

Our Search for Meaning

The search for meaning is as old as humanity. It is perhaps the prime characteristic distinguishing human beings from the rest of the animal kingdom. Although the search has been with us from the beginning, it is critical because now, particularly in the West, we have liberated ourselves from many shackles. We have gained unprecedented areas of free space for ourselves, but have not achieved the maturity to handle it.

Our problem with meaning is inextricably linked with the question of freedom. For many, freedom has positive connotations. We long for it but forget that we can lose our way in unstructured freedom. We are free to walk in any direction; there are no barriers. But neither are there guideposts to a goal. In an open field, we can get lost easily.

We have liberated ourselves from many age-old shackles. One example is in the institution of marriage. For centuries, parents chose, or at least influenced the choice of, marriage partners for their grown children. Marriage took place for social or economic reasons, often disregarding the children's wishes. Today, the West has gone through a revolutionary change—free choice of partners according to our needs and wants. This has contributed to instability in the institution of marriage. Statistically speaking, every other marriage results in divorce. More freedom of choice has brought greater insecurity.

Another example is the place of the woman in the West. She has broken the traditional shackles of being “just a housewife and mother” and has won

the freedom to practice almost any profession. But this freedom has its price: She faces the double or triple pressure of taking care of the home, rearing the children, and establishing herself in a profession. Thus in finding personal fulfillment, deep conflicts arise between family and professional responsibilities.

Other examples (such as the use of increasing leisure time) are not the immediate result of our crumbling traditions. Modern technology has increased our free time and comfort; we do not always know what to do with our free time, and comfort tempts us to an increasingly passive life. We sit in front of our televisions and a remote control spares us the effort of getting up to switch channels. Computers and smartphones offer instant access with a click or tap to social media and endless entertainment. The illusion of everlasting comfort relaxes but tends against productive activities. We even have a new profession, that of “leisure counselor.” Our spiritual horizon is shrinking; liberation from work has made many people *prisoners* of modern comfort.

Hardly any liberation has been more dramatic than that from sexual restrictions, and in no area is insecurity greater. An abundance of sexual stimuli has promoted the belief that sexual potency and orgasms are musts—and opened the floodgates of sexual dysfunction. Natural needs are artificially emphasized at the cost of human caring and affection. The result has been dissatisfaction, an inability to love, and disgust.

Equally dramatic are the consequences of liberation in the upbringing of children. Never before have children had so much freedom and power over their parents. They are raised without guidance, without role models, and with almost no restraints; and never before have we experienced such demoralization, aggressiveness, or reaction of young people against themselves and their environment. What lies behind this brutality? What is to be done with all that free energy? What goals are still worth pursuing? Our children’s self-understanding is undermined. The entire family suffers from a loss of social control that previously was exerted by a large circle of relatives and friends. People live isolated in huge apartment houses. They are free to do what they want, but life has lost its attraction. An urban desert threatens sanity.

Contemporary art, liberated from traditional rules, is in a chaos of sudden freedom. The formless has become the form of our century, the unaesthetic

and the incomprehensible are the expression of artistic revolution. Freedom from all rules has become the rule in the arts.

A final example: the gradual disintegration of religious allegiance. Theories and philosophies, hypotheses and speculations, are born and die as fast as fashion changes. The result is disenchantment and a clinging to what seems secure—the rational, the materialistic. But the downgrading of myths and ideals is only the façade. Behind it is a permanent state of insecurity and skepticism that seems incurable.

If freedom results in insecurity, does this mean we should have no freedom? No; it means that we need the maturity to make meaningful use of it. As with all values, freedom has practical applications that must be understood. Suppose a movie pregnant with meaning is shown on television. In front of the screen sits a two-year old, bored. To the child, the movie is a sequence of disconnected pictures. He or she cannot perceive the totality because meaning lies in the interrelationships between apparently disconnected parts. Similarly, human freedom has value only to the extent that our maturity allows us to see the total picture.

Human beings are in constant development. The question then is: If freedom requires a certain maturity, how can we achieve it and speed up our growth process?

Growth cannot occur in shackles—neither in the rearing of children nor in the evolution of a whole species. Even if the beginning is chaotic, only by experiencing freedom can we acquire the maturity to handle it. This is no time for a pessimism that prevents us from seeing the specific opportunity offered by our confused times—the chance to reach a higher level of maturity.

I tell my despairing patients that every crisis has its opportunity. This is also true of crises arising from our striving for freedom. Perhaps *this* crisis will speed up maturation. Understanding freedom as responsibility would be a giant step indeed.

Our general crisis is revealed in the suffering of disturbed patients, in the strange mixture of aggressive, depressive, and self-centered people who, in spite of having plenty to live *with*, have lost the assurance of what to live *for*.