

Of Life's Meaning

Those who ask, “What is the meaning of life?” and get no reassuring answers have been known to conclude that the whole thing is a cruel joke. If we are supposed to find the answers, they say, why are they hidden? Precisely because we are supposed to *find* them, which means we must look for them; the treasure is buried to keep us digging, the pearl of great price lies glittering in the depths where we must seek it out. Treasure hunts can be both instructive and fun, provided the clues are not too discouraging and kind Providence has strewn the most exciting and obvious clues all over the place. It is only when we choose to ignore them, like the pig-headed constable in the English murder-mystery, blind to all but his own opinion, that we court frustration and cynicism.

“An Intellectual Autobiography,” xix

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We are pushed onto this earthly stage in the middle of the play that has been going on for thousands of years; we want to play an intelligent part and, in whispers, ask some of the older actors what this is all about—what are we supposed to be doing? And we soon learn that they know as little about it as we do.

Who can tell us the plot of the play? The sophic mind assures us that the play is simply a product of lighting, rocks, and wind and has no plot aside from the plots we invent for it. In that book things just happen—and there is no way of proving that that is not so. The mystic makes a virtue of the incomprehensibility of the whole thing; he submerges himself in the darkness of unknowing and wallows in his self-induced and self-dramatizing mood of contradictions: he is strictly a sophic, not a mantic, product.

The mantic admits that the play is incomprehensible to people of as little knowledge and experience as ours and insists for that reason that if we are to know anything at all about it, our knowledge must come from a higher source, by revelation. According to the mantic way of thinking, things do *not* just happen—and there is absolutely no way of proving that *that* is not so. The same starry heavens that have supplied the mantic with irrefutable proof since time immemorial that things do not just happen have always been the most self-evident proof in the world to the sophic that things do just happen.

“Sophic and Mantic,” CWHN 10:370-71

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The whole strength and astounding survival of the Hopis lies in their plot, in their scenario by which they live, and my point is that our world does not have such. The scenario was their real life. The vicissitudes of life were a parody, a sideshow, a mock play on the side, and that’s the only play outsiders ever see. Our existence is a parody; it’s not the real play.

“A Stage without a Play,” 1

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Literature and art can help us enjoy or endure the play (of life), but cannot, by their own confession, tell us what it is about. Science as such confines itself rigorously to examining the props on the stage—measuring and describing

tangible objects. It renounces the goal of comprehending the play as a whole. Philosophy would like to tell us what the play is about, but will not allow itself to run out of scientific bounds; it remains a scavenger in the camp of science. Religion alone can, if anything can, tell us the plot of the play from beginning to end—the eschatology without which it has no meaning. Even the layman cannot be indifferent (because):

a) We were made that way; we cannot rest until we know what it is all about (Aristotle, Augustine).

b) Indifference to eschatology is the mark of sterile societies, and can even be dangerous (Avicenna).

c) It is the unknown that appeals most: science and art can only promise more of the same; religion alone has the excitement of infinite possibilities (Whitehead).

Eschatology is not philosophy, ethics, or aesthetics. It deals exclusively with things that really happen.

“Eschatology,” 1-2

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The basic problem is this moral and spiritual one: what are we to do forever and ever? What do you want to do when you do it forever and ever?

“The Philosophical Implications of Automation,” 3

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My sense of urgency comes from the fact that I spend all my days now with the scriptures. And the two marks of the Church I see are and have been for a long time these: a reverence for wealth and a contempt for the scriptures. Naturally, the two go hand in hand. We should call attention to the fact that these things we are doing are against the work of the Lord. There is one saying of Joseph Smith I think of quite often: “If the heavens seem silent at a time when we desperately need revelation, it is because of covetousness in the Church. God has often sealed up the heavens because of covetousness.” And now the Church isn’t just shot through with covetousness, it is *saturated* with covetousness. And so the heavens are going to be closed. We’re told we don’t get revelation if we put our trust in money in the bank.

“Nibley Talks about Contemporary Issues,” 13

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It is not a case of physical versus “spiritual” values, but of eternal things, physical or not, versus things we know to be passing and therefore unworthy of our ultimate dedication.

“Educating the Saints,” 232

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The comfort of philosophy, the quiet resignation and calm acquiescence with fate are well enough in themselves, but they are what in ancient times distinguished the pagan from the Christian, for the latter amazed the world by

the robust and joyful assurance with which he viewed things of the other world. One of the most striking features of primitive Christianity was its constant and hardheaded insistence on the nearness and reality of the other side.

“Two Ways to Remember the Dead,” *CWHN* 3:164

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If the earth is perfectly adapted and completely outfitted for all our physical and spiritual needs, what is there left for us to do? Won't it weaken our character to have everything handed to us ready and prepared for our use? That question, the most natural one in the world to ask in our society, shows how far removed we are from the celestial order of things. It's the same question that is asked by the small boy who comes to visit you for summer vacation: “If a guy can't break everything around the house and yard, drown kittens, shoot birds, cut down the apple tree, take the baby buggy apart, stick things in the piano, [and] throw rocks at bottles, what can a guy do?”

[That is a good question, and the way we answer it is a measure of our fitness for the kingdom of heaven.] If we advise the little fellow to acquire more sophisticated tastes and follow our example, to seek his diversions more constructively as we do, watching westerns on TV, going hunting, playing golf, going to football games, attending X-rated movies, or driving a car, he can protest that such activities differ from his own only in being more passive and less imaginative, but really they are quite as trivial and immature and unproductive as his. . . .

Pope Gregory VII wrote a letter to the bishop of Rheims in the eleventh century in which he told how the barons of the time were literally destroying Europe in thousands of private wars and feuds and raids on each other's castles and lands and serfs, and how, when he protested what they were doing, they asked him in all seriousness, “If we don't do this, what else is there for us to do? For what other purpose were gentlemen placed upon the earth? What else can a normal man possibly want to do?”

The activities of the modern world that go by the name of work may not have been as spectacularly destructive as those of the barons of the middle ages, yet we are beginning to find out now that they *are* destructive. And it is high time that we begin to ask ourselves, as we ask the little fellow who's spending the summer with us, whether what we are doing is really what we *ought* to be doing.

There is full-time employment for all simply in exploring the world without destroying it, and by the time we begin to understand something of its marvelous richness and complexity, we'll also begin to see that it does have uses that we never suspected and that its main value is what comes to us directly from mere coexistence with living things—the impact on our minds and bodies, subtle and powerful, that goes far beyond the advantages of converting all things into cash or calories.

“Our Glory or Our Condemnation,” *CWHN* 9:8-10

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One would hope that our shopping-mall someday might become the equivalent of the ancient *suq*, the *agora* of the Greeks, or *forum* of the Romans, with their lively exchange not only of goods but of business news and ideas and valuable information. The *suq* and the *agora* were where philosophers preached, and in the *forum* was where the great orations were delivered—the marketplace was an educational place. Will the mall ever become anything like that? Alas, the possibility of that is completely canceled by the imperative of the TV. Here we reach a state of total nihilism; all day long, and half the night, a procession of plots, murders, bedrooms, fights, and lethal explosions

passes before the bemused spectator, sharing time with cunningly calculated interruptions by lavishly contrived commercial sideshows, thus combining the overlapping images of utter depravity with total triviality; and the thundering *Hauptmotif* that runs through it all is *money*. The inversion of the values is complete, for the less important an object is, as the ancient rhetoricians taught, the more fervidly and persistently it must be brought to the public's attention, so that what the new generation gets is a world turned upside down, with the froth as the substance and foundation of reality. They get that all the time, while the perennial base of intelligent thought and action is at best tolerated as a picturesque, elitist, old-fashioned frill of education. We have a complete switch of values: "All is dross that is not Madison Avenue."

"Goods of First and Second Intent," *CWHN* 9:535-36

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The whole eschatological issue can best be explained, we believe, by a brief diversion into one of those little parables for which we have always had a weakness.

Imagine, then, a successful businessman who, responding to some slight but persistent physical discomfort and the urging of an importunate wife, pays a visit to a friend of his—a doctor. Since the man has always considered himself a fairly healthy specimen, it is with an unquiet mind that he descends the steps of the clinic with the assurance, gained after long hours of searching examination, that he has about three weeks to live.

In the days that follow, this man's thinking undergoes a change, not a slow and subtle change—there is no time for that—but a quick and brutal reorientation. By the time he has reached home on that fateful afternoon, the first shock of the news has worn off, and he is already beginning to see things with strange eyes. As he locks the garage door, his long-held ambition to own a Cadillac suddenly seems unspeakably puerile to him, utterly unworthy of a rational, let alone an immortal, being. This leads him to the shocking realization, in the hours that follow, that one can be rich and successful in this world with a perfectly barren mind. With shame and alarm he discovers that he has been making a religion of his career. In a flash of insight he recognizes that seeming and being are two wholly different things, and on his knees discovers that only his Heavenly Father knows him as he is. Abruptly he ceases to care particularly whether anybody thinks he is a good, able, smart, likeable fellow or not; after all, he is not trying to sell anyone anything any more.

Things that once filled him with awe seem strangely trivial, and things which a few days before did not even exist for him now fill his consciousness. For the first time he discovers the almost celestial beauty of the world of nature, not viewed through the glass of cameras and car windows, but as the very element in which he lives. Shapes and colors spring before his senses with a vividness and drama of which he never dreamed.

The perfection of children comes to him like a sudden revelation, and he is appalled by the monstrous perversion that would debauch their minds, overstimulate their appetites, and destroy their sensibilities in unscrupulous plans of sales promotion. Everywhere he looks he gets the feeling that all is passing away—not just relatively because he is saying goodbye to a world he has never seen before, but really and truly. He sees all life and stuff about him involved in a huge ceaseless combustion, a literal and apparent process of oxidation which is turning some things slowly, some rapidly, but all things surely to ashes. He wishes he had studied more and pays a farewell visit to some friends at the university where he is quick to discover, with his new powers of discernment, that their professional posturing and intellectual busywork is no road to discovery but only an alley of escape from responsibility and criticism.

As days pass, days during which that slight but ceaseless physical discomfort allows our moribund hero no momentary lapse into his old ways, he is visited ever more frequently by memories, memories of astonishing clarity and vividness—mostly from his childhood, and he finds himself at the same time slipping ever more easily into speculations, equally vivid, on the world to come and the future of this world. The limits of time begin to melt and fuse until everything seems present but the present. In a word, *his thinking has become eschatological*.

“What has happened to our solid citizen?” his friends ask, perplexed. He has chosen to keep his disease a secret; it would be even more morbid, he decides, to parade his condition. But he cannot conceal his change of heart. As far as his old associates can see, the poor man has left the world of reality. Parties and golf no longer amuse him. TV and movies disgust him. He takes to reading books, of all things—even the Bible! When they engage him in conversation, he makes very disturbing remarks, sometimes sounding quite cynical, as if he didn’t really care, for example, whether peppermint was selling better than wintergreen or whether the big sales campaign went over the top by October. He even becomes careless of his appearance, as if he didn’t know that the key to success is to make a good impression on people. As time passes, these alarming symptoms become ever more pronounced. His sales record drops off sharply. Those who know what is good for their future begin to avoid being seen with him. Like Lehi of old, he is hurting business, and dark hints of subversion are not far in the offing. What is wrong with the man?

As we said, his thinking has become eschatological. He lives in a timeless, spaceless world in which Jack Benny and the World Series simply do not exist. His values are all those of eternity, looking to the “latter end” not only of his own existence but of everything and everybody around him. As he hears the news or walks the streets, he sees, in the words of Joseph Smith, “destruction writ large on everything we behold.” He is no longer interested in “the things of the world.” The ready-smiling, easily adjustable, anxious-to-get-ahead, eager-to-be-accepted, hard-working conformist, who for so many years was such a tangible asset to Nulb, Incorporated, has ceased to exist.

Now the question arises, has this man been jerked out of reality or into it? Has he cut himself off from the real world or has cruel necessity forced him to look in the face what he was running away from before? Is he in a dream now or has he just awakened from one? Has he become an irresponsible child or has he taken the measure of Vanity Fair? Some will answer one way, some another. But if you want to arouse him to wrathful sermons, just try telling the man that it makes no difference which of these worlds one lives in—that they are equally real to the people who live in them. . . .

It will be noted that this eschatological state of mind does not bear the mark of just one school of thought. Once it gets in the blood, all the aspects and concepts of eschatological thinking enter with it. Our businessman, for example, begins to wonder about certain possibilities: What about the hereafter? Will he ever really see the face of the Lord? Is there going to be a judgment? He almost panics at the thought, which has never bothered him before because he has been successful. He becomes preoccupied with history and prophecy, aware for the first time that his whole life is linked not only with D Division of Nulb, Incorporated, but, for better or for worse, with all that happens in the universe; he belongs to history and it to him—“the solemn temples, the great globe itself” are as much his concern as any man’s. These ideas that come to him are all essential parts of the same picture in which one can descry inextricably joined and intermingled apocalyptic, prophecy, millennialism, Messianism, history, and theology—all belong to the same eschatology. . . .

To anyone who does not experience it, the eschatological view of things is pure myth—an invention of an overwrought mind desperately determined to support its own premises. Only what they fail to consider is that those who have had both views of the world interpret things just the other way around: it is, after all, eschatology

that looks hard reality in the face; lazy and timid people take refuge in the busywork of everyday; only strong and disciplined minds are willing to see things as they are, and even they must be forced to it! No wonder the scholars have agreed that whatever else eschatology is, it is not real!

To conclude our parable, what happens to our man of affairs? A second series of tests at the hospital shows that his case was not quite what they thought it was—he may live for many years. Yet he takes the news strangely, for instead of celebrating at a night club or a prize fight as any normal healthy person should, this creature will continue his difficult ways. “This,” he says, “is no pardon. It is but a stay of execution. Soon enough it is going to happen. The situation is not really changed at all.” So he becomes religious, a hopeless case, an eschatological zealot, a Puritan, a monk, a John Bunyan, a primitive Christian, an Essene, a Latter-day Saint. In every age such people with their annoying eschatological beliefs have disturbed the placid (“perfectly adjusted”) waters of the slough of custom and paid dearly for their folly.

“The Way of the Church,” *CWHN* 4:302-7

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The only person you try to impress is your Heavenly Father, and it is awfully hard because he can’t be fooled—not for a minute. I have always felt driven in this way. The gospel is so wonderful. There is so much to find out. It opens the doors to so many things. It is sort of an obsession, a sort of personal thing. As long as you are going to be doing something, why not be doing something that hasn’t been done before?

“Nibley the Scholar,” 2

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Don’t be like anybody else. Be different. Then you can make a contribution. Otherwise, you just echo something; you’re just a reflection.

“Apocryphal Writings,” *CWHN* 12:292

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When I first came here, I went to a few of the apostles, including J. Reuben Clark, Richard L. Evans, and John Widtsoe to ask if it would be better to remain low-key, keep my nose clean, and avoid these things. The answer was always the same: That is the worst thing you could do. We’ve got to have some voices speaking out because everybody knows that all the virtue isn’t on one side of what we’re doing. Since then I haven’t shifted one iota.

“Nibley Talks about Contemporary Issues,” 14

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I never thought of myself as a participant, but always on the sidelines, always looking on, and always finding myself in a position where I could get a rather good look. But *everybody’s* in that position if they just wanted to take it and realize what they were into. We’re wandering around as strangers looking for things to recognize, and whenever you see something which you know is good, true, and beautiful, that’s an act of recognition. And you recognize it as such not by analyzing it, but it comes to your memory, it hits you: “I’ve seen that, I know that’s right,” and so forth.

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What things should we think about then, and how? . . . In the first place, that question itself is what we should think about. We won't get very far on our way until we have have faced up to it. But as soon as we start seriously thinking about that, we find ourselves covered with confusion, overwhelmed by our feelings of guilt and inadequacy—in other words, repenting for our past delinquency. In this condition, we call upon the Lord for aid and he hears us.

We begin to know what the Prophet Joseph meant about the constant searching, steadily storing our minds with knowledge and information. The more we get of it, the better we are able to judge the proper priorities as we feel our way forward, as we become increasingly alert to the promptings of the Spirit which become ever more clear and more frequent, following the guidance of the Holy Ghost.

And as we go forward, we learn to cope with the hostile world with which our way is sure to bring us into collision in time. That calls for sacrifice, but what of that? Eternal life is not cheaply bought.

“Zeal Without Knowledge,” *CWHN* 9:78

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The Church has been put to great trouble and expense through the years by its insistence on sticking to its long and awkward title. Plainly the second part of the name is very important—the Church of the *latter days*. These are the *last days*—the last days of what? Neither we nor the outside world have ever bothered to explore or argue definitions about that—because the answer is obvious: it is the perennial message of the apocalyptic teaching which is now recognized as the very foundation of the Old and New Testaments. The last days are the last days of everything as we know it.

“Beyond Politics,” 292

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The one future that no one could have imagined was what we could read about in the Book of Mormon; but that we tolerantly consigned to a fantastic realm of the long-ago and far-away, a sort of overdone science fantasy. As it turned out, the Book of Mormon was not dashing off into Never-Never Land but bringing us down to reality if we had only believed it. But we did not and we still don't. But the past year has torn aside veils that we would prefer to have left in place, and we find ourselves enacting what our ancestors would have called a mad melodrama.

“The Book of Mormon: Forty Years After,” *CWHN* 8:534

REPENTANCE

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We must keep plugging away at the business of repentance as if the Lord were to come and inspect us today. Until that time, we must withhold judgment of others. Another teaching that is coming into full force just now is the

Book of Mormon admonition to be more patient with the imperfections of the church and less patient with our own. The church is a training school in which everyone is there for the training. So don't waste time criticizing the authorities.

“The Book of Mormon: Forty Years After,” *CWHN* 8:564

Repentance is the main message of the Book of Mormon, which also tells us what repentance is. *Metanoia*, the New Testament word, contains no hint as to how we go about it, but the Greeks had a better instruction in the two great maxims from the temple at Delphi: “Know thyself” and “Nothing in excess.” Both are lamely translated as advice for making friends and influencing people. Actually they are the rules by which the universe is governed; the one sets us on the right track, and the other keeps us there. The Book of Mormon tells us that the essence of repentance is knowing exactly what we are. . . . The very purpose of our being here is repentance, and repentance is an unsettling exercise in self-knowledge: “O how great is the nothingness of . . . men” (Helaman 12:7). This is the time of probation and preparation, though we are born innocent, there are flaws in our nature, and it is the purpose of our earthlife to bring them out in the open through repentance and eradicate them through baptism, to clear the way for further progression. If there is any weakness in our characters, this is the setting in which it is bound to show up, this life is the day of our probation; whether we find ourselves in an unstable and dangerous or a safe and prosperous environment, it makes no difference—the bad stuff in us will come to the surface.

“The Book of Mormon: Forty Years After,” *CWHN* 8:565-66

We're just sort of dabbling around, playing around, being tested for our moral qualities, and above all the two things we can be good at, and no two other things can we do: *We can forgive and we can repent*. It's the gospel of repentance. We're told that the angels envy men their ability both to forgive and to repent, because they can't do either, you see. But nobody's very clever, nobody's very brave, nobody's very strong, nobody's very wise. We're all pretty stupid, you see. Nobody's very *anything*.

“The Faith of an Observer,” 2

We: Dear Father, whenever the end is scheduled to be, can't you give us an extension of time?

He: Willingly. But tell me first, what will you do with it?

We: Well . . . ah . . . we will go on doing pretty much what we have been doing; after all, isn't that why we are asking for an extension?

He: And isn't that exactly why I want to end it soon—because you show no inclination to change? Why should I reverse the order of nature so that you can go on doing the very things I want to put an end to?

We: But is what we are doing so terribly wrong? The economy seems sound enough. Why shouldn't we go on doing the things which have made this country great?

He: Haven't I made it clear enough to you what kind of greatness I expect of my offspring? Forget the statistics; you are capable of better things—your stirring commercials don't impress me in the least.

We: But why should we repent when all we are doing is what each considers to be for the best good of himself and the nation?

He: Because it is not you but I who decide what that shall be, and I have told you a hundred times what is best for you individually and collectively—and that is repentance, no matter who you are.

We: We find your inference objectionable, Sir—quite unacceptable.

He: I know.

"Beyond Politics," 279-80