

The Meaning of Life and its Relation to Money

Jürg Conzett, initiator of the MoneyMuseum, meets with Pastor Adelheid Jewanski in 2005

By Carol Schwyzer, © MoneyMuseum

When Spring and questions awake ...

It's the Monday before Easter. Holy Week. The March days are grey, and people wrap themselves up in their winter coats to protect themselves against the chill air. The bare tops of the trees stand out starkly against the milky sky. But down in the vicarage garden, specks of colour give promise of the approach of Spring. Yellow primulas, purple crocuses and little red tulips defy the universal greyness, and the birds whistle it triumphantly to all the world: Spring has come! Life is awakening from its winter sleep.

Adelheid Jewanski, who has been vicar of Kilchberg near Zurich for three years, has an extensive view from the first floor of her vicarage. She looks down on wide green meadows, old trees and half-timbered houses, but also on to a modern building in brown and orange, and two cranes which signal the construction of new things. And as a background in the distance, there is the smooth mirror of the lake.

The awakening of Spring, although Winter can still be felt. A time of transition, from sleep to burgeoning life. A good time to reflect on and talk about the meaning of life. There can scarcely be a better person to discuss it with than this young, dark-haired woman pastor with her large eyes in which seriousness and humour are evenly balanced. It is part of her profession to concern herself with the essential questions of the human condition, with questions about God and the meaning of life. In the course of her everyday life she encounters people in desperate situations who have lost sight of any such meaning. She helps them merely through being there, by establishing a relationship. A relationship as the hidden centre of the search for meaning – that's an important experience that Adelheid Jewanski brings to this conversation.

The question of meaning in the course of history

From the most ancient times, we human beings have concerned ourselves with the question of the meaning of our finite lives. We don't think about it all the time, of course. Mostly, we just live the life that has been given us, through our senses. We work, eat, sleep, make love, bring up our children and grow old. But we also have the ability to think about ourselves and about the world, to reflect and to observe how we ourselves develop, from the past through the present into the future. Many great thinkers have given us their views about the meaning of life. Sigmund Freud says: «The moment one begins to ask about the meaning and value of life, one is ill.» And the old saying tells us: «Everything has a meaning; it's just a question of finding it.» Adelheid Jewanski says: «If we ask about the meaning of life, we're trying to set up a relationship with something essential that is threatening to slip out of our grasp, or which has already gone.»

The question of meaning no doubt often arises in situations in which the normal flow of life is blocked by a problem, be it sickness or some other crisis. Goethe's Faust is a man in the middle of just such a crisis. He is a middle-aged man who has studied everything – philosophy, law, and

medicine – and has found no answer, because of the limitation of human life and the contradictions in his own nature. He has arrived at a turning point.

Times where thinking about something was enough meaningful

Adelheid Jewanski places a quotation from «Faust» at the beginning of her brief account of meaning. Faust begins to interpret the first verse of St John's Gospel, and searches for the correct translation of the word *Logos*.

*«It is written: In the beginning was the Word!
But there I stop! Who'll help me on?
I cannot esteem the Word so highly;
I must translate it differently,
If I am enlightened by the Spirit.
It is written: In the beginning was the Meaning.
Consider well that first line,
don't let your pen run away with you!
Is it Meaning that effects and creates everything?
It should say: In the beginning was the Power!
Yet even as I write those words,
something warns me I shall not let it stand.
The Spirit helps me! Suddenly, I see the truth
and write in full confidence: In the beginning was the Deed!»*

In those few lines, Faust marches with giant steps through intellectual history into the 18th century, when the enlightened belief in Progress expressed itself in the confident world view: «In the beginning was the Deed.» «As I see it, the Deed represents arrival in the Industrial Age, with its attitude that he who creates something is worth something. This attitude has been valid for the last two or three hundred years», says Adelheid Jewanski.

As far back as classical antiquity, people sought to discover the principles that hold the world together. The view of work as the meaning of life was not, however, always central. In ancient Greece, only slaves worked. The free man found meaning in the perception and observation of the world. What was important was «Theoria» (Greek for «observation»), the explanation of the world. Free men were concerned with questions such as: What keeps the world together? Where does life come from? How can it be described? The slaves simply had to work – «People didn't think so much about the meaning of that.»

Times where the meaning of life had to be worked out

The turning point came in the Middle Ages with the Rule of St Benedict, the founder of the Benedictine order: *Ora et labora!* – Work and pray! The mere perception and observation of the world were now joined as an equal partner by ordinary work to maintain life. The first monks lived in the desert, entirely devoted to meditation. Once there came to be more and more monks, the life of a hermit was no longer possible, and with the establishment of monasteries, work made its entry into monks' lives. «Viewed in that way, work as the meaning of life was an invention of the expanding new religion of Christianity», says Ms Jewanski, «and points out that culture arose in

the monasteries because it was there that research and work was done. The work ethos of the Reformation stated that the success of the work indicated that God had heard and blessed the worker.»

Taken to its extreme, that view may nowadays lead people to measure their own worth by the size of their salaries. The Industrial Revolution created a great demand for labour. Since labourers could now no longer be recruited as slaves or as subjects, as medieval princes had been able to do, work had to be made acceptable. Work moved to the centre of the stage. «Nowadays we all have to work, but what work we do and how we arrange it – that's where we still have a choice.» That is how Ms Jewanski describes the role of work in the world of today. She reminds us that as well as mere financial reward, something else is becoming more and more important: the sympathetic human contact that work brings people. «There's a sort of «attention-economy» – people are more concerned to enjoy recognition than financial reward, for example by appearing in a reality show.» Does this mark the end of money as an expression of social approval? Are there, at the turn of the 21st century, indications pointing away from the kind of extreme materialism that places achievement at the centre of the meaning of life?

A new commandment: «You should become who you are»

This statement of Friedrich Nietzsche shows, that we human beings are born incomplete. We have to acquire and develop almost all our faculties – eating, walking, holding, talking, thinking, are all things we have to learn from birth onwards. All of us receive in our genes a plan which Creation allows us to realise. The skills contained in this plan could be called talents.

In the parable of the talents (Luke 19 and Matthew 25), Jesus tells us how we should use our talents. A man comes back from a journey and sees how his servants have used the money entrusted to them in his absence. Some of them have quadrupled it, some have doubled it, but a few simple-minded ones have buried it, stuffing it under the mattress as it were. These last, who have not worked with the gift of their lord, are sharply rebuked: «For I say unto you: unto every one that hath shall be given ... but from him that hath not shall be taken away, even that which he hath.» This 2000-years-old parable shows that we are intended to use our heavenly gifts, be they intellectual or material «talents», with skill and care, and that we are expected to increase them to the best of our abilities.

The meaning of life, then, consists in investing our talents well, developing our own potential. All of us should develop into the people we are intended to be in our genetic plans. This view is relevant even in the 20th century. To describe it, the great Swiss psychologist Carl Gustav Jung coined the term «individuation». The German writer Hermann Hesse says: «Man's true profession is to come to himself.» That means that if I am Tom, and I have skilled hands, then it is my task to become Tom, and to use my hands, for example as a carpenter. And not to try to emulate Dick, who is so good at thinking and can express himself in words so much better than I can. And the healer Harald Wessbecher sees the task of human beings in expressing their human ideas in the world and living out the creative principle of change. As he puts it: «The meaning of human life is many-faceted, and the more of these facets that are sought out, expressed and lived intensively at the same time, the more will human consciousness be fulfilled, meaningful, and complete in its experience until death.»

Money as a teacher in search of sense

Jürg Conzett is fascinated by the double meaning of the word «talent» in the parable. A talent is both an ancient unit of value, i.e. money, and an innate gift.

In the course of our life's journey, we encounter many teachers who can help us to develop ourselves and to multiply our talents. «A teacher has to have more character than I have. He's got to be able to do more than just tell me things I already know», says Frau Jewanski.

The MoneyMuseum is about money, of course, but it's also about its background and the secrets which emerge in dealing with money. «Your money or your life!» said the highway robbers in the old days. Money *and* life – that's the connection the MoneyMuseum is here to investigate.

If the meaning of life consists in developing our skills, then maybe the meaning of money lies in giving people a means of obtaining the necessary freedom to do that. «Money is not the meaning of life, of course, and left to itself, it creates nothing. But it is a means to freedom, for the realisation of aims.» And it is very important for money to remain just such a means, says Pastor Jewanski, for money can enslave us if we allow it to become the be-all and end-all of our lives.

The handling of money as a mirror

Money has the function of a mirror. If we teach our children to use money wisely, that is a means of showing them the connection between cause and effect. The child spends its savings on a bicycle, and a wish is fulfilled. But the piggy bank is empty, and more money has to be acquired and saved up for the teddy-bear. One learns the value of things, what is worth investing in, and what to do if one has made a wrong investment.

Adelheid Jewanski compares money with water. Water poured on plants makes them grow. In the same way, money can be used to make something flourish. But just as too much water can destroy things in a flood, so money in large quantities can be destructive. Money does not itself provide nourishment as does water, but money can buy nourishment, including intellectual nourishment in the form of education.

If we look at the flow of money, it may dawn on us that someone who has problems with money probably also has problems with the exchange of energies. The market, too, can be a teacher, when it forces us in fear and trembling, in some unexpected crisis, to leave the clear, broad motorways, and leads us up some overgrown forest path. «Unexpected things force us to re-think.» What is true of the market is true of life too.

A shortage, including a shortage of money, inspires creativity, whereas superabundance is paralysing. If one has the feeling of having everything, a blockage results. People can only become creative if they have to develop ways of expressing themselves, whether in an intellectual or material sense. Money is a symbol of exchange; exchanging creates relationships, and relationships are part of the meaning of life, says Adelheid Jewanski.

Meaning and relationships – a symbiosis

In the course of her job, Adelheid Jewanski meets many people who seek her help in crisis situations. People out of work, the disabled, the woman who is going to have to spend her last years in a nursing home, ask especially: «What is the meaning of my life in view of these blows?»

«Human beings live in an open environment which forces them to ask about meaning, about the tangible meaning of life. And they can become conscious of that meaning in the concrete situations in which they find themselves, and in view of the people they care for and who care for them.» Ms Jewanski puts relationships in first place in the search for a meaningful life. In her work as a pastor she offers her company and her presence, and her vicarious belief in improvement and healing, to people who find themselves in a meaningless situation: «Thou shalt love the lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul and with all thy mind, and thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.» This, the most important of the Ten Commandments, comprises all our possible relationships, with ourselves, with others, with the spirit of all other things. Lack of relationships is death, says Ms Jewanski. Relationships as exchanges keep us alive and transmit life, not merely in a biological way in the love between man and woman. The transmission of life is certainly the principal purpose in Nature.

But unlike other creatures such as plants and animals, human beings have found other ways of transmitting life, for example in caring for others. And in creativity, in the creation of art, people have found another way of transmitting life. In his harmonious statues, the sculptor conducts a dialogue, with the stone, with himself, with his figures. That creates yet more – it creates transcendence.

In the form of living relationships, we grow beyond ourselves and experience ourselves as a part of a meaningful whole. For Adelheid Jewanski, relationships are the strongest argument for life.

Happiness – a base right?

The pursuit of happiness, the idea that all people have a right to happiness, was anchored as a basic right in the United States Constitution in 1776. Sigmund Freud asked, in the course of his pursuit of the meaning of life: What do people demonstrate through their actions to be the purpose and intention of their lives? What do they demand of life, what do they seek to achieve in it? «The answer is impossible to miss – they strive for happiness; they want to be happy and stay happy», says Freud.

The enjoyment of the moment, the fulfilling of a need, can give a feeling of happiness. The fact that the enjoyment of life is an elementary part of the meaning of life is expressed in the Bible in the Book of Ecclesiastes: «Eat thy bread with joy, and drink thy wine with a merry heart, for God now accepteth thy works.» And: «Live joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest all the days of the life of thy vanity, which he hath given thee under the sun ... for that is thy portion in this life, and in thy labour which thou takest under the sun.» (Ecclesiastes 9, 7-9)

But happiness can also be one of the side effects if we succeed in unfolding our genetic plan in our lives, if we manage to develop step-by-step into the person we really are. Of course, happiness is not a fixed, steady state, but a repeated gift that fills life with meaning.

Can the meaning of life be found between mere animal existence, conscious self-development, and the striving for happiness? Pastor Jewanski smiles – «The meaning of life is not a finished product; it's a lifelong process in which people build their experiences into their total life-experience.»

The rest is secret

In company with Ms Jewanski, we throw light on many aspects of the meaning of life. But we do not find a single, final, universal answer. Jürg Conzett asks: «Why can't we plumb the depths of a secret, publish it, so that people can have rules to keep to and find the meaning of life once and for all?» Adelheid Jewanski answers: «It's like with faith; you can't transfer it to others. You can talk about it – but even then, other people may not be able to do very much with it. They have to experience it themselves.»

Every life has its own meaning, just as every individual has his or her own personality. As long as we live, we cannot find the final meaning, for human experience is open-ended and we live in the midst of an open process. Giving meaning, creating meaning, providing meaning, seeking and finding meaning in the great expanses of openness. In this Monday conversation with a young theologian we find inspiration to ask for ourselves, to think for ourselves, to seek for ourselves, and to find for ourselves.

The circle closes

With these thoughts about the meaning of life, the circle closes at a higher level. Viktor E. Frankl, a concentration camp survivor, and the founder of logotherapy and meaning therapy, recognised that for human beings, the meaning of existence is a vital concern. Meaning includes our expression in the material world as well as in mental reality. Meaning is central. Money is central too, provided it serves as a means for life and as an expression of our personality. The energy which resides in the money-flow is present on another level as the energy of life.