

## What's the Point?

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"What's the point?" asked the preacher, rhetorically. "*Vanity of vanities, all is vanity*" was his text, taken from Ecclesiastes, an Old Testament book apparently attributed to Solomon, whose wisdom we have all heard about over the years. The child and two women each laying claim to being the mother – and all that. What profit has a person from their labour when the sun rises and falls, the wind comes and goes, the rivers run to the sea? There is, says Solomon, "*nothing new under the sun*". All is vanity. What's the point?

The preacher had his theological point of course. But even if we leave that aside, what is the purpose of our striving? What are we seeking to achieve? For whom?

Our visit to a church in an island community on the outer edges of Scotland coincided with me also reading Victor Frankl's "**Man's Search for Meaning**", his visceral account of life, of survival, in Nazi concentration camps. I often quote Frankl at the start of our flagship mediation training courses: "*Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.*"

That observation sits well in a challenging training environment. But what lies beneath Frankl's search for meaning? He said this of "success": "*Don't aim at success - the more you aim at it and make it a target, the more you are going to miss it. For success, like happiness, cannot be pursued; it must ensue, and it only does so as the unintended side-effect of one's dedication to a cause greater than oneself...*" Frankl draws on Nietzsche: you can bear with almost any "how" if you have a "why". And for each of us it is different: "*No man and no destiny can be compared with any other man or any other destiny.*"

Our preacher summarised our searching by reference to a song by the Irish band U2: "*I still haven't found what I'm looking for*". Or as Daniel Klein puts it, in his book with this title, "*Every time I find the meaning of life, they change it.*" It could get worse. Our great Scottish philosopher, David Hume, considered that: "*The life of man is of no greater importance to the universe than that of an oyster.*" What, therefore, is the point?

The other day at the Edinburgh Book Festival, I was sitting with Alastair McIntosh, that modern Scottish prophet. Alastair was ruminating about climate change. "I just don't see a solution" he said. We agreed that all we might now be able to do is ask questions and explore options. We also agreed that grand schemes and great fixes may elude us. Perhaps all we can do is do all we can with and for those near to us, we concluded. Maybe that is the point – and that there is a point in that.

Remarkably, in the book by Klein referred to above, he cites Frankl: "*Live as if you were living a second time, and as though you had acted wrongly the first time.*" Wise words indeed. What might that mean for those of us who are mediators, often pursuing a second career? What is our purpose? Our cause? Our why? How do we define "success"? How do we find what we are looking for?

My good friend, and fellow Kluwer blog poster, Charlie Woods, speaks of our role as guerrilla gardeners, sowing seeds and not knowing where or what might bear fruit. "Have a plan," he says, "and play it by ear". Improvise, be fleet of foot, don't expect to see a return on all your efforts. Funnily enough, the writer of Ecclesiastes said something similar: "*In the morning sow your seed, and in the evening do not withhold your hand; for you do not know which will prosper...*"

End note: Since writing this, I have read Ian Macduff's post on 26 August 2019. There is perhaps a theme emerging.