

The Power of Purpose Lies in the Question

by Robert Cergol

Life poses the question of purpose to each individual. The question is fundamental challenge to our very existence and to our core sense of self. A consciousness of not knowing our purpose is experienced as pain and as a threat to our existence because, absent knowledge of our purpose, our existence is neither defined nor justified -- both of which we seem to require.

This pain is a portal through which an honest and direct looking, with acceptance of what we see, will reveal an absolute answer that resolves the question with finality. Indeed, this pain is grace from our unseen Source, beckoning us to look for that Source. It commands our attention. To stare directly into our dread is to retrace our life to its very source. Instead, we look away from it. We look away because it calls into question our existence and reminds us of our mortality. The "unseen hand of God" is trying to turn our heads around, to get us to look within at who and what we are. The swirl of events around us offers only a temporary refuge and will funnel us, ultimately, in this inward looking direction.

We seek to avoid this inward looking through efforts to affirm and magnify our independent and separate existence outwardly, in the world. This is a denial of death and, paradoxically, a running away from life. It's as if we think that we can escape this question by losing ourselves in life, particularly if the life we choose is held in high esteem by conventional thinking.

These questions and answers, fundamental to the question of our purpose, still echo in my mind from my childhood Catholic school Catechism:

Q: Who made me?

A: God made me.

Q: Why did God make me?

A: God made me to know, love and serve Him.

My Catholic education instilled in me as a child that there was a unique purpose for my life and that it represented my true calling or vocation. A successful life was one that expressed and fulfilled this preordained calling. If I were one of the chosen few, then my calling would be special -- that of the clergy; otherwise, it was to serve God in some as-yet-to-be-discovered fashion. As a child, I took this very seriously.

As an adolescent I began to question, logically and intellectually, the tenets of the dogma in which I was raised. It was a real struggle. My intellectual questioning collided head on with the intensity of devotion toward God I inherited from my childhood. The result was an insurmountable contradiction. According to the understanding of my religious upbringing, faith was a gift from God, and the tenets of Faith had to be taken -- well -- on faith. To find myself questioning them meant that I was already lost. God had

apparently not blessed me with this gift of faith. My resolution to this was to turn my back on the whole problem by turning away from my religious training. That was more bearable than accepting the notion that God had rejected me and that I was lost.

This ended my active participation in the church of my childhood and in its place appeared an existential angst that would gnaw at me for the next thirty years. I realize in retrospect that absent any guiding faith, this angst provided a beacon lighting the way home and supplied the power to follow that beacon. In the words of William Cowper, "God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform."

The secular world's expectations of career and success layered nicely on top of the residues of this religious upbringing. The secular world apparently agreed that there had to be a unique purpose for my life. However, I managed to make it to college without having been informed of it. Prone as I was to taking myself way too seriously, this undefined direction to my life weighed heavily on me. The dilemma was that I didn't know what I wanted to become, or should become, yet I was keenly aware that time was marching on, and I most certainly was going to become something whether I had any say in it or not. The uncertainty of that unknown something was the equivalent of certain failure because somehow, somewhere, in my heart I continued to believe in the notion of purpose, a calling and vocation that was unique to me, and that without my active and conscious participation, could not be fulfilled.

The dilemma I faced and my emotional reactions to it, I think, are fairly common, if not universal, among young individuals transitioning into adulthood. The options appear almost infinite, and the world appears capable of swallowing up that fragile identity that one hasn't quite yet defined with any conviction. Committing to any one specific path, for a lifetime, at the beginning of that lifetime, can seem like one's purpose is being defined permanently with that commitment. Therefore, if one does not discern a purpose worthy of a lifetime in that choice, one is filled with doubt and hesitation.

This describes the mental backdrop in my life from the time of college and into my late thirties. In college I was exposed to many new ideas and none dovetailed more perfectly with my situation than the idea that my life could be dedicated to the search for answers on a spiritual level. I became aware that others throughout history had lived such lives and reportedly found answers. I decided that this was the solution to fulfilling my calling and to resolving the question of my career. Of course I would also have to make a living, but the priority of searching for my ultimate nature and purpose greatly diminished the importance of the means of livelihood. I dropped out of school to pursue esoteric philosophy and the search for answers. I didn't see then, the life-avoidance aspect of this decision.

Throughout my adulthood, my search, juxtaposed with my worldly occupation, only served to delineate more sharply my sense of lack of purpose, meaning and self-definition. This was felt as a chronic angst about living. After nearly twenty years, I gave up on the idea that the manner in which I was living was somehow manifesting "my calling" and that it would result in any spiritual discovery or final answer. I came to see

my life as a self-centered avoidance of truly embracing life. Subsequently I married, started a family, and pursued my livelihood in earnest.

Yet it was impossible for me to ignore this unrelenting angst, and whenever my attention was not specifically occupied with the mundane affairs of work or living, my attention would fall back into this painful feeling. I could only stare at, and into, it. From that disturbing resting place, the view of my world began to change, subtly, gradually and imperceptibly. The view of myself began to change as well. Some process of deep introspection seemed to have been ignited, and it didn't involve self-analysis or any willful effort on my part. It was simply an intense looking directly into myself and at my sense of individual existence in the world and at the patterns of life surrounding me in that world.

One day, during a particularly stressful period in my life, I was reading some correspondence between a purported Zen master and one of his students that addressed the question of death with a direct simplicity that grabbed my attention with an intensity of focus that I had never before been able to give to the subject.

"The body dies and is dissipated. The mind is one with it at all times and is therefore also dissipated. Nothing of you remains. There is no survival or reincarnation or immortal soul or conscious entity. As far as that goes you are the exact equal of a drop of water and have the same possibility!"

This answer shocked me. It completely contradicted my deeply held beliefs and religious upbringing. To my great dismay, I found myself believing him. The thought screamed out: "He's right. I'm wrong. I've been kidding myself my entire life." What was more shocking was what followed. Some mental Gordian knot was cut and my entire sense of identity dissolved in an instant, depriving my attention of any object whatsoever to latch onto.

He didn't say that nothing remained. He said that nothing of "you" would remain. Accepting his statement as fact was tantamount to my accepting the death of my individuality in that instant. I saw my identity as an illusion. I saw what remains when that identity is removed. I can't begin to explain how this evoked an awareness of what I truly am. I can't explain how it conveyed the purpose of being -- not my being -- just being -- all being.

I now existed impersonally on what I call the "other side" of this life and from that vantage point saw this side as a dream wherein moved a dream-character that I had previously mistaken as me. That dream character along with every object in the dream equally reflected the whole. The contemplation of that whole, absent my egocentric point of view, revealed purpose and meaning everywhere. Purpose is a problem only for the illusory identity. The world is what manifests when God looks upon Himself. God does not need a purpose. He is His own purpose. My dread of life evaporated and has never returned.

In the dream we call life, the purpose is to answer the call to come home that emanates from our true being. Life is an experience that draws our attention outward, away from our true being. Paradoxically, it is only by embracing our life in this world that we will find our way home -- "back to the Father" to put it in religious terms.

We are born into this world with this question rooted in our psyche. The body consciousness, with its need for survival, definition and self-affirming experience, obscures the answer that is our birthright. Our actions in the world are aimed at answering this question but cannot succeed because that which calls from within us can only be answered by going within. It is the returning to the question again and again, with a growing despair that, paradoxically, leads to a final answer.

Notre Dame Cathedral, the Western Wall in Jerusalem, the "Seven Wonders of the World," and many influential social movements are generally viewed as great accomplishments of humanity. But they are not evidence of man's purpose. These examples are emblematic of man's search for purpose -- and for himself -- in the external world. These are evidence of man's plight -- his manifest sense of lack of purpose. Their scale and magnitude is evidence of the intensity and universality of humankind's desperate search for purpose and meaning.

"All things betray thee, who betrayest Me" wrote the poet Francis Thompson in *The Hound of Heaven*, quoting some hidden, inner, relentless voice that will not be satisfied through any external human accomplishment -- or distraction.

I have never met the person who became introspective as a result of pleasure. Philosophies are born from pain and seek to answer troubling questions. Nothing troubles us as much as that which afflicts our sense of self. Nothing afflicts our sense of self and our sense of being alive as much as the sense of a lack of purpose and meaning to our lives.

There is a fundamental contradiction in the conventional way of answering this question, "What is my purpose?"

The question implies we were put here for a purpose--that we as individuals have some unique specific purpose. Then that purpose must precede us. It is a contradiction to simultaneously believe that we then define that purpose. That purpose would have to be defined by That which put us here in the first place. Therefore, the only defensible answer to the question "What is my purpose?" is to seek and discover That which put us here. This is our true calling, our true purpose. All other answers are to a different question and are, in turn, revealing of our misguided efforts to find ourselves outside of ourselves.

We invent both God and purpose instead of discovering these as a result of directly facing our fears and uncertainties and staring into the "place" from which those fears and uncertainties emanate. We delude ourselves by projecting that invented purpose

onto the external world, and we busy ourselves to forget our doubts. That which is responsible for the universe is not in need of any purpose that we would supply.

Our worldly endeavors represent an outward-looking search for purpose that echoes our deep inner calling. The real value in those endeavors lies in the effect that their failure to satisfy this calling has upon our attention. They will ultimately lead us back to the question and to looking within. If, after building their great pyramids, the pharaohs felt empty still, then perhaps they noticed this inner call remained unsatisfied, that life's purpose remained undiscovered. Perhaps that propelled their attention to turn in upon itself, leading them to discover that which engulfs them, their pyramids and the entire world and -- in so doing -- answered the question of their purpose once and for all.

We don't know why we are here. We fear our death. To assuage that fear, and lacking knowledge of our purpose, we invent purpose. To settle for this external, self-invented purpose is to deny our true calling -- and to miss the opportunity for our real purpose to be revealed. It is equivalent to denying our Source and Its purpose for the universe. It betrays a lack of faith in life. If we didn't create ourselves, then we must already be fulfilling our purpose.

No one can predict just what life circumstances will be helpful or harmful to the unfolding of our journey to discover our true purpose. Conventional success may be what one person requires before they can face the deeper question of purpose. For another it might be what the world considers as failure. I think there is great power in accepting our circumstances and the accompanying uncertainty -- and therein finding inspiration to keep looking deeply into the questions: "Who am I? What am I? What is my life?" So one should, as Lao-Tzu puts it, "Have faith in the way things are."

In our culture there is intense pressure to declare an external, worldly purpose that translates into career and accomplishment. This is a mistake. Purpose is not about career or satisfying the needs of identity-building. Our real purpose is not to make a splash in the world or to leave our footprint on the world. We cannot invent our true purpose or calling. Finding it becomes a spiritual path -- a journey that must not be detoured towards pleasing the pressures of culture, or to satisfy our fears about living and dying.

Many people equate the search for purpose with the search for, and finding of, God. Many also believe evidence of God and His purpose are to be found in the great patterns of nature or in the spirit symbolized by epic human endeavors. Such endeavors are man's misguided attempt to answer a still, quiet, inner voice.

There's a Bible passage (1 Kings 19:10-12) telling how Elijah sought out God but did not find Him in the thunderclap or the earthquake or the fire, but only afterwards in "a still small voice." This conveys an image of the ever-isolated individual straining to hear that still, quiet voice that is not to be found in the intense calamities preceding its appearance -- all of which no doubt evoke a sense of being intensely alive. The same can be said of our worldly accomplishments no matter how magnificent or rewarding.

Life so evoked is not that which truly lives. God was not to be found in the fire or the thunder or the earthquake. Nor is He to be found in the ensuing individualized reaction. The life evoked from intensity of experience is cut off from the source of that life. The most real and intense intimacy in life is that which exists between the source of that still quiet voice and the consciousness that hears it. Every other kind of intimacy is only a metaphor or a distant echo of it. The real value in experience is that it may provoke a looking that in turn may lead to this intimacy with what could be called the Divine.

Experience is binding. Intense experience is intensely binding -- pleasurable and painful alike. Observing experience is liberating. We get lost in pleasurable experience. We have an automatic tendency to look at painful experience. The self-diminishment frees us momentarily from the exclusively identity-based point of reference. Looking into this pain is a direct looking at "Who and what am I?" but only for a brief interval before the "feeling alive as me" -- albeit through pain -- takes over. After that happens, the rush of reactive thoughts occupies our attention, and it's back to "self affirming self" as we look at it through consciousness colored with "I".

In the Bible story of Job, Job rejected the circumstances he found himself in and interpreted them as unjust punishment. We are all like Job in that we reject life as we find it, or as we find ourselves in it. We would have a life that affirms and magnifies the personal being we take ourselves to be and reject all in life that diminishes and challenges that being. And like Job, we blame God for not making the world perfect according to our selfish standards -- by finding life and the world to be at fault. The fact of its impermanence is, for us, the ultimate flaw. That fact calls everything into question. That fact, and all in life that challenges our sense of self, throws us back upon ourselves and presents us the questions: "Who -- and what -- am I?" and "What is my existence?"

Clear observation requires acceptance of what is -- not what our ego wishes were. Since we look away from that which we cannot accept, the intervals of opportunity for hearing that inner voice are short. Job spent years blaming God for his pain and saw God only after he accepted that he did not own his life, that it was God's to do with as he wished. His blaming of God was his method of looking away from the question of existence that his life was presenting.

Through acceptance, we embrace our life in order to accept death and in the process are given the possibility of finding that alone which is alive.

We have no choice in deciding to be or not to be. We experience individuality, and until proven otherwise, know only that we exist as an individual. We are compelled to define ourselves. To exist as an individual and to feel the compulsion from a source unknown to be that individual, while at the same time not knowing what that individuality is or means, leaves us no choice. That is our basic nature. That is the direction of all our thoughts and actions. Our mind says: "I feel myself to be. But, what am I?" We become

aware of our own mortality before we have any sense of what we are or why we exist. We run from our mortality, rushing to create evidence of our existence in the external world that we believe will outlast our bodily existence.

The power of purpose lies in the questions it poses: "Why do I exist?" and "What am I?" and in the persistence with which something in us demands an answer, forcing us back on ourselves, forcing us to look deeply within. I know that an absolute answer is available. It requires simultaneously admitting to ourselves our core uncertainty and staring dead into it while not getting swept away by the reaction of fear and pain nor retreating into a dream world of our own making. This requires great hunger, and full commitment to living. The power in the question of our life's purpose is that it evokes those qualities in us. If we refuse to settle for an answer that belongs to this life alone, rest assured -- an answer will be found that both includes and transcends this life.