

The Meaning of Life

Henry David Thoreau, "What I Lived For," from *Walden*

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practise resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life.

R. D. Laing

Life is a sexually transmitted disease and the mortality rate is 100 percent.

Psalms 103:15-16

As for man, his days are as grass: as a flower of the field, so he flourisheth. For the wind passeth over its, and it is gone; and the place thereof shall know it no more.

Kansas, "Dust in the Wind"

Dust in the wind.

All we are is dust in the wind.

All we do crumbles to the earth though we refuse to see.

And all your money won't another minute buy.

John Steinbeck, Undelivered address to Emory Univ., Georgia, 1956

Well, you are perfectly right. You are going out into the world and it is a frightened, neurotic, gibbering mess. Yes, my young friends, you are going to take your bright and shining faces into a jungle, but a jungle where all the animals are insane.

You haven't the strength for vice. That takes energy and all the energy of this time is needed for fear. That takes energy, too. And what energy is left over is needed for running down the rabbit holes of hatred to avoid thought. The rich hate the poor and taxes. The young hate the draft. The Democrats hate the Republicans, and everybody hates the Russians. Children are shooting their parents and parents are drowning their children when they think they can get away with it. No one can plan one day ahead because all certainties are gone.

If you work very hard and are lucky and have a good tax man, then when you are 50, if your heart permits, you and your sagging wife can make a tired and bored but first-class trip to Europe to stare at the works of dead people who were not afraid. But you won't see it. You'll be too anxious to get home to your worrying.

John C. Ames, *Indiana Daily Student*, July 31, 1987

I guess even though I know things are screwed up, I'll just have to accept my lot in life. I should live to a nice ripe age, if we don't accidentally blow the Earth to pieces or melt

the polar ice caps. Of course, I could get lucky and be hit by a campus bus. I used to think the way to handle depressing news of the world was to laugh. I can't laugh anymore.

Greg Frame, *Indiana Daily Student*, May 22, 1989

It comes down to goals. We all have them, but they're not really ours. We didn't formulate them ourselves. They are all prefab, handed down through the generations. Sometimes we're told our goal is wealth, and sometimes that it's power, and usually we're told that it's both of those. That is the message we've long heard and that is what we believe, if only for lack of visible alternatives. ... Sometimes I feel like everything we humans do is done just to kill time, and the mindless accumulation of money and things is the grandest time-killer of all. ... What I mean is that, as humans, we're really bored out of our skulls. We constantly have to make our own toys, trivial as they may be. We're not sure exactly what we're supposed to do here, anyway.

Shakespeare, *Macbeth*

Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow
Creeps this petty pace from day to day,
To the last syllable of recorded time,
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle;
Life's but a walking shadow; a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot; full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*

Reality is a "world of constantly needy creatures who continue for a time merely by devouring one another, pass their existence in anxiety and want, and often endure terrible affliction, until they fall at last into the arms of death." "[We] have not to be pleased but rather sorry about the existence of the world, that its non-existence would be preferable to its existence" As for mankind: "nothing else can be stated as the aim of our existence except the knowledge that it would be better for us not to exist."

Robin Williams as John Keating in *Dead Poets' Society*

They're not that different from you, are they? Same haircuts. Full of hormones, just like you. Invincible, just like you feel. The world is their oyster. They believe they're destined for great things, just like many of you, their eyes are full of hope, just like you. Did they wait until it was too late to make from their lives even one iota of what they were capable? Because, you see gentlemen, these boys are now fertilizing daffodils. But if you listen real close, you can hear them whisper their legacy to you. Go on, lean in. Listen, you hear it? – *Carpe* – hear it? – *Carpe, carpe diem. Seize the day boys, make your lives extraordinary.*"

Andrew Marvell, "To His Coy Mistress"

Had we but world enough, and time,
This coyness, lady, were no crime,
We would sit down and think which way
To walk, and pass our long love's day.
Thou by the Indian Ganges' side
Shouldst rubies find: I by the tide
Of Humber would complain. I would
Love you ten years before the Flood,
And you should, if you please, refuse
Till the conversion of the Jews;
My vegetable love should grow
Vaster than empires and more slow;
An hundred years should go to praise
Thine eyes, and on thy forehead gaze;
Two hundred to adore each breast,
But thirty thousand to the rest;
An age at least to every part,
And the last age should show your heart.
For, lady, you deserve this state,
Nor would I love at lower rate.

But at my back I always hear
Time's winged chariot hurrying near,
And yonder all before us lie
Deserts of vast eternity.
Thy beauty shall no more be found
Nor, in thy marble vault, shall sound
My echoing song; then worms shall try
That long-preserved virginity,
And your quaint honor turn to dust,
And into ashes all my lust:
The grave's a fine and private place,
But none, I think, do there embrace.

Now, therefore, while the youthful hue
Sits on thy skin like morning dew,
And while thy willing soul transpires
At every pore with instant fires,
Now let us sport us while we may,
And now, like amorous birds of prey,
Rather at once our time devour,
Than languish in his slow-chapped power.
Let us roll all our strength and all
Our sweetness up into one ball,
And tear our pleasure with rough strife
Thorough the iron gates of life;
Thus, though we cannot make our sun
Stand still, yet we will make him run.

Rupert Brooke, *The Great Lover*

I have been so great a lover: filled my days
So proudly with the splendour of Love's praise,
The pain, the calm, and the astonishment,
Desire illimitable, and still content,
And all dear names men use, to cheat despair,
For the perplexed and viewless streams that bear
Our hearts at random down the dark of life.
Now, ere the unthinking silence on that strife
Steals down, I would cheat drowsy Death so far,
My night shall be remembered for a star
That outshone all the suns of all men's days.
Shall I not crown them with immortal praise
Whom I have loved, who have given me, dared with me
High secrets, and in darkness knelt to see
The inenarrable godhead of delight?
Love is a flame; — we have beaconed the world's night.
A city: — and we have built it, these and I.
An emperor. — we have taught the world to die.
So, for their sakes I loved, ere I go hence,
And the high cause of Love's magnificence,
And to keep loyalties young, I'll write those names
Golden for ever, eagles, crying flames,
And set them as a banner, that men may know,
To dare the generations, burn, and blow
Out on the wind of Time, shining and streaming

These I have loved:

White plates and cups, clean-gleaming,
Ringed with blue lines; and feathery, faery dust;
Wet roofs, beneath the lamp-light; the strong crust
Of friendly bread; and many-tasting food;
Rainbows; and the blue bitter smoke of wood;
And radiant raindrops couching in cool flowers;
And flowers themselves, that sway through sunny hours,
Dreaming of moths that drink them under the moon;
Then, the cool kindliness of sheets, that soon
Smooth away trouble; and the rough male kiss
Of blankets; grainy wood; live hair that is
Shining and free; blue-massing clouds; the keen
Unpassioned beauty of a great machine;
The benison of hot water; furs to touch;
The good smell of old clothes; and other such
The comfortable smell of friendly fingers,
Hair's fragrance, and the musty reek that lingers
About dead leaves and last year's ferns Dear names
And thousand others throng to me! Royal flames;
Sweet water's dimpling laugh from tap or spring;
Holes in the ground; and voices that do sing:
Voices in laughter, too; and body's pain,
Soon turned to peace; and the deep-panting train;
Firm sands; the little dulling edge of foam
That browns and dwindles as the wave goes home;
And washen stones, gay for an hour; the cold

Graveness of iron; moist black earthen mould;
Sleep; and high places; footprints in the dew;
And oaks; and brown horse-chestnuts, glossy-new;
And new-peeled sticks; and shining pools on grass; —
All these have been my loves. And these shall pass.
Whatever passes not, in the great hour,
Nor all my passion, all my prayers, have power
To hold them with me through the gate of Death.
They'll play deserter, turn with traitor breath,
Break the high bond we made, and sell Love's trust
And sacramented covenant to the dust.

—Oh, never a doubt but, somewhere, I shall wake,
And give what's left of love again, and make
New friends, now strangers But the best I've known,
Stays here, and changes, breaks, grows old, is blown
About the winds of the world, and fades from brains
Of living men, and dies. Nothing remains.

O dear my loves, O faithless, once again
This one last gift I give: that after men
Shall know, and later lovers, far-removed
Praise you, 'All these were lovely'; say, 'He loved.'

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