

## **Why am I here? Our struggle for meaning, in the world and church**

by Robert Jensen

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Let's approach the question "Why am I here?" at two different levels.

The first is the question of the ages, which we all have asked at some point: Why is any one of us here? Why are we humans here, with this vexing consciousness and frustrating capacity for self-reflection? Are we the product of some larger plan beyond our understanding? Do humans have a purpose? Are we special?

The answer to that is easy: No. We are not special. We are an organism like all others, the product of an evolutionary process in a very big universe in which we are, as individuals, insignificant. But don't fret about that; we are also insignificant as a species, and the collection of entities on Earth that we call "life" is insignificant, as is the planetary ecosystem in which we live and our solar system and our galaxy. We are, in the big picture, insignificant beings floating in insignificance in a universe that is vast beyond human comprehension.

If anyone is still wrestling with that one, still searching for some essential meaning to our existence, I have some simple advice: Get over it, and start pulling your weight in the meaning-making enterprise. If there's meaning in any of this, we create it ourselves, and we need all hands on deck for that one.

The second, and more important, question: Why am I here, at St. Andrew's? That's a question all of us have asked at some point, and I suspect most of us ponder it regularly. Why are we members of a church, specifically members of this particular church, with its -- how shall we say politely -- tendency toward heresy and unwillingness to bend to the will of God as understood by John Calvin and his descendants in the Mission Presbytery.

In a culture in which Christianity typically is associated with supernatural claims (understanding "God" as an actual force, entity, or being that controls the world, and accepting the resurrection of Jesus as a historical event), why do those of us who reject those claims continue to identify as Christian? When the Christian world sometimes seems split about evenly between intolerant fundamentalists and ineffectual liberals, why should we struggle for a Christianity that is truly radical in theology, ethics, and politics, in principle and in practice?

In the five years I've been hanging out here, I have heard a variety answers to that question that mirror my own experience: An affection for the stories in the Christian tradition, a desire for a sense of community, an appreciation of the lively intellectual atmosphere, the sense of fellowship. And, of course, the strangely seductive nature of Mr. Monkey and the gang [the characters in the weekly St. Andrew's puppet show, which is nominally for the children but a favorite of all].

All of those are part of why I am here, but perhaps the central reason I keep coming back to St. Andrew's at this particular moment in history is the anguish I feel for the world.

I am not speaking about my anguish over things that have happened to me or to those I love in this world. Everyone deals with pain and suffering in one's individual life, and the distress that comes with

the inescapable disappointment, disease, and death in life is hard enough. I've had my share, as we all have, and those struggles alone are reason to seek out the comfort of church.

But in this context I am speaking of anguish about and for the world, in both concrete and abstract terms. It's the concrete anguish we feel every day when we open the newspaper for the update on the amount of oil spilling into the Gulf. It's that anguish that comes with hearing the news of the latest drone attack on a village in Afghanistan or Pakistan, or a reading a report on the most recent study of species extinction and reduction in biodiversity. And it is the abstract anguish we feel when we think about the world that coming generations will inherit from us, because of us -- because of what we have done and what we have not done.

You may have other words to describe these feelings. A friend of mine speaks of waking every morning into a state of profound grief. Others have told me they experience it as despair. For me, anguish captures the emotion associated with recognizing that we humans have fallen out of right relation with Creation, and therefore inevitably out of right relation with each other. We humans, because we did not attend carefully enough to the way meaning has been made in the modern era, have come to a point where we can see the contours of the end of our place in that Creation. That recognition is, for me, a source an intense anguish that has become not a source of occasional sadness or depression but simply a part of who I am.

The need to come to terms with this anguish was reinforced for me recently when I started reading Bill McKibben's new book, in which he suggests that the changes humans have brought are so extreme that we no longer live on Earth but on Eearth. The planet is melting, drying, acidifying, flooding, and burning in ways so dramatic that the world, while still recognizable to us, is fundamentally different and deserves a different name, hence the title, *Eearth: Making a Life on a Tough New Planet* (<http://www.billmckibben.com/earth/earthbook.html>).

This kind of discussion is often dismissed as "apocalyptic," as if reasonable concerns about the multiple crises we face -- political and economic, cultural and ecological -- can be waved away by a suggestion that anyone who raises them is hysterical. Rather than cope with the evidence, many people want to deal with it through denial. And to rationalize their denial, they dismiss anyone else as a Revelation-quoting, rapture-anticipating nut. Some of you may think I'm a bit crazy, perhaps not without justification. But Bill McKibben, the person who 20 years ago warned us about global warming in the first major book on the subject, is clearly not a nut. He's a smart guy, and he's worried.

Perhaps we should remember that our word "apocalypse" is from the Greek "apokalypsis," which means an uncovering or lifting of the veil. We might think of this as an apocalyptic moment, one in which scientific knowledge and our personal experiences allow us to lift the veil on the unsustainability of the systems in which we live. Whatever our view of "The Apocalypse of John" -- also known as Revelation, the last and perhaps most cinematic of the books of the New Testament -- we can no longer afford to let reality be veiled.

Now, just for the record, let me be clear: I think that people who await the rapture are misguided. But I have no doubt that part of what motivates that belief is the same recognition I am speaking of -- a growing awareness that we have unleashed forces in this world that are not easily tamed, and that perhaps we are past a point of no return. To believe that the anointed are going to be lifted up to heaven in the rapture is a bit crazy, but to recognize the unfolding collapse of all the fundamental systems that structure our lives is not crazy at all. It is rational, sensible, and sane.

I deal with this recognition in many ways, emotional and intellectual, political and personal. But part of how I cope is St. Andrew's. I come to church. I am part of a religious tradition. I use the term "religious" rather than "spiritual" very consciously. It's common these days in my circles to hear people say, "I'm spiritual but not religious." By that, I assume they mean that they like to ponder questions about the nature of our being but prefer to do it without the trappings of formal religion. I can certainly understand that instinct, but it's not my instinct.

I'm religious, not spiritual.

This may be because I was born and raised in North Dakota, a place where the material world -- especially the material reality of blizzards -- tends to overshadow the more ethereal. I don't deny there is a realm of human experience we can call the spiritual, but I don't tend to dwell there. It's all well and good to ponder the spiritual, to dance in the ethereal now and then. But in the meantime, that front that came down from Canada dumped another foot of snow on us last night, and it's time to pick up a shovel.

For me, religion is more useful than spirituality in clearing the driveway of all that snow. By religion I don't mean, of course, a rigid obsession with doctrine that is imposed on people. I don't mean the kind of religion that closes off questions and closes down minds. I don't mean a religion that hardens our hearts to others or lets us grow soft in our commitment to justice. Sadly, that describes a lot of contemporary religion in the United States.

For me, religion is a place and a space, it is people and relationships. Religion is a church building, a place where I can come. And in that place, we try to create a space to work through our struggles. Religion is a group of people who are engaged in a common struggle, a structure for creating relationships that are crucial to keeping us on track and looking forward.

The best of religion helps me in my struggles, in my quest to stay focused. Over and over again, Scripture reminds us of how to do this, such as in 1 Thessalonians 5:12-17.

12 But we request of you, brothers and sisters, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction,  
13 and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Live in peace with one another.  
14 We urge you, brothers and sisters, admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with everyone.  
15 See that no one repays another with evil for evil, but always seek after that which is good for one another and for all people.  
16 Rejoice always;  
17 pray without ceasing.

Rejoice always, and pray without ceasing. I don't take "rejoice always" to be an excuse to "party on," nor do I take "pray without ceasing" to be justification for pious posturing. For me, those two verses are a reminder of the need to always see the joy in life and never forget the struggle of life. That is not easy to do, and for me, religion helps. Church helps remind me there is something beyond, something bigger, but that our work is here. I don't want to float off into the spiritual, to ponder in the clouds, but instead prefer to root myself in the religion -- in relationships, in the work on the ground.

It is that work to which we must return. If we are to do that work well, it's important to remember that just as we humans are not special, neither are we Christians. There are lots of other people engaged in

that work in this world. Much of my own life has been spent in secular organizations committed to social justice and ecological sustainability, and those people are as much a part of my life as the people here at St. Andrew's. To claim that religion can help is not to claim that religion is all we need.

One of those secular people who has been especially important to me is Abe Osheroff, a radical activist who spent his 92 years struggling to contribute to a better world. Abe made his living as a carpenter but his life was defined by his politics. As Abe closed in on the end of that life, he spoke to me about his anguish, his sense of loneliness, his struggle to cope with the pain of knowing too much (<http://thirdcoastactivist.org/osheroff.html>). Abe was culturally Jewish and philosophically agnostic; he had little use for scripture or most preachers. But of all the people I have known, I can think of no one who more fully lived the command to rejoice always and pray without ceasing.

One of Abe's gifts was the ability to cut through pompousness and state clearly what was at stake. The documentary film I produced about Abe's life and philosophy (<http://www.abeosheroffmovie.com/>) ends with a simple statement that he repeated often: "Solidarity is love in action."

Solidarity is a defining term for the secular left, while love is a word repeated endlessly in church. For Abe, who could be as critical of the failures of the left as of the hypocrisy of religion, knew that if solidarity is to be lived, it requires both. Abe knew that love without action is empty, and that action without love is dangerous.

We all know people who profess to love the world but who retreat into the passivity made possible by affluence and privilege. We ask of them, what do they truly love?

We also all know people who act out of what they claim to be a commitment to justice but in that action can hurt others without thought. We ask of them, to what are they truly committed?

We know these people exist because, if we are to be honest with ourselves, we all can remember moments when that person was us, when we fell short.

Rejoice always, but don't forget the admonition to pray without ceasing. We will always fall short, but we can search for the strength to pull ourselves and each other closer to that standard of loving through action and acting out of love.

That standard has never been more important, as we face the reality of life on the slope down. We may laugh at apocalyptic talk of the end times, but we are living in times that are marked by systems and ways of living that are coming to an end. It is the end of the empire, the end of cheap energy, the end of careless and carefree consumption, the end of so much that we have come to take for granted in the affluent world.

I am not nostalgic about those systems. In fact, I am glad to see the end of most of what we have come to call "the good life," for it never struck me as all that good, at least not for most people and other living things. The problem is that the unraveling of those systems and ways of living is likely to bring immense suffering and destruction -- beyond the levels we see today -- if not in our lifetimes then most certainly in the generation after us. Even if we are personally insulated from the worst of it, we will watch this human betrayal of Creation play out all around us.

If we can watch that and not feel anguish, then we will have surrendered our own humanity. To be human today -- to live fully alive -- is to embrace that anguish. I see no other choice.

We all need a philosophy, a theology, a worldview to deal with this. Call it radical humanism, as Abe did. Call it Christianity, as we do. Call it whatever you like, so long as you answer the call to live your own life in solidarity, as love in action. That task has never been easy for people, and it has never been harder than in the anguish of end times.

We cannot know what lies ahead, we can only love and act.

No matter what lies ahead, we can rejoice always. We can pray without ceasing.