

Not a Bowl of Cherries by Dan Jacoby

There is an old joke about a fellow who hears of an “old wise man” somewhere in the Himalayas who knows the meaning of life and will impart it to anyone who proves himself worthy. Our guy sets out to get the answer. He swims the Ganges River, backpacks across Tibet, and climbs the mountains of the Himalayas. After five years, tattered and torn and bleeding and freezing, he finds the old wise man in a cave.

“Old wise man!” he says, “I have swum the Ganges River, backpacked across Tibet, and climbed the mountains of the Himalayas. It has taken me five years, and I now stand before you, tattered and torn and bleeding and freezing, to ask you – what is the meaning of life?”

“Life,” says the old wise man, “is a bowl of cherries.”

“But,” asks the fellow in sheer disbelief, “old wise man, do you mean to say that I have swum the Ganges River, backpacked across Tibet, and climbed the mountains of the Himalayas for five years, and I now stand before you, tattered and torn and bleeding and freezing, only to have you tell me that life is a bowl of cherries?”

“You mean,” asks the old wise man, “life *isn't* a bowl of cherries?”

I've spent the past few months watching far too much of the horrifying scenes in Haiti, following the massive earthquake that has killed tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of people and left millions in even more desperate straits than they were in before this particular disaster – people who never committed any crime, but who were unfortunate enough to be born into abject, hopeless poverty, and who now suffer even more through no fault of their own.

Next came scenes of the earthquake in Chile, and more recently the mine disaster in West Virginia and the plane crash in Russia. In every case, innocent people died, but the news services didn't really seem to care why this happened, or what could – and should – have been done to prevent it, or whether it should at least be done now to prevent similar tragedies in the future. The media seemed far more interested in hyping the disaster so that they could run commercials.

It quickly became crystal clear is that it doesn't matter if some gadget can chop vegetables, tuna fish and nuts quickly and easily. It doesn't matter if some drug can provide temporary help for people with “erectile dysfunction.” It doesn't matter if some soup company adds only a little water to their recipe.

Commercials were, for me, always full of lies, but at least occasionally entertaining; now they are merely a collection of worthless – nay, worse than worthless – and inane refuse. I say “worse than worthless,” because commercials not only waste the time of everyone who sees them, and degrade both those who watch and those who make them, but also because they turn our attention away from what matters in life.

Nothing seen or heard in any commercial matters, because none of it adds to the quality of life. None of it explains why we're here or what we should be doing. What matters, what we must focus on, has nothing to do with peddling overpriced junk, most of which serves only to allow some wealthy, powerful people to enslave hundreds or thousands of others in perpetual misery – those farm or factory workers who are paid sub-subsistence wages so that you and I can pay two cents a pound less for our processed tomatoes or two dollars less for a forty-dollar dress shirt.

I have also come to understand that that which motivates almost all of us in almost all of our endeavors, be it pursuit of money or power, nationalist fervor, personal prestige, or even supposedly altruistic religious passion, has nothing to do with improving the lot of our fellow humans and other thinking and/or feeling creatures. Helping someone become able to smile, or a dog to wag its tail, or even a beetle to find some level of comfort, is far more important than finding a shampoo that gives your hair that shiny, silky feeling (especially since, for most of us, plain soap will do just as well).

We have become indoctrinated into a pseudo-capitalist concept of the meaning life. We practically soaked up its dogma with our mother's milk. Competition is valued over cooperation, because (we are told) it leads to more efficient use of limited resources. Helping your neighbor only diminishes your relative worth; destroying your neighbor, whether by economic or military action, allows you to take what your neighbor had and increase your own value. Survival of the fittest in the public arena (I now call it "agoran Darwinism") is, we are trained to believe, the highest form of human endeavor.

And that's just among humans; we are, in the western world at least, also indoctrinated into the concept that people are here to rule over everything else without regard to the value of anything else. In the biblical book of Genesis, 1:28 (KJV), God tells man to "subdue [the earth]; and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth." So we strip the land of its beauty – its forests, its wildlife, even its high mountaintops and deep rock formations – in our relentless drive to subdue everything we see, and even what we don't see.

To what end?

In the early 1950s, Americans in general allowed Senator Joe McCarthy to destroy many lives because his desire to rule over his neighbors led him to play on ridiculous, insane fears of a communist takeover. Most of the people tagged as communists were merely trying to find a purpose in life greater than that which our capitalist indoctrination has given us. This was particularly true during the Great Depression, when it became clear to many people, especially the most creative and thoughtful among us, that capitalism did not provide the ultimate answer.

During the last decade, George W. Bush and other disciples of militarism and capitalism told us that the Islamic terrorists "hate us for our freedom." Nothing could be further from the truth. They don't hate us because we live with what we consider to be greater freedom; they hate us because we are trying to impose our capitalist indoctrination, mixed with U.S. military and economic supremacy, on others.

It is a stupid, expensive, evil and ultimately self-defeating policy.

Because of our capitalism and our military, almost 3,000 Americans were killed on September 11, 2001. Because of our capitalism and our military, over 4,000 Americans and perhaps as many as 100,000 Iraqis have been killed in Iraq since then. And because of our capitalism and our military, it is conceivable that hundreds of thousands of people have been killed in Haiti.

We created the terrorists through decades, or centuries, of abuse, slaughter, enslavement, haughtiness, and shortsighted, brainless policies designed to prove our superiority over others – a superiority that does not truly exist, except that we have superior weapons and the will to use them. Now that they have weapons and the will to use them; where do you suppose those things came from?

America invaded Haiti in 1915 and stayed for over two decades. During that time, we could have helped that literally dirt-poor country gain a foothold on the economic ladder, but we failed even to try. Had we tried, Haitians might have lived in homes, and worked in offices, and gone to schools, that were built to withstand the inevitable, predictable (and predicted) shock that occurred on January 12.

Instead of concentrating on how we can help people here in America and around the world, instead of working to improve not only the human condition but also the condition of life in its myriad beautiful forms, we have chosen to hide behind commercials for soap, soup, and the wide variety but soulless vanity available at Staples. Seriously, what does it matter how many different colors your Post-It notes come in?

For millennia, philosophers, preachers and politicians have tried to understand the meaning of life. Their various writings have expanded into millions of words, in every conceivable language. Yet they have failed, and failed us, because they have saddled us with dogma, conceit, and foolishness. Their failure, and our failure to avoid heeding their insipid counsel, has led to more misery and horror than any of us can possibly imagine without being driven utterly insane.

There may be no meaning to life. Life may just exist because it does, without any reason. But if we choose to believe that there is a meaning, or at least a purpose that should drive our actions, then we must choose a purpose that rises above the crass commercialism of capitalism, which only serves to pit us against one another and against all life, and also above the ruinous realm of religion, which masquerades as all-encompassing but only serves to divide us while making each of us feel superior in our internal, eternal inferiority.