

Blog-a-thon Day 24

Ken Veit is my guest blogger for today. He is a business associate of my husband, Neil. His wisdom makes me think.

If you haven't pondered the meaning of life lately, here's your opportunity.

“What are the necessary conditions for an individual's life to feel meaningful? Most people begin with health and some measure of financial security, but we all know of people who led lives that were meaningful to them, even though they had great physical handicaps (think Helen Keller) or always seemed to be on the edge financially. Many of the great entrepreneurs lived exciting lives despite going bankrupt on several occasions. So, I conclude that health and wealth are important but not absolutely necessary for a meaningful life, unless one becomes totally debilitated or penurious.

As far as I can ascertain, three things are necessary for an individual's life to have meaning: (1) There must be some involvement with others; (2) There must be achievable goals; and (3) There must be uncertainty. I will elaborate.

The writer Robert Ardrey studied a vast number of animal species and discovered (The Territorial Imperative) that they all seek three things, without which survival is difficult: (1) relief from anxiety; (2) relief from boredom; and (3) a sense of place in the pecking order. It is not difficult to extend this concept to humans (although Ardrey did not). In the animal world, these needs are met in the constant struggle over territory, which may explain man's constant quest for material things.

Beyond material things, however, there is a universal desire in man to achieve relevance and respect. However, we need other people in our lives if we are to be relevant and gain respect. These give us a sense of our place in society, and they make us feel secure in that place. We need goals and risks for stimulation, or else we grow bored. Uncertainty and hope are what underlie stimulation. Without uncertainty life would be boring. Without hope, there would be no point in trying. It is in the trying that we achieve both stimulation and the respect of others.

Imagine a Robinson Crusoe existence, where there is no one else to measure yourself against, laugh with, or share experiences with. Life would be little but a struggle to survive.

Imagine a life without goals. This is a real concern for many retirees who suddenly find themselves with nothing to do after a lifetime of work. I had two aunts who lived into their 90's.

Perspective

Written by Ken Veit

Thursday, 19 August 2010 17:29 - Last Updated Thursday, 19 August 2010 17:42

One asked me, "Why am I still alive? I have nothing to do or look forward to." The other said that every day she got up and asked who she could help. One of her daily "To Do's" was to "Make somebody laugh." She knitted me a beautiful blanket that she only finished the week she died at 98.

Imagine a life without uncertainty. The writer H.L. Mencken wrote that if the future was certain, every rational person would commit suicide. It is the tension that accompanies uncertainty that makes life stimulating. Will he or won't he? Can I or can't I? Who will prevail? If the answers were all known in advance, we might feel more secure, but boredom would overwhelm us.

Of course stimulation and anxiety are often opposed, in that too much stimulation can lead to excessive anxiety, while lack of stimulation breeds boredom. Maintaining one's place in a pecking order can be stimulating, but also cause great anxiety, while rising in the world can actually undermine security, as in the old adage, "The bigger they are, the harder they fall."

In other words, finding the proper balance between one's interactions with others, goal setting, and risk taking is critical to leading a meaningful life.

But if these are necessary conditions, are they also sufficient? Suppose you have family and/or friends to whom you are relevant and who respect you. Suppose also that you have realistic but challenging goals, and that health and financial concerns are not of excessive concern? Is a meaningful life assured?

I can think of one other thing that must be thrown in the mix: luck. Random chance impacts on us all, for good or ill. A small event, a seemingly inconsequential decision, or just a bolt out of the blue can send one's life spinning in a different direction, for better or worse. Good luck is not a necessary condition for a meaningful life, but perhaps absence of bad luck is."

LOTS of food for thought here, don't ya think. Send me your thoughts dear readers.