

Eric Butterworth Speaks

Essay #20
FROM FUTILITY TO SIGNIFICANCE

We often look away from our immediate preoccupations in life and ask, "What is the meaning of it all? Where am I going? Why am I here? Why am I like I am?" Despite the prevalent living standard in our country which is held to be the highest in the history of the world, we are regarded as a nation of disturbed people, and the high incidence of our mental illness is undeniable. There is sometimes an attempt to explain this away as the result of the pace of contemporary living in an essentially urban society. Yet, a survey has recently shown that mental illness is particularly prevalent in the state of Kansas, one of our least urbanized areas, while on the other hand there are many men and women living and working in New York City perfectly well-adjusted and in no danger at all of going to pieces.

The real cause, the root of mental disturbance and mental illness may one day be isolated and explained as due to a sense of meaninglessness and futility in life. The rush and subsequent tension in our lives is not the result of the required pace, but rather the result of our restless, even frantic attempt to be ever occupied and thus avoid boredom. Every once in a while I am present when a group of men and women gather together to celebrate something or other and have thus an opportunity to witness a true study in human nature. They are characteristically business people, and many of them are shortly "in their cups," as we say. I always wonder why is success so devoid of meaning that it must be escaped? Why do these successful people, some of them noteworthy individuals, make such fools of themselves?

Scientific studies of the overuse of alcohol show conclusively that alcoholism is the result of spiritual lack, of emptiness, of living without a purpose. People drink to excess not so much because of the love of the drug as because of a failure of personality. The person for whom life has no meaning turns to alcohol as a substitute, as an escape from an intolerable sense of futility. Alcoholism can be cured only by providing a new sense of significance rather than by simply attempting to correct symptoms.

The chronic alcoholic is thought of as a drifter, unable to hold a job or stay with any permanent commitment, unable to adjust to life's situations. Actually, how often does the current of our beliefs push us into inharmony, into unemployment, into difficulty in coping with inflation, into deterioration and sickness--how often are we not sort of drifters in life, "drifting along like the tumbling tumbleweed."

After twenty-five years of conducting an experiment that started more by accident than by design, the Western Electric Company discovered the power of a sense of meaning in a job--and the importance of seeing divinity as well as dust in workers. The experimenters set out to demonstrate the effect of lighting on production, and the results were not exactly what was expected. When light was increased, production in the test room increased--that was expected. However, when light in the test room was reduced, even below the usual standard, production still increased. So, the astonished directors of the experiment began seeking other factors that might have a bearing on production--possibly, improved working conditions was the answer.

In another experiment, instead of decreasing the light, they decreased instead the working hours, and production climbed higher. The pattern was then reversed. Workers in the test room toiled forty-eight hours a week with few breaks--yet, production remained as high as ever. Well, the whole effort appeared futile; just what was the explanation? Was there some yet-unthought of factor that could explain what appeared to be utterly irrational?

Perhaps the secret was in some way involved in the very nature of human personality. It was Professor Roethlisberger of the Harvard Business School that pointed to the fact that each worker chosen to be in the test room found new personal significance in the very fact that he was being used in an important experiment. Even standing beside an impersonal machine had meaning in relation to the search for knowledge. Workers were finding satisfaction and even inspiration in the discovery that their

output had meaning for themselves and for others, so they responded by doing and giving their best.

An amazing thing has been discovered about meaninglessness and boredom--it leads to fatigue. In a study of a group of industrial workers, Dr. Lillian Galbraith, an efficiency expert, found that those with an interesting evening coming up were less tired at the end of the work day than were the others. She suggested this good advice: If you want to cut down on fatigue in your work, always have something good to look forward to. Well, we agree that there is a human need for purpose, for significance, but how can we find it? How can we make life and living more meaningful, more interesting?

There is a need to relate to dimensions of life that are infinite, and this seems to point to religion. It has always been insisted that joining a church is one way to emerge from this state of emptiness, and how can I deny this? The church might conceivably be the means of assisting a person find a way, but I must emphasize that the church itself is not the way. Joining a church in the hope of finding answers and solutions to life's problems in itself is not enough...often people have found themselves shackled with even more dilemmas--their own and the church's! Certainly the great need of man is find himself in God, and that should be the great, overriding purpose of a church. To the extent that a church is involved in helping people to find God in themselves, it is successful, and it will help people to find meaning, not just by joining the church, but by getting involved in the challenges of the inspirational truths that are disseminated by the church.

Paul says, "In Him we live and move and have our being." This is what we need to come to understand. We hear it said that we must find God. I wonder if this does not in itself increase man's sense of futility. We cannot really find God, for God is not lost, and He is not in hiding. Rather, we accept God, and we do this by accepting ourselves at the deepest possible level. In so doing we assume a new posture, we begin to walk and work with a forward-looking attitude, we have faith in the future and faith in ourselves. This is the need--to look up to the eternal, to sense eternal values, to perceive ends more lasting than the mere accumulation and possession of more material goods. These goals are more satisfying than any mere human achievement.

Each of us is an expression of God, the very self-livingness of the creative process. Our purpose in life is to glorify God by expanding and amplifying that expression, by giving and serving and creating, by making our lives significant, by making that which we do really count. If we lose the sense of purpose in life, it is because we have forgotten that life is lived from the inside out, that our purpose is to express what we are and to rejoice in the opportunity provided in our work to better ourselves as persons. You cannot find purpose out there in the world; you can only find an inner oneness with God, giving an inner sense of meaning. Once having this inner sense of meaning, then it is possible to recognize meaning and purpose in everything.

It is neither likely or possible that you will fully find meaningfulness in your day-to-day life. This must be found in your inward realization of oneness with God, with the determination to express God in your work, in your relationships, in your entire life. When you have this inner commitment or sense of oneness, suddenly all appears interesting and stimulating and challenging; everything seems to fit together into one grand mosaic in your new-found, true life.

Use this affirmation: My life takes on new meaning and significance when I know that I am after all a child of God.