

Meaning of life

Religion



Meaning of Life I would like to relate the story of one afternoon when I was about twelve or thirteen years old, living at home with my parents. It was a very hot day, and I remember feeling very angry with my mother in particular because she had told me to stay in my room. There was an important discussion going on downstairs between various members of my family, and I was excluded from that, partly because I was rather young at the time, but also because my mother told me that she could not rely on me to behave appropriately on such a formal occasion. Normally, I would have been allowed to say hello to the visitors and to be present at least for some of the time. On this occasion, I had been too rather outspoken about something my father had said, and this was to be my punishment. This was an important occasion for me because it was the very first time in my life I seriously thought about the future direction I would take in my life. I reflected on the way I felt restrained by my strict parents and by the high moral standards that I was required to live up to as a practising Muslim in a respectable family. For a short time, I thought half seriously about running away from home. I found the requirement to be obedient to my parents to be too restrictive and imagined all the things I would be free to do if I did not have to stick to all the rules that surrounded me all of the time. As the time passed, I became less angry and I started to do some English homework that was sitting on the desk in my room. Actually I quite enjoy English, and it did not take me long to finish my work. I realized that my family had provided me with everything I need to gain an education and make my way in the world. I know that many children are not so well cared for, and despite my frustration about the requirement to stay in my room, I found that in many ways I was free to make choices. This reminds me of the poem by Robert

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Frost (Schwehn and Bass, 2006, p. 458) in which the narrator describes two paths that he finds in a wood. Until that day, I had chosen to be a difficult child in some ways, resisting the guidance that my parents had been trying to give me. Thinking about my education made me realise that I could actually choose to have a different attitude, and that this might take me to a different destination. At that time in my life I tended to see things in absolute terms. I thought that there was always a right way and a wrong way to do things, and I judged myself and other people very harshly. I think young people often do this because they do not have enough experience of life to more considered decisions which take account of different circumstances. I took religious teachings very seriously, and if I saw another Muslim doing something that I thought was not appropriate, then I used to feel superior about that because I was sure I would never do anything against Islamic teaching. Now that I am older, I still see the value in the teachings of Islam, but I have more sympathy for people who see things differently than I do. The reading by Catherine Bateson (Schwehn and Bass, 2006, p. 465) shows how even the same person can take different directions in his or her life, following particular encounters and experiences. Now that I am an international student, I can see that there are many different approaches to life, and I am glad to be learning about the ways that other people make their choices in the hope that this will make me better at making my own life decisions. The imagery that Wendell Berry (Schwehn and Bass, 2006, p. 468) uses to describe his own path through life made a big impression on me. This author describes how he thought he was walking in a straight line, but in fact he was wandering around and doubling back. The image of the pilgrimage is a good one, because it shows that there is a permanent goal, but it also

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reminds us that the way can be difficult and complicated. In my life religion is what gives my wanderings a particular meaning. I feel secure in the knowledge that even if I make some mistakes, there will be some point to it all, and in the end I will reach my goal of living a good life, in the eyes of human beings but also on a higher level. I was also very persuaded by the argument that Dan McAdams makes about each individual life being a “work in progress” (Schwehn and Bass, 2006, p. 477). As a child sitting in my room, I thought that everything was too tightly mapped out for me and that I would have no choices even as an adult about how to live and what to aim for. As the years have passed since then, I can see that it is true that many things are already decided, such as where one is born, what kind of family one has, and the opportunities that come with a having particular place in society. I realize also that the meaning which is attached to all of these variables can be changed from within, according to the inner attitudes that a person chooses to have. I choose to be thankful for my strict parents and remain true to my Islamic heritage, and yet, at the same time, I choose to remain open to all the new ideas that I encounter in my studies abroad. My faith gives meaning and direction to what I am learning, but with each metaphorical path that arises, I will always have plenty of step by step choices to make. References Schwehn, M. R. and Bass. D. C. (Eds.). (2006) *Leading Lives That Matter: What We Should Do and Who We Should Be*. Grand Rapids, MI Wm B. Eerdmans.