

January 9, 1972
Genesis 1:26-31; Psalm 8:3-9
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MAN THE MIRACLE

One of the great questions millions of people seem to be asking today is the question, "Where can I find meaning for my life?"

The answer, in brief, is that you cannot find meaning for your life. Meaning is not something lying around in the environment somewhere waiting to be discovered. It is not a great secret hidden in the mind of God. Meaning cannot be stumbled across accidentally. Meaning for our lives is not something to be found but something to be created. You and I can give our own lives meaning if we will to do so.

This ability and power to give life meaning is unique in man. The wild and untamed animals which we humans are fond of calling the "lower animals" cannot give their lives meaning, but are driven by instinct, and whatever meaning their lives have they received at birth. It is not so with man.

Albert J. Nock, seldom read today and even more seldom appreciated, once wrote these words about man:

"Whenever I survey a crowd of people I am overpowered by a sense of the most prodigious, the most stupendous miracle that can conceivably be performed even by Omnipotence. What miracle can one imagine comparable with the annual and regular turning out of millions of human beings guaranteed positively no two alike? I can think of none. By comparison with this, raising the dead, cleansing lepers, multiplying loaves and fishes seems almost insignificant. Well, but here the miracle is. Here those beings are and their infinite variety suggests to me that their Creator is not working this continuous miracle merely to show what he can do when he tries, but that he has some pretty distinct idea in mind when he does it."

This then is what God has in mind; that each of these millions of human creatures he turns out each year seek to make something useful and worthwhile out of his life and thereby give it meaning.

II

Psychiatrists, physicians and clergymen are all acquainted with the large number of men and women crowding their waiting rooms whose basic problem is absence of meaning. The prominent European psychiatrist, C. J. Jung, has written about these people. He is only one of many who say the same thing, but his conclusion is more direct. Says he:

"Is the doctor equal to this task? To begin with he will probably hand over his patient to the clergyman or the philosopher, or abandon him to that perplexity which is the special note of our day. As a doctor he is not required to have a finished outlook on life and his professional conscience does not demand it of him. But what will he do when he sees only too clearly why his patient is ill; when he sees that it arises from his having no love, but only sexuality; no faith, because he is afraid to grope in the dark; no hope, because he is disillusioned by the world and by life; and no understanding because he has failed to read the meaning of his own existence?"

C. J. Jung recognizes that this tremendous problem which confronts so many is basically a religious problem. What these people need, says he, is faith, hope, love and insight.

But where will they get it? They will not get it in many churches today where the emphasis is on creating a better society from the top down, and where the old-fashioned virtues of hard work, struggling and overcoming, worship and prayer are looked upon as sinful preoccupation with the self. Man does not find meaning in being part of an amorphous mass called society, which is where communism and socialism tell him he will find it. He must know that his particular existence in the here and now has meaning. He wants to know who he is, not what society is. Nothing less will satisfy his yearning and relieve the misery of his loneliness.

III

The four great gifts which Jung talks about are gifts of God's grace according to St. Paul; faith, hope, love and insight. But these gifts come to us through our human experience. We are not endowed with them at birth. They are the result of struggle.

A retired man was asked the other day if he didn't get tired sitting around all the time doing nothing. "Sure," he replied. "But a fella can't quit just 'cause he gets tired!"

Neither can we quit this life just because some obvious meaning and significance has not been thrust into it. We must go forth as the knights of the middle ages to challenge all that which is ugly and ignoble in our lives and our environment and in that process discover meaning. Until then the only answer is faith. We must have faith that life does have meaning and is not "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury signifying nothing."

Science is not the answer in spite of all it has done for mankind and in spite of all the faith so many have put in it. Writing in a local high school newspaper, a brilliant but atheistic young man claims there is no need for God because science can explain everything. I doubt very much that there is a reputable scientist anywhere in the world, outside the Iron Curtain, who would agree with him. Here is a seasoned historian of great repute, Arnold Toynbee, who insists:

"Science has not been able to cure man of his sinfulness and his sense of insecurity or to avert the painfulness of failure and the dread of death. Above all it has not helped him to break out of the prison of his inborn self-centeredness into communion or union with some reality that is greater, more important, more valuable and more lasting than the individual himself."

Science can indeed do much for this miracle called man, but it fails to give him what most he needs--meaning. Here, science must always fail.

IV

If we may return to C. J. Jung for a moment, he tells of the many patients who come to him from many countries "not because they were suffering from a neurosis, but because they could find no meaning in life or were torturing themselves with questions which neither present day philosophy nor religion could answer."

Jung then goes on to say:

"Let us take for example that most ordinary and frequent of questions: What is the meaning of my life, or of life in general? Men today believe that they know only too well what the clergyman will say--or rather must say--to this. They smile at the very thought of the philosopher's answer and in general do not expect much of the physician. But from the psychotherapist who analyzes the unconscious--from him one might doubtless learn something. He has perhaps dug up from the depths of his mind, among other things, a meaning for life which could be bought for a fee. It must be a relief to every serious minded person to hear that the psychotherapist also does not know what to say. Such a confusion is often the beginning of the patient's confidence in him."

Of course Jung is right. No clergyman, doctor, or psychiatrist knows "the" meaning of life because every individual life must discover its own meaning. A few years ago some government officials were talking nonsense about our so-called "national purpose". What is our national purpose? Can it be anything more than the sum total of all our individual purposes? "What is the meaning of life?" is an inappropriate question. The proper question is "What is the meaning of my life?" Others may indeed assist us along the way, but the quest is ours alone.

V

In his book The Mountain Gorilla, the zoologist George Schaller comes to some significant conclusions on the basis of his extended experience. Most of us conditioned by such movies as "King Kong", think of the gorilla as a ferocious, man-killing monster. Nothing could be further from the truth. He is indeed an amiable, easy-going vegetarian.

Curiously the gorilla has a brain about the size possessed by man's direct ancestor. Why then is the gorilla so much less developed than man?

"I suspect," says Schaller, "that the gorilla's failure to develop further is related to the ease with which it can satisfy its needs in the forest. In its lush realm there is no selective advantage for improvement of manipulative skills like tool-making, or of mental activity along the lines that characterized human evolution."

Our human ancestors lived in a harsher environment, were forced to try new methods of getting food and forced to try a greater variety of foods. Schaller concludes:

"The very existence of the gorilla, free from want and free from problems, is mentally an evolutionary dead end."

Just so, the desire and longing for meaning in life is a hopeless one if we shun struggle and difficulty and ask someone to give our lives that meaning. Meaning must be discovered through hard work and struggle; physical, mental and spiritual. The busiest, most highly admired persons of history seldom ever paused to ask themselves the meaning of their lives. They found it in their usefulness; they found it in the employment of their God-given talents and abilities, and that is the only place you and I will find it.

VI

You and I are here; that in itself gives life some meaning. But St. Paul gave us another: "You are not your own", he said, "You are bought with a price." Let me suggest something of that price which Paul did not mention. Your mother conceived you in pain; your father struggled to give you the necessities and some of the luxuries of life until you were able to be on your own. Hundreds of people invested time, money and effort in your education. Your friends have put their trust and hope in you. Millions of your predecessors have labored and died that you might be here at this particular moment in history.

"But," you may reply, "I didn't ask to be born and to be here."

Perhaps not, but you are here, and all of this is yours. Seeking to make some contribution to it should make your life a great adventure.

Ask not, "What is the meaning of my life?" Ask rather, "What can I do to make life richer and fuller and more meaningful for others?" When you have answered that question you will have discovered the meaning of your life.