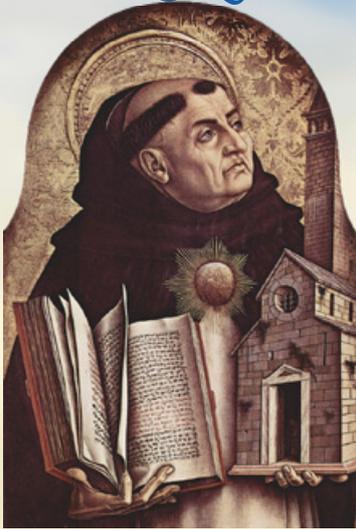


The Big Question: Does My Life Have Meaning?



“I cannot write any more. All that I have written seems like straw to me.”

Those are the words of **Thomas Aquinas** – one of the Western world’s most influential philosophers and theologians – spoken three months before he died in 1274. Aquinas was answering a question asked by people in every walk of life, from parents to plumbers to professors, people like you and me who will never achieve Aquinas’s fame. It’s asked by adults of all ages, but perhaps most urgently by elders who wonder if they will leave anything of value behind: does my life have meaning?

... If you’ve ever been downcast about the meaning of your life, you know that reassurance from others, no matter how generous, doesn’t do the trick. Everyone has to answer the question for him or herself, at least that’s what I thought until 5.15 am on Thursday, May 12th.

I was starting my day as I always do, with coffee and poetry, when I ran across a poem on the nature of love by the Nobel Prize-winning, Polish poet **Czeslaw Milosz**. As I read and re-read it, I began to see that brooding on “Does my life have meaning?” is a road to nowhere. Whether I give myself a thumbs up or a thumbs down, there’s a flaw at the heart of the question – a flaw created by our old nemesis, the overweening ego. Here’s the poem that opened my eyes:

Love

*Love means to learn to look at yourself
The way one looks at distant things
For you are only one thing among many.
And whoever sees that way heals his heart,
Without knowing it, from various ills.
A bird and a tree say to him: Friend.
Then he wants to use himself and things
So that they stand in the glow of ripeness.
It doesn't matter whether he knows what he serves:
Who serves best doesn't always understand.*

There’s truth and liberation in those last two lines. The truth is that I often don’t know whom or what I serve. The thing I set out to achieve turns out to be less meaningful than its unintended and often unknown consequences. I remember, for example, a talk I gave a long time ago. My intent was to blow away the audience with the power of my ideas, but they were not impressed ... Years later, by rare chance, I met a person who’d been in that audience. “I’m glad to meet you,” she said. “I’ve wanted to tell you how your talk changed everything for me.”

Her words were a powerful reminder that I often don’t and can’t know – let alone control – the meaning of my life. All that’s in my power are my own intentions and my willingness to give myself to them ... Peace comes when I understand that I am “only one thing among many,” no more and no less important than the bird and the tree Milosz writes about ... once I understand that I’m not the sun at the centre of anyone’s solar system, I can step aside, stop casting a shadow everywhere I go, and allow the true sun to shine on everyone and everything, making all things ripe with the glow of new life. This, it would seem, is Milosz’s ultimate definition of love, and it works for me.

Source: Parker J Palmer (@parkerjpalmer)

REFLECTION

- > We often don’t know the impact we have on others.
- > How does this influence your daily interactions – at home and at work?