

*Finding Our Purpose in Perilous Times*¹

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I grew up attending a small country church in the state of Missouri, which is pretty much in the middle of the United States. In my early teens, I made my public confession of faith, was baptized into the church, and moved up to the “adolescents and young adults” Sunday school class. I had a lot of questions and was eager to learn more about life and faith from the teacher and the more mature members of my new class. I was excited about the new possibilities of my spiritual awakening; unfortunately, my early church experience was a bit disappointing.

The printed Sunday school lessons invariably would include examples of situations that come up in day-to-day life - questions, temptations, problems, fears. The lessons would ask how we as Christians should deal with these issues. I listened eagerly to the teacher and the older class members, so I could decide how I should respond to such challenges. Regardless of the question, the unanimous response seemed to be that as Christians we should read our bible, pray to God for guidance, and then do God's will. This universal answer wasn't wrong; it just wasn't any real help to me. I already knew *that* answer; I needed something more.

I wanted to know how the bible stories applied to my life, not just as a Christian in Sunday school, but as a farm boy, a high school student, a son and brother, as a young person starting out in life. I wanted to know *how* God provided guidance. Did “He” (God was always a He in those days) always answer your prayers by giving us what we ask for or by denying our request when we ask for the wrong things? The bible didn't always seem clear to me on such matters. How would I know what God was telling me to do? If I wasn't sure what God wanted me to do, how could I know if I was doing “God's will”? Unfortunately, I would have to wait a lot of years to find *my* answers to these, and even then, I didn't find them in church.

I stopped going to church during my college years. However, after I got married and had small children, my wife and I decided we needed to raise our kids in the church. When we started going to church, the whole family went to church and Sunday school virtually every Sunday for close to ten years. We started attending a Baptist church that believed in studying the Bible, “religiously,” and I learned a lot from it. Over the years, we attended various churches, and various denominations, but the churches' answers to life's most important questions didn't seem to have changed much over the years. When confronted with life's challenges, Christians should look for answers in the Bible, pray to God for guidance, and then do God's will. “Be not afraid. Fear not. I shall fear no evil.” These are all familiar phrases from the Bible, but how do the scriptures relate to the perils that we face in the world today? If we prayed, what would God tell us about conquering our fears? What is God's will for us in these perilous times?

¹ Prepared for presentation at the Annual Conference of the United Church of Canada, Conference of Manitoba and Northwest Ontario, Morden, Manitoba, May 22-25, 2008.

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When I was growing up, like a lot of other kids, I was “afraid of the dark.” However, we didn't have electricity or indoor plumbing during my early years, so being afraid of the dark was not a small problem. Later in life, I found that I shared a number of other fears with a lot of other people. I was afraid my parents would die before I could care for myself, I was afraid I might be hurt or killed in an accident, I was afraid I would get sick and not be able to work, I was afraid I wouldn't be a good husband or good father, that I wouldn't be loved, or I just wouldn't be successful in life.

In addition to these common fears, there are plenty of other things to be afraid of in the world today. The scriptures may comfort us in times of trauma, such as ill health or a natural disaster, but how can they help us deal with the personal fears that confront us every day? If we prayed, what would God tell us about keeping or finding a job, or just making a living, in these times of economic uncertainty? What would God tell us to do about the growing gap between the rich and powerful and the poor and weak that threatens the future of our communities and of global society? What would God tell us we should do about the threats to human health, the environment, and the economy that arise from air and water pollution, global climate change, and depletion of fossil energy? How would God tell us to fulfill our responsibilities to those of future generations who must depend on us to be caretakers of society and stewards of the earth?

We live in uncertain times. I speak about these times from the perspective of an U.S. citizen because that's what I know best. However, when we in the United States have something to fear, the whole world has something to fear. The United States is a big country - economically, geographically, and militarily - and seems unwilling, perhaps unable, to keep its problems at home. At no time since the Great Depression of the 1930s has the U.S. economy been so vulnerable to economic chaos and collapse. Federal budget deficits routinely set new records, as the government continues borrowing money to fund their military misadventure in Iraq and an apparently unending global war on terrorism. Over time, the United States has become the world's largest debtor nation, as it has borrowed from other countries to support government spending that its own citizens are unwilling to tax themselves to pay. U.S. trade deficits also have reached historic highs, as its corporations have moved their manufacturing operations to lower wage countries such as Mexico, India, and China. Many U.S. workers have come to rely on cheap imports because, without good-paying jobs, they can no longer afford to buy things “made in America.”

With rising unemployment and underemployment, the U.S. government has reduced interest rates in attempts to stimulate investment and stave off a domestic recession. As a result, the value of the U.S. dollar has declined precipitously in relation to other world currencies. The weak U.S. dollar raises concerns about the ability of the U.S. government to pay off its huge debts and the ability of the United States to continue being the major export market for the rest of the world. In addition, U.S. consumers are suffering under the burden of too much debt with “maxed out” credit cards and home mortgages that are now larger than their home values, as housing prices continue to fall. Equally troubling, financial transactions that have no basis in actual value now account for a significant portion of total U.S. economy. As these complex financial arrangements begin to “unravel,” the U.S. economy faces a very real possibility of collapse.

After decades of economic exploitation of U.S. workers, the economic disparity between the rich and the poor has reached unprecedented levels. The poorest *one-half* of U.S. citizens now lives on only *one-eighth* of total U.S. income while the top *one percent* takes in more than *one-fifth*. In the words of Alan Greenspan, former Federal Reserve Chairman, “The income gap between the rich and the rest of the U.S. population has become so wide, and is growing so fast, that it might eventually threaten the stability of democratic capitalism itself.”²¹ In addition, costs of health care are exploding at a time when the poorest segments of our population is suffering from an epidemic of obesity and diabetes and the nation as a whole is growing older and less healthy. It should come as no surprise that the U.S. is a world leader in mental depression and suicide, particularly among adolescents and young adults.

The environmental problems confronting humanity today certainly are not limited to the United States, although we are a major contributor. At no time in recorded history have humans faced environmental risks comparable to those of global climate change and “peak oil.” Even the major oil companies now grudgingly admit that the world is running out of cheap fossil energy. It took millions of years for the earth to accumulate its vast reserves of fossil energy. Industrial economies have depleted approximately half of the world's total supply of petroleum in just over a century. All of the remaining reserves of fossil energy - including natural gas and coal - will become increasingly difficult and costly to extract and within fifty years all recoverable stocks of fossil energy may be largely depleted. All of the alternative to fossil energy - bio-fuels, wind, water, photovoltaic, and nuclear - will be more limited in quantity and more costly.

Meanwhile, our continued reliance on fossil energy is creating a growing threat to the global environment. Some people still refer to the issue of global warming as a controversy, but the previous controversy has become a scientific consensus. The rapid buildup of greenhouse gases, coupled with retreating glaciers and polar ice caps, now provide undeniable evidence that something is affecting global climate in ways never experienced prior to the domination of the earth by humanity. The potential impacts of these changes could be so catastrophic as to threaten the future of humanity. Sooner or later society must face the “inconvenient truth,” that we risk making the earth uninhabitable by humans.

In such times of peril it's only natural that we feel anxiety or apprehension, if not outright fear. The greater part of humanity, at least the most powerful part of humanity, seems committed to continuing their acts of exploitation, extraction, and eventual self destruction. What can we possibly do as individuals that will have any significant effect, for better or worse, on these important problems? How can we even protect ourselves and our families in times of economic collapse, social chaos, or ecological destruction? What should we as Christians do?

Should we retreat to prayer or meditation, radically alter our lifestyle, or perhaps become activists in a new cultural revolution? We should begin with the understanding that environmental and social perils confronting us today are all natural consequences of an unsustainable economy. All economic value is derived either from nature or society; there is nowhere else to get anything of economic value. When we support today's extractive, exploitative economy with our time and money, we are contributing to the ultimate demise of humanity. But what else can we do? We can pray; but do we really believe our prayers will change the world, or is prayer a convenient excuse for not doing much of anything else? If we

change our lifestyle, no matter how radically, will it really make any difference in the larger scheme of things? If we become activists and try to foment a new social and ecological revolution, will others join with us; what are our chances for success?

In the face of today's perils, many have retreated to their religion, or rather to their narrow interpretations of their particular scriptures, as a defense against perceived threats to their ways of life. Religious fundamentalists of various world religions, including Christianity, quote specific scriptures to justify discrimination based on religion, national origin, race, gender, sexual orientation, or anything else they think represents a threat to their chosen way of life. Some seek to close their churches, their communities, and their national borders to anyone who believes or thinks differently from themselves. They quote scriptures to justify their continuing pursuit of individual wealth, their exploitation of the earth, their continuing oppression of the poor, and their refusal to accept global responsibility for their selfish actions.

Some world leaders boast of their reliance on prayer for guidance, suggesting that God has told them to lead, promote, or participate in the extraction and exploitation of the resources of the earth. Some even use religious beliefs to defend wars of occupation and oppression to promote economic growth and suppression of democratic processes that might restrain environmental plunder. Turning to the scriptures and to prayer doesn't seem to be addressing the economic, social, and ecological questions of today any better than they answered my questions of life as a boy growing up in a small country church.

In such times of great peril, what does God want and expect us to do? Should we persist in searching the scriptures, praying for guidance, and seeking to do God's will? Or should we look for answers elsewhere? Perhaps we should do both. I suspect we already know what we should do, if we will just listen to the inner voice that speaks to us continually, regardless of whether we pray or even stop to listen. The challenge is to do what we know we should do - to know *how* to go about doing it, convince ourselves that it would make a difference if we did it, and then find the courage to do it.

Over a lifetime of questioning, I have come to believe that every person has the capacity to know the will of God for their life - regardless of whether they are a member of any church or have ever set foot in a church. The church may be a good place to find it, perhaps the best place, but I don't believe it is the only place. I believe that every person is born to fulfill a specific mission during his or her lifetime. I don't believe that any person's purpose is any more or less important than anyone else's purpose. We are each a part of a larger interrelated whole and the integrity of the whole depends each of its parts - on each of us. Our purpose is derived from and defined within by a higher level of organization - a higher order of things that is beyond our realm of observation or intellectual comprehension. Our access to this higher order is through the spiritual dimension of our lives, our soul. Regardless of whether we call it our intelligent insight, informed intuition, intentional instinct or wisdom of the soul, we each have access to what we need to guide us along our unique path of purpose.

Why have I come to believe that our life has a purpose? Because, if we had nothing in particular to do in our life, then anything we might choose to do would be equally right or wrong. It would make no difference what we chose to do, even if we chose to do nothing at all. A life

without purpose simply doesn't make sense. I also believe we have a choice in life either to pursue *our* purpose, meaning God's purpose for our life, or to pursue some other purpose in life instead. I don't believe we can be anything want to be, no matter how well we prepare ourselves or how hard or long we are willing to work. Our possible paths through life are limited by the circumstances into which we were born and in our inherent aptitudes and abilities, but we can choose from more than one possible path. I believe that *our* path, God's path for us, has been predetermined, but lacking the freewill to choose, it would be impossible for us to make any wrong choices. Again, it would make no difference what we did, because we would simply be unable to do anything wrong, which doesn't make sense.

I freely admit that it's impossible to prove that our life has a purpose; we must accept it by faith. Most people probably never question whether life has purpose, but scientists do. "Scientific materialism," which dominates scientific thinking today, "asserts that all events are due to the interaction of matter and motion, acting by blind necessity in accordance with those invariable sequences to which we have given the name laws."ⁱⁱ To scientists, human life is nothing more than a thoughtless interaction of motion and matter moving toward some unknowable yet predetermined end. In the science that has been driving the global economy and global society, there is no place for faith, and thus, no place for purpose. Perhaps most important, in science, there is no recognition of our human ability to willingly choose a life's path that reflects our concerns for other people and our concerns for the earth, rather than blindly pursue our individual economic self-interest.

People who have faith also have the capacity to love. To love is to believe, again without proof, in the inherent goodness of a thing. We typically think of love as existing between two humans. Human love is special because it can be returned; however, a person can love an animal or even a mechanical object, a car or a dress, if they believe in its inherent goodness. Love is more about emotion than reason, but even mature love requires no compelling evidence to support it and does not easily accept evidence against it. True love is a matter of faith. To love *life* is to believe that *life* is good. If life were not inherently good, then the continuation of life on earth would not necessarily be good. There would be no reason for concern about a deficit-dependent economy, an inequitable and unjust society, or the prospect of a global ecosystem incapable of supporting life.

By faith, we accept that it is good for life on earth to continue even after our individual life has ended. No individual life lasts forever. When the purpose of a life has been fulfilled, death is a good end to life. To love life is to love the whole of life, because we are all part of the same web of life - the same creation - all species, genders, races, religions, nationalities, physical abilities, ages, and sexual orientations. We are all made and remade of the same molecules, matter, and energy; we are all related and interconnected by the basic processes of life. Our purpose is interrelated with the purpose of all other living things; and part of the purpose of all life is to conceive and nurture new life - to sustain life.

Finally, a life of purpose is a life of hope. In defining hope, I defer to a quote from Vaclav Havel - philosopher, reformer, and former president of the Czech Republic.

Hope is not the same as joy when things are going well, or willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously headed for early success, but rather an ability to work for something to succeed. Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It's not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out. It is this hope, above all, that gives us strength to live and to continually try new things, even in conditions that seem hopeless. Life is too precious to permit its devaluation by living pointlessly, emptily, without meaning, without love and, finally, without hope.ⁱⁱⁱ

Even when we know the odds are against us and we know the road ahead will be difficult, frustrating, and fraught with perils - even when we have reason to be afraid - we know that living with purpose makes sense, regardless of how things ultimately turn out. In this, we can find hope. It's hope that gives us the courage to find our way back to *our* path, when we sense through our soul that we have gone astray. In our hearts we know that *our* life was meant to be good because life is good; we just need to find our path and walk it. In this faith and love, we can always find hope.

When we live a life of purpose, we live without fear. We may be apprehensive or anxious at times, not knowing for sure if we are still on *our* path, but we know that when we are on our path we have nothing to fear. It would make no sense for us to have been given a purpose that we cannot fulfill or a path that is too dangerous to walk. When confronted by unknowns of the "dark," ill health, injury, financial failure, loss of love, even death, we can walk without fear. When confronted with prejudice, discrimination, even threats of physical abuse, we can walk without fear. Even in times of global perils that are obviously beyond our individual control, we can walk without fear. As long as we are on our path, we are living the life that God intended for us, and we know that our life is a part of the goodness of all life, and that it is meant to be good.

How can we find our purpose and how do we know when we are walking our path? In my opinion, this is where reading the scriptures and praying to God for guidance become most important and relevant in our lives. The Bible provides insights into the nature of the higher order of things - of God's will for humanity. Incidentally, other great books provide very similar insights and thus apparently reflect similar perceptions of the nature of the reality. Through prayer and meditation we have access to the guidance we need to find and walk our path of purpose. We can never know for certain we are on our path because it is part of the unknowable higher order. Through prayer and meditation, however, we can transcend the observable and gain intelligent insights and informed intuition, if not concrete knowledge, of the nature of the higher order and of our place within it. This is the message we should expect when we pray: the spiritual-filled insights, intuitions, or instincts we need to help guide us along our path.

Our life's purpose isn't a specific job or professional position but instead is a lifelong vocation or avocation. President Lyndon Johnson once said the most important pursuits in life were those of teachers, preachers, and politicians because each defines a life of public service. However, some people apparently are meant to be poets, artists, or musicians, as these pursuits obviously serve important human needs. Others are meant to be encouragers, nurturers, or caregivers as those pursuits reflect compassion and respect for the less fortunate among us. And still others are meant to fill the roles of employers, workers, entrepreneurs - those who provide for the physical necessities of life. This certainly is not an exhaustive list, but individuals can

find many different jobs or professional positions within each of these pursuits and these purposes can be pursued by different means at different stages of life.

So how can we find the courage to confront our fears in these perilous times? We need only rededicate ourselves to the diligent pursuit of God's unique purpose for our lives. We should always be willing to search the scriptures for new insights into God's hopes for humanity. We should pray unceasingly and listen quietly for God's guidance. However, we must find the courage to continue walking our path as teachers, preachers, or politicians, as poets, artists, or musicians, as encouragers, nurturers, or caregivers, or as employers, workers, or entrepreneurs. We should learn as much as we can about the consequences of our actions and should remain ever aware of the potential impacts of pursuit of self-interests on the sustainability of nature, society, and the future of humanity. However, we can never know the ultimate consequences of our individual actions. The whole of which we are a part is simply too complex for us to fully comprehend. We should always act as if our individual actions might change the world.

Most important, we need to understand that we can change the world for the better, or stop it from changing for the worse, only by fulfilling our unique purpose in life. We need only do our part within the higher order, no matter how great or small or how difficult or easy it may seem, or how long or short our remaining time on earth may be. The task we have been given to do is the most important task *we* can possibly do; it all we need to do in meeting whatever challenge life has placed before us. We can search the scriptures for general directions and pray to God for continuing guidance, but we must find the courage to do God's will in our day-to-day lives, as teachers, poets, encouragers, employees, or whatever we sense is God's purpose for our lives.

When we walk our path of purpose, we have nothing to fear. When we walk with purpose, we find the courage to abandon our narrow pursuit of individual economic self-interest in a self-centered world. We find the courage to be responsible caretaker of God's earth and God's people because we understand that it can never be a sacrifice to do what God what intended us to do. When we live with purpose, our life has meaning; we know that whatever we do or don't do matters. We already know what we should do and it's not all that difficult to find out how to do it. When we walk with purpose, we find the courage to do it. When we walk with purpose, we are living in harmony with the higher order because we are doing our part to fulfill the purpose of the larger whole - of God's creation. This is our greatest possible contribution and will earn our greatest possible reward. *This is the key to human happiness.*

We can never fully know the nature of the higher order but we can gain knowledge of its nature by observing actions and consequences in the world around us and in our own lives. This is what science, at its best, is about: attempting to understand the basic principles of *nature* - the higher order, the transcendent whole - by observing and studying the consequences of actions. The ecological, social, and economic principles of purposeful living are the focus of the final theme session of this conference. But the path away from fear and toward true fulfillment and happiness in life, even in these times of great peril, begins with the principles of faith, love, and hope. In faith and love, there is always hope - even in the most perilous of times.

End Notes:

ⁱ Alan Greenspan, as quoted in Christian Science Monitor, “Gap Between Rich and Poor Gaining Attention,” <http://www.csmonitor.com/2005/0614/p01s03-usec.html> , June 15, 2005.

ⁱⁱ Hugh Elliott, “Materialism,” in *Readings in Philosophy*, eds. John Herman Randall, Jr., Jestus Buchler, and Evelyn Shirk (New York Harper and Row, Publishers, Inc., 1972), 307.

ⁱⁱⁱ Vaclav Havel.1990. *Disturbing the Peace* (New York: Random House inc.), Chapter 5.