

The Second Half: Lifelong Learning Institute
Program: Conversations on Aging
Presentation: Aging - The Examined Life
Presenter: Raymond L. Loranger

As part of a course for The Second Half, Conversations on Aging, Ray Loranger gave the following presentation. It is a road map for living a valuable, meaningful life in the last quarter of our lives. What follows is Ray's presentation as he gave it on May 30, 2017. –Ed.

For those who don't know me, my name is Raymond Loranger. I have been a member of The Second Half for a few years now, and I have facilitated a seminar a couple of times on the philosophy of mind and the nature of thinking. Several months ago, Eileen asked if I would give a presentation on the purpose and meaning of life in the elder years as part of a series of talks under the general heading of Conversations on Aging. Without giving it much thought, I agreed. Several weeks later she provided the title for this presentation which is "What Was the Point: The examined life." Eileen then asked if I would write something to put in the spring catalog, some small explanation, and I wrote, "One of the most recognized statements in philosophy is 'The unexamined life is not worth living.' Philosophy is thinking that seeks rational clarity and ethical consistency. From that definition is born philosophical psychology that focuses on thinking and behavior studied from the past and applicable to the present. In that light, it is life examined from many perspectives." For better or worse I'm here today to try to explain that statement. This was far more mentally and labor intensive than I originally thought, and I have tried to remain neutral on a subject that screams against neutrality, especially theologically and religiously. My approach is decidedly philosophical and psychological. The purpose and meaning of life is a wide-ranging, far-reaching, and deep topic, much discussed over the centuries, and there are many ideas and opinions on this subject, probably as many as there are individuals in this room. Because of that I am requesting that I be allowed to make the full presentation before we get into any questions, comments, and discussions. Please write down your questions or make notes on anything you want to comment on. I really think it is very important for everyone to have the opportunity to express their thoughts on anything relating to this subject matter.

The Greek philosopher Socrates, having been condemned to death, was reported to have said before taking the poison to fulfill his sentence, “The unexamined life is not worth living.” The interpretation of that statement is that it is better to die than not have the chance to examine your life. Why? In Socrates’ view, it is essential to examine one’s life in order to live a better life going forward. For Socrates, self-improvement through self-examination is a key component to living the good life and the philosophical ideal of self-questioning. It is kind of a roundabout way of reaffirming the inscription on the ancient Greek temple at Delphi that reads, “Know Thyself.” Although I do not feel the kind of pressure that Socrates might have felt, I do agree that self-knowledge is important to living life forward, and that it is tied to examining the meaning and purpose of life. My intent today is to attempt to provide a few ideas on these subjects and how they may apply to our elder years. The general question, I suppose, is, “What does it all mean?” At this stage of your lives, my life, in our senior years, have you ever asked yourself: What is the point of my life? What is the point of human life, period?” The first question is subjective, more personal, the second is more objective, more generally philosophical, psychological, and theological. Nonetheless we can all ask individually, what the hell does it all mean? I have lived these many years, 77.5 years to be exact, and I have asked and still ask what does it all mean? How did I get here, how did I get to this point in my life? Even more specifically, who am I, what’s next, and how should I live? These are heavy-duty questions that are in fact deeply philosophical, psychological, theological, and intensely subjective. So where do we start?

Well, let’s start with the fact that we are here, alive, thinking, feeling, and, most importantly, we can ask those questions. We, the human animal, is the only animal on earth that asks those questions. We can ask those questions because we can think about the past, present, and future and communicate about all three areas. We can think because we have a mind, a brain that is capable of questioning, learning, exploring, investigating, expressing, and making choices, and sometimes coming to conclusions. Some of those conclusions may be a little fuzzy at times; nevertheless, it is in our nature, human nature, to think and to reason, to ponder, to wonder, to seek, and generally to express what is on our minds to ourselves and to others. Humans like to express themselves. History surely proves that. Human history is a constant story of human thinking and expression. Just think about the humanities and sciences. Just think over the ages the literature, the paintings, the sculpture, the inventions, the discoveries in the sciences, the vast accumulation of knowledge, and, in all that thinking, is included a search for a transcendent

meaning to human existence. The development of human intelligence (intellect) and the ability to choose and to express (will), that in itself is a good beginning that gives us pause to consider the meaning and purpose of human life, (intellect and will). It is interesting and somewhat surprising that we sometimes seem to take thinking for granted. I wonder, is it because thinking is so constant and natural, rather perpetual that we are in some ways blinded or shaded by our constant thinking? Does this constant use of the mind actually hinder or deter us from a special kind of thinking, which is to think about your thinking, to think about our thinking? How often do you think about your thinking? Why do you think the way you do? This specialized thinking is very important when considering the examined life. I will have more to say about that in a little bit, but first there is another important consideration I want to mention in regards to meaning and purpose, and that is, we all live in an environment that we call nature, and actually, not only do we live in nature, we are part of it, our very being is part of nature. We are nature in nature. There is also an evolutionary history to all this nature, and I think it is appropriate to contemplate and ask, are we (humans) the end product of billions of years of evolution, and is evolution ongoing? Is this evolutionary process just a series of random events, or is it the consequence of a defined created process? That in itself is an ongoing question debated by science and religion and more broadly reason and faith. Is it possible that the evolutionary process continues with humans through the constant and painfully slow development of thinking, mind, and consciousness? That may be another reason to pause and contemplate about the purpose and meaning of life.

Putting that aside for more future discussion, one thing we do know, all things in nature have a beginning and an end, and that includes us. Whatever the life process, it has a beginning and an end. Another thing we know as humans, we can think about this life process and progression. We have the unique ability of thinking. The cognitive powers of thinking and choosing are the single unique and most exceptional aspects of our human existence. Having a mind gives us the ability and capability to study, to examine, to explore, to remember, to believe, to question, to feel, to hate, to envy, to change, to forgive, to pray, to care, to help, to communicate, to love. It is the mind that gives us all these abilities. So, let's use the mind, our minds, to question meaning and purpose in our immediate lives.

I would like to do that by breaking our investigation into three parts.

I think what is especially relevant to our stage in life, our developmental stage, is that for most of us it is probably the last quarter or less of our earthly existence. This period of development is often referred to as the aging, elderly, seniors or just the old folks.

Remembering that we are thinking, expressive human beings of nature, and also remembering Socrates' counsel or admonition about the unexamined life, and the ancient Greek directive of Know Thyself, let us examine the triple life perspectives contained in the following statements.

One, Life is understood backwards.

Two, Life is lived forward.

Three, Life is experienced in the moment.

I think these three statements provide a map to follow, and the idea is to apply them to life in general but more so for you to apply each statement to your life in particular.

So let us start with number one.

Life is understood backwards.

This first item is quite important.

This is about your history, your personal narrative, your personal story.

This is the history, the reminiscence, the recollection, examination, understanding, and integration of your past.

So, I might ask, what do you understand about your life backwards, and how does that history affect your thinking today?

It is said in psychology that mental well-being is dependent on the integration of the past, in fact, it is believed that integration is a necessity for mental stability, openness, and flexibility of thought. And what is meant by integration? In psychology integration means, first, an examination of your past thinking, your accumulated knowledge, your past experiences, and how all of that influences your thinking today, and maybe in some cases even controls or

dominates your mind. Integration means assimilating all the parts that makes you you. All historical mental memories are assimilated into the narrative, a story about your personal history. Because of our age, we have a lot more to review. We are now in the later stage of human development. The operative word is *development*. We are still in a stage of process and progression and have not reached the part that says the end.

Because we are still developing as persons and want to continue to grow, it is reasonable and advisable to want a healthy mind. One consideration of a healthy mind is simply the absence of negative mental symptoms and dysfunction. From a psychological perspective that would mean a mind free from the excess of sadness, anxiety, loneliness, and a racing mind. Aging, on its own, brings enough problems, and the task at hand is to live with a more positive mental attitude where we can enjoy a measure of well-being, moments of contentment, and some peace of mind. Studies have shown that this does not happen unless we integrate the past and understand that our past thoughts and deeds need to be accepted, not pushed away, not denied, but accepted as part of the total package of who we are. Sometimes the acceptance of all of that may not be so easy.

Is there anything in the past that controls or dominates your thinking? The key words here are *control* or *dominate*. We are all influenced by our past, but unresolved issues that dominate the mind create thought patterns that become rigid or chaotic. Integration is a key mechanism in psychological healing. Again, research has shown that impairments to emotional well-being are movements of the mind away from integration. It is afflicted mental health if you are held in mental captivity by past circumstances and experiences. Psychic wounds need to be addressed and treated in order to heal. Healing may leave scars, but we can live with scars but not open wounds. This is about knowing how the past has shaped the present. When you bring everything in the whole, that gives you a better mental flow, and in psychology that is called cognitive stability that provides the opportunity for cognitive vitality.

This is the foundation for wisdom that sets the tone for living life forward, the second of the three perspectives.

Life is lived forward

A psychoanalyst by the name of Florida Maxwell wrote in her journal, which she says she started writing at eighty-two: "I thought aging was a quiet time,

my seventies were interesting and fairly serene, but my eighties are passionate. I grow more intense with age.”

I can identify with that. In my aging, I find I cuss more, I cry more, I laugh more, and I pray more, in no particular order. I am intense about learning, especially about the human mind. I want to understand as much as I can about human nature, the development of human nature, the complexities of human nature, the mysteries of human nature, and the human quest for truth and inner freedom. I personally have come to believe and accept that in general the purpose of human life falls into three categories.

TO KNOW, TO LOVE, TO SERVE. They are all connected and work together like three spark plugs that need each other to keep firing. To know, to love, and to serve.

The first, TO KNOW, is about learning and accumulating knowledge and life experience. This is the knowledge accumulated in the various stages of human development. It is whatever and whenever you learn about anything. This (to know) is simply to know as a human being. It is part of our human heritage to want to know. It is built into our minds. This is what I mentioned earlier about the evolving cognitive powers of humanity. What comes under the heading “to know” is anything that is learnable, explorable, anything that can be perceived by the senses and beyond, to what we learn in the realm of abstract concepts.

Epistemology is the study of knowledge. The purpose of this study is to continuously seek and assess knowledge in the pursuit of understanding and truth in the totality of life. This is a study that is endless. I have personally been bitten by the learning bugs of philosophy and psychology, and it has resulted in a terrible and wonderful rash of itchy curiosity and interest that keeps me scratching my mind. The diagnosis of this non-curable mind-searching condition comes under the general heading of philosophical psychology. It appears to be a permanent condition that will last as long as my mind will allow and the recurring symptom is the question, what is the truth? This enthusiastic cognitive desire to know is contagious and infectious, and you are all vulnerable and susceptible not because of me but because you are human and you want to know. But it is not automatic. We have to engage the mind to think, to learn, and to know and that again is a topic for future discussion.

The second purpose of human life is TO LOVE. To love is all about relationships, all relationships, all human encounters. I remember a TV program called “Kojak” about a totally bald New York detective portrayed by Telly Savalas whose character was that of a stern and professional police investigator, but he had an abiding sense of empathy for those who had been wronged, and he would go out of his way to help and counsel them and become friends with them. I have never forgotten his famous line, said many time in the series, that he asked of those who were in distress and in need of support, “Who loves you baby?”

I might ask the same question of all of you. Who loves you and Who do you love? That might be fairly easy to answer; however, I might expand on that and ask, what is love and why do you love? We do not have the time to explore that today, but there is no doubt in my mind that love is the most essential element for correct human thinking and behavior. It is the absence of love or lapses in love that cause great pain and suffering. If we are unable to love or receive love, then we are already dead, mentally and spiritually dead. Suffice it to say for now that love is rooted in respect, trust, kindness, and compassion, and if we bring that to all our relationships, then that is a good starting point to give essential meaning and purpose to our human existence.

And the third perspective and purpose for human life is TO SERVE. To serve is basically a result of to know and to love, for whatever has been accumulated in the first two, to know and to love, it is meant to be given away in to serve.

It means to express your knowledge and love to everyone that you come into contact with, from a chance meeting to a deep relationship. Life is just so much better when we are caring. Whether shown simply with a smile or with a deep-felt hug, both outward expressions say from the heart, “Who loves you baby.” I really like the Hindu greeting Namaste, Namaste. The original meaning of Namaste is, the divine in me salutes the divine in you. It captures the essence of our human purpose which is, we are here to serve each other in recognizing what is special in all humans, a divine spark or a thinking mind that sets each one of us apart as unique and special.

It is virtually impossible to exhaust any one of the three areas of human purpose, to know, to love, and to serve, because they are all part of the human

process and not ends in themselves. To know, to love, and to serve in my view are the anchors that give meaning to human existence.

As we age I think we should make the effort to live with passion and acceptance of the mystery of life. Our spirits should be questing rather than resting, and along with aging we should be *sageing*, becoming wiser because of our years.

Aging provides a unique maturity that facilitates spirituality and wisdom. In our longevity, we are the ones who set the example to be life affirming and love affirming.

A quality of the mind is acceptance which is the ability to accept our life in all its pain and sorrow, imperfections, missteps, but also goodness, generosity, and beauty. Acceptance is the opposite of resignation and defeat. It is more the grasping of reality and truth. We are awakened to our mortality, and this is often the time for a unique spiritual awakening. This can also be used as a method of integrating conflicts of the past or painful memories not yet assimilated or accepted. Issues of self-forgiveness and forgiveness of others can be included as part of a renewed spiritual quest.

Finally, **Life is lived forward.** You can examine that by thinking about the three categories of to know, to love, and to serve.

Lastly, Life is experienced in the moment.

New research has affirmed what wisdom traditions have taught for centuries that being aware of the present moment without being lost in judgments leads to well-being and serenity. Mindfulness, focused awareness, momentary presence are terms that embrace the ways of being open to things and not being overtaken by pre-existing beliefs and expectations.

Buddhist philosophy suggest that the source of suffering is found in the effort to cling to things. When we let go of material or mental attachments, suffering subsides. That is the goal of mindful meditation, to find deep acceptance in what is, including the reality of the impermanence of all that is or unfolds. Mindfulness is the power of concentration in the moment. Meditation and prayer are concentration in the moment in search of the transcendent. I have been working on mindfulness for many years with limited success. It is most definitely a work in progress. I need to practice more and learn to empty my mind and live in the millisecond of existence somehow united with the consciousness of the universe.

Life is truly experienced in the moment. There is no other moment but now. Maybe the moment, the now, with the mind cleared of earthly attachments is an instantaneous view of a future existence. Thomas Aquinas called it the *nunc stans*, the now that is, the now that never ends, the now that is eternal.

Spiritual eldering, spiritual wholeness are a result of positive mental attitudes and healthy emotions. Spiritual eldering is the context for lifelong learning, and lifelong learning is the context for spiritual eldering. In my view, they are interchangeable. Spiritual eldering affirms knowledge in the form of wisdom; spiritual eldering affirms love in the form of giving to others.

I hope that all of what I have presented here today will be of some benefit to your future thinking and personal explorations. All three areas, Life understood backwards, Life lived forward, and Life experienced in the moment are paths that provide opportunities for self-understanding, self-improvement, and self-love. One definition of love is love is goodness and kindness given away to others. We are meant to give away the good that we have accumulated through learning, and we are meant to give away the love that we now understand in our aging. It is the unique feature of our human nature. I suspect all of you are already doing this and may not even know it. Finally, I hope that I have provided some ideas to ponder and that I have not been too academic. I look forward to questions, comments and discussions. Thank you for listening and I wish you all many blessings.