

A Poverty of Purpose

Sunday morning address¹ to the New York Society for Ethical Culture, January 22, 2006
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It is generally accepted that religions of all dispositions, at least the successful ones, fulfill four needs, providing identity, meaning, hope, and community. I spoke about community this past November. This morning I want to talk about meaning, what it means to enjoy a plentitude of purpose, and how so many suffer from *A Poverty of Purpose*.

There are many ways one can suffer from a lack of purpose, chief among them being a life absent meaning and devoid of hope. You can have one or the other—hope or meaning—but without both purpose is hard to come by.

Hope is a subject for another time. My focus this morning is meaning, and I want to be clear that I do not exactly equate purpose and meaning—they are similar, but I assign purpose a much larger context, a much larger role in our lives. For example, Does life have meaning? and What is the purpose of my life? are two entirely different questions.

My title this morning came from a novel I got off the discount shelf at Barnes & Noble, *Coal Run* by Twain O'Dell—a pretty good read. Set in Pennsylvania, its theme is pretty obvious. This is an excerpt.

Times had changed since Mom's great-great-great-grandfather first took a pickax and shovel and was dropped down a hole to dig coal. The work itself hadn't changed that much. Or the dangers. But the world outside supposedly had. It was a kinder, gentler America now, according to my dad. There was the union. If that failed, hopefully there were other jobs to be had. If that failed, there was unemployment compensation. There was welfare.

No one would starve. That was a very important point with my father ... a man who had faced starvation himself. His main concern [now] was spirit, [Mom] told me. His fear was a *poverty of purpose*. He told my mom ... "You can have all the food and all the toys and even all the bombs, but no man can protect himself against uselessness."

The true tragedy of a poverty of purpose is that it can render life useless. That really struck me because I think a large number, likely a majority, suffer from a poverty of purpose. And an even larger number are in danger of slipping below the line. That to me is a crisis that requires our attention.

For at the same time, Ethical Culturists, liberal religionists, Ethical Humanists enjoy meaningful lives rich in purpose. But we are far from the majority in our country. In fact those who benefit from our life stance, by whatever name, comprise at most eight percent of the general population.

The latter part of the nineteenth century, when Humanism and Ethical Culture took shape, was one that saw liberal religion and free thought in the vanguard of our cultural development. It was an era of ethical creativity and open thinking. It has been said that at the dawn of the twentieth century there were, as a percentage of the population, more non-theists in the United States than at any other time. Figures of this kind are

¹ The reader is reminded that this is the written text of an oral address and remains in that style. While the speaker's presentation marks have been redacted, there has been no attempt to edit it into an essay.

speculative at best but it's not hard to imagine that there were also more regular churchgoers. What does that say about our country then and now?

Well, for one, it speaks to the progressiveness of the times. Today, *progressive* is all too often a term used because *liberal* has become a dirty word. Not to me, by the way. A century ago a progressive was one who respected varying opinions and tried to learn from them, tried to synthesize them into a better way of thinking, a better way of being, and a better way of living. There's not a lot of that floating around today. Our compatriots have grown less tolerant in a hundred years. Our national character has grown spiteful of difference. It has come to worship sameness and authority

And if our country has grown less skeptical over the past hundred years, it has, despite all appearances to the contrary, also grown less faithful, with dramatically fewer practicing their espoused faith religiously. Regular church attendance is down to something around 25% in the United States.

Adding our own eight percent to that quarter, and giving us all the benefit of the doubt when it comes to meaning and purpose, that still leaves two-thirds of Americans who have no real moral foundation, or who have only a shaky faith they no longer truly trust to guide them. They are either in danger of, or are already experiencing, a poverty of purpose.

Compare that to the roughly 13% who live below the financial poverty line. A shameful number given the unbridled accumulation of wealth by a few achieved through a ruthless competitiveness that knows no ethical bounds. And 13% is not a very respectable number when compared to an average household income that allows most of us to look beyond our pocketbooks when making life decisions. Still, it's a small percentage when compared to those who suffer from a poverty of purpose.

We are materially comfortable. We have things, we have stuff, we have the food and toys and certainly the bombs mentioned by the protagonist in *Coal Run*—but somehow we've failed to protect ourselves against the impression of uselessness—an impression that drives so many to chase empty dreams. We've fallen into a poverty of purpose.

So, I have to ask myself, Why? Why is ours a nation so focused on the superficial to the near exclusion of the things that can give human life meaning and give humanity hope? It seems to me that we live in a world devoid of all but the most shallow of purposes. I have to ask why, but I have to admit I don't have the answer. I don't know why so many suffer from a poverty of purpose, but I do know that we don't.

So that's my focus this morning—where we Ethical Humanists find meaning and why we have purpose. I want to accent the positive in the hopes that it will, eventually, with a lot help and effort, eliminate the negative. ...

There are a lot of big questions in life. Where did we and the universe come from? Where are we going? What if anything happens after death? And, wherever we came from and wherever we may be headed, what's the meaning of it all? Why are we here? Does our life have purpose?

When it comes to matters of origin and destiny, most frame their answers in terms of the Always-Was and The Always-Will-Be. Meaning, I believe, is tied to the first—are we special, divinely inspired and created, the ultimate product of the Always-Was? And hope is bound to the second—where are we going, is there a home for us in the Always-Will-Be?

As Ethical Culture is a Humanist movement let me touch briefly on those from that perspective.

Origin: Who knows? Theology takes it back four to seven thousand years before leaping into the infinite void of supposition and the realm of faith as fact. Modern science gives us something on the order of thirteen billion years since the Big Bang. And for those scrambling for their calculators, seven thousand goes into thirteen billion a bit under two million times. However you cipher it, advantage science.

But science says nothing about the Always-Was. Science begins with the Big Bang because that's where the facts it works with begin, and it is not the business of science to speculate. To hypothesize, to explore, to test and probe, yes. To offer up speculation as fact, no.

If you push this question of origin, of where-did-we-come-from, to its logical end, or beginning as the case may be, there are only two possible conclusions: A creative source—some say a God that is still active in our daily lives, responsive to prayers of petition and intercession, others say a creative source that set it all in motion and then lost interest, content to reside for ever after on the other side of the Big Bang, there's no end to creation stories—and you either come to accept one or another of them---or you come to I Don't Know.

As a Humanist, that's where I am. I don't know. I simply do not know. There have been in the annals of human imagination some pretty sophisticated ways of saying I Don't Know. One of my favorites is Thomas Aquinas' *uncaused cause*. There was a first cause but it itself was uncaused. So, I suppose if we were to ask Aquinas what caused the first cause, where the uncaused came from, he would probably say, "always was and always will be." Cute, but, more honestly, he would have to say, I don't know. We Ethical Humanists just get to it a bit quicker in accepting ourselves and the universe at face value, as self-existing.

There were several times during the writing of this talk on meaning and purpose that I wanted to burst into the song, *What's It All About, Alfie?* But, given my singing limitations, I'll content myself with the recited ditty, We're here because we're here because we're here because we're here.

We're here. Good morning. Good day. Good life. We are here.

Now, I'm not stating categorically there was nothing before the Big Bang. For all I know we're the umpteenth iteration of the expansion and contraction of the universe. But if there existed anything the other side of our present knowledge, I have seen no convincing evidence of it, I have heard no compelling argument in support of it, and I see nothing persuasive in the creation stories I've heard.

I don't know. So, as a Humanist, I simply accept what I know as existing. Nothing more.

Matters of destiny? Again, who knows? Destiny and hope are subjects for another day. But, like the Always-Was, there have been, over the course of human history, all sorts of constructs about what if anything awaits the other side of death, beyond the pale, where we go when we cross the bar into the Always-Will-Be. Some of them are quite compelling on an emotional level—who wouldn't want to live on in eternal bliss or return to give it another shot? Emotionally attractive but intellectually unsatisfying.

As with origins, I'm not saying categorically that there's nothing after death, I just see no convincing evidence of it, have heard no compelling argument in support of it, and see nothing persuasive in the stories I've heard about it. I simply don't know. So, as a Humanist, I accept death as inevitable and as final.

Ethical Culture sets these issues aside entirely, taking no position on or expressing any curiosity toward matters of origin and destiny—sort of a stance of applied apathy. So, to apply the old joke, when it comes to these matters, I can say with informed interest, I don't know and I don't care. I simply accept things as they are.

Seeing no divine origin to my own being, and acknowledging death as inevitable, I am left with a self-existing universe and my experience of it before my inevitable and final demise.

Here I am, existing for only the blink of the cosmic eye, just one of several billion critters like me on a small and beautiful but overpopulated planet in an undistinguished solar system in one of who-knows-how-many galaxies in a vast and expanding universe that itself has no known purpose. I arose from primordial ooze and will one day be but an inanimate ingredient of what I am now a sentient part.

Whoa, does that sound like a *Poverty of Purpose*? Well, it's not. Or at least it need not be.

I posit that it is those who consider themselves the special creation of the Always-Was who will tend to care for them in the Always-Will-Be—if they're good and obey the revealed orders interpreted and imposed by a self-selected few—I hold that it is they who are more likely to be poverty stricken when it comes to purpose. There are many reasons for this, such as living life driven by the promise of reward rather than the prospect of progress. But let's look at it from the other side, and here's the crux of my thesis this morning.

Life has meaning to the extent that we assign it meaning, and it has purpose to the extent we act on that meaning. Can it be that simple? Can it be as simple as Life has meaning so long as we assign it meaning?

Let me tell you about Larry Ingraham, a dear and much missed friend of mine. Larry described himself as a Unitarian Buddhist, but I met him at the Washington Ethical Society where he was an active member. Go figure.

During more than one long, hot summer Larry and I had the luxury of lazy days together pondering human nature and the meaning of it all. Washington has a civilized rhythm in July and August, slowing to a Southern crawl. Anyway, from time to time we'd come up with what at first blush seemed too simple an answer to whatever it was that we were noodling at the time.

That's when his Buddhism and what I'd learned of it from him kicked in. As the depth of the simplicity of what we'd stumbled onto sank in, we'd look at each other with eyes and grins wide and laugh. One or the other would ask, Can it be that simple? And we'd just crack up, hugging and laughing till we cried. Those were moments of sheer joy.

Yes, it can be that simple. Despite its apparent insignificance, life has meaning to the extent we assign it meaning. As Larry taught me, often the simple is profound. This is one of those instances.

Larry taught me much. The Buddhists have an expression of happiness for when everything seems right for the world—*It's a wonderful day to die?* Larry's wonderful day

came suddenly and prematurely. I conducted his memorial service and it's the only time I've ever heard the dearly departed referred to as a scruffy whacko. That's an incomplete description but not without merit. As I said, I miss him greatly. But had I not known him I would have missed even more. And that brings us to relationships. You knew I'd get there sooner or later, didn't you?

You know, if you scrounge around enough, you'll find that the founder of this Society and of the Ethical Culture movement, Felix Adler, or one of the early Leaders, had something on-point to say about nearly any point. These people covered the landscape in a way that remains fresh today. The beauty of their wisdom in establishing a religion of ethical relationships is that they weren't dogmatic in their approach to it. They gave us the map but never confused that map with the landscape, which they recognized as ever changing. So, their guidance remains sound.

In a talk entitled, oddly enough, *The Meaning Of Life*, Adler recognized that each of us is unique, unlike any other, and saw in this uniqueness an inherent worth, a significant dignity. Remember, Adler was a neo-Kantian idealist and his ideal was that of the ethical perfection of human society. He said, "Every man, however humble, is worthy of reverence because, in his limited sphere, he can be a beneficent, forward-working agent." A forward-working agent.

We've become more pragmatic about the attainment of perfection since Adler's day, and a bit more gender sensitive with our language, but the thrust of his dictum remains the same: That each of us is unique, that none of us can substitute for another, and that life itself would be incomplete without each of us.

Think of it, the completeness of the universe, the whole incomprehensible vastness of it, depends on you being you. Without you, I would be different. Without any one of us, the universe would be incomplete and life would be different for all of us. That's meaningful. Without your thread, the fabric of life would be weaker, the tapestry of our experience less textured.

Two weeks ago, our Society's president, Michael Kriegh, spoke from this platform about the uniqueness of Shooby Taylor, an obscure scat musician unlike any other. Shooby's music directly affected few, but indirectly, he affects us all. Who knows what the music of more popular musicians would be like had they not heard Shooby, or listened to someone who had. There's a ripple effect to our lives that radiates widely.

Adler went on to speak of the responsibility of our uniqueness, "On every child the whole past lays its burden, and on the outcome of its life the whole future is expectant." The future turns to you, and to you, and to you; it turns to you expectantly, awaiting your contribution. What greater purpose could there be?

One of Adler's colleagues, Percival Chubb, who went on to lead the St. Louis Society, put it this way, "The Ethical Movement is based on the belief that the good life is the supreme object of human endeavor, and that mutual help and combined effort are needed to attain that object." Mutual help and combined effort are the result of ethical relationships; relationships that reflect our respect for the worth of others and that strive to elicit the best in them.

Just last week Curt Collier, the Leader of the Riverdale/Yonkers Society, stood right here and spoke of the strength of such relationships and the latent power within them. He reminded us that relationships lived with the courage, kindness, compassion, honesty,

and respect of Ethical Humanism, are strong enough to lend purpose to life, and powerful enough to transform us, our community, and our culture.

That is the promise of Ethical Culture and we should expect and accept nothing less.

We may not be special or specially created, but we are a part of something glorious. Connected to every other living creature and thing we are part of the awesome majesty of the universe. And through Ethical Culture, through our religion of ethical relationships, we are in a very real way dependent upon each other for who we are and who we become.

At the forefront of Ethical Culture march the conjoined concepts of freedom and responsibility, of individual expression and community justice. Ethical Culture offers a rational meaning to life and a tangible hope of a better future through living it well.

Affirming our uniqueness and worth gives life meaning. Acting on that affirmation gives our lives purpose. As it was put in *The Meaning Of Life*, “In action lies our salvation.” The most important task for all of us, one that embodies meaning and imbues life with purpose, is to turn ideals into actions—actions that transform realities, actions that strengthen relationships and change cultures.

We have something that can ease the suffering of those stricken with a poverty of purpose. It is a powerful and uplifting thing, this Ethical Culture. We, each of us here, reap its benefits and bear its burden, the duty to be, in our own limited sphere, a forward-working agent. With our combined effort and mutual help, the world can be a better place.

There is an animating vitality within us, a vitality that not only calls us to ethical conduct in our relationships but, in the words of Adler, “...testifies to the unity of our life with the life of others, which impels us to regard others as our selves.” ...

I don't know why we exist, but, through my relationships with you, I find meaning in living. Accepting death for what it appears to be, inevitable and final, I find life more dear, more precious, and my part in it more purposeful.

I accept this life as all, and I revere this life as enough. I find it meaningful and I find it full of purpose.



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