

QUEST FOR PURPOSE

Personal Reflection

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“Without a vision the people perish,” Proverbs 29/18

With consciousness comes the question “Who am I?” We ask, why am I here? What is my purpose? The quest for answers has inspired tales from the Odyssey to Voltaire’s *Candide*; songs, from old Irish folk ballads to the Broadway musical, *Pippin*. A youth sets forth on a journey to seek his fortune or serve some great cause. He boldly proclaims, “I can’t live and die without a reason. I must find my purpose,” and embarks down the archetypal road to meaning and manhood.

Sometimes he is challenged, or forced to gamble his life on a riddle. He might deepen, or he might die. He could fly straight into the sun. Occasionally he receives divine assistance. In the end, though, our hero usually returns home, whether triumphant or bruised. There he discovers the meaning that lay all along in his own back yard. A wiser man now, he attends to the ancient purpose bequeathed to him by nature and generations of tradition. He marries and raises a family, while tending his own garden. Like his fathers, he turns his dreams and purpose to his progeny. That’s the masculine version of the story.

Women had a different quest, if they quested at all. Women lived a timeless, instinctive cycle of birth and death. In the world of instinct, women’s bodies knew what to do: feed the children, and keep them from harm. Let the men drone on about gods or politics or life’s meaning. Women knew what life was for. It was for this endless cycle of bearing and caring for babies, tending them, watching them grow, weeping together when they met an early death, and rejoicing when they mated and produced another round of babies to be tended. Life went on like that for millennia, through tribes and empires, through mother-rule and father-rule. None of it mattered much. What mattered was feeding the children. That was purpose enough.

Mate well and feed the children. It’s a sturdy plan. After all, it got us here. If our ancestors hadn’t done that, we wouldn’t be having this discussion. That’s what their parents did, and

their grandparents, for as far back as we can remember. It's a time honored design from an era not so long ago, when most people lived on farms: keep shoes on your children's feet, a roof on the barn, food on the table, and get the crops in before the rains come. People did their duty. They brought soup to sick neighbors and volunteered for the church supper. In the war effort, they made quilts or carried a gun. Beyond that, well, best to leave such lofty matters as purpose to the clergy and the dreamers.

In the last century, all this has changed. Look around. We have plenty to feed our own children and the rest of the world too, should we so choose. We are legion. As a nation we are obese, glutted with fats and sugars like no people the world has seen before. Our purpose surely can no longer be to multiply and fill the earth. It is already filled. We can mate well and feed our children...and then what? For the first time in history, millions of healthy adults with disposable income, time, and energy are asking: What is my purpose?

It is the most human of questions. Our very ability to formulate it defines our humanity. In the asking, human beings transcend brute instinct, and move inexorably toward freedom, choice, and the examined life. As creatures who live by value, weighing what we believe to be more important against what is less so, we cannot know what to value if we don't know to what end. By our answers to the question of purpose, we set the context and criteria for values, which we use to measure all aspects of our lives. On what basis should we answer?

As we round the bend of the twenty-first century, the question has never been more pressing. We are at odds about our purpose as a nation, as a culture, and as a race called humans. Without a collective pointer, how could we, as individuals, be anything but rudderless?

In the absence of clear direction, people do what we have learned well, in our affluent, acquisitive society: get more. Running in circles, we consume in restless frenzy. Eventually we consume ourselves, dying of stress-related diseases. Something is missing. Are we are dying for lack of a vision?

I look into the faces of people in airports, on freeways, and in my consulting room. They seem to have no idea what their life is for. The ones barely getting by and the ones who “made it” a long time ago are caught in the same quandary. Sometimes I imagine them calling out to no one in particular, “Please help me; I don’t know why I’m here. I do what I’m supposed to do. I hunt and gather daily at my office and at huge shopping malls. I run faster and faster to get somewhere, but where am I going? My larder is full. My children are fat.” They seem more disgruntled, angrier, more frightened than ever before. They hate their boss. They resent their parents, distrust their friends, and fear their neighbors. Their children don't respect them. They feel oddly cheated by life.

How ironic! Just when we thought we would be celebrating our triumph over the elements, we feel empty. Has life has played a cruel joke on us? It could appear so. Science has knocked the stuffing out of our most cherished spiritual stories, eroding the shared ground for meaning. If life has no meaning, how can it have purpose? The social necessity to “do our duty” rings hollow. Our moral guidelines barely skim the surface of today’s complex problems. Without inspiration, we find ourselves living out other people’s agendas – those we inherit, or those we adopt through advertising or propaganda—or worse, having no direction for our lives at all. No wonder depression has reached epidemic proportions. We no longer have a clear basis to know what our life is for. If we don’t know what life is for, how can we know what to do with it?

Many people are experiencing first hand what the great teachers in every tradition have taught: increased material wealth does not bring increased happiness. Not that wealth is bad for happiness; it’s just irrelevant to it. Meeting our basic needs may be necessary before we can look beyond them. But fulfilling our mounting desires, masquerading as needs, will never bring us contentment. Curiously, we seem to treat our desires with the urgency of needs. Might that be because we fear we would be lost without our old purpose, that of survival? Where survival is threatened, purpose is obvious. Where survival is secure, purpose is up for grabs.

Nostalgia beckons us backward, but we can't go back to an earlier, simpler time. If we could, we probably wouldn't want to. For better or for worse, we live with the power of mass destruction and global transformation at our fingertips. We cannot pretend to forget what we know. We have chosen lives of choice, and they come at a price: We have to choose.

How shall we find purpose in this brave, new world? Without a larger frame, purpose becomes ego run wild. Individual purpose must be born of collective purpose, a greater human purpose. But with so much choice, where do we find common ground?

We must look beyond our egos. Human purpose can be seen by looking to God's purpose, Life's purpose, and Love's purpose. Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "We lie in the lap of immense intelligence, which makes us receivers of its truth and organs of its activity." It is to that immense intelligence I suggest we look for answers. In each atom of this holographic, expanding universe, we see patterns and inclinations pointing to a greater pattern and purpose. The more we learn from new discoveries in the life sciences and physics about the origins of life and the intricacies of our universe, the more awestruck we stand at its continual unfolding. Dancing itself through our DNA, this intelligence instructs each cell in exactly how to form itself, to play its part in a larger whole. It hides at the heart of the hydrocarbon. It mutates. It spins cocoons and releases butterflies. It pushes its way through small openings in sidewalks and veils. It explodes into unexpected suns from black holes. It generates fractals, and then explains them. It melts mountains and it teaches children to read. It is never still. It is neither distinct from the material, nor reducible to the material. We can only see its manifestations; it is invisible yet present in every piece of the universe. This is divine intelligence, manifest and transcendent, whose purpose we can see in all its works: to evolve more and more complex, specialized, varied, cooperating, and conscious life forms, capable of choice, creativity, and admiration.

Could the human purpose be intentional partnership with this life force? Could we be its protectors, holding the delicate balance of life itself, so that it can continue to unfold? Could we be its progenitors, pushing and guiding life's leading edge through our consciousness and

creativity? Could we be its lovers, admiring and mirroring its wonders back through the eyes of science, art, and religion?

Human beings can reflect, consider, and choose. We can know purpose. Could those very qualities hold the key?

Evolution has brought us to this precise moment. After the struggles of millennia, we have the opportunity and tools to reflect on life as a whole, to choose, and act on our larger purpose, the purpose for which we were intended from the beginning of time. Everything we have experienced and learned these many thousand years has prepared us for this moment. We can now embrace our singular and purposeful role in life's journey, not as the crown of creation, but as its ardent champions.

We have eaten ourselves out of the garden of innocence. We stand on a precipice. In our long travail, we have mastered the arts of food cultivation and war, creation and destruction. On our growing edge lie the wondrous and terrible arts of planetary annihilation, cloning, space travel, off-world terraforming, global communications, self-mastery, artificial intelligence, nanotechnology, biotechnology, cyberspace, reproductive control, and mind boggling discoveries about the nature and origins of life. We have, as the snake predicted when we ate of the Tree of Knowledge, become as gods, knowing good from evil. And knowing both, with the power of gods, we must choose which one will be our purpose: whether we will continue to use our power merely to further our own immediate ends as individuals, as a nation, and as a species, or whether we will collectively take the helm of spaceship earth and align its path with the highest good for life *as a whole*, opening the way for the further evolution of life and consciousness. We have come of age. It is up to us now to decide how we will evolve, who we will become. We are creating the planet's future, as we create our own.

Two roads lie ahead. On the first, we degrade our life support systems so irreversibly that life as we know it becomes unlivable. We hear intimations of that road every day on the news: increasing pollution, growing rates of cancer, asthma, and auto-immune diseases, antibiotic

resistant plagues, global warming, drought, sterile seed stocks, the melting of the polar ice caps, more terrorism and fear, crime run rampant, breakdown of the economy, civil wars and invasions, rising illiteracy, homelessness, addiction, bigger prisons, widening gap between haves and have-nots, oil and water wars, drying of the seas, all finally ending in nuclear or biological war, wiping out much of the human and animal population.

Apocalypse. It could come about easily from making life choices in a self-centered bubble, without consideration for our relationship with each other or the whole. We could go there simply by consuming more, thinking only of ourselves and those close to us, blaming others for our problems, thinking social responsibility is someone else's job, driving bigger and bigger cars, not voting, not holding our elected leaders accountable, neglecting education and childcare, limiting birth control, using antibiotics promiscuously, allowing corporations free reign, raising and buying genetically modified foods whose seed stocks infect the gene pool, spraying crops with poison, letting our topsoil erode, devoting more miles of earth to mounting collections of garbage and toxic waste, allowing our techno-excrement to seep into groundwater and oceans, using more and more oil, ignoring oceanic warming and shrinking fish populations until too late, snubbing our national nose at international treaties, closing our eyes to poverty, disease, and homelessness, and ignoring the cries of our own bodies and souls. It's so easy! All we have to do is nothing.

There is another road. It leads to a world where everyone is fed, clothed, and given the education and resources they need to become self-sufficient. Armies move and distribute supplies, as the definition of national security expands to include eradicating the poverty and ignorance that breed war. Terrorism declines as good will and helping hands shrink the resentment, frustration, and hatred that previously fed it, and as surgical police action replaces military action in the apprehension of perpetrators. The United States has rejoined the world community and is leading the world in environmental technologies and citizen diplomacy. We are no longer dependent on oil; we are transitioning to a hydrogen economy, which is helping to restore air quality and reduce respiratory diseases and cancers. Corporations have no further economic incentive to pollute, as internationally enforced laws tax environmental impact. We are restoring the soil with new methods of bio-intensive

farming and crop rotation, using natural methods for pest control. Grassroots efforts and initiatives have made GMO farming illegal in much of the world, and family farms are thriving.

Congress is putting money into foreign aid and sustainable development, calculating that every dollar spent in aid saves hundreds or thousands spent on defense. This is creating enough surplus to fully fund drug treatment centers, innovative education, and mother and infant programs at all levels, which, in turn, are causing a significant drop in the prison population. Women are taking their lives into their hands and occupying close to fifty percent of elected offices. Birth control and micro-loans and for women in the developing world are giving them the option of having fewer children; those born are healthier and better cared for. Worldwide there is a leveling, and, in some places, a drop in the birth rate, as people are educated through major media campaigns to view parenting as a choice and a calling, rather than a right. Funds are going to plant large greenways, in order to reduce greenhouse gases and lower ocean temperature before the fish population is destroyed. The rainforest is receiving UN protection, with forces deployed to prevent clear-cutting, while indigenous peoples are financed for sustainable development. The international economy is in recovery, as global cooperation becomes the defining ethos. Space exploration is taking huge leaps, as the FAA opens it to entrepreneurs and visionaries, and international ventures are seeding research for off-planet experiments. The affluent and middle class are spending more money on travel, volunteering, charity, and developing their inner, spiritual life, realizing that happiness comes from inside and from deeper relationships. Seventy-five percent of the eligible population votes.

Impossible? No. Utopian? Not at all. All this is well within our reach. We need only have the vision and will to steer our ship in that direction, instead of in the direction it is currently headed.

Through our gifts for reflecting, considering, visioning, and choosing, can we discern and choose the good, the life affirming. An ant or an otter moving dirt on a riverbank need not consider its impact on the spawning salmon, the humans drinking the water downstream, or

the root structure of the tree holding the bank from erosion. The otter and the ant are unable to contemplate such things. Fortunately, they haven't the technical ability to do enough damage to require it. Enter the developer's bulldozer. The developer is not bad, nor is the bulldozer evil. It is simply that the bulldozer has a great deal more power to damage or repair than an ant or an otter. A different level of reflection is required, one in which developer and driver must consider their actions in light of their relationships to the salmon, the tree, and the humans downstream. It is our evolutionary responsibility to learn to think from the perspective of the whole of creation. We are the only living species who can.

This is our purpose, then, the one we were born for: to be the eyes and ears of the universe, celebrating its wonders as we steer human activities from our relatedness to that larger whole, with a vision of the possible. Those having sufficient time and resources to contemplate our purpose may be the very ones chosen by the universe to lead our people through the desert of social, moral, and ecological breakdown into an era of creativity and harmony with one another and the natural world. It is time that we moved our focus, in the words of futurist Barbara Marx Hubbard, from procreation to co-creation. And while we're at it, let's feed *all* the children and keep them from harm!

Such a purpose celebrates our relatedness to the whole of life. Viewing and co-creating from such a vantage point calls us forth to a new level of maturity. We move from our ego-centric, or even family-centric perspective, to larger concern for what the Native Americans wisely called "all my relations," which we now realize, includes all life, as a whole: the enterprise of continuing evolution, protecting its ground and creating its edge through our own joy, love, and creativity.

The call is evident. As the mist clears on human and cultural roles in this great purpose, we can see that opportunities are overwhelmingly present for anyone who has the courage and will to embrace them. But how?

The answer to our individual purpose may be found in learning our part in this great play. Within the overarching human purpose, each of us has some special gift. Be it simple or

grand, the use of that gift for greater purpose is what is meant by the term, calling. In the words of the great theologian Frederick Beuchner “Calling is where my deep gladness meets the world’s deep need.”

Both must be present, then. The deep need is abundantly clear. But this is no mechanical universe; we do not serve it as cogs in a wheel; rather, we express our gifts through our being, as snowflakes do, each unique in all of time. Joy arises as that divine intelligence actualizes itself in each of us through love. Love calls each of us to follow our fascination, our passion (as now, feeling the thrill of new ideas forming in engagement with the question, tasting the words, I allow them to call me forth into new places, new thoughts, to transform me in their turn).

Attending to and reflecting on our environs, listening for the world’s need, we then choose time, place, and means to manifest our offering. Pursuing our loves, we awaken to our own interests and gifts, shining a light on a face of creation that was, until the moment of our investigation, hidden by shadows. We were born for this. Listen: Divine purpose whispers in our ear, calling us to be fully ourselves, yet more than ourselves, calling us to be vessels for life’s longings, calling us to be co-creators in evolution’s destiny, ushering the whole enterprise into its next miraculous expression.

Can you hear? Do you dare? Will you follow?

Purpose is shaking all of us by our shoulders to awaken us to this moment, *to our purpose in it*, for each and every one of us has a role to play. It calls us to go into the silence and listen, to read the newspapers and keen. It calls us to write letters, journey to other realms, vote, tell its story, nurture, build, grow food, tell the truth, recycle, demonstrate, research, celebrate, pray, give money, dance, pick up litter, follow our dreams, meditate, discover, invent, work for peace, experiment, teach, heal, intervene, sing, shout, co-create, and love. In the end, divine purpose, the very force of evolution, calls each of us to take up the mantle and go forth carrying the banner of Life and Love, in the name of the sacred, in the name of the possible, because it knows that we are its own. We love. And more than ever before, it matters.

