

What is the Meaning of Life?

WHAT WILL YOU ASK YOURSELF?



“The questions which one asks oneself begin, at least, to illuminate the world, and become one’s key to the experience of others.” —JAMES A. BALDWIN

I now believe that all of us have keystone questions guiding us through life—whether or not we are consciously aware of them. They are the deeply established questions we ask of ourselves in the attempt to be our best selves. I’ve heard about these many times in conversations with people who have for whatever reason sought to understand their own motivations more deeply. People who have spent time clarifying their purpose have often distilled it down to a compelling motto of some kind, or declaration of intent.

Some are more imaginatively expressed than others. I have always loved the story that author Robert Fulghum tells about attending a two-week cultural seminar in Crete organized by Alexandros Papaderos—a man who personally did a tremendous amount to reconstruct a positive relationship between that country and Germany after the horrors of the Second World War. Fulghum was so inspired that, as the “Any questions?” moment came at the end of the last session, it struck him as reasonable to ask: “Dr. Papaderos, what is the meaning of life?” Papaderos didn’t laugh at what many others would consider a clichéd, unanswerable question. He knew the answer—for himself, at least. After scanning Fulghum’s face for assurance the question was in earnest, he fished out his wallet, produced a small mirror that he kept in it, and quietly explained its significance:

When I was a small child, during the war, we were very poor and we lived in a remote mountain village. One day, on the road, I found the broken pieces of a mirror. A German motorcycle had been wrecked in that place.

I tried to find all the pieces of the mirror and put them together, but it was not possible, so I kept only the largest piece. . . . I began to play with it as a toy and became fascinated by the fact that I could reflect light into dark places where the sun would never shine—in deep holes and crevices and dark closets and behind walls. It became a game for me to get light into the most inaccessible places I could find.

. . . As I became a man, I grew to understand that this was not just child’s play but a metaphor for what I might do with my life. I came to understand that I am not the light or the source of light. But light—the light of truth, understanding, and knowledge—is there, and that light will only shine in many dark places if I reflect it.

I am a fragment of a mirror whose whole design and shape I do not know. Nevertheless, with what I have I can reflect light into the dark places of this world—into the dreary places in the hearts of men—and change some things in some people. Perhaps others may see and do likewise. This is what I am about. This is the meaning of my life.

Gaining a sense of purpose like this allowed Papaderos to create a life that had real impact. Every day brought the question implied by it: What dark place will I find today in need of light, and how will I manage to reflect some into it? This led him to the very big answer that he should join forces with Crete’s Bishop Irineos to build a vibrant academy of learning dedicated to the spirit of reconciliation—the site of the conference Fulghum attended. And it also led him to every day’s small answers, like his choice to tell his story to Fulghum in that moment.

I think it’s a wonderful thing when someone perceives and articulates at an early age the question that drives their journey of discovery through life. Steve Jobs had this benefit, as he explained to the 2005 graduating class at Stanford: “When I was 17, I read a quote that went something like: ‘If you live each day as if it was your last, someday you’ll most certainly be right.’ It made an impression on me, and since then, for the past 33 years, I have looked in the mirror every morning and asked myself: ‘If today were the last day of my life, would I want to do what I am about to do today?’ And whenever the answer has been ‘No’ for too many days in a row, I know I need to change something.”