

one

What do you mean?

Perhaps she told herself, kneeling there, that “I would have to stop and think, to question my own position: ‘What is man that Thou art mindful of him, O Lord?’ What were we here for, what were we doing, what was the meaning of our lives?”

—Paul Elie



They were young in years, yet ripe enough to assume the heady, first-time excitement of pilfering. According to a plan conceived only minutes before the caper was on, my daughter, her best friend (older by a year), and my son (youngest of all and happy to be on the team) filched a lipstick apiece from our local drugstore. One at a time those brazen little bandits did their part of the dirty deed, then sauntered to and through the exit door and raced away—celebrating the success of their first *notable* heist all the way home.

The store owner, a decent, thoughtful man who knew my family nearly as well as he knew his own, had witnessed the mischief and opted not to humiliate the children in front of customers who might have known them (and me). Assuming rightly

I would wish to handle the incident myself, he approached me the next day when I came in for coffee and discreetly unreeled the whole sordid story. I thanked him for his kindness and opened my wallet to pay for the stolen goods, but he waved it away: “No, no, not necessary,” he said, “I’m sure they won’t do it again.” I insisted he allow me to pay: *some* things are a given. Yet, as I lingered over my coffee thinking of ways I should approach my kids later that day, I felt the old fear and trembling of my early childhood and the possibility of doing them harm. On my way out, I told the owner I would be back later with my children in tow to submit their apologies, and asked if he would assist me by accepting their remorse with an appropriately measured response. “Of course,” he said. “Don’t be *too* hard on them, though,” I added instinctively—but I needn’t have worried; he would do it right.

When I confronted them with their no longer secret “secret,” though, would I do it right? I used the time before they came home from school to soften the edges of my disappointment about what they had done. They were too young to deal with my first reaction, the one based on adult values that say stealing anything at all—even the seemingly insignificant—puts one’s very soul in harm’s way. The act defines you as a thief without honor, and that’s not all. Until consciously brought to closure, it is possible that the lingering consequences of a hurtful act not yet repented will hang around in your psyche to remind you of itself for as long as you’re willing to live with it. Many years ago, I discovered that someone close to me was a not-so-petty offender, and since stealing necessitates the twin sin of lying to establish one’s innocence, I could never, down deep where it really matters, trust that person again. My wish—my need—is to forgive and forget when someone is less than honest with me, especially if some sign of atonement follows close behind the lie. But my *experience* is that when my unspoken but critically important assumption that you and I share similar principles is proved wrong, something (in me) breaks and the relationship changes.

But how could I preach hellfire and brimstone to my kids for stealing a lipstick when, given their ages (seven and eight maybe), they had done nothing more radical than to test the limits of their daring and courage in a spontaneous, thrilling, terrifying, and fairly harmless rite of passage? Too many years have passed now for me to recall my actual words to them before we all returned to the scene of their crime. I can only hope I made my case

effectively without being overly harsh. My father was much too severe with my sister and me about such things, so all of his “lessons” were lost in my more immediate need to defy him by yielding *not one teardrop* in exchange for the belt-marks he left on my bottom. Besides, I knew beforehand how mortified they would feel while facing the man they knew more as a friend than as someone who would squeal on them, so I felt a great tenderness for them in their predicament. Who among us hasn’t stood fully exposed under a klieg light shining the truth on an indiscretion? My guess is that my kids gave up any further thoughts of crime, if indeed they’d had any, as they stood that day before their “executioner.” Years later, they all regaled me with some of their teenage adventures—like racing cars on Mulholland Drive and “dipping into” drugs—which they had managed with good sense and great success to keep from me altogether. (God, did I ever thank you for that?)

What gives meaning to my life only now seems easy enough to discern. Truth, you may already have learned, is primary. If you don’t tell the truth, your word is meaningless, and so, I guess, are you, in the sense that I’m not gonna hang out with you—because what’s the point? I learned much about truth from my father. He once fooled me in jest, when, at age seven or so, I asked him the meaning of a word I needed to know for school. When I used his definition and was roundly teased for being light years off the mark, I felt so humiliated—and *betrayed*—that I never did forgive him for “lying” to me. When I was seventeen, I became engaged to my friend Johnny—a really nice guy I knew damned well I would never marry, but whose ring (with its itty-bitty diamond) I wanted to show off to my friends. Scared to death by what I had done, I wanted out, so, compounding my treachery, I concocted a story to persuade that really nice guy that our breakup was his fault. When I admitted to my father what I’d done, he insisted that I go “right *now*” and tell Johnny the truth—no, *not* on the phone, face-to-face. I shook with shame as I apologized to Johnny for telling him a serious, hurtful lie, but afterward I felt clean—and light as a feather—for the first time in weeks. Gathering up courage to “save my soul” wasn’t easy to do at seventeen, but all credit goes to my father in this instance, for teaching me—in one lesson and for all time—a principle that quickly became deeply meaningful to me.

So I learned that both your word *and* mine have to be rock solid before I can feel good about either one of us. After truth come many more civilities—

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tolerance, generosity, compassion, and humility—that matter a great deal to most of us. They are the better qualities of our nature that make us respectable human beings, give meaning to our species, and keep civilization more or less afloat. Looking back, I would say that what gave meaning to my life evolved. It was cumulative. What seemed important in the books I read, the people I met, and my own life experiences moved in and out of favor with me, changing as I changed, until the values that grew strong in meaning to my life simply took up permanent residence as parts of my identity. Early on, depending on the set or sets of life skills I was practicing at the time, I would have said that what gave my life meaning was “my education,” “my marriage,” “mothering my children,” or “advancing my career.” All of them lent meaning because my intentions—to do well and make a difference—had been in each case worthy. But these were life roles, after all, and life roles, even the most important ones, come and go, wax and wane—they have lives of their own, so in one sense their meaning to a life is temporary. They all enlarged my worldview, increased my curiosity, and expanded my consciousness. But there came a time with each of them—usually after I had gained proficiency or was forced to abandon a role altogether (both my marriages, for example)—when my interest and energy and happiness had peaked and were waning and I would know it was time to move on. Always I would find—or it would find me—a new and different challenge ready to launch me on another adventure. Over the years, I got used to the rhythm of that process. I understood it, came to count on its predictability, and was quite content to think that what gave meaning to my life *was* this ongoing process and it would continue to renew my interest and my energy—and my happiness, of course—all the way to life’s end. I was wrong. Jungian analyst James Hollis says:

Depression at midlife is very common. It seems that there is a necessary and inevitable collision between the false self, reflexively cobbled together as a reaction to the vagaries of childhood, and the natural self [the person we are meant to become]. This collision of opposites is suffered as a neurosis. Those who choose to remain unconscious of the task their suffering signifies will remain stuck.¹

When I read those words, I was fifty-two years old, and something had shifted in me that was effectively stripping me clean of the “happiness” I had worked so hard to achieve and had come to believe was mine to keep. It had started with feelings of anxiety, turned dark, and settled in as a pervading sense of dread. It seeped through every crack in my psyche, absorbing light and defeating the power of my will. I could find no cause. My mind trolled for anything that could fix me, arcing a search in all directions and sweeping my past for clues: I was pretty much “cobbled together” as a child, no doubt about that—a mass of tangled wires in search of a motherboard comes to mind. But post-childhood, I had spent ten exceedingly grueling years “under repairs” in therapy—straightening wires, rebuilding some parts, uncrossing circuits, and such. So when sanity finally arrived (they said), I pronounced my self and my work “done”—she’s a go. So might this *really* be a midlife crisis? I thought those happened in one’s forties; I thought I had circumvented mine.

I took another look: I was married and divorced for a second time in my forties. The “happiness” part hadn’t lasted—again, though I had been certain we could overcome the thousand different ways we were so different. Soon, I was offered a terrific job in the most important film company of that era, which at the time was located in my favorite city! I accepted, of course, and in a matter of weeks the haunting sadness of another failed marriage had lifted. I was thrilled, challenged, busy, and happy again—for a couple of years. Then everything in my life upended. At first, only a hint of something gone wrong, followed by increasingly ominous signs—the dread I mentioned, and finally the incontrovertible fact: I was in thrall to a sickness that was slowly killing my spirit and draining energy from every body part. Before long, I was spending too much time by myself—too frequently with a glass in my hand, my thoughts fixed on the once-solid lines of my biography sliding off its pages. All that had once given meaning to my life was floating away, disappearing into the drab gray of days passing by without notice, one indistinguishable from the next. Every part of me—save the solitary, barely breathing instinct taking note of the whole pitiful process—was lost in the throes of a great ennui. One does not forget such a time as that, nor will the mind’s eye soon lose its image of the flat, ashen vastness that was my prison: a place without walls or horizon, extending into infinity.

What do you mean?

I found respite only in the workplace. My job was complex, requiring focus, precision, and a pleasing personality. Like a robot programmed to simulate a human likeness, I went through the motions—acting out the days, returning to what little was left of myself at day’s end. I had pursued happiness all my life as a goal of learning well and trying my best: Why had happiness never lasted? What had gone wrong after all my work to get life right? What deep hole in me required so much more than I could feed it? And why, after all my years of therapy, could I not find the mercy to spare myself this unrelenting self-flagellation? These were the questions that dogged the hours I spent at home, to which my answer was always the same: I was suffering the fruits of all my failures with a full-blown depression. But even then, without Hollis to teach me otherwise, it would not have crossed my mind that I was stuck in a midlife crisis I had *not* circumvented, but denied. And that last divorce? It was only one piece in a sack full of denial that I would need to drag out of my unconscious and shine a light on, because the long con was over.

Ironically, the fear that my mind might succumb to its paralysis helped to keep it alive. I knew just enough about depression to realize that I had no time to lose in finding a remedy. Yet, was it even possible to compel my incredibly resistant mind to overcome its own inertia? I would need to work at a depth of psychic pain completely unfamiliar to me—fathoms below where I had once considered myself to be “done.” If not now, though, said my fear, perhaps not ever. Slowly, then, I heaved myself to my task—which this time around was not about doing more therapy; it was about me finding me in places no one else could go. Hollis, again:

There is a thought, a recurrent fantasy, perhaps, that the purpose of life is to achieve happiness. After all, the Constitution of the United States promises ‘life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness’²

Jung has argued with this myth, as follows. ‘Suffering is not an illness; it is the normal counterpole to happiness.’ Our goal is not happiness, which is evanescent and impossible to sustain; it is meaning which broadens us and carries us toward our destiny.³

I began by collecting my questions: Who am I really? Why do I suffer still? What gives me pleasure? What shreds my heart and makes me grieve? Why, at the most astonishing times, does my heart refuse grief altogether? Where lie my deepest, truest feelings—and why those? Do I care enough to do this work? Is there a *reason* to care? Does anyone else care? Is it meaning I'm missing, or something I don't yet know how to name?

Exploring them one at a time, I could find only half-answers to any of them, because the elusive central meaning of my existence belonged at the heart of them all. I could know what gave meaning to my life, but not the meaning *of* my life. For example, I loved my children more than I could measure, but I never confused my love for them with a belief that they were the central meaning of my life. Doing so, I knew, would put our relationships at risk. I spent many years being the sole caregiver of my mother, whose greatest unconscious need had been to turn her entire life over to me for safekeeping. Feeling stuck in a role with no exits for what seemed like an eternity, I was determined that my own children would never repeat my experience. I surrendered them to their lives each time it seemed appropriate—or, as with one child, when it was not my decision to make. They knew they meant the world to me, so I taught them what I believed: “Your lives are yours to make and should always come before mine.” It was a pretty radical teaching at the time, yet I believe it was and still is the best I will ever do for them.

What else . . . I hadn't loved my parents deeply since my childhood, intuiting at a young age the necessity to protect myself from them, so little positive meaning had survived my parent-child relationship. In my thirties, I made a self-induced foray into organized religion, motivated by an intense need to search for the “larger meaning of my life.” It failed utterly to change my outlook, and I crashed back to earth like a rocket out of fuel. I had always cherished the love and companionship of friends and believed that they would add meaning to my life for as long as we lived. Yet, while friends can enhance my life, they cannot give that other kind of meaning that supports and sustains a life when “the dark nights of the soul” begin to have their way. What does one do when faced with those great estrangements—the death of a friend or the loss of a child, existential loneliness or terminal illness, or a depression that hovers over a psyche like death itself? These were circumstances I imagined could break a person apart unless one's inner

strength was tough and enduring. So how was I to seek this glorious “meaning,” so far beyond my ken? When hope had been my talisman, I could fully imagine finding my way to it. Was it “merely” hope to think I could overcome my suffering—or was hope the essential prerequisite for success, I wondered? But when hope began to die, I began to question whether I had believed so deeply in my quest for meaning because it was at least *something* to believe in.

My mind had refused to read or write anything more than a shopping list for months. Not to find pleasure in doing these things that had always brought me so much delight was a frightening prospect, at first—until even fright became no more than a yawn. Those lifelong pleasures had once meant so much to me; they had inspired my imagination, fed my curiosity, filled so many of my needs for self-expression. Gone now. Could I resurrect enough wit to do the work ahead? It was crucial to make my life matter to me again: I had to try. So I picked up my books, committed my brain to taking instruction, and daily recorded my thoughts. I *read*—almost exclusively in psychology (where I met Jung and Hollis and many other gifted teachers), and then, in a seamless and natural transition, I found myself reading extensively in the spiritual wisdom of the ages. I made no intellectual or deliberate decisions about whom and what to read; I simply moved in whichever direction my healing took me and at whatever pace my mind would allow. Picking through the notes and bibliographies of one book would set me on the trail of a dozen more wherein I found the wise minds and teaching hearts who counseled me through my confusions. Digging deep into their treasure began a process of renewing my energy and ordering my mind, of lifting the gloom and resurrecting hope that I might finally “beat this rap.” And I wrote—to nurse my flatlined feelings back to life. First I wrote the hard, heavy words that image despair and anger and self-pity. Later, with a lighter hand, I wrote about my awakening desires, future possibilities, and the growing optimism that was signaling my recovery. Just so, I persisted on my journey of no certain end—head down, mind open, and absorbing as much as I could, given my circumstances. I was trusting the process, but warily—trying not to count the days or predict any outcomes—carefully keeping in mind T. S. Eliot’s cogent counsel to “wait without hope, for hope would be hope for the wrong thing.”⁴

But I was healing, and I knew that my healing was *structural*. No longer a facsimile of myself, playing all of my parts in daily life again, I became increasingly aware of a psyche transforming itself, creating changes in a process so subtle I could define them only after the fact. One day I noticed that I was smiling effortlessly: such a simple thing. Another day I joined some of my office mates for lunch: a big thing. The monochromatic tedium of a world seen through the screen of depression was gone; my world was dancing again, bright with color. My body parts were animating—eyes brighter, hands flying, body loose and graceful again. I was moving back into the society of others—and into my own society, feeling once again the pleasure of my own company. Then, one day I was simply back altogether, reconstructed from the ground up: happy to be fully living my life rather than merely crawling through its days, grateful to be standing on the far side of hell’s dominions. Here’s what happened (Hollis again):

The activity of the psyche is inherently religious. It seeks connection, meaning, transcendence. It is the most profound of paradoxes that we may discover these divine principles less on mountain tops, less in cathedrals, than in swamplands.⁵

By trekking all the way into the “swamp” with my name on it to reclaim the cast-off suffering of the child, and staying long enough in that unseemly place to pick through its ancient, crusted treasures until I found what I was looking for, I discovered the spiritual dimension of my self. There, buried in the pit to which I had consigned the terrifying god of my early years, was the larger meaning of my life—the sacred part of my self that my heart had yearned for and my mind had denied. In time, all of my answers came clear—tumbling out of me like a bucketful of stars upended. I learned that when “happiness” had wandered away from me, it was not its loss that had caused me to suffer, but how little I knew about *authentic* happiness. My depression had been a late, great clue from my unconscious, demanding to be deciphered, and a warning to redefine happiness until I got it right, because only then would I find the “pearl of great price” that splices happiness to meaning and sets a life free. In his autobiography, C. G. Jung says that one’s myth—one’s personal metaphor acknowledging that there is something more

profound than the ego-self—strives to be meaningful. Meaning is what sustains us when we suffer; without it we cannot know joy. From the same book:

Meaninglessness inhibits fullness of life and is therefore equivalent to illness. Meaning makes a great many things endurable—perhaps everything. No science will ever replace myth, and a myth cannot be made of any science. For it is not that “God” is a myth, but that myth is the revelation of a divine life in man. It is not we who invent myth, rather it speaks to us as a Word of God.⁶

Jung did not literalize God as “other” in his psychology, believing that we carry the God-image (“meaning”) within us—if not consciously, then unconsciously. It was Hollis who taught me to see that every depression has a discoverable meaning, that we need only look *in* and go as deep as it takes to find it. In every case, one must ask, “What is the meaning of my depression? “The well with no bottom always has a bottom, but we must swim down there to see it,”⁷ Hollis says.

My depression had been an urgent signal to me to wake up and locate my buried “myth”—to twist, drag, tear, or tease it out of the wordless dark of my unconscious and into the light of my mind, there to find and experience its value to my existence. Today, I have deeper access to the meaning that makes “a great many things endurable—perhaps everything” when considering the state of the world today. I think of it as the *ground* of my being; home base for spirit; the sturdy, familiar inner place of peace I could only imagine when I was wandering through my hells and hanging on for dear life. I have to believe there are more congenial ways to research and rescue one’s meaning than by crawling through the fog of a depression. It’s worth whatever it takes, though, because, as Hollis says:

During this struggle we move from the fantasy of permanent happiness, or shame at not achieving it, to what is perhaps the greatest gift—the knowledge that we can live without happiness, but not without meaning.⁸

Because I’ve never met the god whose hand I could hold or that I was convinced would or should save my troubled soul before anyone else’s, my

God turned out to be a concept: ineffable, paradoxical, a *symbol* of my meaning. But I have long considered that my life—all life—is miraculous, a gift in every way sacred. Why? Because for as long as I can remember I have felt a responsibility to attend to my life: it's as simple as that. There were times I was at a loss to attend to it well, yet it has always been clear to me that I should at least try. Peter Kingsley expresses it well, I think. "As human beings we've been given something divine, meaning something intensely mysterious and real, and we can't hand it back."⁹ Because the feeling has never left me or changed even a little, I don't question its dictum. I didn't question it even when I was having trouble doing life at all, because it feels right to me—organic, born of some intuition too deeply hidden to locate. It has led me through the black dark of many a midnight, when I was not conscious of its Good Samaritan work until years later. I believe that intuition is a big player in the "divine" life within all of us.

I learned a couple of things really well in my times of trouble. One is that without a clear perception of my deepest meaning, I am simply a body with an unconscious, unattended brain that generates a never-ending stream of thoughts that act me out, move me around, stop me short, and start me up again when morning comes. Thoughts are seldom "whole"—they are unremitting, unregenerate, unreflective, and usually going nowhere in every direction. Have you ever noticed that? A thought is not worth much to me until I grab it out of the flow of its stream, sit it down, focus on its intention, determine its value, make out its meaning (therefore, my meaning), and then put it to some good purpose. When I am not consciously connected to my deepest meaning, I am nothing, incomplete and lost in an unanchored chaos of mostly random thoughts. I must always "go below" to keep life meaningful. The universal energy of which I am a small but critical mass requires me to spend time reflecting a truer reality from a different dimension of my self every day, and that would be when "spirit"—the essential meaning of my life—resides alongside a mind at peace.

So there it was: the central, structural, comforting, evergreen, big-time meaning I was so depressed about not having by midlife had been, all along, my life itself. I just hadn't finished enough of its lessons—hadn't gone deeply enough into self-discovery to even ask the right questions. The questions I noodle today *have* no answers: What is the source of "essential meaning"?

What do you mean?

Where does it start, and does it ever end? Is it God? Emptiness? Universe? Spirit? How about intuition—or truth? I'd settle for that one; I always did like it best. I confound myself with these questions, but I ask them anyway because they lead me without fail into the deeper meanings of meaning—not by way of my intellect, but in awe and wonder, as an open-minded innocent who lives surrendered to life just as it is. How can I watch the sun sink into the sea and not be completely amazed? And how can I be a quasi-divine human being—a little wise and a lot curious—and not noodle the “God” questions? The unknown has always been worthy of speculation; it is, after all, our only eternally fascinating mystery. The human mind, so impressively imaginative and inventive, has been studying clues to its origins and scratching its collective head since the beginning of time and still has not resolved its biggest, most burning question. But have you ever thought about what we would do with the answer? How uninspired by life we might be without our mystery? Creation is the only “whodunit” in all of the universe in which the chief suspect is never caught out, the only “absolute certainty” we have been chasing since our minds learned how to chase—so profound is our need to prove its identity, wrap up the mystery, and pronounce the case closed. Inside that paradox lie tantalizing clues to the meaning of life—for all of us, in all our billions, one, by one, by one. That's breathtaking, isn't it?