

WHAT DOES IT ALL MEAN?

A HUMANISTIC ACCOUNT OF HUMAN EXPERIENCE

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PREFACE

I love those old photographs from the 1800s showing nameless people staring blankly into the camera. The men have large moustaches. Nearly everyone wears a hat. In studio shots, women are dressed in their finery, soldiers in neat uniforms. Sometimes they're taking a break from work, standing in front of a store. The ones I like best show two men pausing in the midst of cutting down an enormous tree with a two-man bucksaw. But no matter where those people may have been at the time, they peer out from a sepia-toned world—and the most interesting part is that all of those people are now dead.

Looking at the photos, I can see that those people were engaged in their world, and it's easy to suppose that they believed their lives were meaningful, just as I suppose mine to be. But now they, and their era, are long forgotten. They've vanished, leaving hardly a mark, except for a few grains of silver on a photograph. Would it have mattered if they had never lived?

Each person in those photos strove to be or to do something; they cried, laughed, worried, argued, prayed, and hoped. They had toothaches, backaches, insights, loves, failures, and moments of contentment, but there's nothing left of all that now. Their life experiences were absolutely compelling while they were taking place, but all of it has long since evaporated into the mists of time.

What was the point of living those lives?

We might imagine that some of those individuals justified their existence by “making a contribution” to society. Yet, however lasting their contributions might have been, realistically, the vast majority of those anonymous people didn’t make much of an impression, except for populating the earth with more anonymous ancestors. They carefully built houses that have since been turned to firewood, they lovingly tended farms that are now suburban shopping malls, and the world they believed in is gone.

Someday, my own photographic image may stare blindly into the eyes of someone who has yet to be born, and that person might be asking, “What did your life mean, whoever you were?”

I’d like to have an answer, both for that person and for myself.

The question of the meaning of life has bothered me for years. Of course, most adolescents go through a meaning-of-life inquiry, but I never outgrew it, and I often wonder why so few people seem to care about it.

Many of my friends accepted the teachings of their church without serious thought, which allowed them to bypass the question, and I suppose that’s how the church expects it to work. The purpose of the church is to remove questions about the meaning of life by providing canned answers.

But that didn’t work for me. Faith always seemed a defeatist strategy, a submission to ignorance. But what did I know? Despite having spent my entire adult life in a school setting, the only thing I knew was that I had no actual knowledge of what to make of my own experience.

In the 1970s, I resigned my position as a college professor and chair of the psychology department at a small western college and signed up with a large state university on the East Coast. They had an extended university program, teaching U.S. citizens abroad, mostly members of the armed forces. So I became an itinerant teacher, reassigned every semester to some new city to teach psychology. In that way, I traveled around the world over a period of two years, living and working in Japan, Turkey, Germany, Italy, and Britain, and traveling in Thailand, China, India, and Eastern Europe.

When it was all over and I was back in the U.S., exhausted and penniless, I reflected on that experience. What I had learned was that nobody knows anything about the meaning of life. All over the world (based on the sample of it that I had observed), most people are hustling just to make a living, feed a family, build a house, teach their children, dig a well, stay warm, or any of a thousand other mundane things, and there really are no secrets hidden out there.

I even stayed as a guest in a Buddhist monastery in Kolkata (then called Calcutta) for a time, because I was sure that if there *were* answers to the great questions of life, they'd surely be found in India.

But if they were there, I didn't find them.

The question of how to interpret one's life experience became more urgent as I grew older. I felt as if I were just cooking in my own juices, so I left the academic world and built a second career in information technology. Despite some modest success over the course of two decades, that, too, eventually became a treadmill.

At some stage in life, you begin to feel as if you know the lay of the land, and you believe that if there were apparent answers to what it all meant, you would have noticed them. But I hadn't noticed. So I quit my corner office, moved to a small island, and took up golf.

Soon I found myself reading psychology books again, attending conferences, and even writing a few papers. Gradually, I realized that, as a psychologist, my lifelong, idiosyncratic interest in how the mind works could eventually lead me to a solution to the question of the meaning of life. All I had to do was to articulate my tacit understanding of how the mind is structured and how it operates, because the meaning of life must be found within the human mind.

My understanding of how the mind works emerged from my training in cognitive psychology, from observing people and cultures around the world, from introspection, and from my reading in science and philosophy. The result wasn't a scientific discovery, but an analytic finding, an articulation, which I'll describe in the chapters that follow.

But as I was writing it all out, I began to wonder, "Of what use is this? Why would anyone believe it, and even if they did, what good would it do them?"

So I turned those questions on myself, and the following answers made themselves apparent:

First, I have confidence in my explanation of the mind because it's based on careful observation and critical thinking, and fits coherently with the rest of what I know. Secondly, my theory's usefulness stems from the fact that it integrates my experience into "the big picture," in terms of life as a whole.

Why wouldn't that work for *anybody*?

Every person is different, of course, but at the level of the mind's basic structure and operation, there are patterns that apply to all human beings. If so, my theory would account for the meaning of human experience in general. So if I knew how the mind worked, I could "easily" discover the meaning of life.

I decided to present my explanation of how the mind works by starting with its practical application: a solution to the question of the meaning of life. And that's what you're going to discover in this book.

My reasoning depends on the concept that there's no other way for a human being to know something except through the operation of the human mind. In other words, all human knowledge is *human* knowledge.

For example, it doesn't make sense to me that God just plants knowledge into our minds because, if that were the case, we wouldn't be responsible for that knowledge, and it would have no personal meaning for us. By the same token, we can't say that knowledge is just a side effect of genetics or brain activity, because that would mean that we really would know *nothing*. An entirely human approach insists that knowledge comes from nowhere except *ourselves*. We have the minds; we *are* the minds, and not just knowledge, but all human experience comes only from us, so nothing about human experience can be hidden from us—not even the meaning of human life.

What, then, is the appropriate way for a mind to examine the nature of the mind, if that is even possible? I think it *is* possible, and I'll devote a few pages in upcoming chapters to

explaining how that examination works, and why I feel confident that it leads to a real, empirical description of the human mind, not just self-delusion or fantasy.

The first question people always ask about this theory is “How do you know?” I’ve tried to answer that question with an explanation of my methods of inquiry, so that anybody could follow the same methods and verify or disconfirm my findings. I’m afraid that many professional philosophers and psychologists may not take the methods seriously, since they don’t make much contact with the scientific literature of psychology in general, or with that of cognitive science in particular. But there are good reasons for that, which I’ll explain.

Once I’ve set forth my theory of how the mind is structured and how it operates, the meaning of life should flow clearly out of that explanation, because all meaning comes from the mind. The answer I’ll offer is this: we’re all trying to recognize ourselves, both in each other and in *all* things.

That, in a nutshell, is how the mind works, what it does for a living. It’s looking for itself. That’s what we *all* do for a living.

Another way to state it is by saying: the purpose of life is self-knowledge. That’s what we’re here for—to find out what we’re here for.

Socrates summed it up many centuries ago, when he said, “know thyself.”

So what’s new here?

What’s *new* is a reasoned argument, based on experience, that shows why Socrates’ answer is right, and that it’s a surprisingly broader idea than the egocentric navel-gazing that it

first suggests. In this book, I'll offer not just the answer, but the justification for the answer. In other words, I'll present a principled answer, not an authoritarian one.

The main title of the book asks *What Does It All Mean?* Maybe I should have added, "... *If Anything.*"

It's legitimate to wonder if there really *is* any meaning to life at all, especially when life stands in the shadow of death. I'll examine that question in the first chapter. My conclusion, predictably, is that there *is* a meaning to life. A more important conclusion, though, after considering several possible answers, is that we need to discover that meaning for ourselves, rationally, by looking at patterns of experience. Nobody is going to tell us the right answer.

In the second chapter, I'll explain my understanding of experience from my humanist perspective. I don't turn to biology for answers to psychological questions, and I don't turn to God, either. That's why the subtitle of the book is *A Humanistic Account*.

It's a practical matter. God only knows what God knows, and biology is about the body—in this context, the brain. But meat and bones don't know anything, in and of themselves. I'll follow a path somewhere between those two common explanations of experience, and limiting my explanation to what a normal, healthy, adult human being can know, first-hand, from personal experience.

Why isn't it obvious to us what the meaning of life is? In chapter three I'll argue that common sense is blocked from discovering the meaning of life by two wrong assumptions that are deeply embedded in Western culture: the certainty that subjectivity and objectivity are not

connected, and the myth of mental privacy. I'll explain those assumptions, where they come from, and how they block our understanding.

Based on the humanistic assumption that an answer to the meaning of life can be found within the mind itself, I'll introduce, in chapter four, the central image of how the mind works. *Bipolar consciousness*, as I call it, is extremely simple—the kernel or abstract essence of consciousness that characterizes any mental process. All human experience can be simplified—or oversimplified—for purposes of understanding the schematic of bipolar consciousness.

In chapter five, I extend the explanation of bipolar consciousness into everyday life, based on an examination of how psychological motivation develops over a person's lifespan. I'll suggest that we're *all* looking for something. We don't know what it is, exactly, but we *feel* it. We want wholeness, completeness, and understanding, what I call "the *telos*." It is the psychological future that draws the mind forward toward its ultimate satisfaction. That overarching motivation is the expression of bipolar consciousness that animates us.

The next three chapters will use the concepts and terminology of bipolar consciousness to explain two radical new concepts—*psychological projection* and *intersubjectivity*—that overcome the inhibiting common sense assumptions about the mind. They won't seem so radical after I've explained them, and they'll provide an explanation of how the mind works that gives an answer to the question of the meaning of life.

In chapter nine, I'll return to the beginning and ask, "What About God?"

My account of human experience and the meaning of life explicitly didn't appeal to any spiritual or theological explanation. God was out of the picture. Was that reasonable? Can we

really understand the meaning of life without a consideration of God? I'll step out of my theoretician's role and set a context for the theory of mind that I have presented. Although the theory itself is not theological, I'll suggest that the best context for the theory is theological.

The last three chapters are like appendixes, supplementing the ideas that have been presented. Chapter ten, for example, answers some common questions people ask about my approach.

Chapters eleven and twelve answer the toughest question, "How Do You Know?" To answer that question, I'll describe what knowledge is, how we get it, and how we determine that it's true. Then, in chapter twelve, I'll discuss the specific methods of discovery and analysis that I used to come up with my theory of the mind and my answer to the question of the meaning of life.

Without the methods, this book might as well be fiction, but by explaining and adhering to them, I can say I'm writing about what I know, and what anyone can know. The result is, as promised, a strictly humanistic account of human experience.

Chapter One

THE MEANING OF LIFE

When we're young, we assume that life's meaning will become apparent from the many possibilities we face. Anything can happen, it seems. But as we mature, we start to wonder, "Is this all there is?" and eventually, we ask ourselves, "What is the meaning of it all?"

But we don't have to be in our senior years to wonder about that question.

The meaning of life has two main terms, *meaning* and *life*. A person can lose either one at any time, and the realization of that possibility is usually what provokes questions about the meaning of life. But most of the time, people are absorbed in the struggle to keep themselves and their families fed, healthy, sheltered, and connected to others. Such mundane concerns easily trump the need to reflect upon the meaning of life.

Even so, as is the case with the trumpets in Charles Ives' short orchestral piece, *The Unanswered Question*, that insistent theme continues to force itself into our everyday lives. And as Ives' music describes, our instinctive reaction is to bat the question down rather than deal with it.

But what if we *did* want to deal with it? The first order of business would be clarification of the question. What, exactly, *is* being asked?

We aren't asking about the biological meaning of life. Frogs are alive and stones are not, and that difference, which we label as *life*, is mysterious, but it's not the mystery we're talking about when we consider the meaning of life.

It may seem as if we're looking into the purpose of our own existence, asking, "Why do I exist?"

When we ask about the meaning of life, it's more of a psychological question than a purely existential one. We want to know if our lifetime of hopes and disappointments, loves and losses, confusions and insights, has any purpose, or if it's all been just a roller-coaster ride, with no point beyond the thrill itself. The reason we want to know this is because we realize that the ride eventually will end, and it's distressing to think that there might have been some grand significance to our lifetime of experiences, but we simply didn't "get it."

Or what if life does have a purpose, but we're either unable or unwilling to fulfill it, or we simply haven't figured out what that purpose is, which causes us to do everything wrong? Maybe it's better not to ask the question than to face those unpleasant possibilities. After all, if we don't think about death, we don't have to think about the meaning of life.

But when we inquire into the meaning of life, we implicitly acknowledge the possibility that there may not *be* one.

We phrase the question purposefully, asking, "What *is* the meaning?" as if we already know there is some important meaning, and we just want to make sure we get it right. But, we have to admit that there is a possibility that life has no meaning whatsoever. It could be purely an accident, with no purpose, and that's not a happy thought, because we *want* there to be a meaning to life.

We know there's meaning *in* life. We find satisfaction in hearing a string quartet, recognizing a loving gesture, or solving a difficult problem, and that satisfaction itself is meaningful to us. Life offers plenty of satisfaction and plenty of meaning, and we'd like more of both. But as we move into mid-life and beyond, we realize that more experience lies behind us than ahead, and that we've seen most of what we're going to see. Yet aren't there still important

things to do or understand, in order for us to get the most out of life? What *are* we supposed to do? What *do* we need to know before the end finally comes?

Meaning and Death

If we didn't know we were going to die, we might never ask about the meaning of life. We might just live our lives, pursue our goals, and complete our various projects, one after another, indefinitely. Children and young adults don't generally concern themselves with the meaning of life, because they're not aware that life is measured. They may know intellectually that they'll eventually die, but death seems a remote possibility, and is rarely considered.

When death occurs in a family, or among one's circle of friends and acquaintances, it's called "shocking," "tragic," or at least "untimely." Those terms reveal the fact that we ordinarily conceive of death as an abnormality, and not the inevitable certainty it is.

Birth and death frame the question regarding the meaning of life. We know when the clock started ticking and, assuming we'll meet our end due to "natural causes," we know approximately when our time will run out—and in between, while the clock is still ticking, is what we call *life*.

How Old Are You?

I find it odd that people are preoccupied with their age and the age of others, without being consciously aware that age represents not just an aspect of self-definition, but also the relentless ticking of the clock. Children learn to keep track of how old they are almost as soon as they're able to master language. From that point on, keeping track of that count is encouraged by their parents and by other children. Throughout their lives, annual birthday celebrations help

measure the inexorable march of time, reinforced by a huge greeting card industry. But why is it so important to know how old we are?

There are practical reasons, such as determining when a person is qualified to attend school or get a driver's license, but those reasons don't seem important enough to explain our cultural obsession with age. The real reason for that fascination is because knowing our age is really all about *death*—it's a measure of how much time we have left. Children don't know that, of course, and they're happy just to have their annual cake and ice cream party. But parents know, if only tacitly and subconsciously, and they're the ones who enforce the annual ritual, unwittingly perpetuating our cultural anxiety about death.

Advertising, calendars, life insurance rates, and fashions relentlessly goad us into continuing to be anxious about death in our *sub*-conscious mind. Death is a prominent feature of our thoughts, even though, paradoxically, we hardly ever think about it. We judge people, in large part, in terms of "how old" they are, and we evaluate ourselves the same way. But it's nearly all tacit, without full awareness of what it means.

When we meet people, we instinctively try to guess how old they are, because that's how we gauge what they *should* have achieved, *should* understand, and should be concerned about at that particular point in their life journey. We all keep our dreaded countdown timer in subconscious awareness at all times but we don't like to consciously confront what it's actually counting down. Age may be a useful scale for organizing life's memories, ambitions, and expectations, but as a culture, we don't give much thought to the final endpoint of that scale.

When someone we care about dies, one would think that event would force us to consider our own mortality. But though our loved-one's absence is palpable, it doesn't help us grasp what has happened. It's as if a bird flew in through a high window, across the room, and then out

another window. Inside the room, we may wonder where the bird came from and where went, but the bird is gone—and the meaning of its brief transit escapes us. We may try to look out the windows, but when we do, we see that they're really mirrors, because our experience is limited *only* to that room—there is no outside, as far as we're able to experience.

Death is that sort of incomprehensible boundary, separating us from nothingness. Someone else's death should remind us of our own eventual end and jolt us into wondering about the meaning of living. But most people, often with the aid of clergy, prefer to imagine that the deceased has simply “passed on” to another place. But that euphemism lets them avoid the possibility that the deceased has become utterly nonexistent. It also allows them the opportunity to formulate a positive, pragmatic plan for moving ahead with their own lives, and thereby escape any intuitions they might have that there *is* no point to life.

Fear of Meaninglessness

Why do we avoid thinking about death most of the time? I think psychologist Ernest Becker (1973) got it right when he said that a thorough denial of the certainty of death helps people avoid asking the question of life's meaning. In short, it's not death we're really afraid of, but life—or more exactly, the potential *meaninglessness* of life.

The problem we face is that death seems arbitrary, undeserved, and unscheduled. One day, we're enjoying life's satisfactions (spiced with occasional failures and disappointments), and then, all of a sudden, our time runs out. No matter how old we are or whether we saw it coming, the end still feels like “all of a sudden,” because every moment we're alive, we're involved with our projects, ideas, and expectations. But suddenly, our time's up, and the Grim Reaper is at the door.

The arbitrariness of death can give us a feeling of meaninglessness. Our meaningful life experiences are strong evidence that life, as a whole, is meaningful, but the single fact that it will all be terminated—suddenly, unreasonably, and unfairly—seems to negate everything that came before.

We're afraid of the meaninglessness that seems to stem from death's indifference to human experience. We're afraid of death *now*, before it's happened, because its certainty threatens to transform the meaning we're experiencing into meaninglessness.

But what we're fearing is loss of *meaning*, not loss of life, because death is not an experience. Since there are no survivors to describe what death is like, death is the *opposite* of experience—the negation of experience.

If we knew that death would wait for the conclusion of a major phase in our lives, such as the affirmation of a relationship or the completion of an important project, it would all be different.

We could say, "I did my best, and now I'm satisfied and ready to go."

In that scenario, every life would have a definite sort of finishing line, offering every person a sense of closure and the opportunity to evaluate the meaning of their lives. But death always seems to be unexpected, undeserved, and indifferent to such subtlety, which is why suicide can sometimes seem to be a reasonable option. Having control over the timing of one's death makes it seem less arbitrary and, paradoxically, allows for the suggestion that one's life has meaning.

Suicide

We can't choose never to die, but we do have a choice about when death will occur. Suicide is typically an act of despair or depression, chosen from a sense of hopelessness or

meaninglessness. But it's a futile grasp at meaning, because it removes the possibility of meaning, even though it seems to assure meaning in the suicide victim's mind.

A suicide note attempts to secure some sort of posthumous meaning, but it's only a substitute meaning that will never be experienced, except in that person's tortured imagination. I gave this concept quite a bit of thought after a fellow university teacher committed suicide.

Tom was a heavy drinker, but he somehow managed to deliver his chemistry lectures and attend committee meetings within the boundaries of social acceptability. At a faculty retreat one autumn, I sat with him on the porch of a country lodge while he downed one beer after another and busied himself with his fishing gear.

It was a quiet time of day, and there wasn't much conversation.

Then he said suddenly, without looking at me, "What makes a man drink, Bill?"

The best I could answer was, "I don't know, Tom. Pain? What do you think?"

But he didn't reply, and three days later, back on campus, I learned that he'd shot himself.

Tom's suicide note was addressed to his wife, saying, "You're the one making me do this, Marie."

Marie had told Tom that she'd leave him if he didn't stop drinking. Of course, that was no justification for his selfish act and cruel note, but from Tom's point of view, he'd solved his problem. His life wasn't really his; it was controlled by the demon drink, and his lifeline to meaning was Marie. But the demon was threatening to take her away, too, which would leave his life with no meaning, and since people can't live without meaning, something had to be done.

Suicide was Tom's assertion of power over his demon.

With that act, Tom had said, "Dammit, I *am* in charge of this life!"

He might have even imagined that killing himself would somehow put him back in control, in a way that the demon could never overturn—and in a way, I had to admit that it make a twisted kind of sense.

I wish Tom's suicide note had said something like that, but Tom wasn't an introspective man, and by blaming Marie for his death, he proved that he didn't understand his desperate predicament. Even so, it seemed as if he had, in a sense, skillfully used the choice of death to secure a sort of meaning for his life.

There are times when we call certain acts of self-sacrifice *heroism*, rather than suicide, and those acts can define a meaningful experience for that person. We think of courageous firemen, policemen, or soldiers, who fulfill their duty with honor and commitment, even in the face of death. When death occurs in the line of duty, it's part of that person's meaningful experience of life, not the negation of their life's meaning.

The difference between suicide and honorable self-sacrifice is *intentionality*. One is an affirmation of living and a commitment to the social community, while the other is a withdrawal of that affirmation and commitment through a selfish attempt to grab personal meaning.

Most people don't choose death, but may come to accept its immanence and inevitability. In consciously accepting death as a boundary that defines life, those people reduce the shadow it casts on life.

Death Illuminates the Meaning of Life

To take the question of the meaning of life seriously, and to pursue the answer vigorously, a person must squarely confront and accept the concept of personal mortality. Otherwise, the arbitrariness of death negates the possibility that a person's life experience could have any meaning. Once we understand that the meaning of life is defined in the context of its

conclusion, we realize that instead of negating life's meaning, bravely facing our inevitable death actually throws a spotlight on it.

Is Death Final?

What if death is simply a transition into the kingdom of heaven, where life continues meaningfully in some other form? That would direct a certain kind of spotlight onto the question of the meaning of life. The meaning of life would then be to qualify for eventual entry into heaven. Maybe we could qualify by washing the feet of lepers, blowing up infidels, donating money to charity, or tending the sick. We'd do whatever our culture told us would earn a gate pass, but it's a traditional answer, based in unthinking belief rather than on critical thinking.

The idea that the meaning of life is to get a ticket into heaven is certainly convenient, and sweeps away the perplexity of dealing with the question any further. Many people, perhaps *most* people in the world, prefer that answer, but our goal is to discover, first-hand, an experience-based answer to the question of life's meaning.

The belief that death is just a transition into an everlasting life in heaven must be rejected, simply because there's no evidence for it in experience. No human being could know that getting to heaven is the meaning of life, because no one has ever come back to report their findings.

But what about Jesus? Didn't he come down from heaven and tell all? Theologians believe that, but there's no concrete evidence. All we have to go on are the scriptures. At best, the scriptures record an oral history of what one person said another person might have said about heaven. The scriptures aren't first-hand accounts of an unexplored territory like the journals of Lewis and Clark, and even given the most generous interpretation, they only add up to the flimsiest of hearsay.

There are people who claim to have experienced death, on the operating table, for example, and were then able to describe the experience after they'd been revived. But no matter what we think about their testimony, the plain fact is that they did not truly die, according to the common meaning of the term, since true death is irrevocable, and you don't come back from it. Those people are still alive, and they're free to describe their experience any way they like, just as some people swear they've been abducted by extraterrestrials.

I'm not saying that survivors of near death experiences are wrong or self-deluded. They could be giving honest reports of actual experiences. But without additional evidence, extraordinary testimony of improbable experience isn't convincing. To be compelling, we need evidence, such as photographs of heaven, or tape recordings of St. Peter's voice. We need samples of angel feathers or other artifacts from "the other side."

But we have none of those things.

What we do have, however, is a remarkable lack of communication with the dead. It seems surprising that, among the billions of departed souls, not a single one has ever had sufficient interest or ingenuity to make unambiguous contact with a living person. Despite self-proclaimed psychics who say they can communicate with the dead, there really isn't a compelling case that bears the scrutiny of fair observation and rational thinking (see examples in Underdown, 2003).

At the beginning of the twentieth century, eminent Harvard philosopher and founder of American experimental psychology William James and his close friend, Frederick Myers, made a pact to investigate this matter. They took a solemn oath that whichever one of them died first, his highest priority would be to communicate with the survivor from the other side by whatever means possible.

Frederick died first. William listened, went to séances, and introspected deeply, but there was no communication from his friend. He shouldn't have been surprised, because as far as we know, using reasonable standards of critical thinking and evidence, people simply don't communicate with the dead. That's because the dead are dead—that is, non-existent—and not living incommunicado in a parallel universe.

Therefore, the idea that death is just a transition to another life in heaven (or hell or elsewhere) must be rejected on the basis of lack of experiential evidence. That doesn't mean it can't be true, but if we're to rely on human experience and reason, it's not an idea that has enough support to be useful as an argument or explanation for the meaning of life. There's nothing wrong with belief in an afterlife, of course, but it's not knowledge, because there's no rational basis for it in human experience. To be knowledge, we need a naturalistic, psychological answer to the question of the meaning of life—something we could *know*—because the meaning of life must be based upon an analysis of actual life experience.

Is Death Permanent?

What if death is final, with respect to this particular life, but not permanent? What if we “come back,” to live again, as in the doctrine of reincarnation? If that were true, it wouldn't change the nature of the question about the meaning of life, but it would multiply the problem, since the question would have to be asked many times—once for each life that has been lived. There would also be an additional question about the meaning of the entire *cycle* of death and rebirth, and there couldn't be any inquiry into the meaning of multiple lives unless one was aware of having lived those multiple lives.

I confess that I have no memory of past lives myself. In fact, I can't remember anything from *this* life before the age of two, and even those memories are only fragmentary, isolated snapshots—but perhaps that's a personal failing.

Some people say they remember their past lives, and could write multiple autobiographies, but I personally wouldn't make an argument based on a claim for which I could provide no trace of tangible evidence from my own experience. Therefore, reincarnation must be rejected as a strategy for dealing with death's effect on life's meaning—not because it's wrong, but due to pragmatic concerns. In that light, I have only this one life to consider, which means that I have only one question: What is the meaning of *this* life?

The Effect of Death on the Meaning of Life

Having considered the widespread tendency of humans to deny the absolute certainty of their own death, and then having looked at suicide, the afterlife, and reincarnation, what can we conclude about the meaning of life, within the context of death?

As soon as we confront the absolute fact that we *are* going to die, we're thrown into the question of the meaning of life, and the certainty of death guarantees that the question is both valid and important. It also suggests that the answer to the question should be able to be found through the examination of our patterns of human experience, rather than being derived from speculation about experiences no *living* human has ever had.

When I look at nineteenth-century photographs of ordinary people I run across at flea markets, the eerie paradox is that all of those people are now dead and virtually forgotten—although not quite forgotten, because I'm looking at photographic proof of their erstwhile existence. But they're dead and gone as individual personalities, and their photos aren't in their family's album—they're for sale at a quarter a piece at a flea market. No one knows who they

were, but they were *people*. They have become nameless representatives of humanity, but I recognize a little of myself in their faces.

When I look into their eyes and ask, “Who were you?” I’m actually asking that question of myself. They are me, and I am them—and precisely because they’re dead, yet still exist within a photographic image, looking into their eyes helps me appreciate, in a concrete, emotional way, that death’s certainty forces me to consider the meaning of life by analyzing my own experience.

Other Provocations To Meaning

Death is the obvious and overwhelming provocation for asking the question about the meaning of life, but there are other important facts of life that provoke the question, as well. Let’s consider a few of them briefly, to further illustrate what kind of a question it is, and how it arises—or should arise—during the natural course of life.

Children

Why do people have children, when the planet already wobbles under the weight of humanity? One easy explanation is that we can’t seem to help it. We’re animals, and animal species reproduce to the limits of their environment, until the food runs out or their environment changes, at which time, the population crashes. It’s a cycle that’s called population dynamics, and is well known in ecological biology circles, but there are other practical, economic, and political reasons, as well.

For instance, children can help work the fields or mind the store, take care of us when we get old, and extend our influence in the community. Those are all valid reasons for having children, but there are *psychological* reasons, as well. First, having children gives us something

to fill up our otherwise empty lives, and second, children can help us deal with our fear and denial of death.

Without children, what would we do with ourselves? There's a general expectation in the culture that after someone has been married for some time, children should be forthcoming, and if they aren't, that person may be considered selfish or abnormal. Being child-free myself, I've heard those suggestions many times from parents and in-laws. Even gay and lesbian couples in committed relationships may adopt children, to fulfill (or fill up) their lives. Without children, a person might throw themselves one hundred percent into their work, but there are an awful lot of days to fill up in our lives, and no matter how engaging the work was, at some point, it would become tiring and that person would inevitably wonder if that's all there was to life.

Children, on the other hand, are ever-changing and ever-challenging. Children are a full-time project for at least twenty years of their parents' lives. They fill their parents' days and nights and, in return, they give unquestioned meaning. No one can deny the righteousness of parents who devote a lifetime to the well-being of their children. Those people are secure in the knowledge that all of their the days have meaning.

Children continue to soak up attention and define a parent's personal identity, even as they grow into adulthood. Then, just when the parent is starting to get uneasy about what to do next, there comes the possibility of grandchildren! Thus, having children provides an assured identity, sets one's priorities, and guarantees a meaning for one's life. Is that so wrong?

People say that children bring them happiness, and who can doubt it? I think there is a genuine happiness to be derived from having unquestioned and unquestionable meaning in a person's life. Even if a child "goes bad," according to the parents' standards, they can still take satisfaction from having done the right thing by subscribing to a meaningful life project. No

matter how it all turns out, having children is psychologically practical, because it provides an effective means of avoiding the existential question concerning the meaning of life, and substitutes the practice of living as an ostensibly meaningful life. And there's no doubt that it works fairly well, at least for a couple of decades. After that, some other approach must be adopted, in order to avoid a recurrence of the question.

Legacy

In creating a family, parents not only get the benefit of having their lives filled with meaning, but there's also the "legacy" bonus, which includes the belief that they have somehow transcended death by passing something of themselves on to future generations. Whether it's our DNA, our values, our teachings, or merely the memory of our existence that we're anxious to see survive, having children is a way for us to pretend immortality. That reasoning is not compelling, though, because the fraction of one's self that might survive death seems insignificant, compared to the overall scope of life.

In any case, for whose benefit is the "legacy?" It seems fair to say that it's for our own benefit *now*, because none of it will make any difference to us after we're dead. The psychological benefit of a legacy exists in our imagination, while we're alive. It's the fantasy that others will appreciate us after we're gone, thus allowing us to tweak the nose of death in a small way.

The legacy motive seems patently self-serving and superficial, but it seems to be important to people with children. I've queried friends and relatives about it as closely as I could before they took offense, and I've found that the legacy concept is generally not well thought out.

Parents say things like, "It's important and satisfying to leave a legacy behind."

But they're not talking about insurance policies and real estate—they mean a “family line.” But what is a family line? It's not DNA, which few people understand or care about, and the parents I've talked with can't tell me exactly what they want to leave behind when they're dead. Instead, they talk about creating “new beginnings” and “future possibilities” through their children, as if their own unremarkable life will somehow be redeemed by some future greatness in their offspring.

The chances are, of course, that their offspring will lead ordinary lives, similar to the ones their parents lived, and even if one of them should become the next Madame Curie or Alexander the Great, what difference would that make to the dead parent?

Therefore, the legacy motivation for having children isn't a rational belief. Instead, it's a barely-understood psychological maneuver, meant to deny the absoluteness of death. The same motivation drives a person's reverence for their ancestors. Whether through elaborate and ritualized ceremonies or through the family photo album, keeping the ancestors in reverent memory is a reassurance that we ourselves might somehow be kept “alive” after our death, as well. But why does that matter?

It only matters if we want to define the meaning of life from the point of view of future generations, which is a point of view that we can't have. The only legitimate point of view is the one embedded in our living experience, right now. Focusing on one's legacy allows us to defer the question of meaning to when we will be conveniently dead—and therefore, not responsible for the answer.

Loss

People face the possibility of meaninglessness when they suffer tragedy. Loss of a relationship, a job, bodily capacity, or even possessions can seem to crush the meaning out of

life—at least for a short term. Great personal loss can lead to a sense of meaninglessness if our lives were significantly attached to the things, people, or circumstances that were lost.

Since everything changes eventually, important personal loss is inevitable, and so is loss of meaning. One's religious or spiritual values are pressed into service at such moments. We become receptive to homilies that reassure us of God's divine plan, of our mettle being tested, or of the interconnectedness of all things.

Those kinds of thoughts and messages essentially deny the experience of meaninglessness. They tell you that it only *seems* as if your life has lost its meaning, when, in fact, the loss was *highly* meaningful. But why would we want to deny the loss of meaning? It's because loss of meaning is more frightening than death. People want meaning in their lives, so after the period of grief and disorientation following a loss, replacement meanings are promptly identified. According to the traditional way of processing loss, there isn't much opportunity for considering the big questions that lie just under the surface.

Those questions are: "In light of this serious loss, what sense should I make of my experience overall? What should be the purpose of my life? How should I live? What should I believe?"

Once in a while, a person does take on the big questions after a great personal loss, and rededicates their life to a defined purpose or set of values. Often, that shift is to a more political, social, or religious orientation, emphasizing unselfish service, in contrast to their prior life of passive, unexamined reactivity and self-aggrandizement.

Even though the certainty of personal mortality is often not enough stimulus for a person to seriously take up the question of the meaning of life, there are times when a traumatic personal loss will kick-start that inquiry.

History

Whenever I go to New York, I visit Lucy. She resides in the Museum of Natural History with her distant relative, Turkana Boy. Lucy is the three-million-year-old *Australopithecus afarensis* skeleton, found by Donald Johansen in 1974. She's only three and a half feet tall, but that's about as big as people got back then. Lucy is definitely a person, and our ancestor—not quite human, but no chimp, either (Tattersall, 1993).

When I stand in front of the glass case and stare at Lucy (or is she staring at me?), I can't help but wonder, what *she* thought her life was about. Did she even have such thoughts? Perhaps she only thought about food and shelter, but who knows?

Lucy certainly couldn't have imagined that three million years in the future, her bones would be in a glass case in New York City, and that's the odd thing about trying to grasp the meaning of life in the context of history. We don't have a comparable field of study that can look three million years into the future.

There are "futurologists," who imagine possible futures, and science fiction writers, who do the same. But the fact is that human beings don't see the future well. We can glimpse the distant past, dimly, but the next three million years is pure guesswork.

An awful lot of people have lived and died, and the more we learn about history, the more sense we get of how short our time on Earth really is. Against the scale of history, one individual life is almost immeasurably insignificant, and that thought may provoke the question: What is the meaning of *my* brief, unmemorable life?

Luckily, we don't need to understand one life in the context of time immemorial. The past and the future may provide clues, but the question is only for *today*.

We're asking, "What is the meaning of *my* life, as I know it, live it, experience it, and remember it, right now?"

The stunning scale of human history can throw people into reflection about the meaning of their lives, which is useful, but too often after that, an answer is then sought in fossils, cave paintings, or old books. But those are only stimuli to the inquiry. The answer must ultimately be local and personal, and we won't arrive at it through history, either social or biological. The only reasonable place to look for an answer to the meaning of life is in the patterns of experience in life, as it is lived, *now*.

Science & Technology

The golly-gee-whiz of today's science and technology is disorienting, especially when it comes to values and human meaning. On one hand, we're delighted to be exploring Mars, decoding the genome, and chatting on the Internet. But on the other hand, we aren't sure what it all means. In fact, we suspect that it means less than it seems.

Surely the world is a better place because of penicillin and air travel, but the relentless progress of science and technology only highlights the comparative stasis of human meaning. The meaning of life hasn't kept up with the pace of scientific and technological change. We yearn for a smaller, cozier world, where we know who our friends are, where our food comes from, and what a person needs to do to be successful. But the rapidly changing technological environment we live in doesn't illuminate the meaning of life, it obscures it. It even seems to diminish whatever meaning we thought we had, and the dizzying pace of change can sometimes provoke a person to consider whether or not there is any meaning at all.

The vast scope of the universe, as pictured by science, also challenges us as never before to find meaning in our lives. Perhaps human life seemed to have more meaning when maps were

smaller. For instance, when the whole universe was the size of Homer's Mediterranean, a person could more easily find their place in the scheme of things—but that's no longer feasible, because the universe is now infinitely larger than the human mind can comprehend.

We may be tempted to blame our sense of insignificance on images from the Hubble Space Telescope, but those images are just the culmination of a gradual awareness that began with Galileo, and within the context of the vastness of space, the idea that an individual human life could have any meaning at all seems ludicrous.

And how do humans react to that? We ignore the vastness of the universe by “getting small.” We collect stamps, build model trains, celebrate local customs, redecorate our living rooms, ignore world news, shop locally, stay at home, and do everything we can think of to reduce our world to a size we can understand. That's a lot of work, but it's easier than the alternative, which is looking up at the stars on a clear night and realizing, with a sinking feeling in the pit of our stomachs, how insignificant our lives really are.

The vastness of the universe should stimulate us to ask the big question about life, but most of us would rather turn our backs—on that vastness, and on the question itself.

The scientific and technological ethos has had another effect on the meaning of life, which is to define the world as a machine, running like clockwork. We no longer believe that a successful harvest depends upon the whimsy of the gods. We know that our abundance depends upon weather, fertilizer, and crop genetics.

The gods of Homer are dead, and our modern world is defined by science and technology, deterministic and soulless, impersonal and cold. We see the world as a huge, interconnected machine, ruled by cause and effect, and operating on its own, without the help of a pantheon—or from us. In fact, we subjective human beings, clinging to our contrived

meanings, values, superstitions, and traditions, seem to be little more than a fly in the scientific soup.

The very question of the meaning of life seems to be a scientific irrelevance.

Despite that, there is scientific work being done to bring human activity, emotions, relationships, consciousness, and even meaning, under scientific investigation. To hear science enthusiasts tell it, everything will eventually be described according to the clear scientific terms of cause and effect.

And don't even *think* about retreating to a belief in God, because mystical religious experiences have already been "explained" as the interaction between certain neurons operating in the brain (D'Aquili & Newberg, 1999; Alper, 2001).

Surprisingly, though, it appears as if scientific imperialism isn't taking hold among the general public. Most people don't accept the scientific view that everything will eventually be explained in purely "objective" terms, and the vast majority of American adults stubbornly continue to believe in God, an afterlife, heaven, hell, miracles, and ghosts (Harris Poll, 2003).

The encroachments of science into the very foundations of human beliefs and values should provoke us into seriously confronting the "meaning of life" question, but that's not happening. In America, at least, most people choose to evade the great questions of meaning that are being proposed, not only by science and technology, but also by history, cosmology, loss, and especially, by death.

Some Proposed Answers

Of course, there are many people who try to address the question of the meaning of life, and then share their findings with others. One day, I went to a bookstore, hoping to discover the

meaning of life, and encountered an entire shelf filled with germane books. But I have to say, the answers I found weren't satisfying.

The books I studied were inadequate for a variety of reasons, but mainly because none of them provided a personal, psychological answer, derived from actual experience. Most of them gave poor answers—often to a confused question, but it will be worthwhile to look at a few, as negative examples, to help define the kind of answer I'm seeking.

1. God gives meaning or, more broadly, religion gives meaning.

Most of the books on the meaning of life offered some form of this answer: The meaning of life is to praise God, serve God, obey God, understand God, and so forth. All of those formulas assume that we already *know* what God wants us to do, but do we know that? No, we don't. Do the scriptures reveal God's mind to us? That would only be the case if God had written them himself, and there's no evidence of that.

Perhaps some people claim to have direct experience with God. If that's true, it's surely a wonderful thing for them, but of little use to someone looking to discover and articulate the meaning of life, in terms of the average person's experience. If even only eighty-five percent of adult humans had direct experience with God, and assuming that God *would* reveal the meaning of life, we'd all know the meaning of life by now. The answer would be part of our human culture, literature, philosophy, arts, politics, and mass media—but that's not the case, which means appeal to God is a non-answer.

The same objection could be raised against books that tell us the meaning of life is to get into heaven. There's no actual human experience concerning what goes on after death, so it's either wishful thinking or pure imagination to suppose that the meaning of life is somehow connected to what will happen after our lives are over. It's an important cultural story, but if

we're seeking an answer to the meaning of life, in terms what a person can actually *know*, it's also a non-answer.

2. Meaning is everywhere. Everything is meaningful.

This answer is often a way to say that God is in everything, and so is meaning. The meaning of life is, therefore, simply to exist—but that's not very helpful.

Another interpretation of this “meaning is everywhere” idea is a theory called panpsychism. (“Pan” meaning *everywhere*, and “psyche” meaning *mind*.) This theory proposes that every single thing, living or not, has some kind of consciousness, mind, or psyche, and therefore could, in principle, experience meaning. Logically, that could be true, but even if it were true, it would only multiply the question rather than providing an answer. It would mean that every object in the world could have the same questions. Every rock on the beach could be wondering about the meaning of life. Even the spare tire in the trunk of my car could be wondering about the meaning of life, at this moment.

That's spooky.

The idea of panpsychism seems to make the original problem even more difficult, and doesn't really offer an answer for the meaning of life.

3. Meaning is in the stars.

This seemed like an strange answer to the meaning of life, until I realized that the author of the book believed that there was intelligent extraterrestrial (ET) life in the universe that was “far more advanced” than humans, and if we could contact *that* life, we could know the meaning of our own.

The author didn't seem to realize that it's really a 250-year-old concept. In 1752, Voltaire wrote a fantastic tale about two giant extraterrestrials from Saturn who came to Earth. They were so large that when they stood in the ocean, the water only came up to their ankles. At first, they believed that there was no life on Earth, but by using a microscope, they discovered a ship, full of French scientists, sailing on the ocean, and learned to communicate with them.

The scientists then asked the visitors to tell them the meaning of life. The Saturnians wrote the answer in a tiny book and then departed. When the scientists got home, they opened the book, only to find that all the pages were blank. Voltaire was saying that life has no ultimate meaning that science can discover, and that there is only the experience of living.

But this author wouldn't have agreed with Voltaire. He was sure that the ETs would have something important to tell us about the meaning of human life. But is that likely? I don't think so.

Even if benevolent ETs landed and could communicate with us, I don't know why we should expect to learn anything from them about the meaning of human life, since knowledge of faraway places like Saturn wouldn't seem to be of much help. The problem with knowing the meaning of life is not that we're ignorant of some key facts about the universe. The problem is that we don't know what we're supposed to be doing, because we don't know our purpose.

The belief (or wish) that ETs exist who have the answers is really just a thinly-disguised hope that *God* is out there and has the answer. What we want is the God's-eye view of human life, so we can see it all laid out—in some superhuman context. But we don't have that and we know we don't, so we imagine omniscient ETs as a surrogate for God.

We imagine that ETs, with their “advanced intelligence,” would tell us, “Oh yes, didn’t you know? The meaning of life is to be admitted to heaven so you can frolic in the clouds. It’s a hoot.”

But that fantasy is just a poorly disguised sleight of hand, substituting imaginary ET wisdom for the unattainable God’s-eye view that we desire.

Other writers try a similar sleight of hand, but instead of calling upon ETs, they set *themselves* up as a virtual ET. They act as if they had special knowledge of “destiny,” “intention,” God’s will, or spiritual forces to explain the meaning of life. Unless those authors can account for how they happen to have attained this special knowledge, so that we could test it ourselves, *they* might as well be from Saturn!

Therefore, for the purpose of investigation into the human experience, all ETs and ET wannabes must be put aside.

4. Meaning is found in scientific understanding of the world.

Another book explained that since human beings are animals and part of the natural world, we’ll understand human beings, and the meaning of human life, once we understand the natural world. That’s a fairly common scientific point of view, and what could be simpler?

The problem, as anyone with a scientific education will tell you, is that science doesn’t answer questions of *meaning*. Science can tell us *how* something works, but not *why* it works. Science just doesn’t do meaning.

People who are satisfied with scientific facts as the answer to the meaning of life have missed the point of the question, which is to learn not just what *causes* life, but what its *significance* is. The scientific approach can’t give a satisfactory answer to the meaning of life,

simply because of the way science works. Science can give us a thorough description of the human animal, but can't explain what it *means* to be a human animal.

5. The Meaning of Life is Social Context

In one book, the authors told me that the meaning of a life can be seen within its historical context: the time and place in which a person lived, the political and economic climates, cultural practices, the ideas of the day, and so on. That means that all of the millions of factors that make up a particular span of time in human history *are* the meaning of life for the people living at that time.

The meaning of our lives today is defined by the relative prosperity we enjoy, by technology (ranging from the atomic bomb to pharmaceuticals), and by the highest population density in human history, just to name a few. Every phase of human history is different, and each bestows meaning on the experience of the people who live during that phase.

But that's not the kind of answer we'd like. We don't want to know the meaning of a historical epoch, or of "lives," as seen by a historian or sociologist, from the outside. We want to know the meaning of *life* as it's experienced by *any* person. A description of the clothes, cars, and books doesn't define a person's actual experience of those things.

Those authors had displaced the question of the meaning of life with a description of cultural time and place, leaving us to ask: What is the *meaning* of cultural time and place, at this moment in history? We don't know, and the new question is no easier to answer than the original one—and nothing is really gained.

6. Meaning is found through practice, ritual, custom, or myth.

This solution to the meaning of life is common among anthropologically-oriented authors. We can turn to any of Joseph Campbell's excellent books on mythology to see how myth gives meaning to people's lives (e.g., Campbell, 1949), and even in contemporary "developed" cultures, many people find meaning through the rituals of the church and in the customs surrounding holidays and festivals throughout the year. Myth, ritual, and custom do give meaning to people's lives. However, this isn't a rational answer. Rituals and customs appeal to our irrational, rather than our rational mind. Intellectually, myths are arbitrary and don't make much sense.

We can read about Mayan kings who pushed needles through their tongues and mutilated themselves in public ceremonies designed to ensure that the sun would continue to rise each day. With our scientific knowledge of astronomy, of course, it made no sense, since rituals could have no effect upon the sun. But beyond that, we can hardly imagine how bloody public displays could give meaning to people's lives.

We smile indulgently and think, "Needles through the tongue to make the sun shine? What were they thinking?"

But imagine a Mayan king, reading about the modern Catholic ritual of eating a cracker and taking a sip of wine as a symbolic act of cannibalism that will somehow save that person's soul from eternal fire. That Mayan king would surely consider such an act to be completely irrational, as well!

The stories, rituals, and customs of other cultures often seem bizarre and contrived, while ours feel natural and meaningful, which just demonstrates that all of them are arbitrary social constructions. If performing local cultural ceremonies really constituted the meaning of life, a

person could do that religiously for an entire lifetime and *still* not know the meaning of life. They might be participating in the meaning of life somehow, but they'd still be ignorant about what it was. So while myths, customs, and rituals do provide meaning *in* life, they don't provide an intellectual, rational framework for *understanding* that meaning.

7. Understanding human behavior reveals meaning.

In this formula, the mystery of life's meaning is due to the fact that we don't understand why we do the things we do. If we knew what we were doing, we'd understand the meaning of our lives. That sounds reasonable at first, and sets out to explain why we act as we do. Then, if we're successful in that effort, we'll know the meaning of our lives.

But that strategy is doomed before it begins. Understanding why we do what we do isn't the same as knowing what we *should* be doing. In other words, description is not prescription. Using this strategy, we might come to understand the reason why we do a lot of crazy things, but we wouldn't be any closer to understanding our *purpose*. The actual meaning of life might call for an activity that's entirely different from what we're doing now.

Our original question isn't about the meaning of behavior, it's about the meaning of *experience*. Explaining some of the causes of various performances doesn't explain what life means. We want to know why we should act one way, rather than another. We want to know what performances will lead us to fulfill the purpose of our lives. Reframing the meaning of life into a problem that involves the description of behavior doesn't answer those questions—which means that those authors have answered the wrong question.

8. People cannot live without meaning.

I believe it's true that people can't live without meaning. Many psychologists and psychiatrists have made that point convincingly (e.g., Frankl, 1959; Jung, 1961; Bowlby, 1969; Jaffe, 1971), but even so, is that an answer to the question concerning the meaning of life? I don't think it is.

We must have meaning, but *what* meaning? Many authors have written books arguing that addiction, depression, aggression, neuroses, alienation, existential anxiety, and many other psychological and social problems are caused by a lack of meaning in a person's life—and that's probably true. However, those authors offer no answers to the question of what our experience *means*, other than to advise us that each person must find meaning—but we already know that.

9. To find one's values gives the meaning of life.

This non-answer is similar to the previous one, except to say that if you identify your *values*, you'll have meaning. But we all have values of various kinds. The difficulty is that we don't know which are the right ones, the ones that would lead to an understanding of the meaning of life.

What is the standard for choosing values? These “value” books offer a smorgasbord of activities, from which we're to choose some especially “meaningful” ones. Some of the proposed values seek to alleviate human suffering, assure justice, create economic fairness, live with honor, serve others, serve God, or any of a host of others. We could hardly argue with those suggestions, but which values are the right ones, and how can we choose?

We're no closer to a definitive answer than before, and maybe it doesn't matter. Perhaps the idea is just to pick a value, any value. As long as we have a commitment to our values, we've

found the meaning of life. If we're totally committed to the acquisition of money and property, for example, that would constitute a definition of the meaning of life. But that means there would be as many meanings of life as there are possible values that human beings could hold. And if that were the case, for all practical purposes, there is no overall, transpersonal "meaning of life," and the question would evaporate.

When we ask about *the* meaning of life, we're assuming that there is some transpersonal meaning that cuts across individual human experience, and we're looking for a universal pattern. We ask the question about the human family, and not about one individual human being. If the answer implies it's "every person for themselves," there's no point in asking the question, because the meaning of life would be whatever you want it to be.

But I think there is a reason for asking the transpersonal question, because there may be a larger pattern to human experience, something that unifies people through their common humanity, so I found those value-clarification books to be more confusing than illuminating.

10. Don't worry, be happy.

This answer to the question of life's meaning simply denies the question altogether. It doesn't say that there is meaning, but it doesn't say that there is no meaning, either. Instead, it implies that the question is not worth asking. One should just take life as it comes and not get too worked up over what it all means. In the Zen tradition of Buddhism, the answer to the question of life's meaning is often "chop wood and carry water." But in the context of an intellectual discussion, that's not helpful. If that's the solution a person chooses, then they should probably chop and carry, but do it without speaking. After all, ideas are ideas—and chopping wood is not an idea. An action or a practice is something to do, not an answer to a question—and we want answers.

What Does A Good Answer Look Like?

The kind of answer I'm seeking to the question of the meaning of life is an answer based in human experience—something that any reasonable person could know personally, through rational investigation. Answers based in myth, religion, or fantasy are interesting, and often culturally important, but they're not personal and not rational.

I'm also looking for an answer that makes contact with psychological experience, since meaning is a psychological occurrence, taking place in a human mind. That means a scientific description of the body, the brain, evolutionary history, or of any aspect of the physical world, wouldn't be an adequate answer. Even though scientific descriptions are rational and can be verified by any suitably trained person, they don't address experience. And that's why science, which is designed to define the physical world, can never provide an answer to the *psychological* question of the meaning of life.

A High Risk Question

Asking the meaning of life is one of the great existential questions. It's not easy to ask, because we instinctively sense that the answer won't be obvious. So without thinking about it consciously, we tacitly decide that maybe it's better *not* to ask the question at all. Therefore, we avoid the question, dismiss it, or latch on to prepackaged answers.

Such squirming is understandable, because we suspect that if we asked the question directly, we might find out that the answer is, "I don't know."

That would be devastating, and much worse than, for instance, not knowing the capitol of Indonesia. There are a lot of things a person doesn't know, and most of it doesn't matter. But not to know the meaning of life is like saying that you don't know your own name, which is a level of ignorance too great to be tolerated.

So we generally avoid the question altogether.

But we're going to look the question squarely in the eye, and ask resolutely, "What *is* the meaning of life?"

I'll approach the question as a psychologist, through an analysis of human experience. I'll describe the structure of the mind and the patterns of experience it generates, which will then yield the meaning behind our great diversity of experience.

There's no need to look to a heaven or hell, to the dead or ghosts, to history or the unknowable future, to God or the stars. The meaning of life is implicit within the patterns of the mind—and that's where we're going to look.