

The Meaning of Life
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7 February 2010

Rather than give you a heroic version of my life up to coming to Montreal in 1949 at the age of 23, I prefer to provide some anecdotes not to disappoint you entirely, but it is largely a period that for me was a problematic childhood and adulthood. What I can say is that if you survive five countries and language changes by age 20, a time in the midst of two war scenes – Europe in 1940/41 and the Far East in 1945/46, you have lived a lifetime – for many young men of that time literally!

But let me give you a few anecdotes. The first was in 1929 just after my Father's death at age 31. I was sent to a kindergarten at age 4 and already displayed highly uncommon leadership. The school was in the woods at Nikolas See, a suburb of Berlin. To get there from the road, one had to walk five minutes through the woods every day with a teacher leading the parade. Well, young Stephen had a great idea. He convinced many of the children to hide behind the trees, so that the teacher, who walked ahead, arriving at the schoolhouse, found many children missing. Obviously their leader was unmasked and expelled for his splendid initiative.

When I lived in Holland, I was introduced to music at Christmas time. We attended the Grote Kerk in Naarden where there was every year a concert, such as the *Mass in B Minor* or the *Christmas Oratory* by J.S. Bach or the *Messiah* by Handel. I have loved music ever since and it became something that constantly inspired me by its beauty. Similarly, we often went to the Rijks Museum in Amsterdam which houses the largest collection of 16th – 17th Century Dutch Art. We went so often that I really had an art education by age 10 or 11. This again was reinforced when I lived in France where I met Chagal in Paris, and in Aix en Provence made the acquaintance of John Rewald, the then foremost critic of Impressionism.

I did well in school, whatever the country or school, and was ever highly competitive to get good grades. At the École du Moncel near Paris, I had the highest grades of the school in 1939/40 at the age of 14. Learning came easily. Then when in Aix-en-Provence, I frequented the library in town and read French literature, which many years later led to the "Book Club" in Montreal organized with five friends (3 engineers). We followed the University of Chicago template of the Great Books. The club stayed vibrant for some 20 years in which we read everything from Greek plays to philosophy and religion, with novels for summer reading. I enjoyed studies in the humanities. Despite also doing well in mathematics and physics at Asheville School, North Carolina, and later in engineering school at Cornell University. After the war I felt that engineering and technology was too narrow a focus, preferring the humanities and the wider human culture horizons.

Boarding schools in France and the United States plus the discipline of the US Army have left a mark on my psyche. One had to follow orders and later in the Army one had to lead plus take orders from higher up. Teamwork, relying on others, became ingrained, though at heart I have mostly followed my own drummer. My study of philosophy, history and sociology has stayed a strong guide in my life. Aristotle probably touched me most – the *Nicomachean Ethics* – and the tenet that the mean is opposed to both extremes and so is the soundest way to go through life. The more so as it is the rational decision rather than the emotional one. Spinoza, Schopenhauer and Kant appealed to me for very different reasons and Descartes fell also in that orbit. To complete this series, I enjoyed Kierkegaard, in the best existential tradition, and also looked at Heidegger for inspiration. Sociology and especially cultures fascinated me. The *Chrysanthemum and the Sword* by Ruth Benedict was an ey-opener on Japan, but my while life till end of 1947 really was taken up with adaptation to ever new and different cultures and so it was no surprise that my Masters thesis at the University of Chicago dealt with the *Influx of Chinese Culture in Japan from the 7th to the 9th Centuries*. Of the 22 University chairs our foundation has endowed, a number of them deal with culture change. In our coalescing World, culture adaptation and change is at the heart of the sociology of our time. In recent years I have been fascinated by Islam which lived 1000 years without much change. Still the differences today between Morocco, Egypt or Malaysia are enormous. I am also looking at Judaism, which for thousands of years has held its ground, even though, because of the diaspora had in each country to adapt to different national norms of non-Jewish content.

Then who were the great influences in my youth? My father, whom I hardly knew but whose enormous achievement at age 31 when he died has ever been a yardstick to go by and was the inspiration to re-establish the family fortunes. Then there was my uncle in Holland, the quiet socialist, idealistic business man whose 250 year old firm imported goods from Asia. He was a substitute father when I lived in the Netherlands. Finally the three professors with whom I did my Masters at the University of Chicago in Far Eastern Culture: Ludwig Bachhofer on Chinese and Japanese art, Joachim Wach on comparative religions and Harley Farnsworth McNair for Chinese History. Far Eastern religions, but especially Confucianism gave me an Asian confirmation of Kant and an urging to become an example to others, but Kierkegaard commanded that I should try to be always true to my values, existential excellence.

Finally, while attracted to the academic pursuits, I decided that I first had to follow my father's example, and first gain freedom through money. I did not want to be an engineer, though I briefly worked as one, and so went to the Harvard Business School for an MBA. My aim at the time was to make \$1 million by age 40 and then become a US Ambassador to Japan. So I joined Alcan Aluminum, an international multi-national upon graduation in 1949 and moved to Montreal, which was the head office.

Recently, at our 60th reunion at Harvard Business School we decided to have 3 of us discuss what life was all about having de facto finished our careers plus having had time to mull over "the meaning of life". I was one of the three chosen, as I had suggested the topic! My patron Saint Stephen died by being badly stoned to death! I "discovered" 22 sayings which I quote:

SAYINGS (Alleged to the new Saint Stephen)

1. In terms of the Universe our human life has no meaning. So the meaning of our lives must be sought in terms of individual actions in relation to a closer background.
2. Individually we leave few traces in the sands of time. Your grandchildren's children will have little memory of you.
3. Time is one-directional. It gives fleeting moments and memories.
4. Humans can think ahead, but not control a wider future, nor the time in history you belong to.
5. Human nature has not changed since first recorded and neither Moses nor Christ nor Mohammed have changed it. As it is ever the same, how come no human nature courses are taught in school?
6. You do not own anyone. Also human possessions are a credit and debit. Ownership enslaves, sometimes happily so.
7. Lady Luck passes everyone's door, but most people fail to be on the lookout. She passes you by time and again, without being seen.
8. Never close your horizons in life.
9. An ethical life is easier than its opposite. People will trust you and you do not clog up your memory with rationalizations.
10. It is easier to get over a wall when people push you over, than when they hang onto your feet.
11. To love your neighbour you must first like yourself.
12. Logically, duty precedes love. Emotionally, it is the opposite. Duty can leave regrets but inadvertently, love may leave guilt and hurt to others.

13. Highways lead you faster to your goal than scenic by-ways.
14. Try to help others and try to improve your World, but know that in time it will again be ebb tide.
15. The search of beauty is paramount in work, actions and your surroundings – nature, art, etc.
16. Use your life as an example for others to emulate.
17. Facts, then thought, then understanding, then action plus correct your mistakes right away.
18. Be rational in business matters – emotional in your private life and hobbies.
19. Be open to others and ever seek out role models.
20. Control risk in life, but do not shirk from risk – courage but not blind courage.
21. Accept and love others for what they are – not what you want them to be nor try, yet worse, to change them to that.
22. Never leave your sense of humour at home and maintain it all day.

Some other miscellaneous sayings:

- Do not seek power, let it be given to you and then accept it hesitantly, as it easily corrupts.
- A fortune is \$10 million and sets you free. At \$100 million it can become embarrassing. At \$1 billion it is an obligation and enslavement.
- \$10 million destroys your incentive when you leave school.

- \$100 million at death can destroy your family.
- If you have too much money all you can do is give it away. This is, if you want to do it in a rewarding way, often more difficult than earning it.

The meaning of life is to have happily shouldered your responsibility towards family, friends, work, your community and the wider world; to have done so intelligently, ethically, building brick by brick. The reward is in itself – often overwhelming!

I thank you for having listened attentively to my autobiographical sketch of my evolution pre-Montreal as well as some of the “wisdom” which 84 years have given me. I thank the Deity for having looked favourably on me all these years. It has been a wonderful and satisfying journey. Finally, without my companion Gail it would have been far more narrow a journey. She has brought beauty and light to my life now for 46 years.