

Elders Finding Meaning: Good Luck!

2022

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As an elder, why am I depressed?

Older people are less able to do, so we spend less time doing. And when we stop filling our days with needed occupational, family and maintenance activities, we spend more time reflecting, considering the Big Picture. But, elder reflection – at least for me in 2022 – brings little to celebrate. Let's consider.

Religion

- 1) Religion with its God, prophets, devils, saints, and saviors – along with the expansive ritual and priesthoods that surround them – belong to a time when we honestly believed that the Earth was the center of the universe and that humans were the pinnacle of creation. “Anthropo, helio, galactico, cosmico” centrism!
- 2) We are now aware that physically we – together with all Earthly existence – are of no consequence whatever in the vastness of galactic, material reality.
- 3) To put the cap on our insignificance, we now know that this vast material reality is only about 4% of the totality of reality – most of which is energy.
- 4) Humanity – much less individual humans – warrant absolutely no more attention from whatever supernatural entities may exist than we humans offer to the electrons in single hydrogen atoms.

The Result: Unless we opt to ground ourselves in the dogmatic beliefs of our major religions, there is no answer to the meaning of life in religion.

Spirituality

- 1) From religion, we can retreat into the fact that we are energetic as well as physical phenomena and thereby share Spiritually in the totally integrated and universal energetic realm of reality.
- 2) In this view, we are part of everything and everything is part of us.
- 3) There may be some comfort in the experience of unification and the sense of “belonging,” but we have to ask, “To what purpose?” We have no clue!

The Result: Again, there is no answer here for our Big Picture query.

Society and Culture

- 1) We can try retreating to the microcosm of Society and Culture where we can take pride in the contributions we make in sustaining and developing this domain. Indeed, we have made great strides in our knowledge of our selves and our world through science and technology. And our democratic societies hold great promise, if we make the commitment necessary to sustain them.
- 2) Unfortunately, in spite of our accomplishments in complex society, we fail miserably in other respects:

a. Our level of cooperation is totally inadequate. And our self-serving, competitive inclinations engender unnecessary conflicts and dangerous warfare that can destroy all of us.

b. We allow our self-serving, aggressive orientation to so abuse our supporting ecology that we reach the point of endangering the integrity of our planetary ecosystem.

c. We allow the combination of our fascination with technological innovation and our dedication to an exploitative global economy to produce a rate of change with negative impacts that are compounding beyond our control.

The Result: Although it promises such, our societal microcosm provides no satisfactory answer in our search for meaning in life.

Family and Community

1) We can try retreating further to Family and Community.

2) Unfortunately, our pursuit of individual freedom and personal success – facilitated by mobility – first dissolved the extended family and local community and then greatly weakened the nuclear family through easy access to divorce.

3) With everyone dispersed, even grandchildren qualify more as young acquaintances than as intimate family.

4) As elders, we become a “separate” challenge for government, not an integrated and sustained component in family and community.

The Result: There is little answer to meaning in life in family or community.

Friends

1) Yet again, we may try to retreat to Friends and friendship groups.

2) Unfortunately, for most of us, mobility through life has reduced long-term friendships to occasional contacts.

3) Friendships developed later in life lack the elements of intimate depth.

4) Moreover, these friends tend themselves to be elders with their own challenges and are only capable of limited commitments.

The Result: Friends provide no substantial answer to meaning in life.

Pets

1) Finally, many seniors resort to Pets as more or less full time companions.

2) Cats and dogs provide some comfort, but offer no assistance.

3) Because pets are relatively short lived, their frequent loss can offset the limited benefits they provide.

The Result: Elder need for pets is a symptom of lack of meaning in life.

Final Result: From cosmic to “petofilic,” no adequate answer. Finding meaning in the moment of doing seems the “given” option; so, why the capacity for elder reflection with its attendant depression? Or, is elder status itself the aberration?