

## A Fulfilled Life Despite Pain

In each person's heart lies a fundamental wish for a meaningful life. However, this idea is given little attention while everything is going well. But if things go wrong, then questions about life's meaning may rise to the surface. This explains why we seldom have an explicit awareness of the meaning of our own existence worked out in advance.

Often, it is only an extreme situation that brings us face to face with the decision whether ours is to be an embittered "no"—or an unconditional "yes"—to life. Such a choice does not allow for any middle ground. And such a judgement, once made, often endures for a long time.

The story of a couple I know comes to mind. Their seven-year old son fell ill with leukemia. With the help of many transfusions the boy lived for three years. But the important point is that these three years turned out to be a very special time for the family. They counted like 30 years, as the couple assured me, not for their difficulties but because of their intensity.

When he felt strong enough for it, the child was allowed to go to school to be with his classmates. When he was weak, he was carried to the playground to be able to watch the other children playing. A third of the children's room was cleared out to make room for a model railway, and many hours were spent together in assembling it. There were also reading sessions that opened up the boy's mind to the fantasy realms of sagas and fairy tales. A beautiful carved xylophone was acquired, upon which the weak

hands of the child sent gentle melodies resounding throughout the house. Was all this meaningless, simply because this young life ended early? His parents emphatically disagreed. Precisely because of the pressure of time, it was absolutely correct. In fact, it was wonderful that the child had these experiences. Of course, the pain of his illness was allowed its full impact, and yet this pain seemed to be of little significance in the face of a deeply fulfilled, happy family.

The individual is able to know human existence as precious—and to say “yes” to it—not because of its length or its lustful pleasures, but rather its content, that to which it is *dedicated*. The word “dedicated” has a somewhat solemn sound, and indeed this is exactly what is intended. That which is dedicated to some cause or some beloved, worthy person has the nature of a gift, because that cause or that loved person are more highly regarded than that which is expended on them. It is similar with our lives in general. If they are to have meaning, they must be spent on some cause or on something worthy of our engagement in a self-transcending way. The experience of fulfillment is intensified through ready, conscious dedication to some task. From such a perspective, effort and pain appear insignificant. That this is possible, even in extreme situations, is clearly proven by this example.

### **Tips for people with tinnitus and chronic illness**

Similarly, you may be in such an extreme situation. Permanent, physical-psychological pain accompanies you all the time. But before you begin to doubt the meaningfulness of your existence, consider this: Beyond the pain, is there something or someone to whom you might wish to dedicate your life? Discovering such a productive purpose will determine your choice, which is full of implications for your future, between a bitterness about your illness which will shatter you, or a rising above it, which can bring you fulfillment.

## No One is Superfluous or Replaceable

**B**y way of contrast, here is an example of a life bereft of meaning: A woman was referred to me who had jumped from a first-floor window, but she had come out of it with little or no damage. She described to me her act of desperation as follows:

I thought to myself, that my husband could, if I were once dead, marry a nicer and happier woman, and that my children would breathe again having been freed from the nagging of their mother. I thought, further, that no one would miss me, neither the shop assistants in the local store that I visited daily, nor the mere acquaintances who felt obliged to drop in occasionally to see us. Whether I exist or not makes no difference to the world.

This woman suffered from no illness or chronic physical pain, but rather from a feeling of being worthless. She saw herself as useless and superfluous, and thus virtually as a burden for her family and her neighbors. How does one reply to such a case? There are two theses to consider. This is how I formulate the first one:

*Every individual deed that we do is our spiritual "fingerprint," as it were, personal, unique, and one that cannot be replicated by anyone else.*

What does this mean? Something wonderful, actually. Nothing that a person does, says, or sets in motion... is identical with that which another person does, says, or sets in motion. Let 10,000 or 100,000 people paint the same landscape and we will end up with 10,000 or 100,000 different