaved, deprived of his possessions, his clothing, being issued prisoner's garb with a number, getting an ill-fitting pair of shoes. Along with other inmates, he developed a sort of gallows humor. He writes of being ordered into a shower with other prisoners, feeling a sense of relief when the shower heads actually sprayed water.

Frankl tells of the inmates passing through a time of shock, then a time of apathy. But even in these times of numbness, occasional compassion was not absent. Once late at night, a fellow prisoner thrashed around and groaned, obviously in the grip of a nightmare. Frankl thought of trying to wake him up, then realized he had no business forcing a man out of a sleeping nightmare into a waking one.

One morning, one of the bravest inmates broke down and cried because his shoes no longer fit, and he had to march to work through the snow in his bare feet. Victor Frankl was glad to have a bit of bread in his pocket that day.

One of the most moving passages tells of an epiphany the author had one morning while marching to his assigned worksite. He recalled his wife's image in his mind's eye, saw her smile, struck up a conversation with her. He writes,

“... for the first time in my life I saw the truth as it is set into song by so many poets, proclaimed as the final wisdom by so many thinkers. The truth – that love is the ultimate and highest goal to which man can aspire. Then I grasped the meaning of the greatest secret that human poetry and human thought and belief have to impart: *The salvation of man is through love and in love.*”

Once, a prisoner rushed in to Frankl's hut and asked everyone to come outside and watch a beautiful sunset. After minutes of silently observing nature's presentation shining out in their miserable world, one prisoner exclaimed, “How beautiful the world *could* be!”

And again ... we are told of a young woman, a camp inmate who knew she was dying. She told Frankl that she was actually glad of her fate. She had led a spoiled life before her imprisonment, ignoring her spiritual life. She viewed a chestnut tree outside her window as her only friend. She could only see one branch with two blossoms through the window. She told Frankl she had conversations with her chestnut friend. He asked her what the tree said, and she replied – “I am here – I am here – I am life, eternal life.”

As he watches the life in the camps, with its horror and its constant degradation, the author realizes that his previous attitude toward life has been all wrong. He writes, “... *it did not really matter what we expected from life, but rather what life expected from us.* We needed to stop asking about the meaning of life, and instead to think of ourselves as those who were being questioned by life – daily and hourly.”

The author then gets on to what really concerns us this morning, the meaning of life. It is impossible, he judges, to make any general or sweeping statements on the meaning of life. The meaning of life varies from person to person, from minute to minute, as each person shapes their responses to life's challenges and determines their own destiny. Everyone has to look at life's tasks, respond to them, and find meaning and purpose in them, even in times of suffering and pain.

The Savage Garden

Anne Rice is the author of a series of novels called The Vampire Chronicles. She often uses her characters to make philosophical and theological comments. In one of her stories, a vampire describes the world of the human mortals as a “savage garden.” Especially in light of the words we have had today from Viktor Frankl, we can better appreciate that description.

Our world can indeed be a garden. Wherever we look in the world, in the present or in the past, we see that fact illustrated. We see the awe-inspiring sweep of the Arche

de Triomphe in Paris, the Colosseum in Rome. We observe the Parthenon, the Great Pyramid, the Mayan ruins, the abandoned city of Macchu Picchu in Peru. All of these are monuments to human ingenuity, wonders of engineering, dedicated to glories that are historically recent or to events and beliefs that are far in the dim, even forgotten, past.

Then we see the places, or structures, again past and present, that remind us of the savagery of our garden. The sacrificial altars of the Aztecs, the killing fields of Cambodia, the mass graves in the Balkans filled with the results of ethnic cleansing, the monuments all over the globe to mass death as the result of warfare – Gettysburg, Stalingrad, Berlin, Verdun, Gallipoli, El Alamein ... and Dachau, Treblinka, Bergen Belsen; a depressingly long list.

How are we, living in the savage garden, ever to understand our own behavior? How can we, who are capable of writing a beautiful sonnet, hiding a persecuted minority in our homes, falling in love deeply and completely, also be capable of killing perfect strangers by the thousands in battle, imprisoning and murdering millions of people due to their religion or their supposed danger to the state, or burning them due to their strange beliefs?

If there is an answer to that question, it is certainly not an answer to be found this morning. It is better to ask, how do we as individuals live in this garden? How do we find meaning in and for ourselves?

Viktor Frankl wrote that he believes that every person has what he calls an “inner freedom” or “inner self” – that which cannot be taken away because it is the core of who you are, the essence of you as an individual. It can be given away because you choose to lose it, but it can never be taken. It is the anchor that you use during times of trouble, it is the part of you that feels joy most completely, and it is that part of you that can be damaged or even lost if you give up in the face of life’s challenges and become beaten. Viktor Frankl believed that the persons who rose most thoroughly to the challenges of life in a death camp, who he even called “saints,” were those who held on most strongly to their authentic selves and to their compassion and kindness.

A Brief Exercise

Now I would like for all of us to join in a brief exercise. Please stay in your seats, close your eyes, and follow me.

Take a moment or two to relax, to draw a deep breath or two. Think about the things that have enriched you, fulfilled you, blessed you with meaning. Are they events from last year, ten years ago, longer ago? As you sit in the peace and quiet, let your thoughts concentrate on those things that have made you who you are, shaped your life, things that you think about at quiet times like this.

These things may not be major or earth-shaking events. You may find yourself thinking about a song that makes you want to tap your toes or get up and dance every

time you hear it – or a song that you find so moving that you want to weep every time you hear the melody.

What is it that occurs to you? Maybe you think of an old friend or a loved one. Is it someone that you are still blessed to have in your life, or someone separated from you by time, distance, disagreement, or death?

Maybe you think of an aroma – a strong memory of something simple. A parent’s perfume or cologne; the wonderful smell of a fresh pie in your grandmother’s kitchen.

Maybe it is a sensation – the feel of a newborn baby, the wind in your hair during your first bike ride, the feel of grass under your bare feet, the first, or last, kiss from a significant other.

Now I want you to come back from those memories. Stay relaxed, gradually open your eyes. Let’s move together a little bit, so everyone can join hands.

Now let’s experience something different. Pay attention to what you feel, what you sense as you hold the hands of the people next to you.

You can feel the skin of their hands – soft or callused. You can feel their bones through the skin. You can feel the pulse of their blood in their hands or wrists, if you pay attention in the quiet. Maybe you can even sense their breathing. Now release their hands, relax and open your eyes.

I wanted to do this brief exercise this morning so everyone could feel, just for a moment, the sensation of their own life. Walking through your memories, I hope, helped you remember what is the most precious to you, what gives you your thought and your identity, what has shaped your “inner self”- that which is uniquely yours and yours alone.

I also wanted everyone to feel the life in the person next to them, whether a stranger or a friend. Our own lives flow so quickly, so madly, year after year that it is easy to forget, even in times of turmoil, that we are all blessed to be part of a larger community. This community helps keep us human.

The Five L’s

I once read a comment that summarized the meaning of life into five words beginning with the letter “l” – live, love, laugh, learn and let go. What does this mean to us this morning?

We know, or should know by now, that just because we breathe and move around does not mean we are alive. In the exercise we just finished, each of us recalled a voice, a song, an aroma, a sensation that refreshed our spirits, or that affected us in some way – some way that made us feel alive. We all have dull, routine activities we perform over

and over – but there is meaning even in them. We must live our meaning and our destiny, not merely move until we die.

Love is salvation, according to Viktor Frankl. For the best type of love, this is certainly true – the love of a cherished friend or a devoted partner; the love of a parent for a child; the love of an owner for their pet. Each love gives us a life richer with opportunities to find and to create meaning.

Laughter is the best medicine, so the old saying goes. Each of us should find reason every day for laughter – at least an ironic chuckle to relieve the stress. We all have a strong need to find the relief in laughter, especially in a world as complicated and confusing as ours. Laughter can keep us healthy, it can keep us sane, and it can keep us from taking all of this too seriously.

Every day of our lives, we learn something. Constant learning keeps our minds and souls fresh, and helps us find purpose and meaningful activity. It also allows us to renew our outlook on the world and see things in new ways.

Last comes the hardest of the five “L”s – letting go. Every one of us has his or her unique baggage – and sometimes we are very reluctant to set it down, much less get rid of it. But not letting go – of anger, resentment, disappointment, hatred – can rob us of the opportunity to enjoy any of the other “L”s.

Conclusion

When we started this morning, we heard several quotes capturing different thoughts on the meaning of life – some silly, some profound, but all *different*. Then, we learned about the meaning of life as seen through the eyes of Viktor Frankl. Last, we learned about the five L’s – another way to approach life and find meaning. These different ideas point to a deeper truth – the meaning of *your* life is yours and yours only. Your meaning is not your neighbor’s, not your boss’s, not your minister’s. You determine how you respond to life’s tasks, you craft your destiny.

Your meaning today may not be your meaning tomorrow, next week, or next year. It will change as you change, as life throws you new challenges.

I would like to leave you with a thought this morning. My wife and I sometimes watch a TV show called *Joan of Arcadia*. On this show, Joan Girardi, a high school student, has conversations with God – not some voice in the sky accompanied by thunder and lightning, but God speaking through the voice of everyday people Joan meets. On a recent episode, God asked Joan, “Do you know what grace is?” Joan responded, “No.” God responded, “Grace is when you receive just enough truth to see the world in a different way.”

As we leave here today, I hope that, through our community this morning, we have received a small dose of grace. As we make our way through the week ahead, may we find our own meaning, our own grace, and our own joy.

Let us hope that, when this party is over and we each reach the end of our dance cards, we have led lives so rich in meaning that we do not ask, bitterly, “Is that all there is?” Instead, may we say, “That is all there is, and I am satisfied and blessed.”