

## **Living a Meaningful Life - World Religions Conference**

**– Red Deer College – October 22, 2018**

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Imagine with me for a moment that you are a passenger on an aircraft. During the flight, you hit some severe turbulence. And then, suddenly, there is a bright flash of light and an alarming loud bang. Your fellow passengers look around, nervously. After a few minutes, the pilot came on the intercom and says, “Ladies and gentlemen, I have some good news and some bad news. The bad news is that we were just hit by lightning. The lightning has shorted out all of our navigational and communications instruments. We have no radio, no compass, no GPS. We have no idea where we are or what direction we are going in.” The captain pauses as people absorb the news. But then the captain continues, “But the good news is that we do know our airspeed, and we are making very good time.”

I first read that joke in a book on medical ethics. The author was making the point that modern science and technology are giving us unprecedented power to go somewhere very, very fast. But do we know where we are going? And do we really want to go there? Without a sense of what really gives life meaning, we will have no idea where we are going in such a hurry.

The question of the meaning of life we are gathered here to consider tonight is not just an abstract one that each of us can toy with in the wee hours when our minds have nothing better to do. This question is one that can and should be one we are discussing at every level of society, and to which we bring every discipline of human knowledge and every source of human wisdom, lest in our rush to go in an unknown direction, we simply grow more and more lost.

In our capitalist economy and our liberal democracies, the default position has been to treat the question of the meaning of life as a largely private question, one that individuals can consider and come to their own conclusions about. Our economy relies on individual consumers making their own choices about how to spend their money. Our laws and politics create as much space as

possible for individuals to define their own values and priorities, based on their own sense of what will make their lives most meaningful. Social decisions are often made by the accumulation of individual choices.

Often, however, the accumulation of individual choices leads to results that no one wants. Garrett Hardin coined the term “The Tragedy of the Commons” to refer to those situations in which many individuals, each pursuing their own interests, can create tragedy for everyone.

When, for example, everyone in a large city takes their private automobile downtown, the roads are so congested no one can move. When everyone catches as many fish as they want, it isn't long before all the fish are gone. Those are all tragedies of the commons, and you could probably think of many more examples. But perhaps the most serious and the most challenging of these problems today is the problem of climate change, which is threatening to evolve into climate chaos within our lifetimes. It too is a tragedy of the commons.

Fortunately there is a solution to such tragedies, and that is when communities come together, recognize that there is a problem, and agree to restrain individual interests for the common good. That sounds so simple, and there have been many successful resolutions to these tragedies, but in fact it can be tremendously complex, often requiring the negotiation of many diverse views of what gives life meaning.

I don't think that we will ever be able to fully resolve the question of the meaning of life once and for all time. Rather, as we address problems that require us to consider our deepest values and commitments, we will discover provisional and tentative solutions, and over time, our shared vision of life's meaning will evolve, but always in a fiercely contested fashion.

In that evolving process, if we are to survive the potential tragedies facing us, we will need wisdom from all the traditions and disciplines of knowledge and inquiry. It was that insight, nearly forty years ago now, which led me to switch my career path from that of a scientist, studying biochemistry, to that of a

pastor, studying theology and ethics. I came to realize that the sciences were giving us the technical capacity to go somewhere very, very fast, but I experienced a sense of call to study the ethical and spiritual questions about what direction we should be going. I was convinced then, and remained convinced, that our spiritual traditions have important roles to play in providing the direction we need.

As a contribution to the question of what makes life meaningful from a Christian perspective, let me share with you briefly some key themes from the story of the life of Jesus.

Jesus was a Jewish man from the northern province of Galilee in what is now Israel. According to the gospel stories of his life, his public ministry began around the year 30 of this era. It starts with his baptism by John the Baptist. To use the language for this evening, at his baptism, he experienced a profound sense that his life was meaningful, and that there was a very specific and personal meaning. But in order to gain clarity about that meaning, he immediately undertook a forty day fast, during which, the story goes, he encountered and resisted temptations, but they weren't the typical kind of temptations we think of. The temptations Jesus encountered were the common assumptions and conventional hopes of the vast majority. During his fast, Jesus meditated upon those common hopes, and developed his own, quite unique sense of mission. In short, he rejected what everyone thought was good and admirable in favour of something better.

Together the baptism, the fast and the temptations constitute the story of Jesus' call. Jesus was not alone in experiencing a call. I have already mentioned my own. The quest for a calling, a vocation, a personal sense of the meaning of one's life, is among the most important quests in life. Fred Buechner describes one's vocation as where "the world's deep hunger meets our deep joy." It is neither purely communal, nor purely personal, but the spark that flies where the personal strikes the communal like flint strikes steel.

There were many other times in Jesus' ministry when the expectations and pressures on him were overwhelming and he found he needed to escape and

find time alone for prayer and spiritual renewal. I think there is wisdom there for our theme tonight: that a sense of the meaning of life is not like a possession that we can acquire and carry around in our back pocket; rather, it is more like a vision that we will often have to struggle spiritually to hold onto. Like the quest for the holy grail, we will often have to search diligently time and again for the vision to live a meaningful life.

Among the first things that Jesus did was to assemble a community of disciples and supporters, male and female, who accompanied and supported him. This suggests that he did not understand human well-being and a meaningful life to be primarily an individual thing. While it may be intensely personal, the meaning of life is never private.

In the community he founded, and that we strive to live out to this day, participants are to support, encourage, challenge, and correct each other. The sense of community is strong, but individuality is important, and diversity is valued. Each community member is given spiritual gifts as teachers, leaders, healers and helpers, and all those gifts are given for the common good. There is an irreducible and lively tension between individuality and community that often knocks us off balance. As the Quaker author Parker Palmer writes, truth and wisdom are often paradoxical; we will often have to live in the tension between values and commitments that cannot be completely reconciled. Living in a tension it is like having two forces pulling in different directions; sometimes we will inevitably get knocked off balance. A meaningful life, then, is one in which individuality, community, and diversity are all valued and encouraged, but the tensions between them and failures to live up to the ideal are confessed and forgiven. We acknowledge our failures but don't define ourselves by them.

The theme of Jesus' ministry was the kingdom of God, a community in which God, not Caesar, would rule. The kingdom of Caesar, which we know today as the Roman empire, was founded on violence and marked by hierarchies (with Caesar and local elites at the top and slaves at the bottom). Jesus, on the other hand, taught a kingdom of God in which inequalities were leveled, power was used for service, violence was renounced, and holistic well-being, justice and

peace were the norm. Again those ethical principles of equality and non-violence and justice are so at tension with the norms of most societies that they remain ideals.

I haven't got time here to go fully into the content of Jesus teaching, but I want to speak briefly about his method of teaching, which was both through what he said and through his life. What Jesus said was through short wisdom sayings and parables. Both sayings and parables had surprising twists on what you expect, much like the punch line of a joke. For example, "the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed." In Palestine, mustard is a weed. It grows and spreads but not necessarily in the ways you expect or want. It would be like saying "the kingdom of God is like a dandelion." Teachings like that provoke questions, encourage the imagination and new ways of seeing the world. Not surprisingly, even today, they continue to provoke conversation, discussion, and even fierce disagreement. Perhaps, this way of teaching suggests, a meaningful life requires imagination, a restless quest for other ways of seeing the world, an openness to alternative ways of seeing the world.

Jesus life was his ultimate lesson about the kingdom of God. Jesus was an itinerant teacher, who once said that he had no where to lay his head. He seems to have embraced vulnerability and solidarity with the vulnerable, as a way of life.

Jesus not only made himself vulnerable, but ultimately surrendered himself to the ultimate form of vulnerability: he was arrested and put to death by the elites because they saw him as a threat. In fact, he was tortured to death using perhaps the cruelest method of execution ever devised: crucifixion. The conventional wisdom was that a successful life could not possibly end in such a way. A life that ended that way was a failure.

But Jesus' followers came to a quite revolutionary understanding: that the crucified one was God's agent for the salvation of the world. The crucified one was both Lord and Saviour, and in him God had entered into radical solidarity with human suffering. And that completely reverses the way that we think of success and a meaningful life. While most people think of success as escaping

the common lot of humanity, escaping poverty, escaping suffering, even escaping mortality, the story and teaching of Jesus suggests that a meaningful life, a successful life comes through embracing our humanity, embracing our vulnerability, embracing those whose lives seem to be failures, embracing the hungry, the homeless, the ill, refugees, prisoners and those who live across the wall, across the tracks, behind the fence. It is in solidarity with vulnerability that we find our fullest humanity and the deepest meaning in life.

The life and teaching of Jesus offers no easy answers to the question of what makes for meaningful life. Like his method of teaching through provocative parables and subversive sayings, Jesus' life provokes questions rather than answers. It invites us into an imaginative, creative exploration of the tensions in which we live, tensions between individuality and community, between power and vulnerability, between conventional wisdom and our own deepest values and insights, between the world's deep hunger and our deep joy.

I want to close with a poem by Wendell Berry that, to me, invites us to live in the tension we must endure if we are embrace the challenges of the modern world in a responsible way. This poem is entitled "The Real Work":

It may be that when we no longer know what to do  
that we have come to our real work,

and that when we no longer know which way to go  
we have begun our real journey.

The mind that is not baffled is not employed.

The impeded stream is the one that sings.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> From *Standing by Words* (Counterpoint, 1983)