

**The unpretentious title of this sermon is
“The Meaning of Life and Other Stupid Questions”**

I want to suggest a different, and perhaps, courageous new way to look at our lives.

We begin with a reading from Carlos Castaneda’s “The Teachings of Don Juan”:

“Any path is only a path and there is no affront, to oneself or to others, in dropping it if that is what your heart tells you. Look at every path closely and deliberately. Try it as many times as you think necessary. Then ask yourself, and yourself alone, one question...Does this path have a heart? If it does, the path is good; if it doesn’t it is of no use.”

In the Movie “About Schmidt” (played by Jack Nicholson), Schmidt’s wife dies. Afterwards Schmidt is alone in his house when he thinks “When I die and everyone I know dies, who will know I’ve lived?”

This question “who will know I’ve lived?” really bothered me. It goes to the heart of why are we here, and what does life mean? Like many I always accepted that these questions must be confronted to live a fulfilled life. Now I don’t. Now I think they are irrelevant, even stupid questions. Especially why are we here?

Or in the words of one of our May affirmants, “The search for meaning stinks.”

To clarify I will use the phrases the meaning of life and why we are here interchangeably.

What I mean by irrelevant is the idea that some creator made us and has a purpose for us.

I am not talking about what gives our live purpose as described by:

Bentham and John Stuart Mill: "that the good is whatever brings the greatest happiness to the greatest number of people".

The meaning I call stupid and irrelevant is the man’s insistence that he is the most important thing in the universe and a creator is responsible for our existence and purpose.

I believe man, Homo sapiens, is just a flash in the pan who came quickly and will leave quickly. And we can take from this knowledge that we exist in a stunningly beautiful and awesome universe. Rev. **Kendyl Gibbons** of **All Souls in Kansas City** refers to this **acknowledgement as The primal experience of reverence** “**It is our job to decide how you will respond to that breathtaking beauty, which consists partly in the recognition that you and the world around you and the creative energy of the whole universe are embedded in the same source, and are in some profound way the same thing.**”

On a side note, my wife cautioned me to emphasize that this is not a call to 'sit around smoking dope saying awesome man, just awesome.'

Again Reverend Gibbons contrasts to what I call the irrelevant meaning of life: None of this Experience of Reverence "has anything to do with an old man sitting on a cloud with a long beard keeping score."

The universe remains unconscious in its beauty. Or as Galileo put it: ""The Sun, with all the planets revolving around it, and depending on it, can still ripen a bunch of grapes as though it had nothing else in the Universe to do."

The last 2 years I read Karen Armstrong's "Life of Buddha" and the Quran and the Bible cover to cover. I even read Ovid's Metamorphoses which is the ancient Greek creation myth and religious story. I wanted to see if these books answered the question "Why are we here".

At the same time I recorded and watched, several times, the entire Science Channel Series "How the Universe Works".

There is an intersection here. The Life of Buddha, the Bible, the Quran and "How the Universe Works".

Buddhism:

From Wikipedia: "The Buddhist [sūtras](#) and [tantras](#) do not speak about "the meaning of life" or "the purpose of life", but about the potential of human life to end suffering through detaching oneself from cravings and conceptual attachments."

From Fritoj Kapra's Tao of Physics

The Buddha was not interested in satisfying human curiosity about the origin of the world, the nature of the Divine, or similar questions. He was concerned exclusively with the human situation, with the suffering and frustrations of human beings.

The Buddha might have answered the question "Why are we here?" with a koan like this
A monk told the Master Joshu: 'I have just entered the monastery. Please teach me.'

Joshu asked: 'Have you eaten your rice porridge?

The monk replied: 'I have eaten.'

Joshu said: Then you had better wash your bowl. '3

The Bible:

We pretty much know what the Bible is about. The Old Testament is the story of the Nation of Israel and their relationship to their God.

One of the best illustrations of Gods relationship to Israel that best summarizes the Old Testament comes from Hosea Chapter 11:

"When Israel was a child, I loved him, and I called my son out of Egypt.

But the more I called to him, the farther he moved from me, offering sacrifices to the images of Baal and burning incense to idols.

I myself taught Israel how to walk, leading him along by the hand. But he doesn't know or even care that it was I who took care of him.

I led Israel along with my ropes of kindness and love. I lifted the yoke from his neck, and I myself stooped to feed him.

"But since my people refuse to return to me, they will return to Egypt and will be forced to serve Assyria.

War will swirl through their cities; their enemies will crash through their gates. They will destroy them, trapping them in their own evil plans.

For my people are determined to desert me. They call me the Most High, but they don't truly honor me.

"Oh, how can I give you up, Israel? How can I let you go? How can I destroy you like Admah or demolish you like Zeboiim? My heart is torn within me, and my compassion overflows.

No, I will not unleash my fierce anger. I will not completely destroy Israel, for I am God and not a mere mortal. I am the Holy One living among you, and I will not come to destroy.

For someday the people will follow me. I, the LORD, will roar like a lion. And when I roar, my people will return trembling from the west.

Like a flock of birds, they will come from Egypt. Trembling like doves, they will return from Assyria. And I will bring them home again," says the LORD.

For Unitarians the Old Testament certainly sheds little light on the why we are here.

The New Testament is the story of the hero Christ and the successful efforts of his followers to make Christianity the State Religion of the Roman Empire.

We do love the Christ who, when asked what do with your enemies responds “Love them”. His life resonates with us.

Kendyl Gibbons: “And it was in the life of a radical Jewish peasant who called for a community of love and justice that took no account of Roman authority and followed his scorn for oppressive power to the cross.”

Still for most Unitarians the story of Christ does not answer “Why are we here?”

The Quran is a manual, revealed by God to Mohammed over a period of 23 years, telling what to believe and how to behave in this life so we can enjoy the next in “a garden with flowing waters”

The Koran details how to handle marriages, divorces, inheritances etc. It states the purpose of life is for man to submit to God’s will. Again for most Unitarians this too does not answer “Why are we here?”

In both the Bible and the Koran much time is spent describing or, if you prefer, creating God. The Bible describes many of the personality traits of God such as anger, jealousy, revenge, bloodlust, and love. These are all human traits. Mohammed also tells us how God knows everything you do and think, and, is the, most Gracious, “Sustainer of All the Worlds”.

In both the Bible and the Koran, this God, created and controls all life, all weather, earthquakes, sea monsters, etc. This God interacts with each of us every day and has distinct likes and dislikes. In both cases God is a humanized icon, created completely in our image.

Both books include extensive explanations of why we are here (God created us in his image to enjoy heaven with him).

I feel both books are the result of man projecting his ego. Man desperately needs to feel significant so he creates The God of the universe.

So what this got to do with the Science Channel Series “How the Universe Works”.

The series starts with the “Big Bang” Theory.

The episode starts with Larry Krause and Michio Kaku stating before 13.7 Billion Years ago there was nothing. No vacuum, no space, no time. Nothing. A Nothing we cannot conceive of. In this Nothing a sub atomic particle spontaneously appeared and became unstable and exploded outwards creating a Universe that is 150 Billion Light years across and now contains over 100 billion galaxies (There is also a competing Brane theory which replaces the subatomic particle with membranes. Both theories result in a Big Bang). In Larry Krause words “Something came out of Nothing”. “Something came

out of Nothing". And since this subatomic particle or Brane created our Universe Krause and company state perhaps other Universes were created out of Nothing.

Physicists question the ability of the human mind to actually grasp these ideas, this something coming from nothing and creating a Universe.

Perspective is important. So I would like to spend some time understanding where humans and the earth fit in.

We are in, as Stephen Hawking says a 'Universe' that is 'is, 'really, really big'.

From Morgan Freeman's "Through the Wormhole: Does Time Really Exist"

"In the past century we learned we live in a nondescript region of a backwater galaxy in a universe that is unimaginably vast"

And from "The nature of design: ecology, culture, and human intention"

By David W. Orr

"We inhabit the third planet out from a fifth- rate star located in a **backwater galaxy**. We are the center of nothing obvious to our science. We do not know whether the earth is just dead matter or whether it is, in some respects, alive".

I would paraphrase Morgan Freeman 'we live in a universe where we are unimaginably insignificant.'

For all recorded history man position himself at the center of all existence. For the ancient Chinese China was the center of the world. We have stories of Ming emperors burning the entire Chinese fleet because they felt there was no point going anywhere since China was the center of civilization and no place else had anything to offer. In the Middle East cultures grew up saying their god was the only god and is the god of the entire universe. The Greeks portrayed the universe as being a series of crystalline spheres with the earth at the center. And of course Galileo wrote a paper stating the Earth was not the center and revolved around the Sun he was excommunicated and put under lifetime house arrest (because it was the beginning of the Enlightenment Galileo was not burned at the stake).

At the beginning of the 20th Century science was convinced there was only one Galaxy and that Galaxy, the Milky Way composed the Universe.

Man's history is one of continued hubris, of continual self-importance and self centerness, of continued projecting his self-importance to the world around him. His God is the only God and is THE God of the entire universe. His physical place is the most significant important place in the universe. And when man discovers maybe he is not the most significant, important, godlike being in existence he creates myths like

intelligent design to deal with this catastrophic blow to his ego. So much of how we view the existence is based on what we want it to be – not as it actually maybe.

Carl Sagan:

Because of the reflection of sunlight . . . the earth seems to be sitting in a beam of light, as if there were some special significance to this small world. But it's just an accident of geometry and optics. . . . Our posturings, our imagined self-importance, the delusion that we have some privileged position in the Universe, are challenged by this point of pale light. Our planet is a lonely speck in the great enveloping cosmic dark.

Our Milky Way is a medium sized spiral galaxy about 100,000 light years across. So light that started on one side of our medium sized galaxy when homo sapiens first appeared on earth, is just now reaching the other end of the galaxy.

The Milky Way has about 150 billion suns (in other words our backwater galaxy has about 20 Suns for every human being on earth – so look at the sky and imagine 20 Suns for every human alive).

The largest galaxy IC1101 contains 100 trillion stars.

The total number of stars in the Universe Could Be 300 Sextillion (3 with 23 zeros after it). That number is our current best estimate which will probably be proven wrong. What we do know is that our best estimates keep increasing.

Werner von Braun “Our sun is one of 100 billion stars in our galaxy. Our galaxy is one of billions of galaxies populating the universe. It would be the height of presumption to think that we are the only living things in that enormous immensity.”

We did not discover the first planets outside the solar system until 1992. And until about 3 years ago we found very few earth-like planets. 2 years ago the Kepler satellite telescope came on line, and Kepler along with the 3 huge observatories in Paranal Chile and Large Binocular Telescope in Arizona now find about 2 planets a day. And the last 2 years we discovered 100 earthlike planets. The nearest earthlike planet is only 20 light years away (with our best technology it would take about 90,000 years to get there!)Based on the latest numbers there could be over 100,000 earths in the Milky Way. And there are over 100 billion galaxies in the Universe. We now think there 100 thousand time 100 billion earths. That is a really large number of earths.

Paul Davies [English physicist](#), “A universe that came from nothing in the big bang will disappear into nothing at the big crunch. Its glorious few zillion years of existence not even a memory.”

Astronomers forecast that earth will be destroyed within 5 billion years, either when earth’s orbit becomes unstable or the sun explodes.

At the same time the universe continues to expand and cool at an accelerating rate. Astronomers forecast that in several trillion years the night sky will be dark because all the galaxies and stars will be so far apart. And that eventually all the stars will burnout. The universe will be cold and dead.

This too is one of the properties of this mystical event we live in.

Dr. Carl Sagan “It is far better to grasp the Universe as it really is than to persist in delusion, however satisfying and reassuring.”

According to many Christians God made us, and we are the only intelligent beings he made and no other planets are inhabited with intelligent beings except earth. Recent knowledge implies that any God involved has much more to deal with than the 3rd planet from a 5th rate star in a backwater galaxy. This God or creative force or whatever entity you would like to describe, may have other universes to deal with. Or perhaps universes are too small and this God force can only relate to multiple universes.

Barry Lopez is an [American](#) author, [essayist](#), and [fiction](#) writer whose work is known for its humanitarian and environmental concerns. He won the [National Book Award for Nonfiction](#) for *Arctic Dreams* (1986)¹ “We simply do not understand our place in the universe and have not the courage to admit it”

Liberation comes in the realization that we exist. We don’t know why. At some point we will cease to exist. Again we don’t know why. And it is not important. It is important to be astounded by the reality around us. To be stunned by its size and incomprehensibility, to want to know as much about it as possible. The liberation comes in not worrying if there is a God, or an afterlife.

“There is a theory which states that if ever for any reason anyone discovers what exactly the Universe is for and why it is here it will instantly disappear and be replaced by something even more bizarre and inexplicable. There is another that states that this has already happened.” Douglas Adams author of [The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy](#)

When the scientists describe galaxies almost with a certain glee they tell us they will die and the universe will become cold dark and lifeless. I believe their ‘glee’ comes from amazement and wonder.

Modern man is a species who has existed about 100,000 year and is one of the youngest species on the planet. In comparison sharks and mosquitoes have lived tens of millions of years. And of course dinosaurs lasted about 100 million years. And this young species homo sapiens who has yet to live as long as light travelling back and forth across our backwater galaxy twice, this species will certainly disappear probably sooner than later (by galactic standards). And when gone will leave no permanent trace. A veritable flash in the pan. So again what can we make of this 'flash in the pan'. The only adequate response is wonderment. How did this incredible universe come to exist? How did we come to exist in it? And isn't it all amazing. Amazing that we even exist.

Edward P. Tryon professor of [physics](#) at [Hunter College](#). "In answer to the question of why it happened, I offer the modest proposal that our Universe is simply one of those things which happen from time to time."

The more we know about reality the more magical it appears to be.

Then why are we here? What is the point? Aren't we going to heaven (or at least the Garden with Flowing Waters and a chaste spouse)?

This is irrelevant. The question is are we going to experience the stunning universe we live in. Are going to put aside this self-centered egotism that obsessed man for all recorded history. Are we going to luxuriate in Kendyl Gibbons Primal Reverence?

This reverence or knowledge is poetry and magic. The more we know the more magical and mysterious a place this seems to be.

Finally from Carl Sagan "Somewhere, something incredible is waiting to be known."