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The Search For Meaning

by Eleanore Braun Luckey

All of us seem to want our lives to be significant and meaningful, and yet we often have a hard time knowing what the significance is and feeling that we as individuals make much difference.

Recently I had the privilege of working with a group of experienced educators who had come together to discuss how they could make the education process more meaningful for those they were teaching. At the outset they proposed a group of questions for themselves that went something like this: How can we motivate our students so that they really *want* to learn what we are teaching them? What are the techniques of attracting the better students into our subject matter fields? How does one maintain a high level discussion group? How can we “test” our students more thoroughly? How can grades best be used for evaluation and motivation?

After a series of nine small-group sessions where ten or so of these men talked pretty honestly and openly with each other this set of questions fell by the wayside, and they began struggling with: *Why* are we teaching students our subject matter? Why *should* they want to learn? Is there really any such thing as *teaching* students? What’s so important about a grade anyway? What good does a test *really* do?

And it was not more than a couple or three sessions past this point that these people began asking of each other — at first rather timidly and apprehensively and then with considerable determination to find out: What the devil is this rat race about anyway?

And I suppose essentially that is the question we all want to find the answer for.

We are apparently born with a few “givens” which we adhere to even though they may not make a great deal of rational sense sometimes; one of these is our strong desire to keep alive — and another one is our strong desire to reproduce the species. Some have called these instincts or “drives;” others have said they were learned responses; still others have simply said this is the way Man is because God made him that way; recently some have thought perhaps “imprinting” had something to do with it, and others have argued that we are so because we are “programed” like a computer or mechanical brain through our original genetic patterns. The truth is that we don’t know why Man wants to live and to reproduce, but the majority of us do want these things and we want them pretty persistently.

Our specific society embellishes these drives (?) and attaches certain values to them which as individuals we then take over and value. When we examine these, the reason for our wanting them may be even more vague: For example, keeping alive is not enough, we want to keep alive in a \$35,000 house with a swimming pool! And we not only want just to reproduce the species — we want to designate *when*

we reproduce and how many; and now we are clamoring for a way to prescribe the *sex* of what we reproduce.

Also attached to this business of keeping alive, being well fed, clothed, and housed, we take on a rather elaborate set of moral, ethical and philosophical beliefs, and so we can argue endlessly about the rights and wrongs of *how* we keep alive and what we do while we're keeping alive. All of this procedure becomes extremely exciting, stimulating, and time consuming; it takes most of our energy and almost all of our thought. We find ourselves not having time to bother much with other people — even our family — except during the process of courtship which is really a wonderful period in one's life because we somehow manage enough time to look at and think about another person and even contrive to find some way to get close to him or her! We find ourselves not having time to bother even very much with *ourselves* except as we are involved in the details of this business of keeping our bodies comfortable and our hands lovely and smooth and our cars washed, our salaries earned and the good opinions of our neighbors maintained.

Now, I don't want to spoof modern society too much because in some ways we have made some mighty fine improvements on things, and it is necessary if we are to live in groups to make these improvements, but I am concerned that a great deal more of our effort in living and thinking and *educating* is going into the *techniques* of keeping alive than is going into the understanding of *why* we are alive. Yet it is the ultimate answer to this latter question that gives any meaning to the techniques that we're developing and using.

One of our eminent historians has said that the basic reason any one studies history is in an attempt to find the *meaning* of life and the course of life. He points out that the historian seeks the forces — the origins — the principles that determine the course of events. There are multiple answers that have been given; one is that human destiny is a God-determined course of events; another is that Man's rationalism determines his historic course; another that class struggle determines it. The answer is disputable, yet this historian believes that there is value in the search itself and there is value in the *proposed* answers, for the price of *no* answer is admitting that existence is nonsense and there is no meaning. And Man has never been able to accept this. We *want* life to have meaning. We *want* history to have meaning. And even more urgently we want our individual selves to have meaning.

If we genuinely want our lives to have significance, how does it happen that we seek it so deviously? Why do we get so breathlessly occupied with the tasks that distract us rather than focus on the core of Life — and, indeed, what *is* the core of life? Wherein *is* there meaning to be found?

I'm sure that there are many routes to the meaning of Life; but when we share ourselves with others, we can best share that which we know best from our own experience; and for this reason, I will speak today of the forces which are most meaningful for *me*.

I believe that the Self is the Core of life and that until we find the meaning and

value of Self, we cannot make any real sense of this business of being alive. I believe, too, that we avoid seeking the dimensions of Self, partly, out of fear — fear both of how little we may find and how much we may find; fear both of how ugly it may be and how beautiful it may be. The greater the dimensions of Self, the greater would be the burdens of responsible investment of that Self, and so we may fear the magnitude as well as the quality of the Self that we are.

It is interesting that throughout the Ages, as Man has speculated about the world in which he lives and the Universe about him, he has consistently conjured up explanations which have been much less remarkable than the truths that Science has ultimately discovered. For example, Man once held the idea that the world was a sort of plate held up by the giant Atlas; that the world was a part of a planetary system swirling in space in a patterned Universe and was subject to certain laws was beyond the conception of Man until through his scientific probing, his continued persistence in putting small pieces together and discovering more small pieces, he came to what we believe is a truer picture of what our world is.

The Self, I believe, will — when it is discovered, as truly as we can discover it — also be that which is more miraculous than the mind of Man conceives.

What are some of the ways that lead to the discovery of Self? Doubtlessly all knowledge contributes to the understanding of what Man is. Both natural and social scientists are continually pushing back their limits to find out more and more about the nature of man. The psychologist examines what Man is as an individual, the physiologist what he is as an animal, the sociologist what he is as a social being. The artist too, through the media of music, drama, painting, or the dance seeks to discover what Man is. And all these discoveries are tremendously important; yet I believe that we — you and I and all of us — have an even more significant role in discovering important truths about humanity and that is in the individual discovery of our own selves and the assumption of responsibility for that self, and in the sharing of that self.

I'm reminded at this point of the story about the grasshopper who inadvertently found himself one of those who out-lived the autumn, and when he was shivering in the winter blasts, he had the bright idea of asking the Wise Old Owl how he could manage to survive until the next spring. The Wise Old Owl thought about this a bit and then said, "Well, the thing you need to do, is to turn yourself into a cricket and then hop onto a nice warm hearth and just stay there until spring." The grasshopper thought this was a very erudite reply and he immediately hopped off to follow this advice. Then he realized that he wasn't quite sure how to do this, so he returned to the Wise Old Owl and said, "Wise, Sir, I thank you very much for your wisdom, but just *how* do I turn myself into a cricket?" And the Owl cocked his head and said, "Oh come now, I told you *what* to do to solve your problem, surely you can work out the details."

I feel as if I have suggested one way that you can discover the meaning of Life — and that is to discover the meaning of your own individual Self. The details are

essentially up to you to work out, but I do have some suggestions.

In my work as a psychologist I have observed that people frequently begin to get the answer to “Who am I?” and “What am I?” through their association with other people. Our first and most important inklings come from our families — both overtly and subtly mothers and fathers define the boundaries of their children’s selves. Brothers and sisters contribute — as do teachers and friends and relatives. We are defined in part by those around us.

One of the most exciting periods of self discovery is adolescence and young adulthood when we are likely to be seeking the boundaries of self in relation to another human being, usually of the opposite sex, in an intimate relationship. Parenthood, too, is a tremendously stimulating period of self discovery — unless, of course, we are so frightened by being a parent that we give up and hide behind a newspaper or in front of a T.V. set.

Depending on life’s circumstances we are likely to discover different kinds of things about ourselves at different periods of our existence; I wish we had the space to trace, in general, the outline of what the general pattern of these usually is. Since we don’t, I would like to deal with the principal ways in which bridges can be built between people in adulthood. It is, I believe, through building these bridges that we come to know ourselves and to be able to relate to others in a way that Life becomes meaningful because it is *peopled* — peopled with self and with those we can love.

As I discuss these with my students, I call them the tripod of inter-personal relationships. There are three essential ingredients in building the bridges between people. These exist in student-teacher relationships, labor-management, business relationships, friendships, in marriage and parenthood, all of our relationships. They are:

- 1) acceptance, first of self and then of the other;
- 2) understanding, first of self and then of the other;
- 3) communication, and again, I believe, communication with self is important first, and then with the other.

These are in a one-two-three order simply because they had to be in *some* order but not to imply that this is a priority listing either in importance or in time. For example, acceptance and understanding are so closely interwoven that I am never sure which comes first — or even if one does come first. They may be a unity or almost so. I know that one rarely accepts himself — or any other person — without gaining some additional understanding, but neither does one understand one’s self or another without gaining some additional sense of acceptance. And in order to both accept and to understand, a great deal of communication with one’s self and the other has to take place.

Toward the Acceptance of Self and Others

Let’s see what we mean by each of these terms. I am always hard pressed when I try to explain *self acceptance*. I feel about it as Fromm does about love —

that it has to be *experienced* rather than described; and if one has experienced it then he doesn't need it defined, he knows what it is — and if one hasn't experienced it, all the explaining and talking about it we might do, would still leave it undefined. I believe the best interpretation that I can give you of self acceptance is through an illustration provided by our youngest son when he was about four years old. He came into the kitchen where I was washing dishes and said, "Mommy, I'm so glad you like me!" Being a little surprised and having no ready reply I reverted to my training in therapy and said, "Well, Robert, I'm glad I like you too, but *why* are you glad that I like you?" His reply, it seems to me, embodies in its purest form *self acceptance*; he said very simply and innocently: "Oh, because *I* like me so!" In this there was nothing of the need to say, "I'm glad you like me because I *need* to be liked because I'm really so unlikable;" nothing of the need to say, "I'm glad you like me because I'm so terribly important and am worth liking." Both of these responses would have indicated some subtle doubts about self worth, but his response that was simply "Because I like me so" seemed to be an expression of innocent belief in one's value. For me that moment was hallowed; and my prayer was that some way this tiny boy could reach manhood and maintain this sense of self acceptance. It was not to be — even as it is not to be with most of us. This phenomena may well be a part of man's dilemma — a part of the struggle every man encounters as he faces the good and the evil in himself. Be that as it may, it was not more than two years later when I heard Rob say with real meaning after he had pulled some blooper, "Oh, I'm *such* a dope!" And it was not long after that before he had need to come strutting to me and to say, "I'm the best one in my room in reading!"

Self acceptance is not to be confused with complacency. The self accepting person is at the opposite end of the continuum from the complacent one. In order to be truly accepting of the self that one is, one has to do away with his own phoneyess — his own self deceit. In order to accept one's self as something genuine and real, one has to be willing to rip away the masks that he wears for the world. He has to be willing to know himself as he is and to find that even though there are uglinesses and distortions and deformities, it is "all right" because he is a *self* of worth, because he is one who is "becoming." This challenge to maintain self acceptance means purely and simply doing the *best* that one possibly can at every turn of the road. This is terribly demanding, certainly there is nothing in the process that tolerates complacency.

Toward Understanding

Along with this goes the need for forgiving self — or understanding self — when one's *best* has not been enough; or when one's judgment has been wrong because his experience has not been *enough*; or when the spirit has been willing but the flesh weak! This business of doing one's best — or *being* one's best — so that he can accept his self, necessitates a great deal of self inquiry (or communication) and understanding. We lie to ourselves with the greatest of ease — and unless we work

at it, we tend to make life's decisions more on rationalizations than on judgment. Life seems simpler to us that way — to all of us. We do what we want to do or what is easy to do, and then, without realizing it even, we make up an acceptable lie for ourselves and for the world. And so we live — on the surface of our selves — on the outer crust of the self. And we relate to the people in our lives as they live on the outer crusts of their lives. This kind of living does not permit acceptance of self or of other and certainly does not permit communication. Throughout our lives, I think, we all get the signals of distress when we live this way. Things don't add up, they don't make sense, we feel vaguely uncomfortable — but we push it away and may get terribly busy and don't do anything about it, or we go on a vacation or take to the bottle or maybe simply stay in bed and cover up our heads. The more we ignore these signals, the weaker they get and the more comfortable our crusty, surface living becomes. Although surrounded by people, we are alone; and we are afraid that we will never find anyone with courage enough to reveal himself to us. And so we live in little boxes — little square boxes — and whether the self inside is made of ticky-tacky or something else we aren't sure.

My illustration of self acceptance quickly involved us with self understanding. If we are willing to look at ourselves, we are likely to begin to understand ourselves. Soon we may know which of the defense mechanisms we use most often in order to fool ourselves. We begin to wonder why some things hurt and some don't, and we probe our motives for extending ourselves to others or for drawing away from them. Which things are responses to our *own* needs and which are responses to others?

Once we have looked upon ourselves as a human being — with all the fallibilities of the human race — we are not afraid to look at others. And when we are unafraid to look at others, they know it and they are less afraid to look at themselves. Our own sense of acceptance extended to others, helps them, then to accept themselves — and as we accept, we tend to understand. Communication is taking place.

Communicating

Communication may be at several levels. Generally, the most common level is thought to be the verbal one. I am not sure this is true. Words, it seems to me, are far more often used to disguise ourselves from others than to reveal ourselves. We talk a great deal but communicate from the core of one self to another very little. Even when we do try to talk meaningfully to another, more often than not our comments are designed to reveal the *other* person while concealing ourselves. I have an assignment which I give my students frequently that is to write down every significant thing they say about themselves or another person in one specific day. When I assign this, there is a great deal of moaning in the classroom, and I am sure they have visions of bringing in a notebook full of meaningful communications. It is never so. Most of them are utterly amazed at how little they say that is of significance in any twenty-four hour period. They also discover that most of the com-

ments that they consider significant are those about someone else, not themselves. Many of these statements begin something like this: “The trouble with you is . . .” or “You feel that . . .” “The truth about you is . . .” etc.

Our reception of other people’s meaningful communications is often pretty inadequate too. Sometimes when someone says something meaningful to us it frightens us, and so we change the subject. A graduate student told me that not long ago an undergraduate came to her room to talk and eventually the younger girl blurted out — “The trouble is I don’t love my mother! I don’t even like her! I don’t think I ever have or ever will!” The older girl was frightened by this kind of revelation — frightened partly for the girl and partly for herself — and she said her response was “Don’t worry about it. You’ll grow out of it — we all do. Who are you going to the picnic with Sunday and what are you going to wear?”

Often we just don’t *register* or *get* meaningful communications, we just haven’t the ears to hear. Other times we *hear*, but ignore. When we do receive them, our response may be essentially to reject or deny the communication. For example a friend says, “I feel that I’m not as good as the other girls in our house.” The reply may be “Oh that’s ridiculous — of course you are!” or “Get that silly notion out of your head” or even “Forget it.” None of these replies respond to the subject’s *sense* of inadequacy — which is real and important to that person. Often we go so far as to say “Oh you *ought not* feel that way.” Many of our feelings we *ought not* have. For example, in our culture we ought *not* be angry or unhappy. When we reply that one “ought not” we are not accepting what is real for the other person; his truth is that he *does*, and communication tends to end.

We communicate in ways other than verbal and sometimes these, I think, are more honest than our verbalizations are likely to be. Some of these are facial expressions, gestures, even the clothes we wear. We communicate by touching people physically — a slap on the back or a jab in the ribs! — a hand on a shoulder or an arm around the waist. We hold hands, we kiss — and certainly one of the most meaningful ways of expressing one’s self is through sexual intercourse. Communications of this kind have just as wide a range — or wider — in expressing our feelings, *ourselves*, as words do. One of the troubles — especially with the more intimate kinds of expression — such as kissing or coitus is that frequently we are unsure what it is that we or the other are trying to communicate. (Incidentally, this is also true of words. More often than we realize probably we say something that we really don’t know why we said it or what we meant by it — we felt like saying it and we did.) In the area of sex our culture has tabooed meaningful conversation and even thinking to such an extent that the majority of people rarely think of the *meaning* of a sexual relationship. They think only in terms of its being something one does do or doesn’t do. We have developed no real *philosophy* of sexual behavior—only rules.

Another level that I am sure most of us have experienced in some degree at some time is communication through empathy — (it may seem sometimes it is even by telepathy.) It is feeling *with* the other—and more often than not this is wordless.

It may be sitting in a room in silence and knowing what the other *feels*. It is the ability to receive and respond to another's feelings although these may not be verbalized. Some people seem to be especially sensitive to others and respond to them at this level.

All communication — no matter what form — is a two-way street. It demands an honesty and genuineness in expressing self and a willingness to listen and to respond to the other. And this takes *time*. I think in our day this is one of the reasons we don't communicate well — we don't have time. We don't *take* time. This is especially true with regard to communication with self. By communication with self, I mean just that, talking important things over with yourself. Sometimes these self communications lead to meditation or a talking it over with your God. Some of the most exciting, most important decisions that I have made about my life have come from periods of silent meditation. But in our modern society, we have very little time to talk to ourselves. We only have snatches here and there — and we use these snatches to make decisions such as, "Shall I wear the red dress or the brown one?" "Shall I study for the test tonight or set my alarm for 5:30 in the morning?"

In order to truly communicate, we need time alone. We need silence. I challenge my students to spend twenty minutes a day alone thinking about themselves in a meaningful way, and many of them admit that at the end of five minutes they've had it! — Students are luckier than most people, they do have some time when they're supposed to be studying in quiet — and sometimes then they do end up thinking about themselves meaningfully. This is one of the delightful opportunities of being a student! Even so my students tell me that usually they do not think about themselves unless they are in trouble or in conflict and are so uncomfortable that their self communication is more worrying and scheming than asking themselves, "*Why* am I this way?" or even "*How* am I? *Who* am I? *How* do I know?"

Personal Maturity Through Family

Acceptance, understanding, and communicative ability are not qualities that can be developed quickly or easily. They are developed over a long period, sometimes tediously, and most advantageously *within* the family. These are qualities whose optimum growth within the child is begun and fostered from birth on — and by those who rear him. It takes very mature parents to provide the atmosphere in which these qualities can blossom.

Some of us have been raised by parents who were themselves mature and who were able to foster in their children a sense of worth, and were able to provide security and love enough for their children to grow into a responsible and free adulthood. Those children are the lucky ones.

If we are not raised with these qualities, we must acquire them, and we must, I believe, always be involved with another person in order to acquire them. As Howe puts it "Someone invites us to become a person." And once we have become a person, we are able to extend ourselves outward in a sense of community to the con-

cerns of the larger group — the state, nation, and world. To get us started on this quest for self — someone must be courageous enough to let themselves become involved with us in a committed caring way; or as Jersild would say, someone must have compassion for us. Naturally, the home is the place where people have the greatest opportunity to care for each other, but a classroom can be such a place too. This means that teachers must be specially qualified people — not only in terms of academic qualifications but in terms of being mature, courageous human beings — not saints, but growing fallible persons!

It is when people *feel* themselves as people, when they dare reach out to explore their own limitations and push the boundaries back that life takes on meaning. It is when we feel *others* as people, when we dare reach out and touch another even though the touching involves risk — and it always does — that there is significance and vitality in our existence. In a sense Life becomes meaningful when we are mature enough and free enough to risk ourselves on others in committed relationships. And those who find a way thus to give themselves are those who — even without finding a specific logical *reason* for their yen to stay alive and to reproduce the species — find the *faith* to do so. And with a *faith* one learns a way of life, and knowing how to live, he also knows how to die.

