

Throughout the book of Ecclesiastes, the teacher generally paints a pretty grim picture of life. Among other things the teacher calls vanity is work – specifically, work done for the sake of accumulation. The things that we accumulate for ourselves will invariably be passed on when we ourselves pass on. We can gain whatever we want in this life, but we will lose it. The teacher is struggling with the apparent meaninglessness he encounters in life. It is worth noting that what the teacher declares as vanity is essentially the accumulation of wealth for its own sake. He is not speaking, per se, of work that is its own reward or a service rendered to others.

One of the more compelling books I’ve recently read is Viktor Frankl’s *Man’s Search For Meaning*. I’ve heard Dr. Kremer reference it a few times and thought it might be an interesting read. As a Jew during World War II, Frankl was captured by the Germans and spent nearly three years in various concentration camps. During this time, his life was a struggle for survival – only one out of every 28 people who entered such camps survived. He eventually came to find that his wife and his parents did not survive. Though this time was a struggle for survival, for Frankl it was also a search for meaning. How does one find any fulfillment in such an environment? And afterwards, how does one face living without their loved ones?

While still in the concentration camp, Frankl noted that for the large majority of his comrades, the question was “Will we survive camp? If not, then all this suffering has no meaning.” The question that beset Frankl, however, was “Has all this suffering, this dying around us, a meaning? For, if not, then ultimately there is no meaning to survival; for a life whose meaning depends upon such a happenstance – as whether one escapes or not – ultimately would not be worth living at all.”

Frankl makes a good point: suffering, to some degree, will always be a part of our living. We must find meaning in a life that includes suffering. And indeed Frankl illustrated this point by his life when he decided not to be part of an escape attempt in order to stay with a sick comrade. Indeed his soul was tormented until he arrived at the decision to remain with his comrade.

In fact, Frankl could have avoided the concentration camps altogether. He could have fled to America with his Visa. He knew the Germans were coming to his hometown of Vienna, but he decided to stay with his aging parents. However, as I have said, neither his parents nor his wife would survive the camps. And so, afterwards, he resumed his life as a psychoanalyst, feeling that what life asked of him was to help provide meaning for others.

On one occasion, he was consulted by an elderly practitioner who suffered from severe depression. The doctor could not overcome the loss of his wife, who had died two years before and whom he loved above all else. Frankl asked him, “What would have happened, Doctor, if you had died first, and your wife would’ve had to survive you?” “Oh,” he said, “For her this would have been terrible, how she would have suffered!” Whereupon Frankl replied, “You see, Doctor, you have spared this suffering –

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the price is that now you have to survive and mourn her.” The Doctor said no word, but calmly shook Frankl’s hand and left the office. In some way, suffering ceases to be suffering at the moment it finds a meaning – such as the meaning of a sacrifice.

Frankl talks of three primary ways in which we can discover meaning in our lives. The first is by creating a work or by doing a deed. The second is through encountering others in love. And the third is through rising above the suffering we endure. Reading this book immediately following our mission trip, something dawned on me. On the surface you may not think that it would be fun to get up at 5:00am and to work in 90-degree weather for eight or nine hours, to have 36 people eating lunch together on a slab of concrete or dinner in a room with 20 or so places to sit, or being tired enough at the end of the day that you really didn’t care if you went to the beach or Charleston or not. What struck me was that our trip included to some degree all three ways Frankl mentioned to discover meaning. We had a task – building a home. We worked, ate and lived together. And we endured rising at 5:00 am and working in the heat. On the surface it may not sound like fun, but you could hardly find a better context for the discovery of meaning. This is the reason I think the youth like this trip so much. In a society with ample means to provide for people and certainly a means to entertain them, it does not provide meaning for people – and people still crave meaning.

Of course there is still the point raised by the teacher in Ecclesiastes. After all our toil under the sun, we do not know what those who we leave it to will do with it. Our prospective homeowner for the Habitat House had been switched the week before, and we didn’t get the chance to meet her until the dedication service on Saturday. As always though, LaNeisha was very grateful that we helped her build her new home for her family. She said, “I thank God for y’all” and “I really hope that God blesses you.” At the very least we played a part in helping a working mother establish a home for her children. LaNeisha was touched by our hard work and the hopes we had for her and her children. Perhaps I’m viewing things through the lens of faith, but I believe that whomever the new homeowner turned out to be, it could not have taken away from the experience of living, eating, working, and sacrificing together. All you can do is offer your best in love. Our mission trip provided us with an opportunity to do just that.

As I thought about the mission trip and context in which we served I was reminded of an experiment that was conducted a few years ago. Two Princeton University psychologists, John Darley and Daniel Batson, decided to conduct an experiment based on Jesus’s parable of the Good Samaritan. You probably recall in that parable that a man is beaten and robbed and left to his fate by both a priest and a Levite who pass him by. Finally, he is helped by the Samaritan. Darley and Batson decided to replicate that scenario at the Princeton Theological Seminary. They met with a group of seminarians. First they asked them why they chose to study theology. To provide meaning to their lives? To help others? What is the reason you are studying? Then they asked each one to prepare a short, extemporaneous talk on a given biblical theme, and then go to a nearby building to present their speech. Some seminarians were told to speak on the Good Samaritan. Others were given different topics. And last thing that they were told was either “you’ve

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got a few minutes but go ahead over to the building” or, “you’re late, you’d better get moving.”

On the way to the nearby building, each student crossed the path of a man who was slumped down, coughing, and groaning. The question of the experiment was who would stop and help? And why?

If you ask people to predict which seminarians stopped and helped the man, and this has been done, their answers are highly consistent. Most all people have responded that those who studied theology in order to help others, and those who were presenting on the Good Samaritan would be the students most likely to stop and help. In fact, neither of these two things made any difference. On the surface, it’s hard to think of a context more conducive to helping one respond to a person in need than sharing your thoughts on the Good Samaritan, but on several occasions, a seminary student going to speak on this topic literally stepped over the apparent victim as he hurried on his way to speak. In the end, the only thing that really mattered was whether the student was told he was late or not. Of the group that was told they were late, 10% stopped to help. Of the group that was told they had some time to spare, 63% responded to the man in need.

Are we really that controlled by our immediate situation? It is quite easy to get wrapped up in whatever it is we are doing. Maybe part of the solution is to be intentional about providing ourselves with opportunities for service and opportunities to feed our spirit. But part of the solution is also being open for God to break into our lives, to be open to chance interruptions in our daily living. If we recall, most of Christ’s ministry was done while on the way to somewhere else. He was open to interruptions and open to minister wherever there was need.

I want to close with an incident that happened on our way home from John’s Island. We stopped in Columbia for lunch at a Chic-Fil-A. A few youth went next door to McDonald’s for the Pirates of the Caribbean combos and would later return brandishing inflatable swords and toy telescopes, but most of us piled into the Chic-Fil-A. It was packed and the line was long, convoluted, and left little room for walking. Scott Kerley and I were at the end of that line. We stood there a while, discussing what we were going to order. And we stood. And we stood. Finally, I stretched out my arms, just in time to hit an older lady walking behind me right in the face with my elbow.

“Oh,” I said, I’m sorry! Are you okay?”

“Yes, I’m fine” the hunched-over elderly lady calmly replied.

Scott Kerley is enjoying this immensely and is eager to put in his two cents. “Wow Lee, you really got her a good one. That’s the best elbow I’ve seen you throw all day.”

I’m now wondering what this lady is thinking. “Ma’am, I’m terribly sorry. I didn’t mean to hit you.”

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But warmly and reassuringly, she says to me, “That’s alright. Everybody’s got to spread their wings from time to time.” And then she slowly walked over to her table where her husband was waiting.

What makes a person approach life like this? What makes them want to reassure a stranger who elbowed her in the face? I hope I’m like she is when I get older. I’d like to be like that now, but I don’t know if I’ve accumulated as much grace and dignity as she has. Her attitude about the whole situation brightened my day. It almost makes me glad I elbowed her.

“Everybody’s got to spread their wings from time to time.” I think the lady was on to something. From a man who displays loyalty in the midst of the seeming hopelessness of a concentration camp, from youth getting up at 5:00 am and working in 90-degree heat for eight or nine hours a day, to a woman who walked hunched over but with grace and dignity, everybody’s got to spread their wings from time to time. I hope you and I are able to do this - whether it’s by responding to the limits life places on us, responding to someone in need, or just by brightening someone’s day. Whether we are mature enough to take advantage of opportunities that present themselves in our day-to-day lives, we need to allow God the space to give us the courage and strength to spread our wings. In doing so, we participate in something larger than ourselves. We participate in the Kingdom of God. As people of faith, I think that at most times we could give intellectual assent to the notion that life is meaningful. When we allow ourselves participate in the life of God, we can say it with our heart.