

The Human Search for Meaning Knows No Bounds

I have long thought that nothing motivates our human existence more than the quest for meaning. Meaning, I believe, is to be discovered, not created. But have no doubt, where we do not find meaning we seek to create it. A pointless human existence strikes most of us as quite unthinkable.

We recoil at the thought that anyone could have lived in vain. And regarding those who die unnatural deaths, we recoil at the thought that they might have died in vain. At the very least there must be some lesson to be learned. If the circumstances of a life or death are tragic, then we struggle to make sense of what happened. Sometime we set a new course, or take up a new task, in order to create something meaningful or to accomplish some good purpose in response to what has transpired, what we have lost, what we cannot simply accept with resignation.

In truth, few if any people live completely in vain. Almost everyone means something to somebody else. Almost everyone makes some contribution to the life of another. Almost everyone makes some kind of positive difference.

But as I see it, countless people die more or less in vain. This is so hard to admit. Think of all the stupid, futile wars in which untold numbers of young and old, soldier and civilian, have lost their lives; all the deaths by accident and disease that could and should have been avoided; all the many suicides, intentional or unintentional, that have resulted from potentially remediable circumstances. Because such deaths are insults to our sensibilities, we go to great lengths to assure ourselves that these are not meaningless deaths, that they did not happen in vain.

And sometimes we do redeem such losses. We learn important lessons, pursue important tasks, and initiate positive changes to make it less likely such deaths will happen in the future. But deaths from senseless wars, treatable diseases, unforeseen accidents, and self-destructive acts continue to happen, nonetheless. Often, the only grounds we have for affirming the meaningfulness in someone's death is a religious faith in a reality that endures beyond what we can see.

There is something worse – far worse – than a life or a death that appears to be in vain. I'd like to think that every human life is precious, of infinite worth – but there are points where I must conclude that the world would be a much better place if some people had never been born. I'm not thinking primarily of those in our jails and prisons, though some of them are doubtless beyond redemption in this life. I'm thinking of those who wield the power to wreck havoc, inflict pain, and cause suffering that far exceeds any positive contribution they will ever make. I'm thinking of all those who will leave the world a worse place than they found it.

It is striking how often the very people who are the greatest scourge upon humanity persist in imposing their wills on others, as if by so doing they can make meaningful the horrendous evil they inflict upon the world. Tyrants, dictators, autocrats, bullies – they all seem to need to dominate in order to give significance to their lives. The alternative, I suppose, would be to acknowledge that their lives are worse than pointless, the negative far outweighing anything

positive and enduring.

Let's not mince words. Human existence is marred by much that is tragic and all that is persistently perverse. O for a world with less tragedy and no more perverse pursuit of meaning by means of destructive, dominating power!

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