

John Docherty, 2013-05-26

“How many Mennos does it take to make sense of life?”

I think I’ve struggled with this meditation more than with any of the others I’ve given this year. And who wouldn’t? Who in their right mind would choose to tackle a message on the meaning of life, in 10 or 15 minutes, for a group covering pretty much the entire life cycle, if it wasn’t prompted by the lectionary readings?

Only an idiot would even try ... so here goes.

It won’t, however, be a sermon. I’m not even sure it will quite qualify as a message either. It is definitely a “meditation”.

To take the edge off a bit, I gave it the title “How many Mennos does it take to make sense of life?” Thinking about the bees from the children’s time and their importance, I *had* considered giving it the title “Does size really matter?” Then I thought, “No ... maybe not.”

“How many Mennos does it take to make sense of life?”

I have a few suggestions by way of an answer to this question; a couple of them pretty obvious choices.

But before I attempt to work up a punchline or two, let’s look at the lectionary reading that stirred this question for me in the first place.

Psalm 8

³ When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;
⁴ what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?

V. 3 : since this verse doesn’t mention the sun, the notes in the Thompson Bible suggest this psalm may have been sung as part of an evening or night celebration.

It may have been used this way, but if it was, it was surely because of what the night sky stirs in us.

When I was a kid I would lie in our backyard during the daylight hours and stare up at the clouds and wonder about them. What were they made of? What kept them up? Why did they keep changing shape? Why were those shapes sometimes so like something earthbound : a rabbit, a boat, a tree?

I would lie and soak in the warmth of the sun (through the protective layers of my long-sleeved shirts and pants of course, intended to cover up this pale, oh-so-easily-burnt Scottish skin) and drift off into realms of imagination. Those clouds were so high, yet so close you could almost *touch* them. And sometimes you *could* touch them when they sank down as fog; cool and damp on the skin, mysterious and haunting, just like Scotland.

I would spend hours like that, or, when I was a teen, riding around the Niagara Peninsula on my bike, exploring laneways, orchards, side roads, the lakeshore, the Niagara gorge, the Bruce Trail on top of the Niagara escarpment. There was much in the daylight hours to fascinate and stimulate a young boy's growing curiosity. This world was *fresh, exciting, huge!*

But at night, when I'd lie in that same backyard, or go down to Lake Ontario's shore, and look up at the night sky, there was a depth there that I couldn't see in the bright blinding glare of the sun. The sky was no longer a defined and opaque blue dome containing clouds and a circling sun. It was now a transparent window to a whole other reality.

This world that seemed so immense and so vital in the sunlight, now seemed different somehow. It would shrink to the size of my immediate surroundings, to what I could see. And that very limited environment would become a simple vantage point, the focus of which was this vast dark canopy of worlds unimaginable distances away.

Even the moon, smaller than the sun, seemed a much more important part of the sky. It certainly looked bigger than the sun. It even seemed to be looking back at you when it was full. And I don't know if any of you felt like you could almost *touch* it, but I never did. To my eyes it was very clearly out of reach.

In a way it was more of a signpost : I'm very far from you, it said, yet I'm big enough to dominate your sky. Now look at those stars ... most of them are many times bigger than your sun, yet they seem so little ... how far must *they* be? And most of them have planets many times bigger than yours, and many of *them* have moons many times bigger than *me*.

And some of those planets being circled by some of those moons circling around some of those suns might even also have life. And there might even be somebody up there staring into *their* night sky wondering if you are here looking up.

And that's just this galaxy, of this universe that we have some grasp of. For all we know, beyond this universe, some multi-gazillion light years away, there's some other universe, and beyond that, an infinite number of universes over an infinite, unending space.

I've already told you in previous meditations that I can't get my head around the notion of infinity. I can't conceive of something that never ends, or has no beginning. Neither can I grasp the concept of a universe that has a finite limit beyond which is nothing, a void. I can't picture *nothing*. My brain is just too small and too limited.

So it doesn't come as a surprise to me that someone like the writer of this psalm should look up into the night sky and wonder ...

“... who are *we* that God should pay any attention to *us* ...?”

We're miniscule parts of this creation – a drop in the bucket.

We're not even little fish in a big pond – we're little fish in an infinite ocean of oceans. To say that each life lived is a drop in the bucket of the universe is being wildly generous. We're not quite *nothing* in infinite terms, but we surely don't register on many universe-scale measurements. Our entire planet is barely a drop in the bucket of the universe.

“... Who are *we* that God should pay any attention to *us* ...?”

For most of us, that question might seem a little abstract. We don't wonder how we fit into God's creation – we just know that somehow we *do*. We're told that we're created in God's image, for example. That surely counts for something. The psalmist certainly seems to think this is what counts.

“ Yet you have made us a little lower than God,
and crowned us with glory and honour.

⁶ You have given us dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under our feet,

⁷ all sheep and oxen,
and also the beasts of the field,
⁸ the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,
whatever passes along the paths of the seas.”

I can hear the hackles on Cameron’s neck rising as I read that passage, knowing how we have used and often misused that place of domination.

But I think the point of the passage is that we have a place in this creation. We are loved, accepted, valued. We instinctively know that we have a place in the universe. It doesn’t have to be an important place, a special place, or a “meaningful” place – we’re happy to take each day as a gift, and simply live our life.

We’re quite content to bask in the warm sunshine and perhaps wonder about the clouds, and don’t worry unduly about the dark night sky and the conundrum of infinity.

But even if we don’t worry, we *do* wonder. At some point in our lives, each of us has to make some sense out of our existence. At some point, every one of us will ask the question : “What’s it all about?”

We’ll wonder, reach out for some kind of answer, and whether we get a satisfying answer or not, we move on and live. Even if we’re Christians and have embraced the promises we take from this Book, we may come away with little more than a sense that God has a plan for our lives, that we are more important than sparrows, and that somehow, sometime, God will reveal all.

And, as I said, for some of us that’s good enough. We’ve been given life, after all, and we don’t agonize over it – we *live*.

For some of us, though, the “why?” question just won’t go away. We can feel small, insignificant, and life seems sometimes pointless. At the very least, we don’t see any great importance to most of our thrashing about, and we don’t have any deep conviction that our own life matters all that much.

I once had a young Haitian man say to me “if I were to die tomorrow, the sun would still come up, the world would go on as if nothing had happened, and in a little while no-one would even notice that I was gone.”

And, of course, on one level he was right. If I die tomorrow, the sun *will* still come up on subsequent days, the world *will* keep turning, and eventually even those closest to me will get on with their own lives and take little notice of my absence. *(though I kind of hope they don't get on with life too quickly after I'm gone ...)*

But he was only right on the big question level : the “what’s it all about on a universal scale? Why does anything exist?”.

But there’s another level to the question. It’s not “what’s the point of existence?” in a general sense, but “what’s the point of *my* life?”

And, of course, this was his real struggle.

On another occasion, I had a young Rwandan man echo the same sentiments.

These young men are both Christians. Both more evangelical and overtly religious than probably most of us here this morning. They are both exposed on a regular basis to the teachings from this Book, and both look to this Book to give their lives meaning. And of course, they ultimately look beyond this Book for God to give their lives meaning.

They are both desperately trying to live whole lives. Both desperately struggling to find meaning in a world where they feel empty.

So what’s missing?

They’re both Christians. Both willing to accept that they are loved by God. Both young, intelligent, healthy, good looking guys.

But they are also both victims of brutal violence when they were about 10 years old in their respective countries. I won’t try to describe the violence, because I don’t think I can without choking up.

Let me limit it to saying that in both cases, they had every reason to believe that they were about to die. That their life was over. They both survived, but were effectively frozen at that point, paralyzed with fear.

In both cases, these young men have great difficulty relating to their peers. They couldn’t form strong emotional bonds to the people around them, and couldn’t see

themselves as older men. Future projects were senseless, because the future itself was senseless – mostly because, for them, the past was senseless.

They felt small, and insignificant, in a universe that didn't need them. In a universe that had *proved* it didn't need them. In the case of the young Rwandan, the point had been driven home very graphically that his mother's and siblings' lives were of no value. With each new hurt, with succeeding failures in relationships, with every flashback of the violence they suffered as boys, their already fragile sense of identity was diminished further.

“... Who are *we* that God should pay any attention to *us* ...?”

I wish I could tell you that in the course of meeting with them, exploring their hurts, identifying their strengths and potential, that they were each able to fully embrace life and get past the horror of their childhood. But I can't. I think we did good work together, but these 2 young men will probably always struggle to maintain their balance.

What I want to do is underline the fact that finding meaning in our lives is not automatic; it's not a given; and it's not something we can achieve if we follow a particular formula.

There is no formula. Each of us has to find our own way. What brings meaning into my life may not bring meaning into yours.

What is common to us is the need to somehow find those things that offer us a meaningful existence.

It's normal to want to make sense of the things that touch our lives. It's the very essence of what makes us human, I think – to want to believe that we're here for a reason; that this isn't all just happenstance and ordered chaos.

We can't fabricate a sense of meaning for our lives, but frankly, most of us don't need to : it just happens.

I know the temptation is to think of “the meaning of life” as something esoteric, mysterious, grandiose.

I suspect it's somewhat simpler than that.

Let me repeat that I think for most of us we're not really asking "what's the meaning of life?" in a broad sense. We're asking "what's the meaning of *my* life?".

We can ask ourselves the question "why am I here?", and that probably gets us twisted out of shape to some extent.

But we can also reframe the question a little, and ask ourselves "what keeps me going? What draws me forward? What do I look forward to in my life?"

And I think the answers to those questions can be much simpler and more down-to-earth. The answers are found in the everyday things that make up your existence and my existence.

The things that give us pleasure. That strike us as important. That make us feel secure or appreciated.

But sometimes, if those things are missing, we can be set adrift, confused, lost.

I know that some of us here have suffered things that have left us reeling. Some of us have been hurt in intimate ways that are difficult to share with others. Some of us have lost people very close to us, and we're left feeling empty, numb, at least for a time.

Some of us have simply been worn down by an accumulation of disappointments, or hurts, or otherwise petty burdens that leave us wondering "what's the point?"

For the last few weeks I've been making my way through Mark Twain's "A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court". It's a fun, light-hearted romp through Arthurian England. But there's a curious passage, out of keeping with most of the rest of the book, where the main character makes the following declaration :

"And as for me, all that I think about in this plodding sad pilgrimage, this pathetic drift between the eternities, is to look out and humbly live a pure and high and blameless life, and save that one microscopic atom in me that is truly me : the rest may land in Sheol and welcome for all I care."

"... this plodding sad pilgrimage, this pathetic drift between the eternities ..."

How many people feel that at some point in their lives? And how many of us plod along, day to day, going through the motions?

I suppose we're a little like the bees I spoke of during the children's time : we get up in the morning, shake the drowsiness from our heads and get on with the business of life. We don't spend a lot of time wondering about the significance of it all, other than to occasionally take stock of whether or not we're satisfied with how things are playing out for us.

If you ask a bee "What is the meaning of life?" you'll probably get the answer "Why, to make honey of course!" And that's a legitimate answer. It *is* the meaning for the individual bee. But in the grander scheme of things, the greater significance may, in fact, be the pollination that occurs and contributes so much more to the well-being of this planet.

Like the bees, we're probably fairly focused on our own honey-making (whatever that might be in our case), and little concerned with, and probably even oblivious to, whatever incidental "pollination" we might be responsible for.

But we *do* pollinate. And we are, in our turn, pollinated. In the mundane, ordinary interactions of our life we pick up a little of this, and a little of that; and as we rub shoulders with each other, we also leave behind a little of this and a little of that. A smile or a frown, a gentle or rough touch, a harsh word, a generous gift, an expression of values, an argument, a helping hand ...

We *affect* each other, and our world, and whether we are aware of it or not, these subtle interactions contribute to our appreciation of life ... or to our sense of isolation.

We can draw meaning from any number of sources, and I'm convinced that each of us has his or her own unique manner of embracing his or her existence. We may share a common framework from within which we draw inspiration. This Book; our Christian or Anabaptist heritage; our church community; our family; our work; etc. can all be part of that.

But I'm also convinced that our most important influences are our human interactions. How we hurt or help each other. How we build up or tear down our neighbours. How we affirm or denigrate those we share our lives with.

These may be ordinary and subtle things, but they are the stuff of significance.

So ... now to the punchlines.

How many Mennos does it take to make sense of life?

Are we talking Swiss or Russian Mennos?

How many Mennos does it take to make sense of life?

How many have you got?

I did say that a couple of the answers would be obvious choices, so ...

How many Mennos does it take to make sense of life?

26 : 1 to make sense of life, and 25 to prepare the celebration potluck.

How many Mennos does it take to make sense of life?

4 : 1 to make sense of life, and 3 more to chime in to produce a 4-part harmony.

Of course, the correct answer is :

How many Mennos does it take to make sense of life?

One. You.

Though I hope the rest of us have something positive to contribute.

We've called this Sunday Passages Sunday, and we're marking the comings and goings of members of our community. For those who are moving on, I hope that what is good about us has rubbed off on you, and we thank you for the positive things you have brought to us. I hope the negative parts of contact with us have been minor.

For those who are now joining our community - good luck. We will try to be gentle with you. And we look forward to the cross pollination you bring to us.