

## A Course on the Meaning of Life (Part 2)

### How should we then live?

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The 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition of Francis Schaeffer's (2005) "How should we then live?" has just been released. This question remains very relevant today not only as a cultural critique but also as a wakeup call for personal transformation.

All lives have two things in common: Birth and death. We came into this world, screaming and kicking. We were brought into a troubled world without our consent and in spite of our howling protest. The seed of death was sown at the very moment of conception. As surely as night follows day, death will come to all of us after a lifetime of toil and struggle. This isn't a pretty picture, but that's the human condition.

The "accident" of birth makes a big difference in terms of **how we live**. Some are born into the lap of luxury and privilege, while others are born into the bondage of poverty and degradation. We cannot choose our parents, nor the time and place of birth, but we can choose how to make use of the time available between our birth and death. Many things in life are beyond our control, but a larger part of our lives is within the region in which we can exercise certain degree of freedom and responsibility. Therefore, the quality and the worth of our lives depend to a large extent on how we answer the existential and moral question: **How should we live?**

When I look at lonely crowds in shopping malls or the surging sea of humanity in city streets, I often ask myself: What do they really want in life? What is it that they are busy with? What kind of lives do they lead? What kind of pain are they going through? Where are they headed? Is there any meaning and purpose in their existence? Why is there such a weary look on their faces?

Brokenness is all around us, even in the midst of grace and beauty. We can see the pain in their eyes, and we can hear their silent cry for consolation and meaning. The world is full of individuals with wounded hearts, shattered dreams and broken relationships.

In Jim Jarmusch's film "Broken Flowers", the frozen stillness of Bill Murray (as Don Johnston) in the opening scene speaks volumes about the numbing pain of broken dreams. Why did Don experience such sadness and weariness when he had already achieved the American dream? What more can he ask from life, when he already possess a beautifully decorated house, financial security, a long string of live-in girl friends and all the leisure time on his hand? Is this film a

critique of the hollowness and disarray of the contemporary Western culture as portrayed by Schaeffer (2005)?

We wonder: What is wrong with humanity? Why are so many people dying of spiritual thirst in a sea of affluence and knowledge? Why are there as so many lonely people desperate for love and relationships in a wired, interconnected world? Why is there so much pain and misery even in times of peace and prosperity?

To pursue this line of questioning even further, we should ask ourselves more personal questions: Why do I find my life so unfulfilling? Why is there no peace and joy in my heart? What is missing in my life? What has gone wrong in my life? How can I make it right? What should I do with my life? What do I want to be?

These are disturbing questions and they have no easy answers. But the payoff of an existential quest is worth all the troubles. Socrates once said an unexamined life is not worth living. I want to add that an examined life is worth dying for. We can begin by examining our lives in metaphors.

### **Life as a drama**

Life is often compared to a drama – we play different roles and follow different scripts. There is a beginning and an end after the predetermined number of acts. What still remains after the curtain falls?

The most famous quote about drama as a metaphor of life comes from Shakespeare:

All the world's a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players;  
They have their exits and their entrances,  
And one man in his time plays many parts,  
His acts being seven ages. (*As You Like It*, 2. 7. 139-143)

We are also familiar with Macbeth's agonizing cry about the meaninglessness of his life, upon hearing the news of his wife's death. To him, life is:

A poor player  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,  
And then is heard no more. It is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
Signifying nothing. (*Macbeth*, 5.5.24-28).

Could Macbeth have avoided his tragic fate? When Hamlet asked the fateful question: “To be or not to be? That is the question.” (Hamlet, 3.1.64), could he have said Yes to life? Is it possible to alternate one’s fate?

When we watch a play or movie, often we can see that the protagonist is heading towards a terrible tragedy, because one wrong choice leads to another, and his character flaw prevents him from accomplishing his dreams. We wish that we could intervene and change his course. We wish that we could rewrite the script and change his role so that we can transform a tragedy into an inspiring tale of human triumph.

Every life is a story, a play. Every person is both the author and the actor. Do you realize that we have the power to re-author our lives? Yes, we have within ourselves the power to make changes. We might some need help along the way from a trusted friend, a mentor, or a counselor, but our future is never cast in stone. It is never too late to rewrite previous chapters. It is never too late to rethink the next chapter. And it is never too late to dream of a different ending.

We have right before our eyes many blank pages. It is up to us how to fill them with our dreams and adventures.

To live is to dream. To dream beyond the realm of familiarities and possibilities. Our future is only limited by our imagination and faith. We can dream, because our future is not determined by our past. We can dream, because with God, nothing is impossible.

Langston Hughes enjoins us never to stop dreaming: Hold fast to your dreams, for if dreams die life is like a broken winged bird that cannot fly.

***Points to ponder:***

- *What changes do you want to make in your life story?*
- *What kind of character do you want to become?*
- *How would you like other to remember your story?*
- *What are your dreams and passions?*

**Life as a journey**

Life is also often compared to a journey. This seems a more fitting metaphor of our quest for meaning and happiness.

Oz Guinness (2001) points out the picture of life as a journey can be found in the literature of every country, in every century: “Life is a journey, a voyage, a quest, a pilgrimage, a personal odyssey, and we’re all at some unknown point between the beginning and the end of it” (p.5).

For most people, life is a long and difficult journey, full of setbacks, obstacles, and heartbreaks. For the few privileged ones, the journey may be relatively smooth, but it can still be full of discontent, loneliness and fear.

We take different paths, travel through different terrains, and encounter different circumstances, but our journeys will all come to the same end – death. It makes all the difference which road we choose.

There are perhaps as many different journeys as there are individuals. However, there are perhaps four basic prototypes of life journeys:

1. **A fool's journey** -- Some people go through life without a direction and without a map. They are driven by an insatiable desire for fun and pleasure. They will indulge in instant gratification without thinking about the consequences.
2. **A victim's journey** -- Some people go through life as victims. They are often on the sideline, taking what is being dished out to them. Often, they feel trapped, but make no attempt to get out. They are driven by external forces. They feel sorry for themselves, but do not have the courage to initiate any change.
3. **A hero's journey** -- Some people go through life struggling and fighting to pursue their dreams against all odds. They are not afraid of problems. Somehow, they grow stronger each time they overcome an obstacle.
4. **A pilgrim's journey** -- Some choose to withdraw from the world. They pursue a spiritual path -- a journey that is primarily private and internal. They devote their lives entirely to prayer and meditation.

According to Taoist thinking, the journey is its own reward. By the same token, the journey is also its own hell. We have before us heaven and hell; the choice is ours to make.

Someone once said that knowing the destination is half of the journey. While we can never know for sure what our final destination would be like, we can always visualize a positive destiny by consistently making the right choices on a daily basis. Neither biology nor environment determines our destiny; but choice can shape it according to our heart's deepest longing.

How we should then live depends both on the destiny we follow and the road we choose. We need to pause and reflect seriously, because we go through this world only once.

***Points to ponder:***

- *Are there other types of journeys?*
- *How would you describe your own journey up to this point?*
- *What kind of life journey would be most fulfilling to you?*

- *What changes do you want to make for the remaining part of your journey?*
- *Do you believe that some people are simply victims of circumstances or fate, and there is nothing they can do about it?*
- *Do you believe that coincidences are often the results of the choices we have made?*
- *Is it too late to change direction?*

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