

Chapter Four

MEANING & PURPOSE

IN WHICH...

- Elwood is asked to work with Washington Wild
- We reflect on the puzzle of moral obligation
- We connect morality, meaning, and purpose
- We frame the good news in terms of meaningful life

*I*t had been three weeks since the Corpse Flower had bloomed and withered, and Elwood had

embraced his life routine with diligence, even while the questions about what constituted a good life, about the daunting aspect of death, continued to tug at the corners of his mind and left him with a perpetual low-grade fever of uneasiness.

In early October Elwood received a call out of the blue from Tom Uniack, Executive Director of Washington Wild, a nature conservation advocacy group, and was asked to spearhead a fresh initiative to revive and protect Golden Paintbrush (*Castilleja levisecta*) on Whidbey Island, a rare species of flowering plant currently on the Endangered Species List. Washington Wild had received special funding from an interested donor to invest in this particular plant, and Elwood's reputation as the leading horticulturist at *The Spheres* had caught Uniack's attention. The proposal was for Elwood to design and manage the implementation of an intensive diagnosis, prescription, and therapeutic plan to bring Golden Paintbrush back from the edge of extinction and center future reproduction and transplant efforts at the Whidbey Island site where currently the most robust colonies of Golden Paintbrush were surviving.

Elwood was thrilled at being singled out to lead such an important rescue operation for a single plant species. He had gone into the study of horticulture with a desire to make a difference in the world. Growing up with concerns about human-caused climate change had sensitized him to the issue, and he found himself caring about the issue of ecological stewardship more than almost all of his friends. This bothered him, but he could never quite put his finger on how to explain the bother. Elwood's worldview was that everything around him had come into being through random natural selective processes over eons of time. Elwood was a *de facto*

materialist, though that was not a term he used to describe himself. Once, when challenging Chad, his college roommate, that he should care more for the environment, he was stymied by his friend's curt response, "Why?"

"Well," Elwood said, "because it's clearly the right thing to do."

"But", said Chad, "why is your sense of "right" right? Why isn't the guy who wants to use the resources available to us to better our lives right now "right"?"

"Because that's short-sighted," said Elwood. "We are short-changing future generations for our own selfish reasons."

Chad pressed: "Who says "selfish" is bad? Isn't "selfish" the way everything works? Isn't natural selection just another word for "selfish"—survival of the fittest, after all. That's what you believe has brought us to the very moment of this conversation, don't you?"

Elwood paused. "Well, yes. But that is different."
"How?" Chad asked.

"Natural selection is a blind process. We are not blind. We can reason. We can predict. We have compassion."

"And how did reason and compassion come to be in us?" Chad asked with a wry smile.

Elwood conceded: "Natural selection."

"Here's the thing," Chad concluded, "You can account for moral *feeling* through natural selection (those with compassion or reason survived over others without those attributes), but you cannot insist on moral *obligation*. Random parentage leaves no room for *should*."

Elwood never forgot that conversation. He left frustrated because he believed his own view was

right, but he didn't know why he was right, and he had no basis to obligate his friend to think or act as he did. He decided that, while he could not tell anyone else what to do, he would follow what he believed was right and hope for the best.

The invitation to help Washington Wild with their Golden Paintbrush conservation project on a part-time basis brought a rush of well-being into Elwood's soul. He suddenly felt like he mattered. He was being asked to do something important. While his work at *The Spheres* was valuable, it's larger context lacked a meaningful narrative for him. Elwood wanted his life to be marked with a purpose. This is something he instinctively desired but he had never thought to explain it, or how meaning and purpose were rather random notions in his view of the random nature of all things. "Oh brother," Elwood thought to himself, "another mental splinter to keep me up at night." He smiled a wry smile as he typed a short email to Tom Uniack. "I'm in," he typed, "and excited for the opportunity."



THE SOURCE OF MORAL SENSIBILITY

Everyone has it, though we disagree on the particulars of “it.” Regardless, the interesting question is how do we explain the sensibility itself?

The Materialist’s Thesis:

Moral sensibility comes from evolutionary psychology. Moral behaviors like cooperation, altruism, and fairness are viewed as adaptations that enhance the survival and reproductive success of individuals within social groups. These values are transmitted through generations and hardwired into our brains.

How to arbitrate moral differences? This thesis explains moral feelings but gives no help to arbitrate moral differences. No “right” is superior to another’s “right”. Enforced morality depends on who has more power or influence.

The Christian’s Thesis:

Moral sensibility comes from outside our system, from God Who creates us and places His likeness into our being. Our moral intuitions are signals emanating from our core design, reflecting God’s imprint in us and God’s reality outside of us. **Genesis 1:26-27; Ecclesiastes 3:11; Romans 2:12-16**

How to arbitrate moral differences? We defer to what God says in His revealed Word, and we trust that undamaged human moral intuitions is not contradictory

MORALITY, MEANING, AND PURPOSE

Moral sensibility is a clue to the possibility of an obligation to something greater than us. If I am a created being, then I have possible Creator-obligations to discover. The Christian worldview provides the following answers via the Bible, in which God says:

Need Me: Psalm 50:7-15

Love Me: Deuteronomy 6:5; Matthew 22:37-40

Imitate Me: Leviticus 11:44; 1 Peter 1:16

**(Which is fulfilled in loving and serving others):
Leviticus 19:18; Mark 12:31; John 13:34**

To the degree I fulfill my creaturely obligations I enter into congruence, alignment with my being, and this state of fulfillment is what we mean by a “meaning-full” life.

Personal purpose is experienced when a person not only lives in alignment with his general creaturely obligations (to need, love, and imitate God) but when I express those creaturely obligations through the particularities of my own unique story: **1 Corinthians 3:5-10**

Formulating a meaning-themed Good News Statement

Try It:

