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LIFE

HOLIDAY BONUS

WHY ARE WE HERE?

THE MEANING OF LIFE
BY
THE DALAI LAMA
GARRISON KELLOR
WILLIE NELSON
ROSA PARKS
RICHARD NIXON
L. R. SINGER
AND DOZENS OF WISE
MEN AND WOMEN



ELVIS' DAUGHTER TALKS

ABOUT DAD, DRUGS,
MOM AND MARRIAGE

LISA MARIE PRESLEY
PRISCILLA PRESLEY

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THE MEANING OF LIFE
THE BIG PICTURE
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With the holiday season upon us, LIFE asked some wise men and women to ponder why we are here. Scientists and theologians, authors and artists, celebrities and everyday sages on the street responded. The following "answers," along with the work of seven photographers who captured the meaning of life on a single frame of film, provide a medley of philosophies--personal and at times profound.

writer TOM ROBBINS

Our purpose is to consciously, deliberately evolve toward a wiser, more liberated and luminous state of being; to return to Eden, make friends with the snake and set up our computers among the wild apple trees..

Deep down, all of us are probably aware that some kind of mystical evolution is our true task. Yet we suppress the notion with considerable force because to admit it is to admit that most of our political gyrations, religious dogmas, social ambitions and financial ploys are not merely counterproductive but trivial. Our mission is to jettison those pointless preoccupations and take on once again the primordial cargo of inexhaustible ecstasy. Or, barring that, to turn out a good, juicy cheeseburger and a strong glass of beer.

philosopher MORTIMER ADLER

The question is not "Why are we here?" but "How should we live our lives?" All of our technological advances have not changed that essentially difficult question. The Greeks of the fifth century B.C. are our contemporaries; we are no wiser than they were. Remember Harry Truman's response when asked why he was reading Plutarch's "Lives?" Said the President: To find out what's going on in Washington.

writer MAYA ANGELOU

Since age two I've been waltzing up and down with the question of life's meaning. And I am obliged to report that the answer changes from week to week. When I know the answer, I know it absolutely; as soon as I know that I know it, I know that I know nothing. About 70 percent of the time my conclusion is that there is a grand design. I believe that the force that created life is betting that human beings will do something quite wonderful--like live up to their potential. I am influenced largely by Blaise Pascal and his wager. Pascal advises us to bet on the toss of a coin that God is. If we win, we win eternity. If we lose, we lose nothing.

I'm looking out a large window now and I see about 40 dogwood and maple and oak and locust trees and the light is on some of the leaves and it's so beautiful. Sometimes I'm overcome with gratitude at such sights and feel that each of us has a responsibility for being alive: one responsibility to creation, of which we are a part, another to the creator--a debt we repay by trying to extend our areas of comprehension.

11-year-old cancer victim JASON GAES

Why are we born was a really hard paper to write. I think God made us each born for a different reason. If God gives you a great voice maybe he wants you to sing. Or else if God makes you 7 feet tall maybe he wants you to play for the Lakers or the Celtics. When my friend Kim died from her cancer I asked my Mom, if God was going to make Kim die when she was only 6 why did he make her born at all. But my Mom said even though she was only 6 she changed people's lives. What that means is like her brother or sister could be the scientist that discovers the cure for cancer and they decided to do that because of Kim. And like me too. I used to wonder why did God pick on me and give me cancer. Maybe it was because he wanted me to be a doctor who takes care of kids with cancer so when they say "Dr Jason, I get so scared" or "you don't know how weird it is to be the only bald kid in your whole school" I can say "Oh yes I: do. I had cancer and look at all my hair now."

writer ELIE WIESEL

I've built my entire work on questions, not answers. It's important not to accept easy answers. Easy answers are always the wrong answers. Questions remain, answers change. Sometimes the answer changes more than once in a generation. And "Why are we here?" is the most important question a human being has to face. Our obligation is to give meaning to life and in doing so to overcome the passive, indifferent life. A person who is indifferent is dead without knowing it. I believe that life has meaning in spite of the meaningless death I have seen. Death has no meaning, life has. We must make every minute rich and enriching, not for oneself, but for someone else, and thereby create a bridge between beings that limits the domain of nothingness. Life is a gift and meaning is its reward. The meaning of life is to be found in every encounter. Every moment is a moment of grace.

taxi driver JOSE MARTINEZ

We're here to die, just live and die. I drive a cab. I do some fishing, take my girl out, pay taxes, do a little reading, then get ready to drop dead. You've got to be strong about it. Life is a big fake. Nobody gives a damn. You're rich or you're poor. You're here, you're gone. You're like the wind. After you're gone, other people will come. We're gonna destroy ourselves, nothing we can do about it. The only cure for the world's illness is nuclear war-wipe everything out and start over.

Supreme Court Justice HARRY BLACKMUN

It is perhaps more difficult to answer the question "Why are we here?" than it is to answer "What ought we to do, now that we are here?" The latter, I suppose, has led to the events that constitute the history of man, so far as we know it; to the development of our social structures; to our sense of beauty, however expressed; to the emergence of the world's legal systems; and to our conceptions of morality and all the other factors that enter, or fail to enter, into it--faith, trust, justice, compassion, understanding, peace.

But here we are. Not one of us asked to be here or had very much to do with his arrival. With our finite minds we cannot presume to know if there is a Purpose. We sense, however, the presence of something greater than we can comprehend, a force as yet unknown to us--perhaps ever to be unknown. So we accept our situation, learn from it, and do the best we can, resting on faith, despair or cynicism, depending on the individual. Overriding all this must be an obligation--self-imposed or externally impressed--to do the best one can for others, to relieve suffering and to exercise compassion. We are all in this together, for life is a common, not an individual, endeavor.

artist ROBERT LONGO

You're walking through the forest. There's trees falling down, animal carcasses. Then there's this rusty Coke can. You can barely notice it. Now, is the Coke can nature--or culture? Part of the underlying "why" for our being here comes down to figuring out: What's the deal with this can in the woods? Mankind has some kind of perverse cultural addiction to negating natural processes with our own creations--buildings and computers and bombs. But we've forgotten why we began building them in the first place. We're like the character Arnold Schwarzenegger played in the movie The Terminator : a really efficient machine whose motives got lost somewhere. Our purpose is to get back to the reasons behind our creating--the middle ground where the medium and the message are one--back to the human values, the responsibilities to our fellow beings, that first prompted us, passionately, to build these replacement mechanisms. Once we do that we'll have a chance to save the planet so other cats can grow up and dig the forest.

boxing champion MUHAMMAD ALI

All the wealth on this earth, all the wealth under the earth and all the wealth in the universe is like a mosquito's wing compared to the wealth we will receive in the hereafter. Life on earth is only a preparation for the eternal home, which is far more important than the short pleasures that seduce us here. We have stopped under this tree of life for a short while. We have stopped under a tree of temporary comfort. We have enjoyed its shade. One day life on earth will end and a new world will be resurrected. On that day the entire record of our good and evil deeds will be presented before God for final judgment.

Hindu scholar RAMON PAN

To look for a purpose in Life outside Life itself amounts to killing Life. Reason is given by Life, not vice versa. Life is prior to meaning. Life does not die, sing the Vedas. Christ came so that we may have Life, say the Gospels. Ah, these terrific Westerners who anguish over questions other cultures ask with more detachment and serenity, who are believers to the marrow even in their desacralized existence! Human life is joyful interrogation. Any answer is blasphemy.

Iran-contra figure OLIVER NORTH

We are not here to predict the future but to change it for the good. We are not here as helpless creatures but as sons and daughters of Adam capable of affecting our own fate. We are not here to avoid decisions but to make hard choices between good and evil by using an ethical system not invented by man but by our Creator--a framework of truth and moral guidance through which we can find deliverance from despair. We are not here to glorify ourselves, but to glorify He who made us all--and who eventually will judge each of us on how well we did at the end of the journey we all take but once.

humorist GARRISON KEILLOR

To know and to serve God, of course, is why were here, a clear truth that, like the nose on your face, is near at hand and easily discernible but can make you dizzy if you try to focus on it hard.

But a little faith will see you through. What else will except faith in such a cynical, corrupt time? When the country goes temporarily to the dogs, cats must learn to be circumspect, walk on fences, sleep in trees and have faith that all this woofing is not the last word. Time to shut up and be beautiful, and wait for morning. Yahooism, when in power, is deaf, and neither satire nor the Gospel will stay its brutal hand, but hang on, another chapter follows. Our brave hopes for changing the world all sank within view of their home port, and we have become the very people we used to make fun of, the old and hesitant, but never mind, that's not the whole story either. So hang on. What keeps our faith cheerful is the extreme persistence of gentleness and humor. Gentleness is everywhere in daily life, a sign that faith rules through ordinary things: through cooking and small talk, through storytelling, making love, fishing, tending animals and sweet corn and flowers, through sports, music and books, raising kids--all the places where the gravy soaks in and grace shines through. Even in a time of elephantine vanity and greed, one never has to look far to see the campfires of gentle people. Lacking any other purpose in life, it would be good enough to live for their sake.

astronomer FRANK DRAKE

Observations of distant galaxies have produced provocative evidence for a startling idea: Our universe was just one bubble in a great fountain of bubble universes springing from the Big Bang that created all reality. Given billions of years of evolution, sophisticated living structures have developed, including creatures conscious of their universe, able to manipulate it in massive ways. There is no doubt that life will have developed in many places in our universe. Our own significance, our ultimate potential and our ensemble of possible destinies will be understood by finding and studying the other intelligent creatures of space. Thus a prime task is to seek out other intelligent civilizations and to share knowledge with them.

composer JOHN CAGE

No why. Just here.

Chicago Bears coach MIKE DITKA

I believe we're here for a reason--created by somebody to live for somebody to return to somebody. I believe that I'm created by God to do the job that He's given me while I'm here, to serve Him and then to return to Him. But it took me a long time to understand this. People pump up professional athletes, saying, "You're the greatest," telling you from day one that you are it. Then, all of a sudden, you're not it anymore. You're just part of it. Once I stopped playing ball and became an assistant coach in Dallas, I started understanding that I was just a small cog in this big machine. And it sunk in.

writer JAMAICA KINCAID

If I had been asked why we are here four years ago, just when my daughter was born and I would stand over her as she lay in her little bassinet asleep and just weep uncontrollably because I was beyond happiness or sorrow or any other feeling I had ever known, I would have said that this small child--my child--and all others just like her, was the reason we are here. Just the other day, though, over her objections, I turned off the Sleeping Beauty video she was watching so that her father and I could watch the evening news. Half to herself, half to the empty space in front of her, not directly at us at all, and in a plaintive voice, she said, "Now I'm all alone with my boring parents."

If anyone should absolutely, definitely, truthfully find out why we are here, please do not tell me. If I were to really, really know, I feel certain that I should then ask, "Please, may I now leave?"

Presbyterian minister ROBERT McAFEE BROWN

Ralph Sumner died the other day, full of years (80 plus) and wisdom (dairy farmer, cabinetmaker, churchgoer, member of the local road crew, dowser). When we laid him in the ground there were some tears, but there was also a lot of gratitude for the joy he had spread around the folk of Heath MA 01346. Ralph's death made me think about my life.

I believe we are placed here to be companions--a wonderful word that comes from cum panis ("with bread"). We are here to share bread with one another so that everyone has enough, no one has too much and our social order achieves this goal with maximal freedom and minimal coercion. There are many names for such sharing: utopia, the beloved community, the Kingdom of God, the communion of saints. And while the goal is too vast to be realized solely on this planet, it is still our task to create foretastes of it on this planet--living glimpses of what life is meant to be, which include art and music and poetry and shared laughter and picnics and politics and moral outrage and special privileges for children only and wonder and humor and endless love, to counterbalance the otherwise immobilizing realities of tyrants, starving children, death camps and just plain greed.

But I expect Ralph Sumner now sees it more clearly than I do.

comedian JACKIE MASON

Life has no meaning beyond this reality. But people keep searching for excuses. First there was reincarnation. Then refabrication. Now there's theories of life after amoebas, after death, between death, around death. Now you come back as a shirt, as a pair of pants. If Shirley MacLaine tells some brilliant guy, "There's an ethereal planet that sits right next to a delicatessen in Ethiopia and if you go shop twice a day, you'll live forever," this putz believes it because he needs an answer from somebody. People call it truth, religion; I call it insanity, the denial of death as the basic truth of life. "What is the meaning of life?" is a stupid question. Life just exists. You say to yourself, "I can't accept that I mean nothing so I have to find the meaning of life so that I shouldn't mean as little as I know I do." Subconsciously you know you're full of shit. I see life as a dance. Does a dance have to have a meaning? You're dancing because you enjoy it.

Tibetan Buddhism's spiritual leader THE DALAI LAMA

While we exist as human beings, we are like tourists on holiday. If we play havoc and cause disturbance, our visit is meaningless. If during our short stay--100 years at most--we live peacefully, help others and, at the very least, refrain from harming or upsetting them, our visit is worthwhile. What is important is to see how we can best lead a meaningful everyday life, how we can bring about peace and harmony in our minds, how we can help contribute to society.

Scientists speak about evolutionary changes and about how the human body can further evolve. Buddhism also describes the natural evolution of the human body. According to Buddhism there are a limitless number of universes. It is we who are

dependent on this Great Triple Thousand World System, rather than our affecting its course. In this vastness, can we ever know why we are here? From the Buddhist point of view, our consciousness has the potential to know every object. Because of obstructions we are, at present, unable to know everything. However, by removing these obstructions gradually, it is ultimately possible to know everything.

Those who believe in the theory of rebirth would say that we are here because of our own past actions. It can also be said that the essence of life is the search for happiness and the fulfillment of one's desires. All living beings strive to sustain their lives so that they might achieve happiness. As to why the self, wishing for happiness, came into being, Buddhism answers: This self has existed from beginningless time. It has no end but for it to ultimately achieve full enlightenment.

Afro-American studies scholar WILLIAM COOK

We are here, charged with the task of completing (one might say creating) ourselves. The process is jazz. It requires improvisation, the daring to strike out on your own coupled with a sure grounding in and respect for the tune on which you are working changes. As Robert Frost says, we must keep the colors of ourselves "unmixed on the palette."

writer CHARLES BUKOWSKI

For those who believe in God, most of the big questions are answered. But for those of us who can't readily accept the God formula, the big answers don't remain stone-written. We adjust to new conditions and discoveries. We are pliable. Love need not be a command or faith a dictum. I am my own God. We are here to unlearn the teachings of the church, state and our educational system. We are here to drink beer. We are here to kill war. We are here to laugh at the odds and live our lives so well that Death will tremble to take us.

paleontologist STEPHEN JAY GOULD

The human species has inhabited this planet for only 250,000 years or so--roughly .0015 percent of the history of life, the last inch of the cosmic mile. The world fared perfectly well without us for all but the last moment of earthly time--and this fact makes our appearance look more like an accidental afterthought than the culmination of a prefigured plan. Moreover, the pathways that have led to our evolution are quirky, improbable, unrepeatable and utterly unpredictable. Human evolution is not random; it makes sense and can be explained after the fact. But wind back life's tape to the dawn of time and let it play again--and you will never get humans a second time.

We are here because one odd group of fishes had a peculiar fin anatomy that could transform into legs for terrestrial creatures; because the earth never froze entirely during an ice age; because a small and tenuous species, arising in Africa a quarter of a

million years ago, has managed, so far, to survive by hook and by crook. We may yearn for a "higher" answer--but none exists. This explanation, though superficially troubling, if not terrifying, is ultimately liberating and exhilarating. We cannot read the meaning of life passively in the facts of nature. We must construct these answers ourselves--from our own wisdom and ethical sense. There is no other way.

artist JENNY HOLZER

Children are the most cruel of all
Children are the hope of the future
Slipping into madness is good for the sake of comparison
You are the victim of the rules you live by
You are the guileless in your dreams
The most profound things are inexpressible

writer D.M. THOMAS

Sometimes it is difficult to avoid the conviction that life is just a two-dimensional cinema screen, hung amid blackness and nothingness, upon which a random and meaningless narrative is being enacted. We drift into the narrative briefly and then vanish from it. There is no director or screenwriter or even a projector. But more usually I have intimations of meaning. I know that, as an artist, I make minuscule patterns out of chaos; and by analogy, since the universe is so harmoniously organized, I have to see a mysterious creative impulse behind it. One might as well call this impulse God as anything else.

Darwinists argue that natural selection is a sufficient explanation of organic life. Yet it seems common sense that if an organism moves toward greater complexity, self-consciousness and intelligence, then it is because those qualities are desired.

Astronomer Fred Hoyle observed that it was no more likely that our world has evolved out of chaos than that a hurricane, blowing through a junkyard, should create a Boeing.

Looking at certain people who have or had strong religious feeling, I am often impressed by a depth of spirituality that "the good atheist" very rarely has. I am thinking of people like Mother Teresa, Carl Jung, Anna Akhmatova, Boris Pasternak. The last two are great poets; and it is not easy to find poets who have no religious concept. If in doubt, I have always felt, trust the poets.

Olympic swimming champion JANET EVANS

I believe we go to heaven from here. While we are here we should set goals and achieve them, make the best of things, make others feel good about themselves and be happy with what we are and what we're doing.

sex therapist RUTH WESTHEIMER

It's been 50 years since Kristallnacht, the night Jewish synagogues and stores were destroyed in Germany and Austria. Hitler was testing the world to see how it reacted. And as we all know, the world didn't react. We are here to be vigilant, to be aware of the terrible things we can prevent--like the Holocaust, like Hiroshima, like hunger and want. There is a Jewish lullaby that says that we are like a river's shores, and deep, deep in us runs what has been, what we are now and what is to be transmitted to the next generation.

musician WILLIE NELSON

Matthew 5:48 says: "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in Heaven is perfect." The purpose of life is to reach perfection. The rose starts as a seed, then grows with the sunshine and the rain. After a period of time, the perfect rose blossoms. The human experience is much the same except that the time span is much greater because man, before he can reach this state of perfection, must return again and again through many incarnations to conquer all disease, greed, jealousy, anger, hatred and guilt. To achieve perfection man must use his imagination to create a mental image of himself as a happy, healthy person, perfect in every way. Wanting to be perfect is all that is required. God has a perfect picture in His mind of everyone living in love, peace and harmony. And since God always gets what He wants, it is not a question of whether man will reach perfection, but when.

poet/historian EDUARDO GALEANO

What are we here not to do?

We are poisoning the air, the water and the soil, and we are poisoning our soul. The neutron bomb, which respects things and annihilates people, is the most perfect symbol of our topsy-turvy life. People owe obedience to things, as the poor owe obedience to the rich, civilians to the military, blacks to whites and women to men. To maintain order, this order of the upside-down world, the giant machine of fear manufactures armaments at a rhythm of \$2,000 a second, while the media discommunicates us and the educational system diseducates us. One lives to possess, not to be. Money is freer than people. For most of humanity--inhabitants of the Third World and the world's slums--the world more resembles a concentration camp than a house for everyone.

This isn't what the world wanted to be when the world still was not. I think that fighting to change it, to recuperate it, gives sense to the human adventure. In this fight I recognize myself in others. In this fight I become a compatriot and contemporary of those who are moved to action by the will for justice and the will for beauty. I am their compatriot though they were born in another country. I am their contemporary though they lived in another age. And thus I feel and know that I am a breeze of a wind that will continue to be when I am no longer something more than a speck of dust lost in the universe, more than a little moment lost in time.

barber FRANK DOMOFRIO

I've been asking why I'm here most of my life. If there's a purpose I don't care anymore. I'm 74. I'm on my way out. Let the young people learn the hard way, like I did. No one ever told me anything.

Islamic scholar SEYYED HOSSEIN NASR

Man can be defined as a being born to transcend himself. And the meaning of human life resides in man's seeking to become what he was, is and will be eternally in God. According to a famous saying of the Prophet of Islam in which God speaks in the first person, "I was a hidden treasure and I wanted to be known. Therefore I created the world so that I would be known." Man is the eye through which God knows himself in his creation, through which God sees and reflects upon his own splendor. The supreme goal of life is the attainment of this state of awareness of being the eye of which God is the light. This divine knowledge also entails love of God and his whole creation. It requires correct action based upon his will and according to ethical principles. As human beings we have no choice but to accept the meaning of the precious gift of life for the use of which we shall be responsible at the moment of death, that gateway to eternal life.

actor/director LEONARD NIMOY

I find the question "Why are we here?" typically human. I'd suggest "Are we here?" would be the more logical choice.

singer/songwriter TOM WAITS

While Calamity Jane in a slow burlesque plays catch in a bone yard way at the top of
a two-legged mare
it was a good night full of bad dreams with flat champagne and leaves in my hair, still
shooting at birds with a violin bow
first whisper your dreams in your children's ear making them safe as a hurricane
dangling from a spider web
and across the plate with a swing and a crack with just a skull for a ball and a leg-
bone bat
and all I remember are sparkle rocks, blue horses and flamingos as the train begins to
slow and I always saw better when my eyes were closed

Socialist commentator MICHAEL HARRINGTON

There is one world in which we lead one life. For the overwhelming majority of humanity, that life has been short, brutish and intolerable. If paradise were achieved on earth tomorrow, it would be cold comfort for their irretrievable misery. But there are those who have enlarged the sphere of freedom in the face of these terrible necessities. They are not simply the artists and saints and the great thinkers and doers. They are also craftspeople, trade unionists, rebellious peasants-and clowns and comedians-all of those who do not bow down to what is and to those who assert what should be. Ultimately the dream that we will only approximate is this: that no one shall ever be condemned by his or her birth into a class or race or nation or gender to a life that is less than human; that everyone will choose and shape his or her existence. The good life is led by those who serve this ideal. Our lives are meaningful to the degree that, as individuals or as participants in common action, we make this world the homeland of the human rather than its place of exile.

Choreographer TWYLA THARP

Life is about moving, it's about change. And when things stop doing that they're dead. Dancing and choreography are at the heart of being alive. It's the business of dancers and dancemakers to ask what the rules of life are, remind us that we are alive, and insist, through art, that there is a right and a wrong in culture and society. There is an overall order to life, and art wants to be in sync with it.

civil rights figure ROSA PARKS

I was born in the South, 50 years after slavery, when racial segregation was legally enforced. Racial pride and self-dignity were emphasized in my family and community because of the seeming insecurities and concerted efforts of many whites to make blacks feel and act inferior. I was, therefore, determined to achieve the total freedom that our history lessons taught us we were entitled to, no matter what the sacrifice. To this day I believe we are here on the planet Earth to live, grow up and do what we can to make this world a better place for all people to enjoy freedom. Differences of race, nationality or religion should not be used to deny any human being citizenship rights or privileges. Life is to be lived to its fullest so that death is just another chapter. Memories of our lives, our works and our deeds will continue in others.

industrialist/physician ARMAND HAMMER

The first thing I look at each morning is a picture of Albert Einstein I keep on the table right beside my bed. The personal inscription reads "A person first starts to live when he can live outside of himself." In other words, when he can have as much regard for his fellow man as he does for himself. I believe we are here to do good. It is the responsibility, of every human being to aspire to do something worthwhile, to

make this world a better place than the one he found. Life is a gift, and if we agree to accept it, we must contribute in return. When we fail to contribute, we fail to adequately answer why we are here.

psychologist JULIAN JAYNES

Our mentality has been going through an astonishing transformation. Early human beings were locked into a nonconscious absoluteness, told what to do by hallucinated voices called gods. We possessed a mind without choice, doubt, wonder or ambition. We lacked even a sense of "selves." That mind, over the years, has slowly been replaced by introspective consciousness. This new way of making decisions has left us wishing that we might again feel the continual authorization of divine guidance and has made us able to ask questions such as "What is the meaning of life?" This question has no answer except in the history of how it came to be asked. There is no answer because words have meaning, not life or persons or the universe itself. Our search for certainty rests in our attempts at understanding the history of all individual selves and all civilizations. Beyond that, there is only awe.

Protestant pastor NORMAN VINCENT PEALE

We are here to be excited from youth to old age, to have an insatiable curiosity about the world. Aldous Huxley once said that to carry the spirit of the child into old age is the secret of genius. And I buy that. We are also here to genuinely, humbly and sincerely help others by practicing a friendly attitude. And every person is born for a purpose. Everyone has a potential, in essence, built into them. And if we are to live life to its fullest, we must realize that potential.

basketball star KAREEM ABDUL-JAIBBAR

My Muslim beliefs tell me earth was created by a supreme being for mankind, given to Adam to do his thing. Mankind's obligation is to make earth a better place and I'm optimistic about our chances.

rabbi HAROLD KUSHNER

I no longer ask the young man's question: How far will I go? My questions are now those of the mature person: When it is over, what will my life have been about? First, as Martin Buber taught, life is meeting. We come alive only when we relate to others. Secondly, we are here to change the world with small acts of thoughtfulness done daily rather than with one great breakthrough. Finally, we are here to finish God's labors. One of the sages of the Talmud taught nearly 2,000 years ago that God could have created a plant that would grow loaves of bread. Instead he created wheat for us

to mill and bake into bread. Why? So that we could be his partners in completing the work of creation.

social psychologist KENNETH RING

My view of the meaning of life has been shaped by a large band of unusual and inadvertent adventurers. For 10 years I have studied cases of persons who have survived episodes of near death or clinical death only to tell of wonders in the land beyond the edge of life.

One man speaks of being in a state of "total radiance from absolute knowledge" when he realized that "finally I was alive." One woman says: "I was enabled to look deeply inside myself. I saw...that my core was perfect love--and that applies to all human beings." But it is not just that one experiences this truth; one becomes it. The meaning of life has something to do with realizing that our essence is perfect love, then going on to live our lives upon that truth, experiencing each day as a miracle and every act as sacred.

poet JAMES MERRILL

"I am that I am," said the God of Abraham. Only some such divine tautology would seem to do justice to us all: the old woman who sees ultimate meaning in her grandchild, the mathematician who sees it in a formula, the tribesman who sees it in a crocodile. The meaning of life is that it should mean.

At everyday levels surely meaning is one with nourishment. Clean air, uncontaminated food and water for the body, ideas that exercise the mind and spirit--without these what on earth is meaningful? In our time meaning is threatened at every turn. Nuclear waste, deforestation, greed, plague. God accordingly may be said (by those who still "believe") to have exchanged the mask of creator and judge for that of the firefighter and the paramedic. I put "believe" in quotes because our beautiful human feelings aren't to be trusted. As a poet I know how words, even those words brought together under laboratory conditions, breed meanings not intended by the author. The resulting surprise needn't always be a nasty one. The planet blackened by us as never before may of its own accord break into leaf tomorrow. But this is a mere literary man's daydream, and under no circumstances are the world's lawmakers and corporate heads entitled to share it.

White House astrologer JOAN QEIGLEY

The cosmos teems with meaning. Einstein believed that human experience is fated. And in the main, I agree. Human beings evolve from lifetime to lifetime, and while some experiences may seem inexplicable in the short term of a single lifetime, in the context of the total evolution, no experience is ever wasted. Even the person who seems to be the least important is slowly preparing for some special mission to benefit humankind. Despite the artificial barriers men have set up to separate the different

formal religions, there is one reality that unites them and reconciles one with another and has equal meaning for all.

Writer ISHMAEL REED

In ancient times, the rich hung out at a sort of Republican country club of the day, while the slaves did all the work. While Plato and his friends contemplated the eternal questions, the slaves, unless they were brilliant (patronized tokens like the African playwright Terence), were too busy trying to survive to contemplate such questions as 'What is the meaning of life?' For them, staying alive was the meaning of life. The same holds true for most blacks in this country today--stalked by unemployment, poverty, violence and death-who feel they have no reason to answer the existential questions.

37th US. President RICHARD NIXON

Some contend that we are here only by chance, as stepping-stones in the evolution of the species. Others insist that our lives are predestined by a divine will. I cannot accept either of these extremes because they are based on the false premise that we have no control of our destiny.

Unless a person has a reason to live, he dies-first mentally and then physically. Self-gratification is not an adequate reason to live. Only a life lived for others is worth living. We cannot live a full life unless we have a purpose bigger than ourselves. We all cannot expect to be great philosophers, scientists, statesmen or business leaders. But we must always seek to reach up and reach out to achieve our full potential. Some of the most heroic lives are lived by those who cope with the tragedy, adversity and daily drudgery of life and rise above it. It is a mistake to assume that we can ever achieve perfection. But it is an even greater mistake to cease trying. Without risk there will be neither success nor failure. As Thomas Aquinas observed: If the primary aim of a captain were to preserve his ship, he would keep it in port forever.

ecologist MICHAEL McCLOSKEY

Homo sapiens has appropriated two thirds of the land of the planet, destroying the habitat for millions of species. As this millennium ends, industrialism has damaged the ozone shield for all life and has triggered an epochal change in global climate. We are not immortal; our acts are.

The rights of our coventurers on this planet are not even acknowledged. The question is not why we exist but whether we deserve to exist as supposedly rational beings if we act like conquerors rather than caring beings willing to share the planet with all those who are less powerful, respecting the needs of all life to come. As a species we are on trial to see whether rationality was an advance or a tragic mistake.

storyteller ISAAC BASHEVIS SINGER

Creation was no accident. God had an intention to breathe life into the world and to make man his masterpiece--so it is written in the Bible.

There is no question that each living creature possesses a divine spark of God; all of us, animals included, are God's creatures. God is life and life is God. Every living creature, as a child of God, is of the highest importance, therefore.

At the same time, I am greatly saddened by the blatant disregard for life I see every day. If man were taught to treat each human being and animal with the love and respect that is accorded to God, the creator of all things, then perhaps we would not see the shameful neglect of life--murders, wars, slaughters and rapes--that has characterized all of human history. My firm belief is that if we don't respect and love and even worship life, then we don't respect and love God himself. This is the essence of my religion and the reason for my vegetarianism.

If man could only realize that God created men and animals to enjoy life, not to destroy it, then man most probably would be a lot happier, and the question of why we are here--which is ultimately unanswerable--would not trouble our minds so mightily.

Confucian scholar TU WEI-MING

Copernicus decentered the earth, Darwin relativized the godlike image of man, Marx exploded the ideology of social harmony and Freud complicated our conscious life. They have redefined humanity for the modern age. Yet they have also empowered us, with communal, critical self-awareness, to renew our faith in the ancient Confucian wisdom that the globe is the center of our universe and the only home for us and that we are the guardians of the good earth, the trustees of the mandate of heaven that enjoins us to make our bodies healthy, our hearts sensitive, our minds alert, our souls refined and our spirits brilliant.

We are here because embedded in our human nature is the secret code for heaven's self-realization. Heaven is certainly omnipresent, may even be omniscient, but is most likely not omnipotent. It needs our active participation to realize its own truth. We are heaven's partners, indeed cocreators. We serve heaven with common sense, the lack of which nowadays has brought us to the brink of self-destruction. Since we help heaven to realize itself through our self-discovery and self-understanding in day-to-day living, the ultimate meaning of life is found in our ordinary, human existence.

writer ANNIE DILLARD

The Old Testament book of Micah answers the question of why we are here with another: "What doth the Lord require of thee but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?" We are here to abet creation and to witness it, to notice each thing so each thing gets noticed. Together we notice not only each mountain shadow and each stone on the beach but we notice each other's beautiful face and complex nature so that creation need not play to an empty house.

According to the second law of thermodynamics, things fall apart. Buckminster Fuller hinted at a reason we are here: By creating things, by thinking up new combinations, we counteract entropy so the universe comes out even. A shepherd looking at a mess of stars, thinking, "There's a hunter, a plow, a fish," is making mental connections that have as much real force as the very fires in those stars themselves.