

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The greatest mystery is not that we have been flung at random among the profusion of the earth and the galaxy of the stars, but that in this prison we can fashion images of ourselves sufficiently powerful to deny our nothingness.

Maurice Friedman, *To Deny Our Nothingness:
Contemporary Images of Man*

ASKING WHY?

The question “Why?” is the fulcrum on which the question of meaning hinges. Before asking why, we take the world for granted. We go to work, have children, eat meat, attend church on Sunday mornings perhaps, but we do all of these things unself-consciously and without deliberation. We simply accept the norms of our culture and community without awareness or questioning; in a sense, we are living and acting on automatic.

In contrast, asking “Why?” signals the point at which we self-consciously step back from what we are doing to look for a reason or justification. With this simple, childlike question, the taken-for-granted quality of our life suddenly loses its foundations, and we are left exposed to the threat of meaninglessness. Why do

good people suffer? Why do I choose to go to work in the morning rather than walking barefoot on the beach? Why am I a Christian rather than a Buddhist or a Muslim? Why do I merrily go about my daily activities despite the prospect of my own death and the deaths of all those I love? Meaninglessness represents the inability to persuasively answer the *why* questions about either our beliefs or our actions. Without an answer to the *why* questions we may continue to exist, but we will fail to thrive.

PERPLEXITY AND ARREST

With the skill of a great novelist, Leo Tolstoy described the debilitating effects he experienced once he began to ask “Why?” and “What for?” Nearing the age of fifty, prosperous and in good health, Tolstoy reported experiencing occasional moments of “bewilderment” and “arrest” when these questions brought his life to a halt and he knew neither what to do nor how to live. Life, which had been intoxicating to him, was suddenly sober, flat, and meaningless. The novelist’s own words speak more powerfully than any paraphrase:

At first I thought these were pointless and irrelevant questions. . . .

It happened with me as it happens with everyone who contracts a fatal internal disease. At first there were the insignificant symptoms of an ailment, which the patient ignores; then these symptoms recur more and more frequently, until they merge into one continuous suffering. . . .

. . . The questions seemed to be such foolish, simple, childish questions. But as soon as I laid my hands on them and tried to resolve them, I was immediately convinced, first of all, that they were not childish and foolish questions but

the most vital and profound questions in life, and secondly, that no matter how much I pondered them there was no way I could resolve them. . . .

If a fairy had come and offered to fulfill my every wish, I would not have known what to wish for. If in moments of intoxication, I should have not desires but the habits of old desires, in moments of sobriety I knew that it was all a delusion, that I really desired nothing. I did not even want to discover the truth anymore because I had to guess what it was. The truth was that life is meaningless. . . .

. . . And there I was a fortunate man, carrying a rope from my room, where I was alone at night as I undressed, so that I would not hang myself from the beam between the closets. And I quit going hunting with a gun, so that I would not be too easily tempted to rid myself of life. . . .

. . . If not today, then tomorrow sickness and death will come (indeed, they were already approaching) to everyone, to me, and nothing will remain except the stench and the worms. My deeds, whatever they may be, will be forgotten sooner or later, and I myself will be no more. Why, then, do anything? How can anyone fail to see this and live? That's what's amazing! It is possible to live only as long as life intoxicates us; once we are sober we cannot help seeing that it is all a delusion, a stupid delusion! Nor is there anything funny or witty about it; it is only cruel and stupid. . . .

The former delusion of the happiness of life that had concealed from me the horror of the dragon no longer deceives me. No matter how much I tell myself that I cannot understand the meaning of life, that I should live without thinking about it, I cannot do this because I have done it for too long already. . . .

"My family . . .," I said to myself. But my family, my wife and children, are people too. They are subject to the same conditions as I: they must either live the lie or face the terrible truth. Why should they live? Why should I love

them? Why care for them, bring them up, and watch over them? So that they can sink into the despair that eats away at me, or to turn them over to stupidity? If I love them, then I cannot hide the truth from them. . . .

. . . Had I simply understood that life has no meaning, I might have been able to calmly accept it; I might have recognized that such was my lot. But I could not rest content at this. Had I been like a man who lives in a forest from which he knows there is no way out, I might have been able to go on living; but I was like a man lost in the forest who was terrified by the fact that he was lost, like a man who was rushing about, longing to find his way and knowing that every step was leading him into deeper confusion, and yet who could not help rushing about.¹

I have often thought that the cover of Tolstoy's *Confession*, from which these passages are excerpted, should carry a parental warning: Keep this book out of the reach of children. Pornography and obscenity are trivial compared to Tolstoy's narrative of disillusionment; reading his account is an antidote to the happiest of moods. Who can read Tolstoy's sobering account with immunity, even when reduced to brief excerpts?

Five observations about Tolstoy's narrative frame our subsequent discussion. First, Tolstoy clearly makes a distinction between appearances, including the habits of his former, intoxicated life, and reality or the truth. The happiness of life, before the questioning began, was a delusion, a concealment and lie perpetrated by the conventional answers of success and fame and material comfort that the culture provided. In contrast to this intoxication, there is the sober perception that life is meaningless, cruel, and stupid. This perception becomes the compelling force, which he describes as a fatal disease, in Tolstoy's life.

Second, the question of meaning arose for Tolstoy when he was in otherwise happy circumstances. He was a respected, successful writer, a landowner, and enjoyed good health and the affection of his family. Why or when does the question “Why?” arise? Typically, it does so when people suffer events or experiences that they do not choose or wish for or are forced to participate in activities that they do not value. A man works because he has to earn a living, rather than because he is engaged in what he considers a meaningful activity. Illness, old age, or loss descends on a woman in a way that precludes deliberate choice and a future. Social upheavals—the loss of a job, war, the transition from a rural to an urban society—call into question the world and values on which one has relied. In contrast to all these triggers, nothing in Tolstoy’s life at the time explains why these questions were provoked. Indeed, the absence of these triggers suggests that the impulse to ask “Why?” may be innate. We ask the question because we are human, and we fail to be fully human whenever we fail to ask it.

Third, once sobriety happens, one cannot return unself-consciously to either innocence or intoxication. The symptoms, as Tolstoy describes them, become both more severe and more frequent. He cannot go back to *not* thinking about the truth because, as he says, he had done that too long already. The door only swings one way; after the fall, Humpty Dumpty cannot be put together again. Apparently, one cannot deliberately live a life that is perceived to be a lie or delusion. In the excerpts quoted above, Tolstoy rejects the option of turning his family over to “stupidity”—meaning to the conventional customs of his community—even if that were possible. Seeing the truth marks one as irreversibly an “outsider,”² alienated and a step removed from social conventions.

Fourth, the experience of sobriety and truth is, emotionally at least, negative. Cultural symbols and rituals protect us from being exposed to the truth, including the truth that we and everyone we love will die one day. Ernest Becker makes this argument in his classic, Pulitzer Prize-winning book *The Denial of Death*. Whenever cultural symbols fail, and we are exposed to the truth, our condition is close to madness. Tolstoy hides the rope, quits hunting, and speaks of “the horror of the dragon.” It is possible to live, he says, only when intoxicated. The sense that life is meaningless undermines all desire and the choices based on those desires. If a fairy granted him a wish, he would not know what to wish for. Tolstoy thus demonstrates the cynical adage “Those who seek the truth deserve the penalty of finding it.”

Fifth, Tolstoy could not rest content with the idea that life was meaningless. He intuited that there was, so to speak, a Truth behind the truth. Beyond the truth of meaninglessness that is revealed when culture fails, there is a deeper Truth. As he says, he was not a resident of the forest but a person lost in the forest with a longing to find a way out. Tolstoy does not explain the source of that longing—although in his case Augustine’s “My heart is restless until it finds its rest in Thee” comes to mind—but he is clearly comfortable with neither the despair that eats away at him nor the stupidity of his former life. He simply “longs,” like a person lost in the forest, for a way out. Unlike those who have not asked the questions, at least he knows that he is lost. Tolstoy is caught in between the question “Why?” on the one hand, and, on the other hand, a longing for another level of Truth beyond that first level of disillusionment.

BEFORE THE QUESTION IS ASKED

The existentialists had one thing right: life is full of choices. However, most of these choices are made unconsciously or instinctively. Our family cat Gypsy, for example, is not faced with the bewildering questions of what to believe or how to act; she is already perfect in her catness. Guided by instincts, she knows what to do without thought, doubt, or emotion and acts without hesitation to fulfill her identity as a cat. Gypsy never doubts or asks whether she should eat the mouse, nor does she feel remorse or guilt when she does. Gypsy never asks “Why?” because instincts preclude her from having to ask the questions.

In contrast to Gypsy’s, only a portion of my own beliefs and actions are instinctive. Eating when I am hungry is instinctive, but whether I eat meat or am a vegetarian is not; trying to swim once I’m submerged in water is instinctive, but jumping into a pool on a hot day in July is not. Many, perhaps the majority, of my beliefs and actions are neither instinctive nor biologically determined, unlike Gypsy’s. Beyond the limits of the animal instincts I share with Gypsy, there are an immense number of questions about how I should act and what I should believe, from the most mundane (what should I have for dinner?) to the most momentous (do I believe in God?). In normal times, and for most people, these questions are answered by the norms and directives embodied in the symbols, ideologies, and rituals of culture, which constitute the everyday world I take for granted. On a typical day, I don’t stop to think self-consciously whether to choose to have a cup of coffee or read the morning newspaper or drive to work. Within our twenty-first-century American culture, all those things are a part of the taken-for-granted landscape.

At any point, I could step back and question whether by drinking coffee I'm contributing to the destruction of tropical rain forests and, as a consequence, decide to drink water instead. Similarly, I could step back and question the belief that newspapers accurately reflect the events of the previous day and decide that they are useless, distorting instruments of economic or political bias and self-interest. But most mornings I don't raise such questions; most mornings I let the culture decide for me. I simply have a cup of coffee while reading the morning newspaper. Similarly, most of the time, I don't ask myself whether I believe in God or an afterlife. I let the culture decide for me, because if I had to make a conscious decision about every aspect of my life—from what I eat, to what I wear, to what I believe—I'd become immobile. Cultures function as peculiarly human forms of instincts. At the point where animal instincts fail, what's awkwardly been called the "surreality of culture"³ takes over to guide our actions and beliefs.

CHOICE AND MEANING

When cultural symbols and rituals are compelling, and the social group that supports them is coherent, culture works with the efficiency of Gypsy's instincts. People living in what are mistakenly described as primitive cultures act unreflectively and unerringly in a way that is almost instinctual. One consequence is that the question of meaning, along with a host of other questions, does not arise. Our beliefs and actions require no justification or explanation, because we take the world for granted. As long as we are immersed in culture, we are not challenged to step back from or step outside of day-to-day living to ask: "Why?"

However, whenever cultural symbols and rituals become weak, answers to questions about what to do and what to believe become muted or inconsistent. Personal or social tragedies—the birth of a deformed child, the Holocaust, or when one culture clashes with another—can challenge the answers that my culture provides. When this happens, cultural instincts begin to fail and Tolstoy’s *why* and *what for* questions become more insistent, and the answers become less and less certain. Culture leaves large areas of choice and belief open where preferences are arbitrary and need no justification or reason: I like vanilla ice cream; you like chocolate. But in other, culturally defining areas, such as whether one eats meat or has an abortion or engages in adultery, to violate a culturally instinctive norm is taboo. To ask the questions “Why?” or “Why not?” cheat on income taxes or permit physician-assisted suicides is already to stand outside the unquestioned norms of the dominant culture.

Should same-sex marriages be sanctified by the Church or sanctioned by a civil ceremony? A century ago, I suspect, that question never became a question. The culturally based instinctual reaction to homosexuality was revulsion and disgust. Now, however, those instinctual reactions are less sure. We may have friends or co-workers who are gay or lesbian and whom we like and respect. The mainline Episcopal Church elected a gay bishop, while, concurrently, the pope warned American lawmakers that it would be “gravely immoral” to legalize same-sex marriages. What should we think about homosexuality? Should I support the ordination of gay priests or should I oppose it? Why? The culture is clearly no longer providing an unambiguous, instinctual response. As a consequence, our own actions and beliefs are less certain, and we tend to look for answers either by

being attentive to only one portion of the largely, pluralistic culture or by examining our own Protestant consciences.⁴

We shall discuss later the factors that weaken the strength of culturally based instincts. For now, it is sufficient to say that whenever a culture fails to supply unambiguous answers to the questions of what to believe and what to do, no action or belief seems justifiable. The question “Why?” does not elicit a convincing answer. As a result, all actions and beliefs seem arbitrary or subjective. “Everything is relative,” as some people like to say. Pluralism and diversity reign. Choice is a matter of personal (i.e., nonpublic) preference or whim. There is no better or worse; there’s just difference. The landscape is flat because there are no high and low points. There is no error because there is no one truth, or, as a character in Steven Soderbergh’s movie *Solaris* (2002) expressed it: “There are no answers, only choices.” Choices are instrumental acts to achieve meaningful ends, but when those ends lack justification, choice is arbitrary and meaningless. In a world without meaning, choice is a futile gesture. Meaninglessness occurs when the *why* questions—*once they are raised*—remain unanswered.

Of this world, in which every action and belief is equally meaningful and equally meaningless, we can say two things. First, this is the free, but empty, world in which many of us now live and about which much has been written. This is the world we inherited from Nietzsche, the existentialists, and their progeny. I shall describe the features of this world in more detail a bit later. Second, the experience of living in an entirely flat world has proven to be, for most of us, as emotionally devastating as it was for Tolstoy, the equivalent of catching the flu, rather than of falling in love. What the theologian Michael Novak describes as the “experience of

nothingness”⁵ is not neutral; on the contrary it tends to make us positively unhappy and brings us to the edge of insanity. The experience of nothingness is terrifying, Novak observes, because it makes all attempts at speaking of purpose, goals, and meaning spurious. If the flat landscape of our postmodern culture made us happier, if saying that one choice was as good as another demonstrably contributed to a better world, and if we were content with that world, then the human, symbolic needs provided by the secondary instincts of culture would be satisfied and our actions would be sure and unerring. But that’s not the way it is. Tolstoy hid the rope and stopped hunting with a gun.

TOLSTOY WRIT LARGE: THE CULTURAL TRIUMPH OF UNCERTAINTY

That people fail to see what he sees—that life is trivial when seen against an infinite, indifferent universe or futile in the face of death—that’s the “amazing” thing according to Tolstoy. One wonders how widespread Tolstoy’s experience was during his day or for that matter during different historical periods. There is no way of knowing for certain the answer to that question. However, it is clear that the experience is, in our own day, neither peripheral nor extraordinary; on the contrary, it is both central and widespread.

Stringing together scholarly endorsements of this assertion is easy to do: philosophers, psychologists, sociologists, theologians, and writers attest to the fact that the issue of meaning has become the central question of our time:

Bruno Bettelheim: “[O]ur greatest need and most difficult achievement is to find meaning in our lives.”⁶

Michael Novak: "The experience of nothingness is now the point from which nearly every reflective man begins his adult life."⁷

Robert C. Solomon: "The world is no longer ours. The old habits keep us moving, robot-like through the paces of life, but we are not wholly there. The 'why' has no answer and that is the singular fact that now defines our existence. . . . I believe that it [the absurd] is still the dominant philosophical conception of our time. It is not a philosopher's invention. It follows with merciless logic from our most everyday thinking."⁸

James E. Edwards: "Thus nihilism—the self-devaluation of our highest values—seems the secret logic of Western culture: the worm was in the bud all along."⁹

Wilfred Cantwell Smith: "The intellectual problem of the modern world is how to be a relativist without being a nihilist."¹⁰

Viktor Frankl: "We have heard that man is a being in search of meaning. We have seen that today his search is unsatisfied and thus constitutes the pathology of our age."¹¹

Richard Tarnas: "Our psychological and spiritual predispositions are absurdly at variance with the world revealed by our scientific method. We seem to receive two messages from our existential situation: on the one hand, strive, give oneself to the quest for meaning and spiritual fulfillment; but, on the other hand, know that the universe, of whose substance we are derived, is entirely indifferent to that quest, soulless in character, and nullifying in its effects. We are at once aroused and crushed. For inexplicably,

absurdly, the cosmos is inhuman, yet we are not. The situation is profoundly unintelligible.”¹²

Erich Fromm: “Once skepticism and rationalism were progressive forces for the development of thought; now they have become rationalizations for relativism and uncertainty.”¹³ “Doubt is the starting point of modern philosophy.”¹⁴

Whereas many scholars identify the problem or question of meaning as cultural—as either the failure of culture altogether or as conflict between our deepest desires and a scientific culture that proclaims that the universe is indifferent—the theologian Paul Tillich argues that the question of meaning, and the anxiety of living it provokes, is an inescapable aspect of the human condition. It is not the result of an individual’s personal or cultural history but, Tillich says, “belongs to existence itself.” Tolstoy’s life was good; he was successful and in excellent health. But no matter how good life may be otherwise, there is what Tillich called the “ontological anxiety” occasioned by the inescapable awareness and threat of nonbeing, including death. Anxiety in its nakedness is always the anxiety of ultimate nonbeing, the remedy for which, Tillich argues, is what he calls “the courage to be.”¹⁵ The experience of nothingness may thus be at the heart of the human experience, as well as the underlying impetus for culture.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

If the questions “Why?” and “What to do?” find an answer neither in our biological instincts nor in the secondary instincts of our postmodern culture, then what to do? Where do we go from here?

What do we do when the truth is exposed and the truth is that life is meaningless?

Shorn of the secondary instincts provided by culture, it is not surprising that many people fall into depression. The prevalence of depression is well documented; by some estimates it will affect 7.9–8.6 percent of adults during their lifetime. While the biological and psychological reasons for depression are complex, at least some forms of depression are associated with a sense that life is without meaning or purpose. Whether depression leads to these feelings or whether, alternatively, a sense of meaninglessness leads to depression is a classic “chicken and egg” problem. Regardless of which comes first, the close association between depression and meaninglessness is nevertheless strong.

Several, ultimately futile possibilities exist on both the individual and social levels for at least temporarily denying meaninglessness and its associated depression. One strategy is to return to our primary instincts. The pioneering sociologist Émile Durkheim described the failure of culture as *deculturation*, a state, he said, that reduces its victims to the animal level of chronic fighting or fornication. If I find direction or meaning neither in culture nor in more self-conscious attempts to answer the *why* questions, then I may find solace in my body, emotions, and pure, unmediated experience. From the perspective of these strategies, meaninglessness is not the problem; thinking self-consciously is the problem. Avoid or deny the questions, concede that you are nothing more than an instinctual animal in an indifferent universe, and you’ve solved the problem. Alcoholism, drug addiction, sexual obsessions, and adventurousness—in which meaning remains, but only while engaged in extreme and risky activities, including violence—have all been attributed to

misguided and finally self-destructive attempts to suppress the question of meaning by drowning in instinctual behavior. The climber Mark Jenkins articulates perfectly the experience and joy of losing oneself entirely in the body this way: "At this moment, all I know is movement. I'm not even thinking; I'm just climbing. I shut down the brain and let the body be what it is: an animal. Unbeknownst even to myself, somewhere high on the Sheila Face, I unlatch the cage. . . . The cage door swings open and out steps the beast."¹⁶

On a social level, as early as 1941, Erich Fromm was writing about our collective *Escape from Freedom*. Why the need to escape? From what are we escaping? Fromm argues that a long history of liberation—from first nature, race and family, the authority of the Church and then the state (the Reformation and the rise of democracies, for example)—terminated in the achievement of individual freedom. But having attained that cherished goal, the question became "freedom not from what but for what?" Having progressively rejected the guidance and authority of revelation, community, tradition, and reason, freedom becomes a burden, and we have the absurd situation of being free to choose anything we wish but having no choices worth making.

Knowing neither what we must do nor what we should do, nor even what we wish to do, Fromm argues, we typically look for clues by watching what others do, or willingly abdicate the burden of freedom by reverting to the authority of others, whether the latest guru, pop celebrity, or political leader. Conformity and authoritarianism are thus collective strategies for relieving the anxiety that absolute freedom elicits. We willingly exchange our anxiety and freedom for compulsive activity

and the answers provided by others. Conformity to the cultural norms modeled by members of our family, friends, and associates or obedient loyalty to the goals of our leaders and nation protects us from the debilitating experience of nothingness resting at the heart of modernity.¹⁷

Philosophically, the modern, debilitating ideology that humankind is nothing but a complex mechanism of chemical reactions or social forces and its attendant experience of nothingness is, itself, the culmination of a long skeptical tradition. The notion of the Absurd arose when humankind's desire for meaning and purpose confronted the indifferent universe that the skeptical tradition projected. On the one hand, modernity was a necessary prerequisite for the emergence of the existential vacuum, and thus a source of the problem. On the other hand, modernity is also a solution. If one believes that the universe is indeed indifferent and without purpose, then the absurd is merely nostalgia for a world that never existed. The modern idea that the universe, and in turn humankind, is meaningless, without intrinsic value or purpose, is both a cause of and a solution to the problem posed by the experience of nothingness. Living in the modern universe of indifferent and mechanical causation may require honesty and courage, but it is finally not absurd, whenever the nostalgia for purpose and meaning is abandoned. All one has is this world as it is, and many would claim that that is sufficient. Firmly within a modern perspective, there is no answer or resolution to Tolstoy's question "Why?" Our best course of action, as a consequence, is to enjoy and make the best we can of this world as it is. Or as the literary critic Lionel Trilling expressed it poetically: "If we are in a balloon over an abyss, let us at least value the balloon. If night is all around, then