

Building a Life
March 22, 2009

If you have ever wondered about the value of a human life, our government has an answer in concrete dollars. It's a little disconcerting for a couple of reasons: First, even trying to translate life into a monetary equivalent sends chills up my spine, but even more arresting is the fact that human life has dropped 11% in value since 2004. And I thought I just had to worry about value of homes going down.

An American life is now valued at \$6.9 million and it isn't worth what it used to be according to the Environmental Protection Agency. Life has lost a million dollars in value over the past five years. Let me try to explain as best I understand it.

When drawing up regulations for environmental policies, the EPA puts a value on human life in order to weigh the costs of a proposed regulation (let's say for cleaner air) that would possibly hurt industry. Before imposing restrictions on polluting industries the EPA would run the numbers: Would the loss of life exceed in value or not exceed the price to force industry to make changes for improving the environment? In other words, the less life is worth according to the government, the less need to impose expensive alternatives to air and water pollution.

Here's an example: A hypothetical industry regulation costs \$18 billion to enforce, but will prevent 2500 deaths. At \$7.8 million per person (the old calculation of life's worth), the life saving benefits outweigh the costs. But at the current \$6.9 million per person, the new rule would cost more than the lives it saves, so it may not be adopted.

The Bush administration has now been accused of changing the dollar value of life to avoid enforcing tougher environmental rules. The executive director of the national Association of Clean Air agencies says that the Bush administration "cooked the books" with regards to human life.

What I hope we might consider this morning is life and value. Not dollars and cents value, but how deeply or not we consciously strive to extract the rich value of this precious gift we are given without ever fully knowing why we are here or what is our purpose and how do we understand its meaning. How do we design our lives or build our lives so that we awaken to a profound sense of VALUE. Life's value. We may scoff at the notion of the Bush administration reducing our value 11% in order to push through some damaging deregulation of industry. But that's politics. Let's now think about valuing life in more personal terms and our own limitations in appreciating the extent of life's worth.

A favorite allegory: Imagine if you will, a sad and dreary storybook Kingdom in which colors simply do not exist. Everything was either black or white or gray: Gray skies, a white-hot sun, black leaves. Even the flowers, although they had beautifully

shaped petals and a fragrant sweetness, seemed to the people of that kingdom to be no more than different shades of gray. Although the people had no idea that it could be different, still they lived gray and joyless lives. That was just the way things were.

But after a while the king and queen had a baby girl, and she seemed different from all the other children in the kingdom who were solemn and docile. (Sometimes docile children aren't such a bad idea). Anyway, the princess in this story was playful and full of laughter and curiosity. By the time she was a few years old everyone knew there was something special about her, and she herself began to understand that the people around her, whom she loved, did not see the world with the same eyes of happiness. Gradually, she learned that in many cases she had the ability to see differences while other people saw sameness. Two kinds of flowers that the people of the kingdom saw as the same, she saw as different. This was also true of birds and clothing and bedspreads. In fact, she was the only person in the kingdom with color vision.

At first she felt she must be wrong and all the others were right. She was raised knowing she would be queen someday so she tried to behave herself. But sometimes she just couldn't resist crying out with delight. She dressed herself with a shudder in the clothes laid out for her by her nurse, and she tried to be polite about it. It took many years before it occurred to her that she might know more than the others, and that she might be able to make her vision of the world available to them.

What would it be like if all these dour people also saw the world as brilliant and sparkling? The grown-ups, busy about her education, never even thought of learning from her, although, of course, the servants had to listen politely since she was a princess. Even younger children shook their heads in bewilderment when she talked about what she saw, and often she floundered for lack of words.

One day she went and sat on the Queen's lap and said, "Mother, look into my eyes and tell me what you see."

"Why you have beautiful eyes," said the Queen. "I look into your eyes and see they are as pale gray as egg yolks and lettuce leaves."

"No, mother Look more deeply."

They sat for a long time, and finally the Queen said, "I see something I have never seen before. And what I see is different from egg yolk and lettuce leaves." So the princess said, "What you see is called blue. If you look at an egg yolk you will see that it is yellow, and the lettuce leaves are green."

The princess took her mother by the hand, and leading her around the palace and the palace garden taught her to see color. Then they went to the king and taught him to see color, and bit by bit everyone in the kingdom learned to see color: Indoors

and out, they all started laughing aloud at how much more variety they could see in the world than they had ever imagined.

How tuned-in are we to the variety of things so available if only we enlarged our vision and perception? Look deeply. What do you see?

It's not only a certain quality of life that we miss by failing to look deeply, but by enlarging perceptions, humanity can begin to heal itself. I would love to invite a homophobe to look deeply into the eyes of a gay man. Tell me what you see. Sit for a long time until you stop seeing the world in the limited colors. What do you see that is so frightening?

Look into the eyes of refugee who can't get work because of his Muslim lineage. Look into the eyes of an undocumented immigrant farm worker and tell me what you see. Do you see their pain? Do you see their humanity?

It's not a stretch, really, to compare ourselves with the people of the storybook kingdom. We, too, need instruction, training, discipline, in order to break from routine perceptions and a superficial existence, to begin paying attention to life more fully. In our regular routines in going about life, do we not limit our vision to black, white, and gray? Are we not in too much of a hurry to see other perspectives?

I find a lot of humor in the 39th psalm, although probably nobody else does. The psalmist asks God how much time he has left before he dies. What strikes me as funny is this image of a guy who is spending his precious earthly life on matters inconsequential like accumulating things while neglecting his spirit. He thinks narrowly that what life is worth is measured by all he has acquired. But then it hits him he can't take it with him when he dies, although he loves his toys. So he asks God: When does my meter expire so that I might begin to look more deeply towards the end of things. "Lord, let me know my end and what is the measure of my days; let me know how fleeting my life is"

Guess what. God doesn't tell him. But God does disclose that man walks in a vain shadow. Accumulation that flatters the self or fools the self into feelings of invincibility is not a new phenomenon.

I recently read about an obscure book written in 1910 by a Dominican nun named Sister Mary Mercedes. She devoted her life to teaching at two convent schools in California, and the name of her book was: "A Book of Courtesy: The Art of Living With Yourself and Others"

In the year 2000, at the 50th reunion of the class of 1950 in the school where sister Mary Mercedes once taught, the alumnae decided to release a revised edition of the book as a gift to the new generations in the 21st century. The class maintained that they were passing on the book because they felt that those inheriting the world today were sorely in need of its message.

Here's the message: Be kind and gentle. Be simple in your tastes and sincere in your actions and let everything you do be governed by this timeless rule: Love your neighbor as yourself and do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Keep in mind that every person on earth carries the spirit of God in her or his soul. The fruits of God's spirit are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, and generosity."

Look deeply and tell me what you see. Become more attentive and you will embrace a wider perception of all the things you have missed. Look, and build a life of love and joy and peace.patience, kindness, and generosity.

Life and value.Aristotle phrases the question perfectly when he asks: What will make my life worth living?

I think we probably ask that all the time. Here's Aristotle's reply to his own question: wealth, health, strength, beauty, influence, power, and ability. Well yeah, those are all on our lists of what makes life worth living.

But then you read on, and he says (I'll paraphrase a little), he says: Are you crazy? Wealth, beauty power, etc, are measures of earthly success. They have no lasting value. There's that word again. Value. Aristotle concedes you may need some wealth and power to carve out a living, but he also makes a distinction between making a living and living artfully.

Aristotle might as well have said,"Look deeply,"because he firmly believed that the quality of the soul determines the quality of life. And how else do we discover the quality of soul unless we look deeply and come to understand how we have limited and constrained those pieces that make life valuable. We can build a life with the same shortsightedness as the psalmist who worried how much time was left in his life to finally go about the business he needed to do-like caring for his soul. Or we might resemble the allegorical queen who was blind to the multiplicity of life's splendor. But we can also have the capacity to build a life whose value is wrought from love and generosity.

One last point that Aristotle makes that I believe is helpful. There are temporary pleasures and satisfactions, which preoccupy our myopic views of life. Bear in mind that these represent only partial knowledge, thus depriving us of a sense of wholeness and true worth. Aristotle requires of us"contemplation."The princess says we need to look deeply. They're really talking about the same thing.

Life and value. What is a life worth? How do we find worth in life? How do we find value in life which is so directly linked with meaning? These are religious and spiritual questions. These are questions not best left to government agencies to decide. These are questions we must ask ourselves despite our cultural proclivity to wealth power and beauty. I can see us, even the well intentioned as we all are, keeping an eye on the clock and wondering how much time is left. If I can just

accumulate a few more things then I'll begin looking more deeply and become more attentive and build a life of lasting value.

God won't respond to us any more clearly than answering the psalmist. But don't we know, inherently, that there is not much time left regardless of measured earthly years. And is this not what really makes life so precious?

We cannot begin assessing life's value until we sit for a long time and discover the worth of looking more deeply than we have ever imagined before. It's not an easy exercise. But life's riches lie beyond the easy routines of our lives. And when we discover in our drab world that egg yolk is really yellow, and that lettuce leaves are really green, and the eyes of a princess are really blue, then we can finally begin to grasp that life's value often lies beyond what we ever thought possible. And if we're lucky, there may be just enough time left for us to figure it out. Amen.