

Engaging the Next
Generation of Adventists

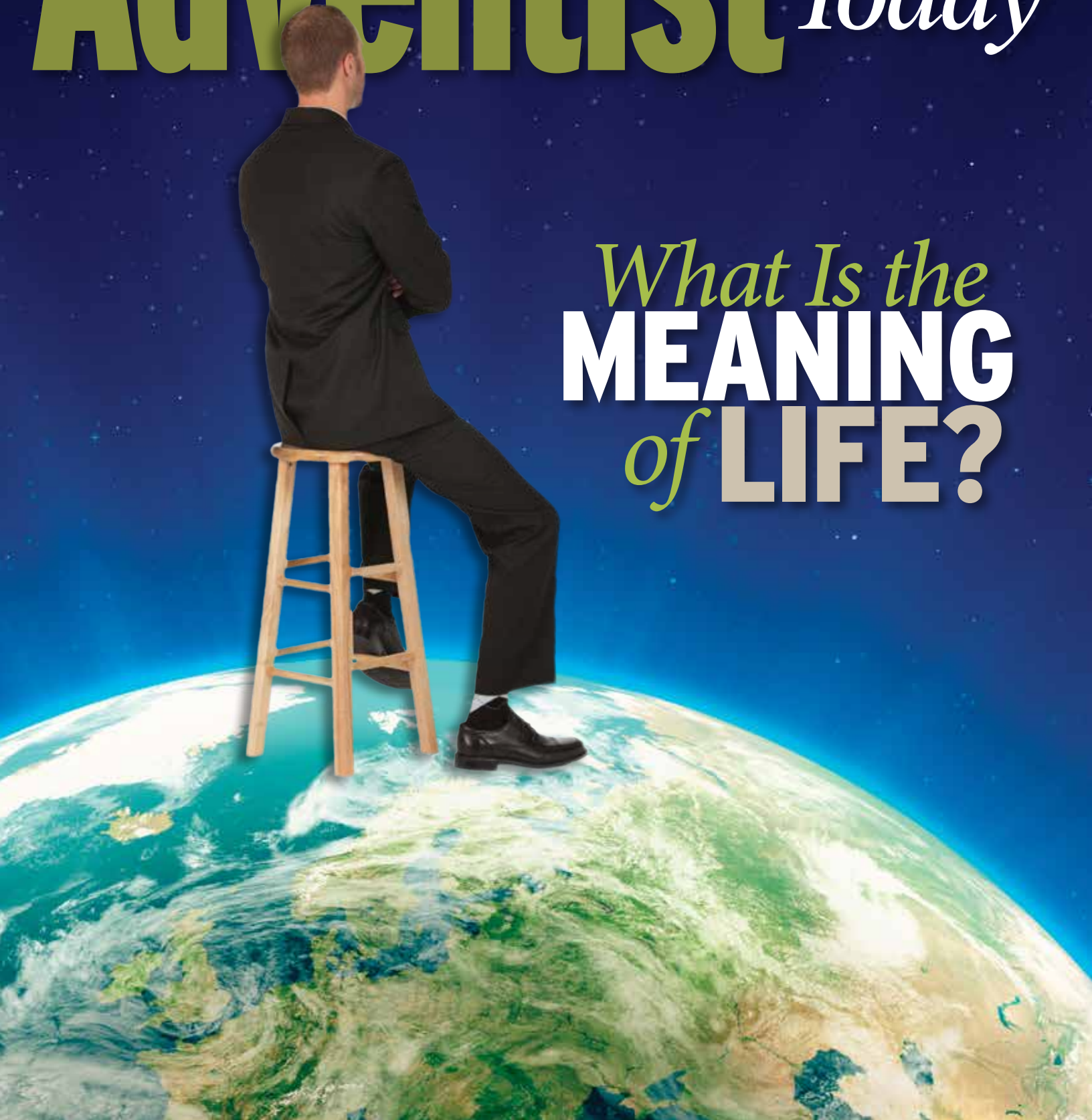
Anger, Disappointment,
Hope, and Trust

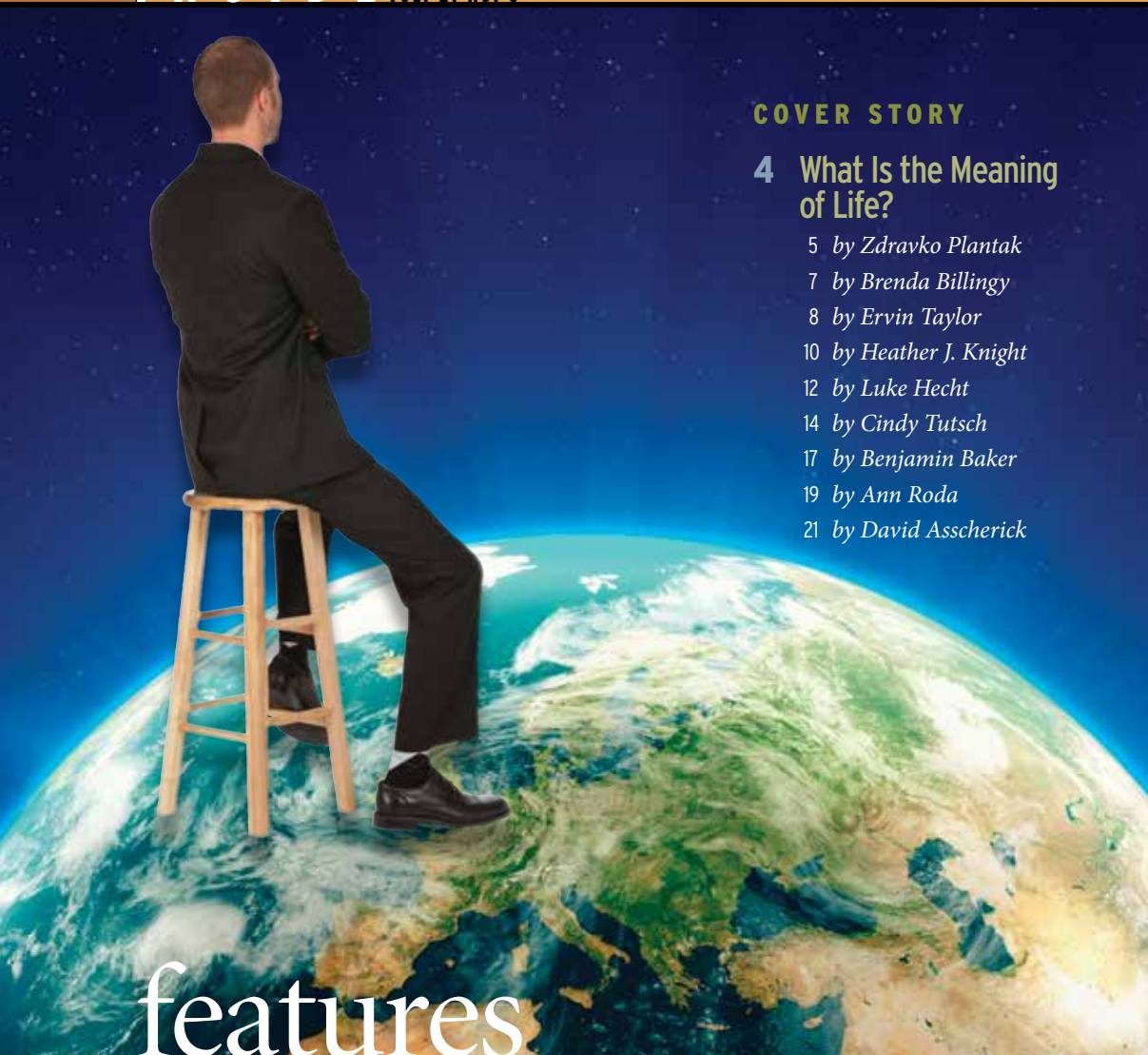
The Ditched
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Adventist *Today*

What Is the
MEANING
of **LIFE?**





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The Ditched Ox Diner

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Introduction to the Meaning of Life

By J. David Newman

All nine persons writing on the meaning of life in this special issue are members of the Seventh-day Adventist denomination, yet they represent a wide spectrum of belief. I asked them to write on three questions: What is the meaning of life? How do you know what the meaning of life is? What does it mean to be human? I gave each writer up to 1,500 words for the essay.

All gave their version of the meaning of life, but they really struggled over the next two questions. How do we know what we know? School never taught us how to answer that question, and philosophers have argued over whether we can ever really know. Most of us believe whatever we believe because of how we were taught or not taught, seldom reflecting on how we decide why we believe what we do.

There are five basic ways by which we know, and each one has its pluses and minuses.¹ Most of us know because we were taught by someone, and so we appeal to authority. We know because of the testimony of others such as parents, teachers, and friends. Even after graduation, we rely on the media and on books for much of our knowledge. It is impossible for us to verify everything we are told, so we accept by faith what we are told unless we begin to suspect that not everything is the truth.

There are many challenges in accepting what authority tells us. First, why should we accept *any* authority? And if we appeal to a second authority for verification, then where do we stop? What do we do when authorities disagree? How do we then decide what is correct?

The second way of knowing is subjectivism. We rely on our intuition, our feelings, our desires, our innate sense of what is right or wrong. We may have an immediate contact with the person(s) imparting knowledge. We sense that they are right and make sense. It is just common sense to believe that way.

However, our feelings can deceive us. And what happens when someone else's subjective experience

contradicts our subjective experience? Knowledge is more than experience. Experience must be made up of facts.

A third way of knowing is rationalism. We have minds to think and reason, and we have the ability to use logic so that we can search for ultimate truth. This seems, at first glance, the best way to arrive at how we know. But it too has its share of problems. "Several criticisms have been leveled at rationalism. It has been argued by a large body of philosophers that an apodictic starting point can never be the basis for a comprehensive theory of knowledge since it must either be (a) a tautology or (b) incapable of elaboration by deductive techniques. The class of tautological statements would contain propositions such as '1+1=2,' 'A is A,' and 'Bachelors are unmarried males.' It has been argued that such statements, while true and absolutely certain, are not informative about the world. If this be so, then such propositions can never be the basis of empirical knowledge."²

Another problem is where does the rationalist begin? The three great classical rationalists—Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz—all have quite different starting points. In addition, "reason is only capable of demonstrating what is possible, not actual. But one is precluded from appealing to experience. Thus there is no way for a rationalist to determine what in fact is true. Let us illustrate. Either 'a yellow Volkswagen is in the parking lot' or 'a yellow Volkswagen is not in the parking lot' is true. One of the two is true; both are not. But which one is true? Which one am I justified in claiming to know? Reason alone is helpless in guiding me in this situation."³

The fourth way of knowing is empiricism. Experience rather than reason is the source of knowledge. Knowledge ultimately depends on our senses and what we discover by them. Some empiricists claim that every belief is either a direct

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Most of us believe whatever we believe because of how we were taught or not taught, seldom reflecting on how we decide why we believe what we do.



What Is the
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TO LIVE IS TO LOVE

By Zdravko Plantak



“Who am I?, Who am I? I am 24601!” were the most reflective words of Jean Valjean in Victor Hugo’s provocative and deeply reflective novel *Les Misérables*. I first read this novel as a teenager, but the words became even more striking after seeing the musical performed in several different countries and continents during the last 20 years. Am I a number, or am I a name? How does naming me “Zdravko” differ from “Zack”? What do I bring to the cultural mix that has been rich and continually moving? In what ways do I reflect all the cultures I have adopted—the Croatia that I was born into and lived in for the first formative 22 years; the England I decidedly naturalized in and accepted as my own for the next 16 years; and the America I have chosen as the place of my life and work for the last 14 years?

A Purposeful Existence

I have always postulated for myself, my children, my friends, and my students that “the unexamined life is not worth living” and that meaning in life cannot be discovered by chance. Rather, we ascertain it upon living and reflecting on this life, continually hoping for a modified, purified, improved, and hopeful life to embrace in all its abundance and, at times, in its struggles. With the Bible writers and Dostoyevsky, Ellen White and Niebuhr, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry and Tolstoy, as well as so many other thinkers before me, I continue searching and then investing my full energies into this purposeful existence.

The meaning of life is found in the relationships within the created and purposefully intended universe in which a good Divine Being loves and, in the community of triune relationship, cannot but create and spill the Supreme Love onto the image that is called Wo/Man. In that socially constructed community as a man and a woman, God poured Triune Image, which is always and inevitably in relationship. This divine relationship

is full of love and grace and cannot be expressed in any way other than deep care and supreme concern for the other. Even when the relationship between God and humanity is broken, God continues pursuing the created *Imago Dei* in us, endowing us with abilities that go beyond our sinful instincts and making us loving and most fulfilled when we are acting Godlike in our endeavors with each other. In other words, ontological humanness is actually to be in relationship and to centrifugally love and forgive when it does not logically or even existentially make any sense. When we feel that we should be ruthless in order to endure, when we feel that we must pursue the “survival of the fittest” mode, the *Imago Dei* makes us give until it hurts, love until it does not make sense, and forgive when it goes beyond “natural” human instinct. And when we do such extraordinary things, we label such action heroism, or going beyond the call of duty, or a miraculous way of living an exemplary life. The ancient thinkers would call this a “good life,” and by that, I assume, they would mean the morally upright and fulfilling life. The more modern thinkers would call it an authentic existence. And I would call it a meaningful or purposeful Christ-centered life.

The Essential Element

Let me use the example of a fish to illustrate my single point: God created fish to live and thrive in water. The gills are adapted to absorb oxygen from water. Water is the *only* element in which a fish can find freedom, fulfil itself, and find its “fishness.” It could exist in salt water, fresh water, or—in the case of salmon—it may even go from one to the other. But water is the element in which it finds itself and is free as a fish. So, without a shadow of a doubt, water limits fish. Its limitation is imposed on it by creation. But that limitation is also the secret of its liberty. The liberty of the fish is found in *accepting* the limitation that is been imposed on it by creation.

Let’s suppose one has on the table a goldfish in a round bowl. The poor thing is swimming in circles until it is giddy. It finds its frustration unbearable. So it decides to make a bid for freedom by leaping out of the bowl. Now, let us suppose for a moment



that it lands in a pond in the garden and in such a way increases its freedom, because it is still in the element it was created for—water. So the fish finds more freedom but the same element. However, if instead the fish leaps to the carpet or the wooden floor, then we know that its bid for freedom spells not freedom, but death. Creation limits its liberty and its purposes.

Now we will apply this principle to human beings. If fish were made for water, what were human beings made for? What is the element in which human beings find their humanness? For me, the answer is *love*. Love is the major element in which human beings find their humanness, in relationships of love with both God and our fellow human beings. Love is the essential element within which human beings can live and thrive and find their meaning. And the reason is because God, who is love, made us in God's image. When God made human beings in his likeness, he gave them a capacity to love and to be loved, which is one of the basic ingredients of our humanness. So we find our destiny as human beings in loving God and loving one another, which is why it's not an accident that the first commandment Jesus uplifts is to love your God and the second is to love your neighbor. The reason for this is that it is in loving that we live. Living is loving. And without love, we die. People who are turned on themselves are dead. Life is loving. Even the Beatles presumably understood that when they sang, "All You Need Is Love." That's what we were made for.

A Christian Paradox

Michelangelo said, "When I am yours, then I am at last completely myself." *I am myself only when I am yours and only yours, God. When I belong to you in love, than I am completely myself and truly fulfilled.* When I understand this, it brings me to the most striking Christian paradox:

1. Freedom is freedom to be my true self, as God made me and meant me to be.
2. God made me for loving. And loving is giving—self-giving.
3. Therefore, in order to be myself, I must deny myself and give of myself; in order to be free, I have to serve; in order to live, I must die to my own self-centeredness; in order to find myself, I have to lose myself.

That is the beautiful paradox of Christian living and freedom. Freedom under the authority of Christ, freedom of giving

oneself to him and one another, which Jesus himself taught. True freedom is the exact opposite to what most people today aspire to: no responsibilities to God nor to any other human being in order to live for themselves.

In the musical *Les Misérables*, Jean Valjean concludes in the previously quoted song, "Who Am I?":

*Who am I?
Can I condemn this man to slavery?
Pretend I do not feel his agony
This innocent who wears me face
Who goes to judgement in my place
Who am I?
Can I conceal myself for evermore?
Pretend I'm not the man I was before?
And must my name until I die
Be no more than an alibi?
Must I lie?
How can I ever face my fellow men?
How can I ever face myself again?
My soul belongs to God, I know
I made that bargain long ago
He gave me hope, when hope was gone
He gave me strength to journey on*

*Who am I? Who am I?
I am Jean Valjean!¹*

In loving and acting for the other, I discover myself and I uncover the purpose of life. In relationships with human beings and the Divine Being, I truly find that loving is living, and I find purpose in giving my selfishness to the higher causes. I love because God loved me. And in denying myself, I fully discover myself as I was intended to be. Loving is living, and living is loving; I know this. It was supremely illustrated in the life of the most exemplary human being, as he kenotically emptied himself to become like me in order to give me another chance to be as he originally wanted me to be when he created my parents.

Zdravko Plantak, Ph.D., is chair of the religion department at Washington Adventist University.

¹ <http://www.metrolyrics.com/who-am-i-lyrics-les-miserables.html>

THE MEANINGFUL LIFE

By Brenda Billingsy

I relied on good old “Webster” this morning to define for me the word “meaning.” According to his definition, a meaningful life is a life of significance—lived the way it was intended—that has purpose and makes sense. This is exactly the way God designed that we should live.

The Bible has an interesting twist on the “meaningful life.” One day David was admiring the heavens, the awesome moon and stars created for specific purposes, and his life may have seemed meaningless in comparison. He asked the pertinent question: “What is man that You take thought of him, And the son of man that You care for him? Yet You have made him a little lower than God, And You crown him with glory and majesty!” (Psalm 8:4-5, NASB).

A Correct Self-Assessment

Wow! What an awesome description of how God feels about his children—crowned with glory and honor! Intellectually, I grasp the thought. However, I must confess that there are days when I look myself in the mirror and the image reflected is not one of “glory and honor.” In those dreary moments, I ask myself: *Why am I here? Is there any meaning to my life? If so, how do I discover it?*

Jeremiah may have asked himself similar questions, especially after God’s “glory” statement to him: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; before you were born I sanctified you; I ordained you a prophet to the nations” (Jer. 1:5, NKJV). This prophetic word certainly did not match Jeremiah’s existing assessment of himself. He responded, “Ah, Lord GOD! Behold, I cannot speak, for I am a youth” (verse 6). If Jeremiah was going to live a meaningful life, God needed first to correct his self-assessment. Therefore he cautioned Jeremiah in verses 7-9:

1. Be careful what you say [do not speak negatively] about yourself, and do not say, “I am a youth.”
2. Be obedient to God’s directions and commands. Go where he sends you, and speak his words.



3. Be not afraid. Remember, God is *with* you.

4. Be receptive to God’s miraculous, enabling touch.

Like Jeremiah, I was content to live a simple, ordinary life, but God was not content with “ordinary” when he held the option of “meaningful.” As God did with Jeremiah, he once again sent a prophetic message—this time through my co-worker. We both were astonished at the message, but it was important enough for me to write it down. The same four points listed above were included in my message. Needless to say, I had a Jeremiah response: “Alas, Lord God, I do not know how to speak! You couldn’t really be asking me to do something for which I’m not gifted or trained!” The Lord responded with the assurance that if I promised to obey and follow his directions, he would put the words in my mouth and enable me to speak for him. The very moment I accepted God’s calling, which included putting aside fear, I began to discover the true meaning of life.

A Blueprint to Follow

We are created to fulfill God’s will. He intended that our lives should be significant and purposeful. Instead, most of us live each day fulfilling the requirements of our job descriptions. We determine who we are by what we do, or what position we hold. Self-esteem and life direction is attached to a title. This is a bit problematic, for there may be times when we lose a job or switch titles. The end result is that we can easily lose our focus, and life quickly becomes meaningless. By contrast, when we accept the purpose and plan God has ordained for our lives, we have a clear *blueprint* to follow, and we have the *assurance* of success. Even if we experience setbacks or failures along the way, we know that failure is never final, and we continue to press toward the mark of God’s high calling—believing that he will continue to allow us to experience his supernatural power as long as we continue to follow his blueprint.

Ellen White indicates that “In every age there is given to men their day of light and privilege, a *probationary* time in which they may become reconciled to God.”¹ But I must be honest. That may be easy to read, but it’s challenging to live. We seem to spend most of that probationary time trying to convince God to come into alignment with *our* wishes and desires. Aligning your life with the will of God does not come naturally. An element of faith is required to believe that God has the power to transform the



“mundane life” into a “meaningful life,” regardless of my current perception of who I am (or am not) or what I can (or cannot) do. I must believe that in Christ, I am a new creature; old things vanish away and all things are made new (2 Cor. 5:17).

This faith challenge forced me to have a serious talk with “self.” I had to settle this question: “Would you prefer to live the normal human existence—being employed and receiving a paycheck every two weeks—or would you rather take a faith-based risk and discover the true meaning of life?”

After much debate, I chose the latter. I gathered every ounce of courage and switched from my *job* as a financial aid director to my *calling* as a pastor. The salary changed and the responsibilities dramatically increased, but the aligning of my personality and gifts with God’s purpose, empowerment, and direction brought a new sense of peace and satisfaction that was priceless! To be in the “center of God’s will,” doing what he created me to do, is living a truly *meaningful life!*

A Specialized Toolbox

You may be struggling today, existing without purpose and meaning in your life. You may be wondering how you can discover God’s purpose and plan for your life. The Bible encourages us in James 1:5 to simply *ask*. If you seek him, God will let you find him, and he is willing to answer your questions and give you direction. John 16:13 describes the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of truth, whose job is to guide you into all truth, telling you what he has heard and showing you things to come. As you do your search, the Spirit will prompt people around you to confirm the gifts that are evident in your life. When they share those compliments, you must be careful to pass it over to the Lord, for “every good and perfect gift” comes from God (James 1:17), to be used for his glory and honor! I remind myself often that God has graciously given to each one of us a specialized toolbox full of tools to help us accomplish our purpose here on Earth. In a physical toolbox, a hammer is a very important tool, but it can be used only for specific purposes. A hammer cannot be used to cut crown molding, but it can certainly be used to drive the nails that keep crown molding in place. Similarly, God has stored within our spiritual toolboxes specific tools/gifts to be used for specific purposes. My gift may not provide healing, but it could certainly provide the encouragement that helps a patient to press through the process of healing and restoration.

Sadly, some people exist for most of their lifespan without even realizing that they have a toolbox, much less utilizing the tools/gifts that are available. It is to your advantage to know exactly what’s in your toolbox. (Here’s a hint: I’m sure you have a tape measure of faith, because God promised it in Romans 12:3, KJV). It’s up to you to begin using it.

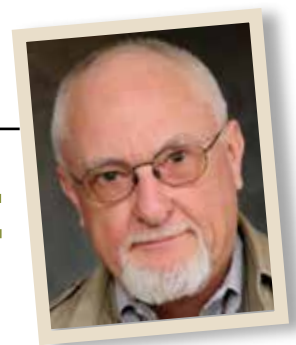
Daily, I choose to live a meaningful life—aligning human *willingness* with divine *will*. It’s a dynamic combination! Try it today, and you will be just as amazed at what God can accomplish through you!

Brenda Langford-Billingy is the senior pastor of Metropolitan Seventh-day Adventist Church in Hyattsville, Maryland.

¹ *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1898), p. 587.

WHY ARE WE HERE? A “SIMPLE ANSWER?”

By Ervin Taylor



May I begin by suggesting that there is only one “fact” we can confidently assert when existential questions such as “What is the purpose of human life?” or “Why are we here?” are considered. That fact is that members of the species *Homo sapiens* are the only organisms on this planet that have the capacity to ask such questions. Whether or not we *Homo sapiens* have the capacity to answer these types of questions *correctly* is a matter of debate.

There is, of course, a simple answer to various types of existential questions. In this case, the simple answer to the question posed is: “Regretfully, there is no objective way to know what the purpose of human life is or even if there is some purpose.” If pressed, perhaps the best we can do is to say that the purpose of human life is to sustain human life, i.e., to support the maintenance of existing human forms and to reproduce these life forms.

A Desire for Definitive Answers

However, this “simple answer” would seem to have few adherents. There is a tendency for us to want concrete answers to these types of “existential”—or what others might call “spiritual”—questions. Other existential questions of this type are origins questions, i.e., “Where did we come from?” There are also questions about the nature of our ultimate fate: “Where are we going?” i.e., “What happens to us after we die?” Many of us seem to think that it is important to discover clear and definitive answers to these kinds of questions.

If we are not comfortable with this simple answer—that there is no objective way of knowing the purpose of human existence—it becomes quickly obvious that the answers offered to such existential questions have been and are many and varied. They are almost as diverse as there are different human personalities, cultures, and societies. With some notable exceptions, until relatively recently, the answers to these types of questions were supplied primarily by whatever existing religious system each

The “simple answer” ... basically says that there is no objective way to know what the purpose of human life is or may be.

society or group within a society had long adopted. The religious system dealt with the “spiritual” realm, inhabited by spirits both good and bad, and provided answers to the questions of existence such as “Where did our group come from?” and “How do we ensure good hunting or a good crop and ward off bad things happening to our kin group?” (Of course, when we use the term “religion” to designate such a system, we are using a relatively modern Western category introduced during the period of the European Enlightenment.)

In the vast majority of human societies, which were hunter and gatherer and subsistence agriculturalists, there were typically special people (“shamans”) with unique capabilities that enabled

them to contact and deal with the mysterious “spiritual” realm—usually thought of as being inhabited by all sorts of negative and positive “spirits.” The positive, or good, spirits included those of the ancestors. The primary way of transmitting how the ancestors had approached and “explained” the mysterious realm of what we would call the “supernatural” was with oral traditions—stories which, in part, provided explanations of why things are the way they are in our group and why we do things the way we do.

Our Way Vs. Their Way

A common statement made to anthropologists studying these small-scale human bands or tribal units was: “This is the way the ancestors of our group [usually the name for their own group can be translated as “the people” or “humans”] viewed the realm of the spirits and explained why things happen as they do in our world. Other groups have different spirits and their own explanations. We have our way, and they have their way.”

It appears that this approach to explaining “reality” and various forms of “Why are we here?” questions continued to be employed in most human groups, even within the state systems or “civilizations” that emerged in several localities beginning sometime after about 5,000 years ago. In these societies, there were still the realm of the local “spirits,” but there were now also major deities—usually associated with the cults maintained by the ruling classes. A new category of religious expert emerged: the “priest,” a full-time functionary responsible for the functioning of the major state cults. The priest was one of the few individuals in the society who could use the newly invented writing system, and he wrote down the important stories that had previously been transmitted orally.

Each human society, even in the form of complex state systems, seems to have continued to consider its own set of local spirits and now-major deities as uniquely its own and thought that other societies had a comparable set of deities. With a few rare exceptions, there was no attempt to insist that one deity should be considered as the only “true” deity. And the correct way of serving your deity in your society was never assumed to have any relevance outside your own group.

Belief in Only One “True” Way

This view of how the religions of different societies functioned



changed drastically with the rise of the monotheistic religions, which existed in varied forms down to the present day. The adherents of the later forms of Hebrew religion and Christianity and Islam all came to proclaim that they possessed the final and supreme truth about the nature of the “really real” and how humans should relate to that reality—typically centered on their God, by whatever name their deity was known. They proclaimed that their God was the only “true” God. All of the other deities of all other religions of humanity did not really exist; they were all figments of human imagination.

As a consequence, these religious systems came to view the written stories they told about their deity as revealing the true nature of the world in all its manifestations. The beginnings of humanity and the end of humanity were known by consulting the now-written-down sacred writings of these religious systems, since there was some sense that the true God, i.e., their God, had communicated such information to a small, select number of special messengers. In what became orthodox Christianity and in Islam, any deviation from what was revealed in the sacred stories was probably the work of an evil force in the cosmos, the Devil and his supernatural agents.

Use of a Metanarrative

With all of that as a historic backdrop, let us direct our attention to individuals associated with a specific Christian faith tradition. Consider the most likely outcome when a member of one of the relatively conservative branches of the Christian faith tradition in the 21st century is confronted with the questions: What is the purpose of human life? Why are we here?”

For example, an adherent of the Seventh-day Adventist faith tradition who takes seriously the theological teachings of that small branch of Protestant Christianity might be expected to turn to the basic creed of that denomination—known as “the fundamental beliefs”—of which there are currently 28. One of these fundamental beliefs provides the master narrative, or story, that this faith tradition uses to define what it views as existential reality. That metanarrative goes by the name of the “Great Controversy.”

For those committed to a belief in its veracity, the Great Controversy theme, as conceptualized in writings of a 19th-century American prophetic figure, E.G. White, is viewed as

providing a comprehensive theological system that answers all major existential questions—where we come from, why we are here, what we should be doing, and where we are going.

For those who share the view of this author—that there are serious problems associated with accepting the existential validity of the Great Controversy theme—there are many alternative answers to the question of the purpose of human life. The “simple answer” noted at the beginning of this discussion basically says that there is no objective way to know what the purpose of human life is or may be.

If one does not wish to accept this particular “simple answer,” there are many other answers that have been presented in stories told in many other faith traditions, or by philosophers of many schools of thought. As humans living in the modern and postmodern world, we have the option of accepting or not accepting any one of them, since there is no way known to this writer to determine which one is existentially correct.

Ervin Taylor, Ph.D., is professor emeritus of anthropology at the University of California, Riverside, and past executive publisher of Adventist Today.

REFLECTING THE LIGHT

By Heather J. Knight

He turned. And made the ritual gesture: “Are there any questions?” ...

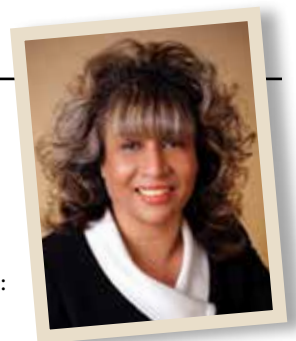
So. I asked.

“Dr. Papaderos, what is the meaning of life?”

The usual laughter followed, and people stirred to go. Papaderos held up his hand and stilled the room and looked at me for a long time, asking with his eyes if I was serious and seeing from my eyes that I was.

“I will answer your question.”

Taking his wallet out of his hip pocket, he fished into a leather billfold and brought out a very small round mirror, about the size of a quarter. And what he said went like this:



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“When I was a small child, during the war, we were very poor and we lived in a remote 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 and put them together, but it was not possible, so I kept only the largest piece. This one. And by scratching it on a stone, I made it round. 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. It became a game for me to get light into the most inaccessible places I could find.

“I kept the little mirror, and as I went about my growing up, I would take it out in idle moments and continue the challenge of the game. As I became a man, I grew to understand that this was not just a child’s game 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 the light. But light—truth, understanding, knowledge—is there, and it 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 black 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.”

Then he took his small mirror and, holding it carefully, caught the bright rays of daylight streaming through the window and reflected them onto my face and onto my hands folded on the desk.

Much of what I experienced in the way of information about Greek culture and history that summer is gone from memory. But in the wallet of my mind I carry a small round mirror still.

Are there any questions?¹

This story was shared with me by a cowboy on a recent trip between San Diego, California, and Austin, Texas. We were, in fact, just strangers on a plane, but we somehow decided to reach across the chasms of our very different worlds to touch each other as fellow human beings on what could have been just a very routine flight across the country. Instead, this airplane ride became a philosophical and spiritual journey as we each made a deliberate decision to “share the light” with each other and to discuss what we each believed were the ultimate sources of that Light—a loving

personal God in my case, and an expansive view of Nature in his.

We were not the first individuals, however, to reflect together on the meaning of life, or what it means to be human. The great books of philosophy and religion are replete with expositions and theories addressing this very important question. In fact, it would be fair to say that this question is the great existential question: What is the meaning of life? Why are we here as a species? How do we find meaning and purpose in life?

Asking the Perennial Questions

In my role as the president of a Seventh-day Adventist Christian college, I am also acutely aware that an essential part of the educational and spiritual mission of my institution is to help college students, in these most formative years of their lives, to explore and to affirm a particular system of meaning, a religious framework within which to find meaning and purpose in their lives. This educational process, researched and documented so well in the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA’s major multi-year research project, *The Spiritual Life of College Students*, affirms the fact many college students, in religious and secular colleges and universities alike, are rigorously engaged in a perennial spiritual quest in which they are appropriately asking many of the following questions: What kind of person do I want to be? What am I going to do with my life? How will I know I am going the “right” way, and how am I going to leave my mark when I finally pass away?

Interestingly enough, these same questions regarding the meaning of life were brilliantly explored by another teacher and preacher, the Hebrew King Solomon, in the biblical book of Ecclesiastes. After ruminating on the futility and vanity of life—even its most treasured characteristics, such as the cycles of nature, purposeful work, pleasure, and material possessions—King Solomon comes to the conclusion that true happiness and meaning in life will be achieved only through the recognition and reverence of the Creator, as well as devotion and obedience to his wise precepts—the 10 principles of life. *The Clear Word* paraphrase renders Solomon’s conclusions in this contemporary language: “When I carefully considered this, I decided that there is nothing more important for me than to be a teacher and pass on to others what I have learned. ... After all is said and done, there is only one thing that really matters. Respect your heavenly Father and do what He says. That’s the only thing that has



meaning and lasts. So love God and keep His commandments. He loves you and has told you all that you need to know. One day He will judge everything we have done in this life, including every secret thing, whether it was good or bad” (Eccl. 12:9-14, *The Clear Word*).

And so, as an educational leader, a fellow teacher and wisdom-seeker navigating life’s journey along the way, I must agree with both King Solomon and Dr. Alexander Papaderos: the meaning of life is to connect with the Source of All Light and then to reflect his light to others as we attempt, in our varied spheres of influence, to illuminate the dark places—first in our own hearts and then in the hearts of those with whom we are privileged to come into contact. In other words, “Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven” (Matt. 5:16, NIV). Indeed, as the old Negro spiritual proclaims, “This little light of mine, I’m going to let it shine, let it shine, let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.”

Constructing a Life of Purpose

In 1991, I had the privilege of hearing statesman and educator John W. Gardner, former U.S. Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare and author of the business classics *Excellence* (1987) and *Self-Renewal* (1983), who served as the commencement speaker for my 1991 graduation from Stanford University. Like many commencement speakers and wisdom seekers, Gardner had taken much time in his own distinguished life to reflect on the meaning of life. Like many students anxiously sitting through a commencement speech, I do not recall every word that was spoken. But I do value these compelling words of his, which I believe present important truths about the meaning of life, as well as how to construct a purposeful life:

“Meaning is not something you stumble across, like the answer to a riddle or the prize in a treasure hunt. Meaning is something you build into your life. You build it out of your own past, out of your affections and loyalties, out of the experience of humankind as it is passed on to you, out of your own talent and understanding, out of the things you believe in, out of the things and people you love, out of the values for which you are willing to sacrifice something. The ingredients are there. You are the only one who can put them together into that unique pattern that will

be your life. Let it be a life that has dignity and meaning for you. If it does, then the particular balance of success or failure is of less account.”²

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¹ Robert Fulghum, “The Mirror,” *It Was on Fire When I Lay Down on It*, 1991, pp. 173-175.

² John Gardner, “The Road to Self-Renewal,” *Stanford Alumni Magazine*, March 1994.

WHAT IS THE MEANING OF LIFE?


By Luke Hecht

Galatians 5:19-24 describes “acts of the flesh,” including hatred, jealousy, and selfish ambition. Meanwhile, love, gentleness, and self-control are considered “fruits of the spirit.”

But this is a false distinction. All of these—good and bad—are aspects of human nature and products of our evolutionary history. Genetics aside, *being human* is about balancing and controlling these contradictory facets of our nature. This means answering Socrates’ challenge: “The unexamined life is not worth living.” Our mortality introduces a sense of urgency to all of this and requires us to think hard about how we should live, because we have only one shot.

The doctrine of human exceptionalism has taken some hard hits over the centuries, culminating in the discovery that we are literally related to all life on Earth, from apes to trees, jellyfish, and even viruses. Each of these species is adapted to a specific ecological niche and brings with it characteristic adaptations. The characteristic human adaptation is our big brain. The cognitive depth produced by this brain gives us concerns that so far appear





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to be uniquely human. We instinctively see purpose and change in our surroundings, but we are also self-reflective about these things, seeking analogous meaning for ourselves.

To ask the question “What is the meaning of life?” assumes that there is a single transcendent purpose to human existence. This view is often decorated with theology and places human life at cosmic center stage. I think that an honest reflection on the nature of the universe and human affairs renders this popular view quite implausible. We find ourselves in a universe that is vast, old, and profoundly hostile to human life. The universe existed for more than 13 billion years before our species came to be. We have yet to find a place beyond the Earth that is hospitable to human life, and even in many places *on* the Earth our survival owes more to our technology than our biology. The universe is not made for us, and on its scale we are inconsequential. Nevertheless, a scan of my Facebook news feed reveals prayers for good grades and success in relationships, directed at the alleged creator of all this. It is a singular conceit to suppose that our lives and petty concerns have some significance in the cosmic scheme.

So, if life has no transcendent meaning, does this lend itself to nihilism? Absolutely not! To quote the biologist and author Richard Dawkins: “Presumably there is indeed no purpose in the ultimate fate of the cosmos, but do any of us really tie our life’s hopes to the ultimate fate of the cosmos anyway? Of course we don’t; not if we are sane. Our lives are ruled by all sorts of closer, warmer, human ambitions and perceptions.”

Life clearly holds meaning for most of us, but the identity of this meaning varies from person to person. I find great meaning in science, history, and ethics. Given the brevity of our lives and the remarkable and precarious fact of our existence, it feels wrong not to take the opportunity to understand how we got here and where we should be going. Like any good source of meaning, this provides a sense of direction and influences just about every area of my life.

One of my flatmates, a fellow biology student, derives meaning from playing the guitar. For him it is a source of relaxation but also direction. Improving his skill on the guitar offers a sense of accomplishment that transcends the stress and monotony of everyday life. Many people find meaning in their relationships with family, friends, or especially children. Any good relationship

involves progressive change, while raising children brings a special sense of accomplishment and connection with the future, as well as being the closest we’re likely to get to a second chance at living.

By considering the diverse sources of meaning that people draw on, we can distill some common themes. People find meaning in things that offer a sense of direction and accomplishment, marking each week as an improvement on the last. I think many people seek an element of consistency as well, which may explain why religion is such an attractive source of

Life clearly holds meaning for most of us, but the identity of this meaning varies from person to person. I find great meaning in science, history, and ethics.

meaning. If you make faith in a god the most important thing in your life—your source of purpose and value—then no matter what else goes wrong, you still have that “solid rock.” This works regardless of whether or not the “rock” itself exists, so long as you keep the faith. When you take the risk of thinking for yourself, there is no guarantee that the answers will be comfortable. When your meaning in life is based on other people, there is no guarantee that they will always be there for you. For a nonbeliever like me, such permanent comfort is not available. But this frees us to see life as a blank easel, rather than a color-by-numbers activity. As the astronomer Carl Sagan put it: “Better by far to embrace the hard truth than a reassuring fable. If we crave some cosmic purpose, then let us find ourselves a worthy goal.”

Luke Hecht is a graduate of Takoma Academy who is currently working on a degree in evolutionary biology at the University of Edinburgh. He is in his second year as president of the University of Edinburgh Humanist Society, which promotes the values of reason and compassion without any supernatural belief.



THE MEANING OF LIFE

By Cindy Tutsch



Enduring Anthropological Questions

Philosophers and theologians from ancient desert sages to postmodern existentialists have pondered the meaning and purpose of life. The questions surrounding the origin, nature, and destiny of humanity may elicit more interest from those seeking anthropological truth than does any other topic. From the heart of an innocent child to the genius of Tolstoy come the questions: Who am I? Where did I come from? Where am I going?

Scientists (particularly those studying metaphysics), poets, and world-religion pedagogues present conflicting answers to the great questions of human origins, purpose, and destiny. However, all human explanations must of necessity be theoretical and speculative, since no living person on Earth can provide proof that he or she has experienced cognition before conception, or after death.

As a teen and young college student, I struggled with finding direction for my own life and wasted opportunities to further my education while I searched for life's elusive meaning. Suspecting dimly that life's purpose might be found in service, I applied at my SDA college to be a student missionary, hoping to teach indigenous children in Alaska. But the committee found me "not religious enough."

Though surrounded with other opportunities to serve, I was unready at that point to see service and social justice through the lens of the Servant Christ. Unwilling to submit all to biblical truth, my search for meaning in life continued.

God's Word Provides Conclusive Answers

One Wednesday night while in my mid-20s, I decided to attend prayer meeting for the first time in my adult life. There I found a handful of elderly people (probably about the same age I am now, but they seemed elderly to me at the time!) studying the book *Steps to Christ*. I had never read it, so I took a copy home. Somewhere in the course of reading that book, I rediscovered the Jesus of my

childhood and resolved to look for his purpose for me in Scripture.

Over time, my Scripture study brought me to several key discoveries upon which to build my understanding of life's purpose: The Incarnate Christ not only lived on Earth (John 1:1-4, 14) and entered the mysterious sphere of death, but also rose from the dead (Rom. 6:9) to life "original, unborrowed, underived."¹ Possessing the keys to experiential knowledge of life (John 11:25), death (Rev. 1:17-18), and humanity's purpose (Eccl. 12:13; Eph. 1:4, 5; Eph. 2:10), he chose to reveal his anthropological wisdom through heavenly messengers who spoke to human agents (Rev. 1:1-2). These agents transcribed heaven's messages into the words of humanity (1 Pet. 1:20-21), which eventuated in the Scriptures, the God-breathed Word (2 Tim. 3:16). Thus, for me, *biblios* provides authoritative answers to the grand cosmological questions.

The God of truth reveals the deep and secret things (Dan. 2:22). This wisdom, this truth, is not composed of dead letters; it is spirit (John 6:63) and living energy (Heb. 4:12). Human thought, reason, scientific demonstration, creedal statements—all must bow in submission to God's Word and become subordinate to its verity.

Cosmic Significance of Lucifer and Christ in Conflict

But what about suffering? How could I find meaning in tragedy? In Scripture, I found the narrative of the cosmic conflict between Christ and Satan at the core of understanding suffering, pain, disaster, and death on planet Earth. I found this conflict to be the lens through which human history, purpose, and future is understood. With early church fathers such as Origen, Augustine, Gregory the Great, Peter Lombard, and Thomas Aquinas, I came to believe that Isaiah 14:13-14 referenced Satan. (Even some contemporary theologians—Gregory Boyd, William Dembski, and others—believe that both Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28 have application to Satan.²)

Abusing the freedom God gave to his created beings, Lucifer persisted in his envy, rebellion, and desire for predominance and was eventually banished from heaven.

God's Purpose for Humanity's Creation

After speaking the Earth and all non-human life into existence (Psa. 33:6, 9; Psa. 104:5), the triune God (Gen. 1:26) established

his divine purpose for his creation by forming the man and woman in his own image (Gen. 1:27), only “a little lower than the angels” (Psa. 8:5, KJV). God created the Earth to be inhabited (Isa. 45:18) by pure and holy beings with whom he could enter into close relationship and communication. God’s intention was that the likeness of his character of righteousness and purity would be revealed in his children, and that the Earth would be peopled

I have tested the promises of God for myself and found that he is faithful. I have encountered Jesus’ longing to enter into daily relationship with me.

with happy and holy friends after his own heart (Gen. 1:28). “The genealogies in Genesis demonstrate that the successive generations after Adam and Eve all descended from this first pair. Paul said, ‘From one man he [God] made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth.’ Acts 17:26, NIV”³

The holistic nature conferred on Adam and subsequent humanity is threefold, comprising physical, intellectual, and moral powers. God intended that these powers be cultivated and developed, that each individual would maintain accountability to himself or herself, to society, and to God.⁴ This ideal of renewal in the image of God transformed my worldview, priorities, and focus.

The Entrance of Sin and Genesis 3:15

Satan determined to ruin the tranquility and joy of God’s newest children in Eden. Envious of Adam and Eve’s happiness and peace, Satan plotted to cast dishonor upon God and to cause grief in heaven by inciting the holy pair to disobedience.

Because of their sin (and the subsequent sins of every descendant of Adam), the sentence of death was pronounced on all of humanity (Rom. 6:23). Thus, death is a direct consequence of sin and was first introduced to planet Earth

through disobedience. Pain, suffering, death, and natural evil are not normal instrumentalities through which God creates or for which he is responsible. By choosing to accept Lucifer’s lies against God’s plain directives, Earth’s first parents separated themselves from Christ, the source of life.

In consequence of their rebellion against God and his government, Adam and Eve and their descendants were barred from their Eden home. “The dominion of this earth passed under the sway of a new ruler. Satan took Adam’s place as the governor of the planet, and the human race passed under his [usurped] dominion. He now became the ‘god of this world’ (2 Corinthians 4:4).”⁵ Hence, disease, disaster, and death are the unhappy result (Isa. 24:4-5).

Although the right to eat from the tree of life was taken away from Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:22), God would not abandon his children to perpetual suffering and eternal death. On the very day that their dominion was lost, God called the guilty pair from their hiding place in the garden and offered them hope regarding the possibility of total reconciliation with God and restoration of all that they had lost (Gen. 3:15).

As a daughter of Adam, this worldview offers me hope for my future and meaning for my brief earthly existence. Because Christ, the Son of God, stood between life and death and proclaimed that he would bring atonement, I have a future beyond the grave.

Even before the creation of the Earth, the plan of salvation through the vicarious death of Christ had been laid (Rev. 13:8). Death is the consequence of sin, and only God himself could pay the price of sin for all of humanity.

Death, Resurrection, and the Eschaton

God alone possesses immortality (1 Tim. 6:16), and he gives it to the righteous who are redeemed at Christ’s second coming (1 Cor. 15:51-54). Death is represented by Christ as a sleep-like state (John 11:11-14), void of thought or consciousness. At the *eschaton*, the righteous are raised from their graves to life eternal with Christ. The righteous who are living when Christ returns join those who are resurrected to meet the Lord in the air, “and thus we shall always be with the Lord” (1 Thess. 4:17, NKJV).

Thus, the meaning that I find in life is centered on the redemption theme. Because Christ lived and died and rose again



on behalf of others, it is my holy privilege to seek to serve others as he served, to proclaim the *evangelium* as he did, to die to self as he died for others, and to rise, with him, to newness of life.

I believe God will break into Earth history with a literal, visible, second coming, with no more possibility for pain, tears, funerals, sorrow, or crying (Nah. 1:9). To be prepared for that event, and to help others prepare for that event, gives definitive purpose to my life—purpose that I sought unsuccessfully for much of my youth to discover.

Satan's Final Delusions

The father of lies has been honing his deceptions regarding human origins and destiny and purpose for thousands of years, preparing for the final conflict that plunges humanity into chaos and choices of desperation just preceding the *eschaton*.

As part of his façade near the consummation of Earth's history, Satan attempts to embrace the entire world in his confederacy. "Hiding his deformity under the garb of Christianity, he assumes the attributes of a Christian, and claims to be Christ Himself."⁶

Part of my life's mission and purpose is to alert others for whom Christ died of this coming deception. Additionally, God invites me to partner with him in reaching out to a world in desperate need of his redemptive mission. For me, the mystery of the cross explains the meaning of life—seeing God's original purpose fulfilled as Earth is made the eternal home of his redeemed creation.

How I Know Life's Meaning Is True

What you have just read is my personal summary of the meaning of life. It is my journey of faith and cannot be replicated in a test tube. It is self-authenticating in my own experience. Before discovering life's meaning, I was restless, anxious, searching, and uncertain. I believe now that the yearning for meaning I experienced was God-driven. He set eternity in our hearts (Eccl. 3:11). Now that I have discovered, through the Word of God, the cause for suffering and God's ultimate plan to eliminate pain and even death, I experience sweet peace and certainty that this present life is not the end.

I have tested the promises of God for myself and found that he is faithful. I have encountered Jesus' longing to enter into daily

relationship with me. Therefore, when Jesus assures me that there is a heaven, that he is the resurrection and the life, and that if I believe in him I will live forever, I accept that as truth (John 11:25-26; John 14:2-3; 1 John 5:13).

Further, the only way I could be absolutely certain there is life after death would be if someone died and then came back to life! This is the Christ-event—he died, rose again, and assures me through his Word that because he took the death that should have been mine, I can experience life after death as part of his redeemed family (Rom. 6:23).

Does this personal assurance mean that I have no more questions, or that there is nothing more in this life to learn of the meaning of life? Not at all! My understanding of God, his love, and my purpose, my destiny, is imperfect. Yet, day by day, I know that he is teaching me more, through his Spirit, of his will and aims for my earthly existence. But what will it be to see him face to face, to experience his love in a perfect environment, to dialogue about the great mysteries of destiny? Surely, heaven will be a continual unveiling of the true meaning of life (1 Pet. 5:10). There we will share in the glory to be revealed and be learners throughout eternity.

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¹ Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1898), p. 530.

² G.A. Boyd, *God at War: The Bible and Spiritual Conflict* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), pp. 157-162; W.A. Dembski, *The End of Christianity: Finding a Good God in an Evil World* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2009), pp. 134-135.

³ General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Ministerial Association, *Seventh-day Adventists Believe: A Biblical Exposition of Fundamental Doctrines*, 2nd ed. (Silver Spring, MD 2005), p. 93.

⁴ White, *Child Guidance: Counsels to Seventh-day Adventist Parents* (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 1954, 2002), p. 39.

⁵ Carlyle B. Haynes, *Life, Death, and Immortality* (Nashville, TN: Southern Publishing, 1952), p. 59.

⁶ White, *Manuscript Releases From the Files of the Letters and Manuscripts Written by Ellen G. White*, Vol. 8 (Washington, DC: E.G. White Estate, 1981), p. 346.

THE MEANING OF LIFE

By Benjamin Baker



I must begin by stating that the following take on the meaning of life is purely my own, so it will of necessity be limited and, perhaps, narrow. As with every person's grappling of the meaning of human existence, my statement here is contextualized—couched in the time and place I live, with all that entails. So I am not proposing that what is outlined below is the meaning of life for all humans who ever lived, or even the person stuck in traffic next to me. But these words will resonate with certain people, and hopefully the rest will take the opportunity to enter into the mind of another for a moment. My primary goal here is articulation.

The Context of Christianity

I was born into a home of Christian faith. My father, a third-generation Seventh-day Adventist, was a minister in the denomination at that time, pastoring a church in the Midwest. My mother was a second-generation Adventist, and aside from the herculean responsibility of being a minister's wife and raising two sons, practiced physical therapy.

My earliest memories are of church. I flash back to the peculiar glow that stained-glass windows assume when sunrays touch them, tan wooden pews with maroon padding on the seats, fans in the bin in front of the pew with visages of black heroes on one side and advertisements of funeral homes on the other. I recall the effulgence of church lights, my father and the elders filing onto the platform in dark suits accompanied by music. I remember the courageous hymns, the ethereal Christmas carols, and always the saints—not with halos, but '80s fashions.

When you grow up in the church, the church becomes a part of you, as authentically you as your name and mannerisms. Not mere ceremony, it is the very fiber of your being. Your life revolves around it, and you plan your week around its cycles and dynamics. The congregants are your extended family—babysitting you, adoring you, disciplining you, loving you.

You are faced with a critical decision, therefore, in your

late teens, twenties, or even thirties—whenever you become independent: Do you want to continue observing the religion you were born into? Undergirding this decision are more interrogatives: Do you really believe in what you were at one time forced to do? Would your life be meaningful without this religion, with its inherent beliefs, customs, culture, and people?

This juncture marks the sharp divide between those who are religious and those who are spiritual. The merely religious have decided that this is their culture, their very nature, and to part with it would be at most destabilizing, at least discomfiting, even though they don't truly subscribe to it. They go through the *rituals* of religion without experiencing their true meaning—rituals therefore in the very sense of the word. The spiritual, on the other hand, discern the profound significance of the rituals (discerning that their significance necessarily comes after years of performing them, for you do them well before you can even reason), thus enjoying a fresh experience. Religion takes on a profoundly personal meaning for these individuals, and the religion becomes truly spiritual.

My Second Nature

My decision was to embrace the Seventh-day Adventist faith as a sentient adult. As a result you might say that Adventism was not only my nature, but now my second nature. I really believe the 28 fundamental beliefs of the church and even deem sacred the history of the church. I draw meaning and direction from the lives of my spiritual forebears. All of this is to say that my purpose, my meaning in life, will stem from Seventh-day Adventism.

From its very beginning, and even before that in its predecessor Millerism, Adventism saw itself as eschatologically significant. Adventism was a movement, so moving was a must. Adventism was here to leave, literally. The founders held that they were commissioned by Jesus Christ to prepare the world for his second advent, and that their effectiveness at this task would determine their duration on the planet, and indeed, the longevity of the planet itself. So in every conceivable way, Adventists were to tell people about Jesus—his creation, his life, his death, his heavenly preparations, his intercession, his return. This manifested itself in Adventism excelling in the areas of education, health, publishing, relief work, and evangelism. Their aim was to



stay fixed on the prize, ever aware that in the performing of the means, the end can be lost sight of.

One may flinch at this notion, believing it reveals corporate arrogance or even narcissism to believe that the fate of the planet depends upon the efforts of a denomination. But more and more it is dawning on the global mindset that humans do indeed have a large say in the fate of the planet, whether it be in environmental treatment, politics, birth control, etc. Indeed, whenever even one person sets out on her/his lifework, she/he does so on the assumption that she/he will impact humanity, however minimally. I, along with other Adventists, simply maintain that this also applies to the spiritual realm.

My Goal and Life Work

Therefore, for me the meaning and purpose of life—why I believe I am here, in this world—is to take up the commission Jesus tasked my Adventist forebears and my parents with: to prepare the world for his return. In my own small way, with the gifts and talents God

The pain and suffering in life ready us for the better land. When bad things happen to good people, our minds cry for justice, alerting us that there is evil to be shunned, both immediately and ultimately; heaven is near.

has given me, I move toward the realization of this goal.

How do I know that this is the true meaning for my life? This is an essential existential interrogative, but one I have never needed to ask. Only when I enunciate my take on life's meaning to others am I faced with this probe. The answer is starkly self-evident.

First, I know it is my meaning of life because of the way my life has been arranged. I don't reckon it coincidental that I was born into an Adventist family, but purposeful. Further, my genetic makeup longs not only for meaning, but deep meaning—one that even transcends this life. Finally, I am profoundly fulfilled only when I am working toward the goal laid out above. Divergence from it feels like defeat and even alienation from authenticity. One may decry this as existential and subjective, and it partially is. But the providential ordering of my life is not. That is far above and beyond my own experience, for it created my experience. One can know a distinct kind of fulfillment that comes only from embracing one's true purpose, whether it be superficially (e.g., using one's God-given talents in any pursuit), or deeply (e.g., using one's God-given talents for God's cause). Although not the only proof, the latter is a strong indicator that a person has found his/her purpose in life.

Herein lies the essence of being human: to accomplish what you were created for. To be human is to have eternity in the heart, as well as the social proclivities to require that it be spent with others. Every aspect of our being is programmed for this. Even our frailties and weaknesses exist so we can identify with others and reach them for Christ, all the while remaining humble ourselves. The pain and suffering in life ready us for the better land. When bad things happen to good people, our minds cry for justice, alerting us that there is evil to be shunned, both immediately and ultimately; heaven is near. God has so orchestrated the human existence as to be conducive to learning of him and gaining eternal life through his grace.

And so because of this purpose in life, I am task-oriented. As far as possible, everything done in life should be to the furtherance of helping others to heaven. When I stay on track, life is others-centered, unselfish, and fulfilling. When I wander from this goal, life inevitably becomes self-preoccupied, short-sighted, and—to a lesser or greater degree—confusing. Further, preparing the world for the return of Jesus requires a kind of duality, for you are in one world but are really looking to another. These two worlds must be equally real and balanced in your mind, for when you become too dominant in your thinking, you lose connection and will frustrate your purpose. The quote by Oliver Wendell Holmes that "Some people are so heavenly minded that they are

no earthly good” comes to mind, with its inverse equally true. As with any philosophy of life, balance of focus is essential.

The telos, the acme, the ultimate meaning of life, is to meet Jesus in peace when he comes, having done all you can to give others the same opportunity. The meaning of life must be aimed in this direction, aligned skyward with this pull. The commendation of Christ, in the simplest yet most meaningful of words, will be, “Well done, good and faithful servant; ... Enter into the joy of your lord” (Matt. 25:23, NKJV).

Benjamin Baker, Ph.D., writes from Kensington, Maryland.

WHAT ARE YOU?

By Ann Roda

While sitting in an airport concourse waiting for a connecting flight, I noticed a woman looking at me, her eyes lingering just a bit longer than a casual glance. I could tell she wanted to talk to me, so I gave her a smile. Shortly afterward, she moved to a seat beside me and we began engaging in small talk. Eventually, the real motive for her coming to me became clear. She leaned in closer and whispered, “What are you?” I am asked that question often and have always disliked it. This moment was no different. So, I responded by saying, “I’m a girl.” She looked at me in surprise and after an awkward pause, she restated the question, saying, “No, I mean, what is your ethnicity?”

For as long as I can remember, I would always answer the same: “My parents are from the Philippines.” She seemed satisfied with the answer, even though I really did not answer the question at all. The inquiry was about me and my ethnicity, but my response referred to my parents’ ethnic origins.

Recently I began to honestly explore why I continue to avoid

the question. Why do I refer to my parents’ ethnicity and not my own? Is it because I don’t feel an affiliation with any ethnic group?

I was born in Thailand, spoke the language, and spent my developing years there. We moved to the United States, where not only did I very quickly adopt English as my first and only language, but the Western culture and values as well. And this is where my journey became very confusing. When I looked in the mirror, I saw a Filipino; when I examined my heart, I discovered a Thai; when I reflected upon my thoughts, I recognized a Westerner. It was then I realized that I did not have a place of belonging, an identity, and a sense of history. What am I?

When the airplane touched down at Ninoy Aquino International Airport in Manila, Philippines, I could see how excited my parents were. They were coming “back home.” Many foreigners refer to their homeland as “back home.” For all my life, at various gatherings, I would hear “When are you going back home?” or “We did this back home.” Even though my parents claimed another citizenship more than 40 years ago, the country of their birth has always been their “home.”

Unfortunately, I did not share my parents’ excitement. I dreaded having to acclimate to the weather (my winter, their summer), time zone, language, and the general chaos related to being in unfamiliar surroundings. My hesitations further increased as we exited the airport and entered into a cacophony of foreignness. The heat immediately stung my face; the assault on my personal space made me uncomfortable; the diesel fuel exhaust made my eyes tear, and the incessant honking of horns heightened my headache. I was miserable and mentally resolved to endure until our departure, 14 days away. I took a quick look at my parents and saw something I had never seen before and did not understand. They had a look on their faces that proclaimed they were “home.” Their eyes were closed and their lips arched into a comforting smile. They were breathing in every sight, sound, and smell. They were “home.” I was not. Within me, the echo of the question surfaced from the back of my mind, “What are you?”

Hierarchy of Human Needs

Belonging is an important human need. Humans have an inherent need to belong, to be a part of something larger and greater





than themselves. In Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the "belongingness" is an important need that influences human behavior and the manner in which we live our lives.

Maslow's hierarchy is represented by a pyramid divided into five levels. The basic needs, physiological and safety, form the first two foundational levels. The more complex needs, esteem and self-actualization, complete the peak of the pyramid. The need for love and belonging lies at the center and relates to family, affection, relationship, and group identity. While these needs are less important than physiological and safety needs, the need for belonging is critical in distinguishing human beings from all other creatures on Earth. The need to belong informs our desires

This is the core of our being as humans—to have relationships, intimate and intentional, with one another; to experience life together, sharing and laughing and crying and holding each other through the intimate and superficial paces of life.

for relationships, intimacy, companionship, and love.

Perhaps that is why God created human beings in such an intimate way. He touched us, forming us with his own hands. He poured his affections upon us, for we are an expression of his image. He bent down and kissed us, breathing the breath of life into our nostrils. This creative action of drawing us close confirms not only God's need to belong to us, but also our need to belong to him. Then, as Scripture tells us, "man became a living person."

Sensing a Change

It was a human traffic jam at the arrival deck. There were throngs of people, five and six deep, each person in a state of

anticipation—looking for the familiar face of a loved one or friend. I saw a young man walking toward us. His face did not blend into the crowd as the others did. There was a sense of familiarity in his manner, the intensity of his eyes, and the shape of his smile. It was my cousin, there to pick us up. I had never met him and have rarely seen his picture, but I just knew we belonged together.

In the days that followed, as my cousins and I began to spend more time together, laughing and eating, sharing stories and taking pictures, I felt a change happening. A sense of familiarity was growing within me. I experienced a rhythmic comfort with what initially seemed foreign and strange. I developed an expanding sense of affection and pride for a people born out of struggle and oppression. I began to realize just how much in common I had with people other than the color of our skin. I realized that my sense of feeling lost and foreign decreased as my relationships with my cousins and other people increased. The heat didn't bother me so much, and the noises and smells became an object of laughter. For the first time in my life, I felt connected and experienced a sense of belonging. I had an awareness of being alive, and my aliveness had meaning. I was part of something greater than myself. I felt at home. I was home.

I have since returned from my trip to the Philippines and am now settled in the normal activities of daily living. However, I am not the same person. Gone is the feeling of being disconnected, and feeling lost is replaced by a sense of belonging, identity, and connection to a place and to a people. As I reflect upon these newfound feelings, I also realize that "belonging" cannot be based just on a relationship with a place or a certain group of people. Yes, we all have a core affiliation from which our identity is formed and our sense of belonging flows. But it cannot be limited to a singular place, people, or experience. We were created to be connected with one another. This connection was instilled in all of us by God himself. This is the core of our being as humans—to have relationships, intimate and intentional, with one another; to experience life together, sharing and laughing and crying and holding each other through the intimate and superficial paces of life. Inasmuch as God's intimacy with us—his hand upon us and his breath as our breath—deems each one of us a "living person," our intimacy with others—our hand in their hands and the breath of our shared experiences—gives meaning to our lives. This, I believe is what it means to be a human.

I believe the breakdown in our societies stems from this loss of connectedness and belonging to one another. We don't know each other, so we do not have to care. We do not have to listen and seek to understand; we do not have to accept one another. Therefore, we live parallel yet isolated lives, continually searching for meaning yet not truly finding it because we choose to live alone. Perhaps this is why human beings intentionally inflict cruel and evil acts against one another. Perhaps Maslow had it wrong. Perhaps the need for belonging is the essential foundational base of all human needs. Perhaps we need to go back "home" and revisit our birthplace as human beings—to understand that the intimate nature in which we were created, the connectedness with the Divine and with one another, is truly what it means to be a human.

Now, when people ask me, "What are you?" I can respond with a smile and say with confidence and assurance, "I am a human being."

Ann Roda is the pastor for Family Ministries at New Hope Adventist Church in Fulton, Maryland.

WHAT IS THE MEANING OF LIFE?

By David Asscherick

A consequential question, to be sure. But, first, another: What is meaning?

What does "meaning" mean?

Who's to say what the answer is to either of these queries? Or, for that matter, to any query of consequence? Who decides what "meaning" means and what life's meaning ought to be? There cannot be many answers. Either it is me, individually; us,

corporately; or God, transcendently.

For many and diverse reasons, which lie outside of the scope of this particular essay, I am roundly persuaded that the last option is the answer.

What, now, follows from this?

No Modest Claim

If God is, then he holds the answers to all of our queries, the one in the title of this essay not excepted.

Happily, we are not left orphaned to grope and grasp for an answer. It lies pregnant, nucleic even, in an ancient three-word phrase, a phrase that, if true, is the most revealing, and thus the most determinative, truth of all.

That phrase? What else?

God is love (1 John 4:8).

Not merely *loving*, mind you, but love itself. This is no modest claim. It is as grand and incomparable a claim as can be imagined. Again, if true, the grandest of all.

If God is, then the answer to our present query is his to give. And if God is love, then the answer to our present query is easily apprehended.

What is the meaning of life? To love and be loved.

Surely, the reader will hear the ring of truth in this answer. Surely, there is something deeply resonant here with our innermost soul and personhood. Do we not long to love and be loved? Do we not sense that reality itself is charged with social energy and meaning? Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg has made his billions by crafting a venue that taps into this reality. No one believes that he created the reality, only that he gave us a modern and meaningful way to access it. The reality is there, and always has been.

Always.

Because reality itself is relational.

And if God is, then all ultimate reality statements are ultimately statements about him.

What is he? We do not know, and will likely never know, the chasm between the created and the Creator being incalculably and incomprehensibly wide. And yet there is an incandescent glimmer of revelation contained in Scripture's grammatical and theological equivalence that "God is love."





To Love Is to Give

Love, Paul averred, “does not seek its own” (1 Cor. 13:5, NKJV). What, then, is it seeking?

Others.

Others’ best good, others’ needs, others’ wants and hopes. Love cannot be contained within itself; it must extend, give, communicate, and cherish. This is God’s own essence—to give. In the words of Ellen White, “Real godliness is diffusive and communicative.”¹

All of this echoes Jesus’ own axiom of love, “Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for his friends” (John 15:13, NKJV). So love not only extends, it extends at the expense of itself. It is given in the truest and noblest sense, not with

The essential and native plurality within the nature of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is no abstruse and dusty theological frippery.

attachments or conditions. Like the rain and the sun, announced Jesus in Matt. 5:45, it is intended for all—the appreciative and the apathetic alike.

Jesus gave himself. This is a phrase—gave himself—which Paul, seemingly, could not resist. Not surprisingly, he repeatedly employed it as a grammatical and theological equivalent to love: “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who *loved* me and *gave Himself* for me” (Gal. 2:20, NKJV, emphasis mine).

“Therefore be imitators of God as dear children. And walk in love, as Christ also has *loved* us and *given Himself* for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma” (Eph. 5:1-2, NKJV, emphasis mine).

“Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also *loved* the church and *gave Himself* for her” (Eph. 5:25, NKJV, emphasis mine).

To love, says the apostle, is to give. More than this, it is to give *oneself*.

Note Ephesians 5:1-2, where the reader is exhorted to imitate God. One can almost feel Paul’s thinking here; the moment he entreats the church to imitate God, his thoughts turn naturally and even necessarily to that quality that is most godly: love. How does he instinctively modify his exhortation? What comes first to his active, apostolic mind? “And walk in love” (verse 2).

So for Jesus, for Paul, and for Ellen White, we are most godly when we are most loving. We are most godly when we are giving ourselves without expectation or even hope of return. We are most godly when we are diffusive and communicative. This is because love places us in harmony with the nature of reality itself, and, as we have already noted, reality is relational.

The essential and native plurality within the nature of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is no abstruse and dusty theological frippery. It is a window into the very heart of God, and thus into ourselves as fashioned in his image.

Note especially the plural pronouns “us,” “our,” and “them” in the following passage: “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness ... ? So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. Then God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply’” (Gen. 1:26-28, NKJV).

So God is an eternal family, an eternal relationship. Author Ty Gibson perspicaciously draws back the curtain on this divine mystery: “Three is the essential numeric value of love. Where there is only one person, love cannot occur. Where there are two, each is the sole recipient of the other’s attention, giving place for self-absorption. But the moment there are three, each recipient of any one’s love must also humbly defer attention to the third party, and each is the third party to the other two. Pure selflessness can now occur by virtue of the fact that each one must love and be loved with both an exclusive and a divided interest. The pure biblical genius of identifying God as a triune fellowship rather than as an absolute singularity or even as a dualism, is convincing evidence that Bible is, in fact, the revelation of the one and only true God, whose essential nature is love.”²

Millard J. Erickson also captures this underpinning reality profoundly when he writes: “If reality is fundamentally physical, then the primary force binding it together is electromagnetic. If,

however, reality is fundamentally social, then the most powerful constituting force is that which binds persons together, namely, love.²³

That there is a physical component to life and reality, no one denies. And that there is a social imperative and beauty in life, no one can safely deny. Life is more than biology, and reality is more than atoms. This can be denied, but not safely, and, what's more, this denial cannot be lived.

It's All About Relationships

As a pastor, I have been to many hospitals, bedsides, and funerals. I have heard many confessions and regrets aired in life's last conscious, gasping moments, and yet I have never heard individuals confess to me that their great regret in life was that they

See Jesus, pouring out his life for others, giving himself, loving. A dying Man and an honest Man. A Man who looked death square in the eye without a pixel of regret over social opportunities lost and neglected.

spent altogether too much time with their family and friends.

Oh no, but I have heard, and more often than I'd care to remember, the opposite.

Because when the chips are down—when life's remaining breaths can be numbered, when the gadgets and toys are seen for the meaningless things that they always were, when tomorrow's NASDAQ numbers matter not at all, when the office has seen its last late night or long weekend—it always comes back to relationships.

To family. To friends. To love.

Dying men tend to be honest men. Not always, to be sure, but more often than their healthy counterparts. This being the case,

we do well to hear them.⁴ And no dying man was more honest or important than Jesus the Christ. Were his parched lips laden with regret? No indeed.

See Jesus, pouring out his life for others, giving himself, loving. A dying Man and an honest Man. A Man who looked death square in the eye without a pixel of regret over social opportunities lost and neglected. Quite the opposite, actually. He gave himself so that a larger, better, and eternal social reality might be created. "Who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross" (Heb. 12:2, ESV).

You are that joy. So am I.

Joy flows from love, its truest source. And peace flows from these two.

Love. Joy. Peace.

So if these three words—*God is love*—are true, then the answer to the question of life's meaning is these five words: *to love and be loved*.

In what might be considered a strange "command," Jesus iterated his timeless words: "And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.' This is the first commandment. And the second, like it, is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these" (Mark 12:30-31, NKJV).

It is better to seek to truly love and yet fail than to succeed at anything else. 🇺🇸

David Asscherick is co-director of Light Bearers and co-founder of ARISE. He is the author of God In Pain: Another Look at Evil, Suffering, and the Cross, his first book.

¹ Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, Vol. 5, 1875, p. 543.

² From a personal email conversation dated May 9, 2012.

³ Millard J. Erickson, *Making Sense of the Trinity: Three Crucial Questions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000), p. 58.

⁴ Along these lines, I highly recommend Dr. Herbert Lockyer's fascinating book, *Last Words of Sinners and Saints*.

Converts drop out of the church, not young people raised in the faith. At least that is the way oral tradition has it in the history of the Seventh-day Adventist movement. This idea still hangs on as a widely believed myth, despite the fact that at least since the 1980s research has shown that young adults raised in Adventist families are more likely to drop out than are adult converts.

The most recent studies indicate that about half of the teenagers who grow up in Adventist families in North America

they were in academy. Those who have studied the Baby Boomer generation say that it is more cynical and questioning than the Millennial generation, more individualistic and less supportive of large organizations.

It is no surprise, now that most of the pastors and church administrators in the Adventist Church in North America are Baby Boomers, that massive campaigns like Harvest Ingathering, Mission 72, and the Five-day Plan to Stop Smoking have come to

Engaging the Next Generation of Adventists

BY MONTE SAHLIN

have left the church by their mid-20s. The statistical impact of this reality is made more acute by the fact that there are fewer young people and a larger share of older people each year in the Adventist population. Changing demographics make this even more acute among white and native-born Adventists than among ethnic minorities and immigrants.

Concern about holding onto the next generation was a founding reason for *Adventist Today* and continues to be one of the top-ranked topics in a recent survey in which readers were asked what subjects the magazine should cover. In 1950 the General Conference was already concerned enough about this issue that it conducted the first major survey of families in the North American Division. Since that time many other studies have been completed, and two Adventist scholars—Dr. Roger Dudley at Andrews University and Dr. V. Bailey Gillespie at La Sierra University—have done major work in this field, resulting in 14 books. (See the Sources list at the end of this article.)

There are indications from comparing the Valuegenesis 1 and 2 data that today's young adults—the Millennial generation—have more denominational loyalty and greater faith maturity than did the prior generation, somewhat disrespectfully labeled “Gen X.” A direct comparison with the Baby Boomer generation—parents of the Millennials and today's middle-aged cohort—is not possible because there was no Valuegenesis survey when

an end. “It's like herding cats,” a union conference president said to me a couple of years ago, reflecting on his years of leadership with colleagues who were mostly Baby Boomers.

There are signs that with today's young adults the church is turning a corner, headed “back to the future” in some ways. The percentage of Adventists who express a strong assurance of salvation in Christ has grown significantly since the survey question was first asked in 1980. Support for most of the core doctrines of the Adventist faith is stronger among today's young adults in Valuegenesis 2 than it was in Valuegenesis 1. Out of the 11 items that form the Faith Maturity Index, the Millennial generation scores higher than Gen X on seven items and somewhat lower on four items.

Millennial-generation Adventists evidently have a much stronger relationship with the church than did Gen X and, very likely, their parents' generation (the Baby Boomers). They have a much more positive attitude about the congregational climate of their local church than did Gen X (see Graph 1). They also evaluate the youth ministries of the church much more positively than did Gen X. They rate higher on all four items that measure denominational loyalty (see Graph 2). Interest in volunteer service is at an all-time high, especially in humanitarian projects and urban ministries.

Today's young adults were just as orthodox as the previous

generation on six of nine items that measured theological orthodoxy in Valuegenesis (see Graph 3). But there are three doctrines about which contemporary young-adult Adventists seem to be saying, “You lost me.” On these three items, the Millennial generation is markedly less likely to register agreement than were Gen X respondents. The majority of Adventists in the Millennial generation do not agree that “the Seventh-day Adventist Church is God’s true last-day church” (the Remnant), that “Ellen White fulfilled the predictions that God would speak through prophecy in the last days,” or that “the investigative judgment began in 1844” (see Graph 4).

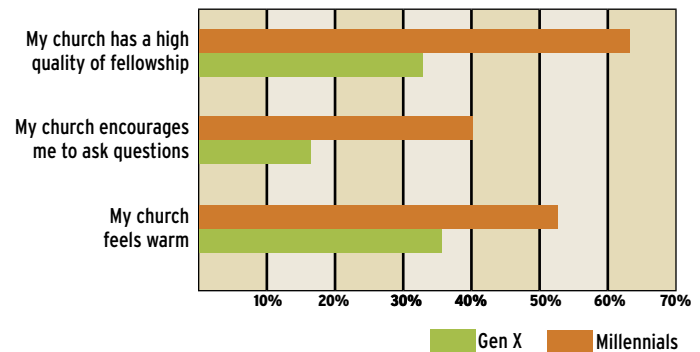
A large number of those who did not agree to these doctrinal statements say they have not made up their minds, while a smaller number disagree. So the theological outcome for this generation is not settled. It is possible that the majority will shift to full acceptance of one, two, or all three of these church teachings. The percentage of support in surveys may also be shifted by the fact that those who are uncertain leave the denomination and are no longer included in future research. If new ways of presenting and explaining these doctrines are developed, then the former outcome is more likely. If traditional presentations are simply pushed harder, then the latter outcome is more likely.

Dudley tracked a random sample of 1,500 young people from Adventist families with annual surveys for 10 years, from ages 15 and 16 through ages 25 or 26. This major piece of research provides a more accurate and detailed look at the issues related to passing faith from generation to generation than any study done by any Protestant denomination in the United States. It was funded by the North American Division of Seventh-day Adventists and conducted by the Institute of Church Ministry at Andrews University. The sample included youths from across North America.

The study found that by their mid-20s, nearly 55 percent of the young people had dropped out of the Adventist Church, although some of these still considered themselves to be Adventists. “What is the major theme these [young people] are trying to tell us? They are hungry for relationships and are not finding them in the church. Very few have ever complained about the doctrines of the church. In fact, many affirm them. ... But they want something more than cold teachings or rules of behavior. They long for people in the church, especially adult leaders, to care about them. And most of all they seek a relationship with Jesus.” Dudley concluded, “I would like to suggest that we need to perceive and teach religion as a set of relationships rather than as a list of commands and prohibitions.”¹

GRAPH 1

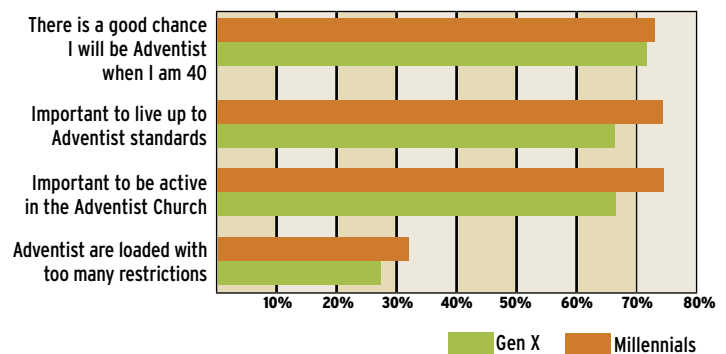
Percent Who Agree



Source: Valuegenesis surveys in 1990 and 2000

GRAPH 2

Percent Who Agree



Source: Valuegenesis surveys in 1990 and 2000

Changing Models of Conversion

Research reveals three models of conversion: (1) **sudden conversion**, such as Paul’s experience in Acts 9, is dramatic but clearly uncommon, although it is often seen as paradigmatic; (2) **unconscious or lifelong conversion** is what happens with most young people born to Adventist parents. They often cannot remember a time when they were not believers. They cannot recall any dramatic turning point; (3) **gradual conversion** is the typical process by which adult converts come into the Adventist faith. They experience a time of growth that eventually results in a choice to embrace the religion. “Gradual conversion is more *intellectual*,” Dudley states. “The prospect studies religious material, asks questions, seeks answers, and makes a deliberate decision.”²

The majority of Adventists in North America are now people

who were born into Adventist families. This is a significant change from a few decades ago, when most were adult converts. The unconscious, lifelong model of conversion has largely replaced the gradual conversion model in the experience of today's young adults. This has resulted in a phenomenon often labeled "cultural Adventists." There are many young adults who feel themselves fully part of the Adventist community while at the same time without a definite conversion story and having doubts about one or two official teachings of the denomination.

Labeling these young adults as "cultural Adventists," hinting that their faith is not entirely legitimate or authentic, will not likely bring them closer to the church or convince them of more orthodox interpretations. And it is a mistake to assume that they are "liberal." In fact, there are likely as many of these among younger conservatives as liberals.

The Valuegenesis research has found that a key element that helps young people stay with the faith is a climate that encourages thinking. Perhaps this is the way in which the gradual conversion

Made aware of this reality, many young adults say that they don't want to be part of a governance process. They are unwilling to participate in votes to approve baptisms or drop members. "Those should be private choices," many say. In fact, pastors say that there are a growing number of requests for baptisms to be private events with only family and invited friends present.

Young adults expect the pastor and elders to make leadership decisions, and they vote with their feet when the leaders get it wrong. In other words, they behave more like consumers relating to a business than villagers at a town hall meeting. They are willing to take responsibilities that are clearly delegated to them by a leader, but not on the basis of standard job descriptions or vague assumptions rooted in tradition. They want specific, tailored assignments in writing. One indicator of how widespread these attitudes have become is the fact that since the 1990s, the North American Division has published a resource that gives pastors the tools to develop documents of this type.

One consequence of these changing attitudes about

The Adventist organization is built more like the old General Motors than today's high-tech startup. Unlike the Baby Boomers and Gen X, today's young adults will not fight the system. They simply participate selectively and turn their back when it doesn't fit their style.

is made accessible to "cultural Adventists." Dudley used the items that defined a "thinking climate" in the Valuegenesis studies to ask young adults about their local church. He found that 40 percent said their church "expects people to learn and think," 35 percent said "most members want to be challenged to think about religious issues and ideas," 34 percent said "I learn a lot" at church, 31 percent said their church "challenges my thinking," and 28 percent said "it encourages me to ask questions."³ In other words, about two-thirds do not experience a thinking climate at the church where they attend. This is part of why the dropout rate is so high.

Changing Concepts of Organization

Young adults today do not understand the concept of membership used by the Adventist Church, which originated about 500 years ago in the Reformation. Membership involves an ownership stake in the denomination and participation in governance processes. A vote by a local congregation is the ultimate source of decision-making, although in the Adventist denomination that has been hedged to a large degree with a polity that is more presbyterian than congregational.

organizational behavior is that the median age of the Adventist church members who have key roles in church governance has increased. Relatively few members under age 40 sit on church boards. "It is rare that the majority of the people on a school board are young enough to have school-age children," a conference education superintendent told me. "There are school boards that have no one in that age group."

At several levels of the denomination, there are requirements that young adults be included among the delegates to constituency sessions, but often the required percentages are not met. "It is very difficult to meet these guidelines," a conference officer said to me. "Young adults see it as a waste of time."

The Millennial generation prefers an organization that affirms initiative and empowers small teams. It has been called "intrapreneurship" in the business world—turning loose many small enterprises within the larger framework of a big corporation. The ideal of the Baby Boomer generation (the parents of the Millennial generation) was the "free agent," or making one's living as an independent contractor, not an employee. The Millennial generation is less individualistic and

more supportive of large institutions than were their parents, but they expect large institutions to personalize operations and function through many small, autonomous projects.

The Adventist organization is built more like the old General Motors than today's high-tech startup. Unlike the Baby Boomers and Gen X, today's young adults will not fight the system. They simply participate selectively and turn their back when it doesn't fit their style. The good news is that inter-generational conflict has largely disappeared in the church. The bad news is that there isn't much of a younger generation there to get into conflicts with.

What We Must Do

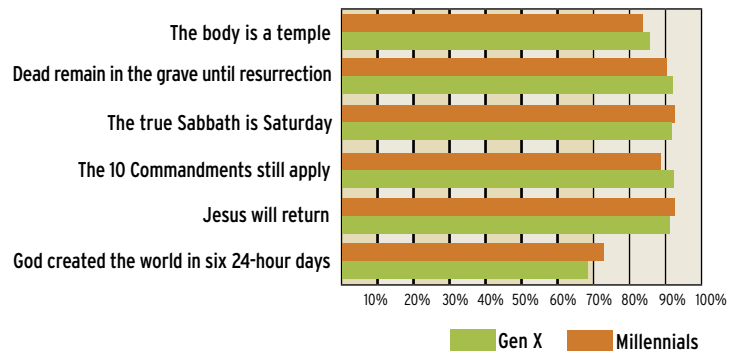
1. Empower initiatives by young adults instead of asking them to serve on church committees and boards. Let the young adults in your congregation or organization develop the approach to their generation. If your local church has a half dozen or a dozen people under 35 years of age, ask them to come together as a task force and delegate to this group the authority and funding to develop a way to engage more young adults. Stay out of their debates and decisions. Protect the autonomy of the group. Be affirming and supportive.

2. Provide information and foundations for new generations. Young adults are often hungry for objective, balanced teaching about biblical principles, the Adventist heritage, and practical skills, so long as we respect the fact they will adapt this to the culture of their own generation. Good mentors help people grow and stand on their own feet. Today's young adults are quick to spot bad mentors who are biased, opinionated, overly directive, and prescriptive.

3. Free up the young adults we are hiring as pastors. Too many of them lament that they are babysitting dying congregations. Almost all of them have a dream in their hearts to plant new missions that reach their own generation. We are missing the opportunity to start a new generation of local churches and ministries. It would be a great plan if church boards would raise the money needed to hire a retired pastor as a part-time associate and to tell their young pastor to use the freed-up time and energy to plant a new congregation or start a new ministry in the community.

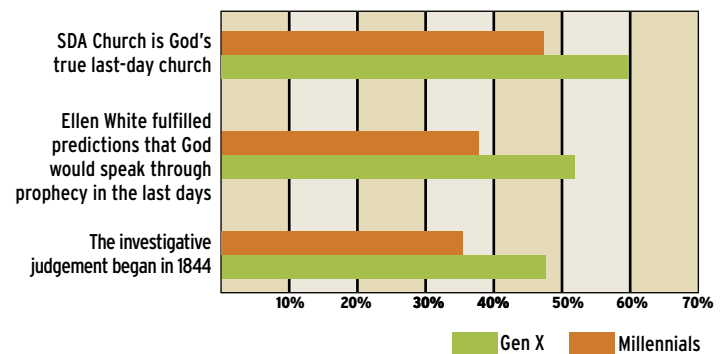
4. Give young adults opportunities to embody their faith in creative and humanitarian projects. What we have traditionally called ministries of healing and compassion—more often called social justice and environmental stewardship today—are the most highly valued ways for Millennial-generation believers to experience Christ and to express their faith. These values intersect powerfully with the wholistic message of the Adventist

GRAPH 3
Percent Who Agree



Source: Valuegenesis surveys in 1990 and 2000

GRAPH 4
Percent Who Agree



Source: Valuegenesis surveys in 1990 and 2000

Church, in which “the state of the dead” really says more about the state of the living and the quality of life than where one goes after dying. An important dimension of this is found in the arts, music, and drama. If we do not provide these opportunities in the context of Adventist faith, they will find it elsewhere.

5. Focus on hope and not on sin. Surveys show that today's young Adventists have a good knowledge of what they should not do. It may or may not keep them from doing those things, but preaching about it will only alienate them, not change behavior. The most powerful influence for living a moral life is a life that makes a positive contribution in the world and that demonstrates the practical impact of “the hope that is in Jesus.”

6. The most important thing you can do to engage new generations is to make friends with young adults. This requires

friendships of sufficient quality that real conversation and sharing takes place. Your listening skills are most important. Especially in the beginning, spend your time listening and expressing interest in your young friend's life and goals. The time will come when he or she will ask questions. Then, be honest and authentic; be open about your mistakes and doubts. Most of all, affirm in practical ways how important your relationship with Jesus is to your life. Be prepared to tell real stories about how you have lived out your faith in your profession, through the arts, through volunteer service, in the wider world, and in your family life. But don't tell those stories until you are asked a question that demands it.

Bottom Line

The Seventh-day Adventist Church today is largely embroiled in the issues of the middle-aged Baby Boomer generation—a generation that thinks it is “forever young” even as it enters the senior citizen category. We are consumed with institutional survival, conflicts that should have been settled decades ago, and trying to compensate for old wounds. The Baby Boomer generation is deeply polarized. Every small rewording of policy or doctrine becomes so important that grace and tolerance are thrown out the window. Baby Boomers fight over theology so obscure that in the entire history of the Adventist movement, the issues have never been resolved and probably never will be, even if some vote prevails.

At the same time, the Baby Boomer generation of Adventists is ignoring the demographic realities around them and the trends among younger people. They have not really come to terms with the fact that half of their own generation born into the Adventist faith has walked out. They are largely unwilling to accept the reality that most people don't care about the issues that cause such vehement conflict.

Adventist Today began 20 years ago with the goal of relating the Adventist faith in contemporary terms to new generations (see

Objectives of *Adventist Today*

1. Serve as an independent news source for the Adventist community.
2. Provide a “free speech area” in the Adventist community.
3. Engage new generations of Adventists and encourage them with resources that enable them to make sense of their faith in the current context in which they live and work.
4. Publish responsible opinion on major issues facing Adventists that reflects a full range of views and perspectives.
5. Pursue stories that the official denominational media tend to ignore or do not report fully.
6. Support a Christ-centered, grace-oriented, progressive, compassionate and hopeful expression of contemporary Adventist faith.

box). Foundational to this is an honest, open discussion of the facts. As an independent journalistic enterprise, *Adventist Today* is beholden only to its subscribers and donors. Its commitment is to Jesus Christ and his mission, not to other organizational interests. It is faithful to the heritage of James and Ellen White and the other young adults around them in the 1850s who invented the Seventh-day Adventist denomination—a faith rooted in “Scripture and reason,” in the words of James White. That heritage includes giving new generations the opportunity to reinvent the faith as the Holy Spirit leads them. Without such renewal, the faith will begin to die.

Sources

Roger Dudley has published the following books related to this topic, as well as other books: *The Complex Religion of Teens* (2007, Review & Herald); *Why Our Teenagers Leave the Church* (1999, R&H); *Valuegenesis: Faith in the Balance* (1992, La Sierra University Press); *The World of the Adventist Teenager* (1990, R&H); *The World: Love It or Leave It?* (1987, Pacific Press); *Passing on the Torch* (1986, R&H); *Why Teenagers Reject Religion* (1978, R&H). Dudley edited with Allan Walshe, *Ministering with Millennials* (2010, Center for Youth Evangelism/AdventSource).

V. Bailey Gillespie has published the following books on this topic, as well as other books: *Valuegenesis Ten Years Later: A Study of Two Generations* (2004, AdventSource); *Keeping the Faith* (2001, Hancock Center Publications); *The Experience of Faith* (1998, Religious Education Press); *The Dynamics of Religious Conversions* (1991, Religious Education Press); *Religious Conversion and Personal Identity: How and Why People Change* (1979, Religious Education Press). Most recently, he has written with his son, Timothy Gillespie, pastor for young adults at Loma Linda University Church, *Love Them and They Will Come* (2011, Hancock Center Publications).

Additional research on this topic is available from the Center for Creative Ministry at www.creativeministry.org or at 800-272-4664. The Center for Youth Evangelism at Andrews University provides a wide range of resources and supports the Church of Refuge (COR), a network of local churches committed to welcoming and affirming young adults. More information is available on the COR Network Facebook page or at 269-471-8380. 

Monte Sahlin is a Seventh-day Adventist minister in the Ohio Conference. He has written more than 75 research monographs and 21 books, as well as many journal articles.

¹ Roger Dudley, *The Complex Religion of Teens* (Review & Herald, 2007), pp. 71-72.

² *ibid.*, p. 83.

³ *ibid.*, p. 90.

Editorial *continued from page 3*

report of experience or an inference from experience.

Some philosophers say that there is knowledge that does not come from experience. Such ideas as “equal” or “parallel” are never found in experience, thus the concepts cannot be derived from experience. Others say that even knowledge of particulars such as a certain man, sound, color, and so forth is impossible without a conceptual element.

The fifth way of knowing is pragmatism. This involves a radical reinterpretation of the nature of knowledge. Knowledge

is not static. It is dynamic. It involves a combination of humans interacting with their environment. So all knowledge has to be practical. Science is simply an aid to reason to solve problems by trial and error. Since the environment is constantly changing, there are no final solutions. The problem here is that everything is in flux and is seen as a means rather than an ultimate end. The result is the most radical kind of subjectivism and relativism.

Most of us will follow some combination of the five methods outlined above. None of them is sufficient by itself, yet much misunderstanding comes when we act as if our knowledge of “how we

know” is the only way to know.

¹ These five ways of knowing are abstracted from Norman L. Geisler and Paul D. Feinberg, *Introduction to Philosophy* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House Publishing, 1980), pp. 103-118.

² Geisler and Feinberg, p. 111.

³ *ibid.*

EDITORIAL PHILOSOPHY

The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of the editor or the editorial board. One of the purposes of this magazine is to encourage dialogue between those of differing viewpoints within the Adventist Church. Thus, we will publish articles ranging throughout the conservative-liberal continuum.

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1844-2044 The Raison d’Etre for the Adventist Church

In the devotional book *Maranatha*, Ellen White explains that God raised up the Adventist Church to prepare the world for his coming before the end of the 19th century: “Had Adventists, after the great disappointment in 1844, held fast their faith, and followed on unitedly in the opening providence of God, receiving the message of the third angel and in the power of the Holy Spirit proclaiming it to the world, ... the Lord would have wrought mightily with their efforts, the work would have been completed, and Christ would have come ere this to receive His people to their reward” (p. 61).

We have ended the 19th century, passed through the 20th century, and are now well into the 21st century. So the big questions are: Is the Mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church still the same mission? If it is, why are we still here? If it is not, what should it be?

Wieland and Short tried to answer the “why” question with their 1888 message. Herbert Douglas is well known for his “harvest principle.” The General Conference is known for its Global Mission (planting an Adventist presence in every unreached people group). But we are still here.

Four individuals are writing on this very important topic. Tell your friends to subscribe. You will not want to miss this very important subject.





Anger, Disappointment, Hope, and Trust

By Alden Thompson

The editor said: “I have nine diverse people writing on the meaning of life. You may want to join them.” While writing on the meaning of life was not a high priority, the idea of 10 people writing on one topic was intriguing. So I came on board.

First, I am entranced by the vision of a God who likes people and invites them to pool their talents with others in mutually helpful ways. It’s a vision of a Creator who crowned human beings with glory and honor (Psa. 8:5).

But defining the meaning of life more narrowly soon turns tricky. I finally settled on four key words. Two of them—anger and disappointment—could destroy the vision; the other two—hope and trust—keep it alive.

ANGER. I’m still not sure that this one belongs. A seething anger can give meaning *in* life. But because it is so easily mixed up with vengeance, I’m not sure that it helps us determine the meaning *of* life. I know something about anger, but this is not the place to talk about that. Given the abuses that haunt our troubled world, I believe anger has a real place. It’s volatile and dangerous, to be sure, but what would it say about our moral sensitivities if we simply shrugged at evil? Having said that, however, I will point out that it is remarkable that anger is missing from all of the New Testament virtue lists. It’s gone. The word that does show up on every list is patience.

Anger is a powerful diagnostic tool. In that sense it can be useful. But in most cases, its potential for evil far outweighs the possible benefits.

DISAPPOINTMENT. If anger smashes, disappointment simply erodes. Yet success may be more damaging than disappointment. C.S. Lewis wrote:

“From all my lame defeats and oh! much more

From all the victories that I seemed to score;

From cleverness shot forth on Thy behalf

At which, while angels weep, the audience laugh;

From all my proofs of Thy divinity,
Thou, who wouldst give no sign,
deliver me.”¹

Success too easily slips into arrogance. But disappointment helps us know our shortcomings. Hard times may actually bring the greatest blessings.

When we face difficulties, God can grant us tenacity. As Ellen White put it, “Men of power are those who have been opposed, baffled, and thwarted. By calling their energies into action, the obstacles they meet prove to them positive blessings. They gain self-reliance.”²

HOPE. A Christian lives by hope. Isaiah 11 promises a vegetarian kingdom where no one eats anyone else. We’ve never seen a world like that. The prophet hadn’t either. But intuitively we know it has to be that way some day. Paul takes us to that world of hope: “For in hope we were saved,” he declares. “Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience” (Rom. 8:24-25, NRSV).

A colleague spoke the truth when

he quipped: “Hope is what you do when you don’t have enough evidence to be optimistic.” And that’s puzzling to non-believers. As C.S. Lewis put it, non-believers “cannot ... be expected to know on what our assurance feeds and how it revives and is always rising from its ashes.”³ Hope cannot be proven. But when rooted in trust, it is powerful, immovable.

TRUST. Confidence, faith, and trust are all close cousins, pointing to an imponderable reality that keeps hope alive. In spite of crushing disappointments, hope somehow persists, even in the face of paradoxes and contradictions. Hebrews 11, for example, testifies that some “through faith ... escaped the edge of the sword” (verses 33-34, NRSV), while others “were killed by the sword” (verse 37, NRSV), also “through faith” (verse 39, KJV). Take your pick ...

How does that happen? Through the One whom the apostles had heard, seen, and touched with their hands (1 John 1:1). From their testimony, we live in hope of a better world, while seeking to make this world as much like that new world as we possibly can.

¹ C.S. Lewis, “The Apologist’s Evening Prayer,” in Walter Hooper, ed., *Poems* (New York: Harcourt, 1964), p. 129.

² Ellen White, *The Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1905), p. 500.

³ C.S. Lewis, “On Obstinacy in Belief” (1955), in *The World’s Last Night: And Other Essays* (New York: Harcourt, 1987), p. 29.



Adventist Man

A SATIRICAL LOOK AT ADVENTIST LIFE

The Ditched Ox Diner

I'm always delighted when someone among this column's readership decides to seek advice from the Fount of Wisdom. (I'm not referring to myself, but to a little bubbling stone statue in a mossy grotto in the *Adventist Today* building's courtyard. From this statue, I get my drinking water.)

The following email was sent to the address at the end of this column:

Dear Sir:

I need your help with a problem I have encountered with our pastor. While he was speaking to the church, he mentioned that some of us eat at a restaurant after the Sabbath morning church service and that he refrains from that practice. He then pointed out that those of us who do eat out should be extra generous with our tips, because the restaurant staff helps us to enjoy the Sabbath. He wants us to pay them extra money for working on the Sabbath.

On the other hand, he did not say a word about giving them a tract about the sacredness of the seventh day or that failure to keep the Sabbath might make them vulnerable to the mark of the beast. He did not even suggest that we give them a copy of The Great Controversy, which Adventists are giving away almost everywhere. It is hard to figure out if he is too conservative or too liberal. Something is just not right. What do you suggest that I do about this problem? Thank you.

—Bewildered

P.S. *That smirk on your face looks for all*

the world like George W. Bush. Are you and W related?

Bewildered, I've just taken a couple of glugs from my Fount-of-Wisdom refrigerator jug, and this has provided not only an out-of-the-box solution but also a marvelous opportunity for church outreach.

Obviously, the congregation should purchase the offending restaurant and rename it the "Ditched Ox Diner," after Luke 14:5, which says that on the Sabbath it's permissible to rescue a farm animal that has fallen into a pit.

Next come some crucial renovations. Rip out the booths and replace each with an ox cart, wheels and all. Play CDs of bellowing cattle and other farm noises through the speakers.

As each luncher arrives, he or she should be met by a moneychanger sitting at a table outside the door. Cash will be quickly converted into play money borrowed from the children's Sabbath School rooms, which is normally used for stewardship mentoring. Thus, fake currency and not real money will be used in the Diner itself.

As each luncher scrambles up the wheel-spokes into the cart, a bib-overalled and straw-hatted server (a re-costumed deacon who has rushed over after the church service) appears, with a menu in one hand and a hayfork in the other. The usual food items are roguishly labeled as "straw," "hay," "silage," "mash," and so on, which generates much curiosity and merry conversation yet barely muffles the insistent abdominal growls. Dishes are wicker and shaped like little mangers.

After an extended commentary on the weather and its potential effect on the

crops, the server takes the order with many a cheery "Yep" and "You betcha," and then departs, leaving the luncher to study the Chinese astrological placemat (the previous restaurant was Asian), with the "Year of the Ox" information highlighted in yellow.

When the luncher leaves, the moneychangers grudgingly convert any remaining play money back into real cash, but only after a passionate plea to donate the difference to the church budget.

Bewildered, I hope this gives you some ideas.

Now a few words about the sassy remark in your P.S. And I quote: *That smirk on your face looks for all the world like George W. Bush. Are you and W related?*

It depends, my friend, not on your views of capitalism but on your care with capitalization. Are you referring to the recent president of that name? Or do you mean the "George W." bush—the gnarled remnant of the cherry tree chopped down by our Founding Father?

As it happens, something about that ravaged stump does indeed remind people of me—possibly due to my rugged good looks or my historical importance or my innate integrity. But I assure you, it's not all fun and games being compared to a cherry tree. It's the pits.

Do you have a tough question? Adventist Man has "the answer." As a former member of "the remnant of the remnant," Adventist Man was ranked 8,391 of the 144,000—and working his way up. Now he relies solely on grace and friendship with Jesus. You can email him at atoday@atoday.org.

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—J. David Newman

Adventist Today editor J. David Newman looks at both history and the current condition and leadership of Adventism. Trying to return to the past is neither possible nor prudent, he writes. The world is changing, and ministering to end-time society requires more than simply replicating past approaches.

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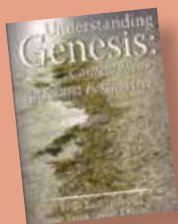


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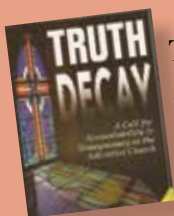


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