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Seekers, Truth, & Fulfillment

by R. Wesley Hurd

Can truth be found? Are we interested in searching for it? At what personal cost are we committed to such a search? These difficult questions penetrate to the core of who we are, what we think about ourselves, and what we think about the world around us. And yet they are questions we must ask if we want to pursue what will fulfill us as human beings.

Explanations of life are many and varied. We have inherited thousands of years of ideas and beliefs from cultures around the globe. Our technological and media-saturated world puts thousands of explanations of life and interpretations of being human literally in our living rooms and at our fingertips; whole libraries are accessible in our homes through the Internet alone. Amid the overwhelming plethora of ways of looking at life and reality, where do we begin looking for a way of understanding life that is true? Or, do we succumb to the intimidating spirit of dogmatic postmodernism which asserts that truth does not exist (only *truths* exist) and just select from the smorgasbord of ideas and beliefs one that seems to "fit" us or make us feel good?

First, however, we must ask a more profound question. Though we need answers for living our lives, do we feel the need strongly enough to take on the task of finding those answers that truly satisfy us? At the most basic level of existence, we are creatures who need material sustenance and adequate psychological equilibrium (within ourselves and with those around us); satisfying these needs allows us to survive physically and mentally. But humans—at least some humans—seem to need more. They are creatures who crave answers to *who* and *what* they are, *where* they are, and *why* they are. We must all ask ourselves: Are we such creatures? Do we want to be serious "seekers" of those answers?

Natural Seekers

Human beings are "wired" to be seekers; we are fundamentally seekers by nature. But we have to choose to seek. We can ignore the nature and effect of our "wiring" by consciously or unconsciously choosing not to seek. We can be either "philosophers" or "drug addicts"; that is, we can be either persons who seriously seek explanations for their existence and experience, or we can be persons who fill life with "experiences" that dull or divert their felt need for true fulfillment.

The world we live in typically does not reward seekers. Seekers are gadflies whose compulsion to search often annoys those around them. The vast majority of people in the world take the wider path to simple, immediately-pleasurable solutions to fulfillment. Novelist Walker Percy

suggests that most people are sunk in "everydayness"; that is, they are willing to settle for being mired in the tinselly din of living "just to get by." There are enough quick-fixes close at hand that we need not trouble ourselves to delve below the surface or to try to see beyond the workaday world for the deeper fulfillment of finding larger meaning. As one screenwriter put it: "What I want is a good time; the rest is propaganda."

Who Seeks and Why?

Seekers yearn for more both in their experience of the world and in themselves. Often, seekers either look back to times that seem better or ahead to a future in which fulfillment may be found. This mix of dissatisfaction and desire impels seekers to search. But something more is at work within them. Seekers possess an "intuitive wisdom" that sees through the surface of things in search of what those things mean; that is, they are not likely to settle for the superficial, even if superficial is what most people settle for. This intuitive wisdom cries out for a deeper, more coherent way of understanding "being human."

King Solomon, a seeker and the author of Ecclesiastes, considered this wisdom both a great gift and a great burden. In his magnificent and troubling book of Hebrew poetry, Solomon chronicled his own no-holds-barred quest for what is good, valuable, true, and ultimately lasting. He declared a "task" for himself, a task he thought the Creator had given to all humans: to find what is truly lasting and meaningful in the world.

Solomon used his great wisdom as a tool to accomplish this task. No one was ever more successful in worldly life than Solomon. He was extravagantly rich. He was the most powerful king of his day. He built great architectural edifices, planted forests, cultivated magnificent gardens. He exploited his enormous wealth to find and experience the great pleasures available in this life—lavish living, social and political power, the sensual pleasures of food, drink, and sex. Solomon found great success in every area the world could offer him, and yet he concluded that it was all mere "breath" compared to what he really sought.

And here is the point: Solomon's wisdom would not let him settle for shallow answers to deep questions. Wise Solomon saw through even the most glorious successes and pleasures to conclude that they had failed him, because they had failed to fulfill him in a deep, lasting way. Ironically, he also concluded that even the wisdom he used to perform his "task" of seeking for true fulfillment would ultimately be rendered futile—by death. Although his wisdom could not ultimately fulfill him, it confirmed in him the yearning for a Truth that transcends death itself. He observed this poignant fact: at the core of human nature lies a need and desire for things eternal in quality and character. Humans can and must live in this world, but we will figuratively and literally die without some hope of attaching ourselves to a Reality that truly transcends the temporal one in which we now live.

Ancient King Solomon and twentieth-century artist Paul Klee observe the human condition in similar ways. Klee observes:

The ideological capacity of man to penetrate earthly and supernatural spaces at random—in contrast to his physical prostration—is the origin of human tragedy. This combat between power

and prostration implies the whole discord of human existence. Half-winged, half-imprisoned—that is man. Here is the revelation: that where there is a beginning there can never be infinity. [Roger Lipsey, *An Art of Our Own*, p.179.]

In this pithy statement, Klee describes the human condition as one in which finite human beings are devastated by a two-fold fact: On the one hand, they are earth-bound bundles of flesh circumscribed by their limitation. On the other, they possess an ability to see through and think beyond the ordinary—to imagine a different kind of existence. Humans are finite but yearn for infinity.

But why do humans seek more? First, as discussed above, something *in* humans compels us to find significance beyond the ordinary demands and routines of living to survive. And second, something about the world—its nature and structure and our experience of it—provides clues to something beyond it. Sociologist Peter Berger in his book *A Rumour of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural* (pp. 52-75) refers to these clues as "signals of transcendence."

Signals of Transcendence

Signals of transcendence are clues or signs that lead seekers to consider the possibility that human nature and the nature of the world are not accidents of chance. Rather, humans and nature are ordered by something greater than themselves from which they derive meaning. These "signals" are not proofs, but pointers beyond themselves to universals, or principles of reality, upon which existence itself is ordered and built. Some significant examples come to mind:

- *The cry for order and meaning.* When little children awaken in the night crying from fear, mothers hold them and comfort them with the words, "It will be OK. Everything is all right. You are safe with me." Implicit in this universal maternal scene is a clue that humans yearn for and require order and meaning. To children, parents embody the safety and comfort that comes from order and meaning. Humans universally cry out for order, meaning, and the safety from threats coming from a world in which that meaning and order are not certain or promised.
- *The cry for justice.* The impact of some evils on the world is so great that these evils are universally repudiated. Even in our day of deeply entrenched moral relativism everyone finds some evils so morally repugnant that we cry out for damnation of the evil and justice for the victims. This universal cry points to a truth that rises above the whims of culture and seasons of history; namely, that there must be an eternal kind of justice that gives foundation to justice for this world.
- *The cry of joy.* Happiness can be thin and short-lived. True joy, like the healthy birth of a much-desired baby, seems to "demand" the perpetuation of its own existence. Something profound about joy captures us. True joy seems so right and good that it deserves to exist forever. The human experience of joy cries out, "Let me be forever!" Joy also seems to point to the "need" for a forever in which it can continue to be true.

• *The cry of love.* The same can be said for love as was said for joy. Even in superficial popular versions of romantic love there hides an impulse that love can surmount all boundaries. True unconditional love—like that experienced between parent and child or within "family"—possesses such character that it seems to surmount ugliness, harm, and the limitations of our finite existence.

These "cries" for order, meaning, justice, joy, and love all seem to point to an authentic human need for bigger, lasting versions of them to exist beyond this present world. They seem to say there must be another, truer reality which transcends and outshines this present one—an eternal existence in which order, meaning, justice, joy, and love, rule over all else.

Truth, Courage, and Vulnerability

Truth seekers must be courageous *and* vulnerable. Trying to "see through to" truth in our day of vapid but intimidating relativism takes courage; to speak of one's search for what is true in a time when it is socially, politically, and philosophically incorrect to do so is not easy. It also takes courage to admit when one's present understanding of humanness and the world is not working. When one's understandings of what is true begin to break down, only personal courage will allow an open, honest search for a better and truer understanding of the world and how one is to live with that understanding.

However, while gathering our strength to resist storms of propaganda and ideology, we must also remain vulnerable to letting the truth hit home. Seeing through to truth requires openness—a vulnerability and receptivity to letting the truthfulness of Truth have its impact. This vulnerability to truth is a moral commitment of integrity we must make to acknowledge the truth when for sound reasons we believe we have heard or seen it.

To be a seeker, then, is to possess an intuitive wisdom that will not allow one to settle for what Nietzsche called "sleepwalking" through life. Seekers are burdened by the need to "see through" ordinary experience in the search for something larger to give meaning beyond "everydayness." King Solomon, the poet, wisely warned humanity that the Creator has placed "eternity" in our hearts and given us a "grievous task." That task, at the root of our restless yearnings, is to search reality for what is true and therefore worth giving one's life to. That which is absolutely true and absolutely good will fulfill absolutely our deepest human yearnings for what is eternally significant.

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