Meaning, Value, and Usefulness

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Based on my earliest memories it seems that I was a boy that just wanted to have fun. After my most basic needs for a safe environment, sustenance, and a rudimentary orientation in life were met by my parents I was relatively free to develop and go after things that interested me.

Of course, the scope of my experiences were limited to my own family and little by little expanded to the neighborhood and school. In our big Irish Catholic family and fairly ethnically diverse neighborhood, competition became our bedrock ethic. I learned that there were things that I wanted and I had to compete with others if I was to have any hope of getting them. In the beginning, competition didn't come naturally to me and I avoided it if possible. Looking back over the years I see that I buried sensitivity in the ever present need to compete. I got tough. Kind of reminds me of the song 'A Boy Named Sue.'

As I recall now, I was less interested in winning than in not losing. The fear of failure drove me at first. It was only along the way that I discovered that there were some things that I could win at and when an opportunity presented itself, I went for it. Still my biggest motivation was not to lose or even worse to be exposed or even ridiculed as a loser. In a game of pick up baseball, the most important thing was not to get chosen last; much more important than actually winning the game. It was a weak, painful, and vulnerable place to be. It is pretty hard to focus on the pursuit of excellence when your main concern is not to be embarrassed.

So I was never a great athlete, student, or anything else for that matter. I was headed for obscurity. Over time I did find some things I could do well. Reading was an early skill that I picked up. Most folks can read but I really liked it. It became my refuge in our boisterous home. I could do it alone without comment or criticism from anyone.

I gained some confidence in sports through trying hard and not giving up. It was required in our family. Baseball and basketball, where a lot of skill was essential, were never my strong point. In baseball I played catcher often since it was easier to catch the ball when it was thrown right at me as opposed to a pop up in right field that could easily be misjudged or a hot grounder to second base that had the double potential of the ball rolling between my legs or the throw to first going over the first baseman's head . As the catcher I had to let the guy on the mound hurl the ball right at me but I was nothing if not brave. We called the mask, chest protector, and shin guards, the tools of ignorance and I wore them with a certain pride.

The real problem was; if the runner took off for second and I had to make the throw. I imagined throwing it over the infielder's head and it was often self-fulfilling. The worst was to toss the ball over the pitcher's head. How shameful. Basketball was similar but I was good at contact sports. Football was my game and I played on the interior line where the willingness to hit and be hit were the main skills. I also did really well in wrestling. I even got my name and picture in the local sports pages several times for key wins.

Then there was the Marine Corps. I went down to Parris Island when I was eighteen years old for boot camp. It was, to say the least, a very narrow portal to pass through but pass through it I did and became a United States Marine. That's forever.

From the time I was young I wanted to have a valuable and meaningful life. The problem was I didn't know what that might be. I read the lives of the saints and thought I should be a saint. Problem was I wasn't very saintly. Later I read a lot of history mainly World War II and about U.S. Marines. I thought

the thing was to be a hero. A hero or a Martyr seemed to be about right.

Everything I read I was looking for the meaning. Everyone I met, I was searching for meaning. Every movie and show I watched, I looked for the meaning. What the hell does that mean?

I became interested in why people believed things, often some pretty outrageous things. It seemed to me that folks made up things and assigned meaning to things and events quite arbitrarily. Often folks believed things that didn't match observable reality at all.

In order to act we have to orient ourselves in the world. Problem is, the world is essentially un-knowable. The more that we know, the more things we don't know. In order to act we have to believe something. This pattern of belief constitutes meaning. A pattern of belief allows us to orient ourselves in a direction which is essential for acting. We have to act in order to survive.

Nowadays days I often encounter, mostly on social media, what is called flat earthers. How absurd to believe that the earth is flat. They do believe it and I would like to know why? The answer may be because they want to believe it and they can. Somehow it works for them. The various conspiracy theories are the same. Although the proponents of one theory or another are adept at marshaling facts in support of what they believe, in the end, beliefs are not so much dependent on facts but on the belief and we all believe what we want to believe.

Most beliefs, I would say, are embodied in and passed on in narratives. Narratives are stories. Everybody likes stories because they are entertaining and mean something. The stories underpinning a culture and people bind them together.

Facts, those uncovered by science, are tremendously useful but have their own set of shortcomings. These facts are powerful because they are observable and reproducible. Problem is they are all equal in value. No fact is more true than any other fact. Therefore they can provide no direction. Vertical direction is established when there is a hierarchy, one above the other; one more valuable than another.

It was only much later in life that I came to understand that the instinct to find meaning was common to us all.

I'm attracted to beauty; beautiful things and beautiful people. Is there embedded meaning in beauty? Although beauty standards are quite culturally derived, there are some attributes of beauty that are more or less universal. Symmetry of face and body are attractive cross culturally. Tall, athletic men might be good protectors and women with wide hips and shapely breasts could be assumed to be capable of giving birth to and feeding lots of kids. Those are useful when choosing a mate aren't they?

According to the innate and cultural standard of beauty in any given environment, a hierarchy of beauty is formed with some being more beautiful and others less so. There are surely some advantages to being more beautiful than others and so it is valuable.

Is value equal to meaning? Is value equal to useful?

How is it that we should confront the unknown or chaos? Keep your eyes open and describe what you see truthfully using words. Then put the words in order of the least useful up to the most useful. Then you have a direction to move. You probably don't want to move downward but upward. This movement towards the most valuable creates meaning.

The most valuable thing in any situation is the thing that is most useful in moving towards the place you want to go. The place you want to go is a place that you perceive is better than where you are now. So I think we can say that value and usefulness are the same. Some things are valuable or useful for a limited time and place. Other things are useful and therefore are valuable in the longer term.

So then I must conclude that in order to have a meaningful and valuable life I ought to be useful. Useful to whom? I ought to be useful to myself by moving towards a place I want to be. I ought to decide, as well as I am able, where I want to be and move towards that. Problem has been, over time my concept of who I am and where I want to end up has not remained static but has changed and hopefully become more clear. Wisdom can be said to be a properly ordered value system. A value system has to be continuously updated to be properly oriented.

In addition, I don't live in the world alone, so to have a valuable, meaningful life, I better be useful to others. In order to be useful to others one must find something that needs to be done in order to make things better and take responsibility for it.

Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me."