

The Gift of Purpose

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No one lives in a cocoon. Instead, the world constantly invades our lives. In response, we give purpose to these invasions. The image, here, is that of a pearl. What is the purpose of a pearl? The pearl is the oyster's gift to a grain of sand that gets inside the oyster and disturbs it. Of all the gifts we can give, the greatest is the gift of purpose. It is the pearl of great price. All other gifts are ornaments and baubles.

A quite different view of purpose is common. According to this view, the invasions of life come with purposes already attached, and our job is to discover those purposes and reconcile ourselves to them. The image, here, is that of a coin. The coin is an instrument for exchange, and its purpose is predefined. Confronted with a coin, we can be ignorant of its purpose or we can consent to it. But, strictly speaking, we cannot rebel against its purpose: in the very act of rebellion, we tacitly consent to it.

The problem with this second view is not that it is wrong but that it is incomplete. Where it applies, it presupposes the first view, because even things like coins do not have their purpose intrinsically but as a gift (in this case, from the national treasury). But, more significantly, very little in life has a predefined purpose. To be sure, most things in life occur against a backdrop of purposes. But just as a house composed of bricks is itself not a brick, so an event that occurs against a backdrop of purposes need not itself have a purpose.

For instance, a business that goes bankrupt resides in a socioeconomic context chock-full of purposes (the underlying monetary instruments, trading conventions, and contractual understandings are all purpose-driven). But the merchant whose business goes bankrupt cares little about what purposes apply to business life in general. Nor is the

merchant's ultimate concern with the precise reasons why the business went bankrupt. Even if a compelling, rational explanation can be given for why the business failed (mismanagement, unforeseen new technologies, sabotage, etc.), this doesn't answer the deeper, existential questions of meaning and purpose that invariably arise when things don't go our way. *Why did this happen to me? How do I make sense out of it? What do I do now? What does this say about the benevolence, cruelty, or indifference of the world toward me? Is life worth living?*

If everything in life comes with a purpose already attached, then life is worth living only if the things that the world throws our way exhibit, on balance, beneficial purposes. Such a view of purpose makes for a harsh view of reality, for it makes fortune the arbiter of destiny. Fortune decides on the distribution of beneficial and harmful purposes in our lives. Accordingly, life consists of winners and losers—those on whom fortune has smiled (the winners) and those on whom fortune has frowned (the losers). This is a very common view. Aristotle, in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, remarks that happiness is not possible without a favorable nod by fortune.

But should fortune have this power over us? Indeed, what gives us the expertise to decide whether something is fortunate or unfortunate? Eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil has certainly given us direct experience of both good and evil. But has it given us discernment between good and evil and, in particular, between good and bad fortune?

Consider a Chinese parable. A series of unexpected events occurs in the life of a farmer and his son. The local residents comment on each of these events, calling them either good or bad. When the residents say “good,” the farmer asks, “how do you know it

is good?” When they say “bad,” he asks, “how do you know it is bad?” The story is contrived so that events which initially seem good later appear bad, and vice versa. Thus, the farmer has a bumper crop and is able to buy a donkey. This is supposed to be good. His son, in riding the donkey, breaks his leg and becomes disabled. This is supposed to be bad. A local warlord comes through the region looking for conscripts. Because of his injury, the son is exempt. Subsequently, all the other young men from that region die in battle. And so, everything turns out all right for the farmer and his son.

But does it? The usual moral to this story is that silver-lined clouds and disguised blessings are not immediately recognizable. Yet, the deeper lesson is that classifying the events of life as alternately good or bad is inherently unstable. What if we did not end the story here? What if the farmer’s son subsequently contracted a terrible disease that slowly and painfully killed him over the course of several years. What if, during this time, the son reflected on the far less painful death of his friends in battle and wished that he had been there to suffer their fate. In that case, the chain of events that the farmer and son previously regarded as a blessing now becomes a cruel joke.

The problem with seeing the events of life as endowed with intrinsic purpose and value (whether good or bad) is that it enslaves us to life’s contingencies. The world sends each of us good things as well as bad things. To be sure, through our efforts, we can try to make the good outweigh the bad. But that’s all we can do—we can *try*. The world is always ready to overrule our efforts. If, in addition, we let the world determine what is good or bad for us, we become helpless. Victims of pleasure are as much victims as victims of pain. That’s why the utilitarian calculus, which evaluates a life by summing its pleasures and pains, is so unsatisfying. A life whose worth is determined by a calculus or

algorithm is not a life worth living. It is a life of servitude to caprice, the caprice of fortune and the caprice of our own errant judgments concerning what is best.

The satirist Juvenal, writing at a time of Roman decline and decay, remarked, “We are now suffering the evils of a long peace; luxury, more cruel than war, broods over us and avenges a conquered world.” The very things we yearn for most and regard as our highest good (wealth, fame, power, and even scientific insight) can be our undoing. The theologian Alexander Schmemmann saw the clearest demonstration of humanity’s predicament not in such obvious evils as immorality and crime, but in humanity’s “positive ideal—religious or secular” and its “satisfaction with this ideal.” Our positive ideal determines what we value most. And what we value most controls us, whether it deserves to control us or not. There’s only one way out of this predicament, and that’s by valuing not things but the power to bring good out of things.

The call of our humanity is to liberty. This liberty depends not on life’s circumstances but on our response to them and, specifically, on our ability to transform them into something beautiful, irreplaceable, and sacred. Too often, the circumstances of life are ugly. And without the gift of purpose, they will remain ugly. Only as the gift of purpose works to transform our circumstances can beauty emerge from ugliness. The beauty that emerges is real, but so is the ugliness that precedes it. In consequence, the liberty that transcends circumstances is a hard-won liberty. It is not the delusional liberty of a blind and foolish optimism that sees only beauty and denies ugliness.

Bernard Malamud’s novel *The Fixer* wonderfully illustrates the liberty that transcends circumstances. Yakov Bok, a Jewish handyman in pre-revolutionary Russia, leaves his small town and heads off to the big city (Kiev). Trials await him there. Why

does he go? He senses the risks. But he asks himself, “What choice has a man who doesn’t know what his choices are?” Later in the novel, when he has been imprisoned and humiliated, so that choice after choice has been removed and his one remaining choice is to refuse to confess a crime he did not commit, thereby preventing a pogrom; after all this, he is reminded that “the purpose of freedom is to create it for others.”

If our freedom or liberty consists simply in controlling our circumstances, then we have no liberty at all. But if our liberty transcends circumstances, then our liberty consists in giving purpose to those circumstances and thereby transforming them into something of eternal value. Take Viktor Frankl. In *Man’s Search for Meaning*, Frankl describes his life as a prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp. According to Frankl, the hardest trial by far that he and other prisoners endured was to maintain a sense of meaning and purpose in the face of Nazi cruelty. He could see it in prisoners’ eyes when they lost their sense of purpose. And having seen their purpose die, he could predict with uncanny accuracy that they too would be dead in a matter of days.

How did Frankl maintain his sense of purpose in the face of Nazi cruelty? There’s no general formula for meeting life’s challenges and endowing them with purpose. In Frankl’s case, what kept him going was the thought that Nazi cruelty at Auschwitz was an unexampled evil and that by surviving he could give voice to its victims and solace to those who had to deal with its aftermath. Frankl lived a long and fruitful life after his concentration camp experience, and through his work as a psychotherapist helped many to recover their sense of purpose in living.

Though the Nazis murdered Frankl’s family and though he himself experienced the full brunt of Nazi cruelty, one detects no bitterness in his writings. Instead, he

constantly emphasizes the power of purpose to bring peace, hope, love, and healing. For the one who would be neither victim nor victimizer but experience true freedom, there is no place for bitterness, anger, and unforgiveness. To succumb to these impulses because of life's injustices is, unhappily, to perpetuate the hold these injustices have on the victim and turn victimhood into a full-time occupation.

Writing out of his Christian experience more than 1,500 years ago, John Cassian describes the underlying problem with anger: "No matter what provokes it, anger blinds the soul's eyes, preventing it from seeing the Sun of righteousness. Leaves, whether of gold or lead, placed over the eyes, obstruct the sight equally, for the value of the gold does not affect the blindness it produces. Similarly, anger, whether reasonable or unreasonable, obstructs our spiritual vision." Cassian concludes that the only legitimate use of anger is to "turn against our own impassioned or self-indulgent thoughts."

The problem with anger, bitterness, and the unforgiveness that invariably accompany these, is that they speak of frustration. Unforgiveness says, "You had the power to frustrate my purposes and I resent you for it." It assumes that a properly structured life is one that determines its own purposes and then single-mindedly pursues them. Insofar as one's purposes are accomplished, that is good; insofar as they are frustrated, that is bad. If we were godlike beings who could determine the course of nature and the destinies of people, we might be justified in this attitude. But we have no such power. We are mere human beings, made of the same dust (humus) that lies beneath our feet.

In consequence, our only hope of true freedom is to deny circumstances the power to decide the purpose of our lives and, instead, reserve purpose as the supreme gift we

give to circumstances. This is not just sound theology and philosophy, but also sound medicine and psychotherapy. Bernie Siegel, whose message of hope has been such a blessing to cancer patients, stresses the need for inner peace if genuine healing is to take place. At the heart of this inner peace he finds an “increasing tendency to let things happen rather than to make them happen.”

There is a curious inversion here. The person who “makes things happen” seems so much more energetic and engaged than the person who merely “lets things happen.” The one seems so active, the other so passive. But in fact, the person who lets things happen and then creatively endows what happens with purpose is the active participant in life. Conversely, the person who is constantly making things happen forces life’s contingencies into preset molds and thereby stunts creativity. The busy life is not the creative life. The world attempts to keep us busy by foisting its purposes on us and thereby denuding us of our creativity. Our challenge is to maintain our creativity by giving purpose to the world’s incursions. William Blake put it this way: “I must create a system or be enslaved by another man’s. I will not reason and compare; my business is to create.”

In the act of creation, we endow raw materials with our own purposes. To be sure, the raw materials that the world sends our way are not always pleasant or pliable. But, inevitably, they present us with an opportunity to be creators, making us into givers of purpose rather than slaves of another’s purpose. In this way, we become co-creators with the ultimate Creator, whose gift of purpose to us is our ability to give purpose to the world. As a consequence, we are not just creators but also priests, offering back to the

Creator a transformed world, formerly profane, but now rendered sacred through the gift of purpose.

The biggest temptation we face is to refuse our obligation to be creators. Specifically, we are tempted to take the raw materials of life at face value and stop there. Initially, we cannot help but take the raw materials of life at face value. That's how life comes to us and is experienced. For instance, the Nazis intended Viktor Frankl harm. Their purpose was to destroy him, body and soul. That was the face value of Frankl's experience. The Nazis intended it to be the final word about his experience. But Frankl did not let the Nazis have the final word. The Nazis attempted to set Frankl's life on a logical train whose tracks were headed for destruction. But Frankl derailed that train and set it on different tracks headed for redemption.

Redemption is yet another example of the gift of purpose. Specifically, it is the gift of purpose to the oppressed that provides them with comfort, hope, and, ultimately, release from captivity. Ordinarily, we cannot redeem ourselves. Simone Weil, who understood the oppression of the 1930s and 40s, stressed in her writings the power of oppressive structures to crush the individual. For every Viktor Frankl, there were many more at Auschwitz whose spirits the Nazis crushed.

Redemption, therefore, presupposes a community of purpose that works in concert to overthrow unjust, enslaving, and incapacitating structures. Often, we point to some key figure who comes to symbolize the redemption, and we might even refer to this person as a *redeemer*. Martin Luther King's role in the Civil Rights Movement springs to mind. But redemption is always a joint effort, and those outside the limelight are just as necessary as those in it.

As the structures that oppress increase in scope, so do the communities of purpose needed to unseat those structures. The logic here impels to a universal community of purpose whose purpose-giver is the Redeemer, writ large, who happens also to be the Creator, again writ large. Christians refer to this universal community of purpose as the Church. But all the great religions acknowledge a universal community of purpose. Indeed, the impulse to universalize purpose is the animating principle behind religion. Contrast this view of religion with Darwin's, who, in *The Descent of Man*, argued that religion arose out of a fear of unknown natural occurrences (he compared the religious impulse to his dog being scared by a parasol blowing in the wind).

Redemption is painful business. Indeed, its business is to bring good out of evil, and, invariably, this requires grappling with evil and being hurt by it. The evil here need not be strictly moral. Natural evils, such as disease, famine, and earthquakes, also require redemption, and some of our best and noblest communities of purpose are dedicated to alleviating natural evils. But whether a community of purpose is dedicated to unseating moral evil or alleviating natural evil, the pain of evil is never absent.

Perhaps the most poignant passage in Rabbi Harold Kushner's *Why Bad Things Happen to Good People* is where he reflects on the death of his son, who died from a disease that prematurely aged him. Through the gift of purpose, Kushner was able to learn from his son's tragedy and help others deal with similar tragedies. Without his son's tragedy, his effectiveness in helping others would have been significantly diminished. And yet, when Kushner reflects on all he has learned as a result of his son's death and on all the good that has come from it, he states that he would still rather have his son alive.

Better not to have been put in the position to give the gift of purpose in the first place than to have to give it. This is the pain that gnaws at the hearts of all who work for redemption. Redemption in this world is never complete. That's why ultimately we must look not to redemption *in* the world but to redemption *of* the world. The same logic that impels to a universal community of purpose and to an ultimate Redeemer impels to a final redemption of the world in which the pain of redemption is once and for all healed and the tears of redemption are once and for all wiped away.

But that still leaves us with living in this world and making the best of things. Even with the hope of final redemption, we must still play the cards that we are dealt. What's more, no one is dealt a perfect hand. It follows that regardless of what cards we are dealt, we must play them creatively. In other words, we must creatively give purpose to the circumstances that come our way. What does this mean practically? It means that we must be very clear about what our choices actually are. Invariably, we have more choices than we think we do.

Just as we must not take the circumstances of life at face value, so too we must not take the choices that those circumstances seemingly permit at face value. A weakness of our humanity is that we tend to take any choice whatsoever as a sign of freedom. Manufacturers, for instance, realize that to sell more of their "target brand" it is helpful to introduce a "decoy brand." To be effective, the decoy brand must be at a higher price and of lower quality than the target brand. Of course, with respect to the target, the decoy presents no actual choice at all (it is in every way an inferior product). As a matter of human psychology, however, we like to imagine that we have choices and congratulate ourselves on getting a good deal. But in fact, the manufacturer is manipulating the buyer

and is only using the decoy to deflect attention to the target (for the underlying psychology here, see the work of Itamar Simonson and Amos Tversky).

In giving purpose to the circumstances of life, we face three challenges: first, knowing what choices we actually have; second, deciding which choice to make; and third, following through with the choice we make. The third requires perseverance and courage. The second requires wisdom and clarity. The first requires inspiration and insight. This is where the creative potential of life resides, in understanding our true range of choices.

But how do we come to this understanding? What specifies our true range of choices? There are no easy answers here. There is, for instance, no calculus or algorithm to lay out our choices. The truly creative choices that give purpose to life's circumstances require thinking outside the box. They are solutions to innovative problems, not to routine problems. It follows that the way we come to understand our true range of choices is indirectly—not by mechanically trying to spell out our choices, but by opening ourselves to novel possibilities. Remember Yakov Bok: “What choice has a man who doesn't know what his choices are?” The one choice we always have is this: We can choose not to limit our choices.