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Meaning-Making Methodologies | Francis Su & Paul Asimow

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The Veritas Forum

Harvey Mudd College Mathematician Francis Su and Caltech Geologist Paul Asimow discuss their personal perspectives on meaning and purpose from the stage at California Institute of Technology. Please like, share, subscribe to and review this podcast. Thank you!

Transcript

Welcome to the Veritas Forum. This is the Veritas Forum Podcast. A place where ideas and beliefs converge.

What I'm really going to be watching is which one has the resources in their worldview to be tolerant, respectful, and humble toward the people they disagree with. How do we know whether the lives that we're living are meaningful? If energy, light, gravity, and consciousness are a mystery, don't be surprised if you're going to get an element of this involved. Today we hear from Harvey Mudd mathematician Francis Su and Caltech geologist Paul Asimow as they take to the stage at Caltech to discuss meaning-making methodologies.

Hello everybody. So, 30 years ago I got up in front of an audience at my high school graduation and I left everybody stunned by starting with, I've decided to set aside my prepared remarks and just take questions. [laughter] Which I actually got from a New Yorker cartoon with a drunk husband who comes home late and comes through the door and says, "Well, no." So, in fact, I haven't prepared any remarks.

This is going to be strictly off the cuff. And I'll say that this is difficult for me. I'm a very private person.

I get up in front of large crowds of students and I teach about the earth, but I don't talk about myself. And I see a number of students who've been in my classes here, and I'm sure one reason they're here is they're wondering, "Who is this person?" [laughter] What do they have to say for themselves? So, let me start with my background. I come from a

pure-bred Jewish family.

All eight of my great grandparents are from the Ukraine and Biola Russia. All of them Jewish. All of them fled in between 1900 and 1920 and came to the United States as immigrants.

My grandparents were born in various midwestern cities around the United States and then came to California. My family's been in California since all of us since about 1925. Many of my great grandparents' generation and my grandparents' generation were completely secular.

They were ethnically Jewish, but it meant nothing to them as a religion. They never went to temple. They never belonged to Jewish organizations other than if they wanted to get together with people and speak Yiddish, because that was their cultural language.

Or my grandmother was a Yiddish folk musician, but as a folk art. My parents' generation, and in many cases, I think second-generation Jewish immigrants, discovered Judaism as a religion when reform Judaism came along. Reform Judaism is a little bit like Unitarian Christianity.

It's Judaism-like. It doesn't come along with a lot of rules. You don't have to keep kosher.

You don't have to observe the Sabbath. Nobody really tells you what to believe or what not to believe. I was brought up going to a Jewish nursery school, going to Hebrew school after elementary school, and I was Bar Mitzvahd.

The content of what I learned was, here's how you read Hebrew phonetically, so that you can read from the Torah, so that you can go through the motions of appearing to pray. But they didn't teach me to speak Hebrew as a language, and they didn't teach me to understand what I was reading. In that context, I never developed, I never remember, having faith in God.

People talk to me about God all the time, but without any authority, and without any real resonance coming from me. So, as far back as I can remember being conscious of, "Do I believe or do I not believe?" I have not believed. And so, I have constructed my view of humanity, my view of the world, my view of reality, my view of what is right, and what is wrong, what is ethical and what is not ethical, what is moral, and what is immoral.

I have attempted to construct for myself from principles of logic. I believe that humans can figure out what is good and what is bad without needing to be told by an external authority, without needing reference to divine authority. I believe that if we all want to live, and we all want to live together, and we all want to have good lives, that we can independently arrive at the same principles of how we should treat each other, and what we should do and what we should not do, that you can find by reading in Scripture.

That's my personal belief. I fully understand that other people have other beliefs. I'm only telling you what I think.

So, what brings meaning to my life? Meaning in my life comes from several sources. It comes from my family, the extended family in which I was raised, and the nuclear family that I have created through marriage and through children. It comes from my work.

I feel very, very, very fortunate to have found work that is satisfying to me, that is interesting, that contributes to the world, and to be able to do that work, because it's the work that I want to do, not because anybody is telling me to do it. And if there's one really important lesson that I learned from my father, it's "Get Terner." My father spent most of his career as a law professor at UCLA, and I saw that indeed the life of a tenured professor is the closest thing to paradise on earth. So, I feel very fortunate that I found the earth sciences, that I found the beauty of the earth sciences and the utility of the earth sciences, and that I am able through my teaching and through my work to share with students and with the world the magnificent nature of this planet that we live on.

I might say this planet we have been given, but I say this planet that we live on, the result is the same. It is up to us to be its stewards, and it is entirely up to us to destroy it if we choose also. Yes.

Well, I guess that's fundamentally who I am and where I come from and what I believe. And I am not here to convince anybody else that you should believe the same. I hope you will not try to convince me that I should believe otherwise.

And I think we can all agree that life is unique, as far as we know. Life is precious. This planet is unique as far as we know, and this planet is precious.

And if we are going to live on it as a species and as a society, that we must live according to sound principles, the most sound of which surely is the golden rule. And while the golden rule appears in the Talmud as an interpretation, it says really all you need to know about the Torah is due unto others as you would have them due unto you, I reach the same conclusion without reference to the Torah. First of all, thanks a lot, thanks for having me.

It's nice to be in a setting where often in an academic environment, it's actually tough to have conversations about deep, deeper things. One of the things that I think is a luxury of college is that you actually have the space to have deep conversations with the people that you're around. And you're in close proximity with lots of people for whom you can have great conversations, great dorm chats.

I'm going to tell you a little bit about my own journey. As you've heard, I'm a college professor. One of the things that sometimes happens when I go and give lectures at other places is I hear stories about students.

And one that comes to mind is I was recently giving a lecture at a college in the Midwest, and a student came up to me and he'd heard that I went to Harvard for grad school when he had just gotten admitted. And in fact, I thought, he said, "I can't talk to you afterwards." And I said, "Sure, yeah." And I thought he was going to ask me some questions about what it's like to be a grad student at Harvard or to live in Boston. And instead he asked me, "What do I have to do to be successful there?" And I said, "Well, what do you mean by that?" And he said, "Well, if I'm not the top PhD student for my advisor, how am I going to get a job?" And I thought to myself, "Oh my gosh, this guy hasn't even gone to grad school yet.

He's already thinking about the next step." This guy is his professors said uniformly he was the best student that they'd seen in several years. And yet he was asking this question. He was feeling trapped in some sense.

And that's my picture too. I think I probably felt very similar to him, and so I had sort of an affinity for his story. So in thinking a little bit about what I would say tonight about meaning, I guess I thought it might be good for you to tell you a little bit of my own journey.

I did not start in a Christian home. I grew up in a non-religious household. And I became a Christian, actually my freshman year in college.

I thought it would be maybe helpful for you to hear what I would have said, three things I would have said were meaningful then, before becoming a Christian, three things that I would say are meaningful now. I guess the first is what I alluded to in that in my introduction. And that is I grew up in an Asian American household, and education was like the most important thing.

And so I guess I would say success and achievement, whatever that means, was important. In my household, it was not being second best was not good enough. So I always had this sense from my parents that if I came home and I was salutatorium, then that would not be good enough.

The second thing I think I would have said was meaningful was to love and be loved. Certainly like everybody else, I have this deep desire to be accepted, a deep desire for friendship. The third thing I would say was important to me was to be good and make the world a better place.

Certainly that's a very good thing to aim for. Now if you think about all three of these things, they all point to finding your significance in something. Significance in your work, success, achievement, significance in being loved, significance in doing good.

And I guess all three of these things began to crumble when I went off to college. I right before college, my parents became ill, both of them. My father got cancer, my mother

started showing signs of Lou Gehrig's disease, and suddenly I was in a crisis.

The big questions started arising, like what does it mean? Why am I trying so hard to be successful if we just live and die and that's all? What's the point of achievement and success? I was losing two people, probably some of the two people who loved me the most in the world. And the desire to be a good person and make the world a better place seemed really futile to me. It did seem like it had no meaning.

Now part of it was just the despair, the suffering my family was going through, I think it showed me that the world was really rotten in some ways. I also began to see some of the rottenness in my own heart, right? I mean with all the stuff going on with my mother and my family, I found myself having very selfish thoughts. Like I don't want to get cancer, this is not how I want to die.

In realizing that at my core I have a certain selfishness that made being good seem like an impossible thing to do. So that crisis, my freshman year in college, was I think in some ways a real blessing because it helped me realize that I didn't want life to be meaningless and that I needed some kind of hope. So what happened in college, one of the things that happened is I actually met Christians that were not the stereotype I had in my mind.

I mean these Christians were actually thoughtful and intellectual and felt like they were living life differently. They were just as intimate science and math as I was and that was maybe a little bit of a surprise. I guess I thought that being Christian was met being moral, being a good person, and they surprised me by explaining that following Jesus was actually not about being moral.

They, yeah, so I guess I responded to that message of hope in deciding to follow Jesus. And even after becoming a Christian, I guess another thing that surprised me was, and it took me years of being a Christian to begin to appreciate this, was a very simple idea that our dignity doesn't come from our accomplishments. I became a Christian my freshman year in college and then I went off to grad school at Harvard and suddenly I met all these super talented people, people who were better at what I thought I was best at and I started to feel threatened.

And part of that was I realized I was just getting my sense of significance from the things that I do. I had an experience in grad school where I nearly failed out of grad school because of, well, part of the turmoil was going on at home. A part of it was feeling psyched out by all these grad students who'd gone to Ivy League colleges and I had not gone to an Ivy League college.

And so, you know, part of the good news of the Christian gospel is that our dignity doesn't come from ourselves. It doesn't come from anything that we do. It doesn't come from any characteristic about us.

It doesn't come from our intelligence. It doesn't come from our beauty. It doesn't come from our money.

It doesn't come from the color of our skin. And so if you believe this, then there really is great freedom because if you'll stop comparing yourself to other people, you'll stop worrying what other people think of you. Because you realize I don't need to get my significance from these things if they come from God.

If I realize God loves me. And that's sort of the radical idea that I began to appreciate. It's this idea of grace that you don't earn your dignity.

And the architect, God, the architect of the beauty that we see in science is also the lover of our souls. So the response then, if you believe this, is, and this is what I began to embrace, is, gosh, you know, if this is true, God loves me, then I'd respond in gratitude. So I naturally try to be more virtuous, more moral, but it's not being virtuous and moral that makes me loved by God.

God loves me regardless. And if God is the architect of beauty, then the beauty that I see in science is actually wondrous because I feel like I'm getting a view into the mind of God. And so if you ask me now, what are the three things that I, you know, to think about those three things that I would have said I was meaningful before I became a Christian.

Now they've changed. I mean, for instance, achievement, yes, achievement's a good thing, but it's overrated. I mean, yes, it's good to get a PhD and become, you know, a scientist or college professor or whatever.

Yes, it's good to be a doc, to go to medical school and be a doctor. So I'm not knocking achievement. Achievement can be very good.

It can serve noble ends. But achievement is not where you get your dignity. There's a big difference between achievement and dignity.

And if we were able to understand that, it would give us a lot of freedom. So in contrast to achievement, I guess I would say now that struggle is meaningful. That to me is a deep lesson that I've learned in my life.

The best lessons I've often learned through struggle, the best friendships I have have been forged through struggle. The intellectual insights that I most remember have been the ones that I've struggled the longest at, right? You know, you struggle with a hard problem set and you actually remember what you learned, surprisingly. Amazing.

And one of the biggest struggles I face now is dying to my selfish desires. And that to me is meaningful. Second thing I would say is meaningful is I still think loving and being loved is meaningful, but I see that now as a window, a signpost, a pointer to the way that God loves.

My best friends are people who love me unconditionally. Well, guess what? That's the way that God loves. My best friends could care less if I'm a moral failure.

They could care less if I'm an intellectual failure. And this is how God loves because my dignity is only found in the fact that He loves me. And lastly, doing good, making the world a better place, yes, that's still important.

But now I see with greater clarity why it's important. It's no longer about me being a good person. It's about serving people and helping them flourish, especially those who are weak and vulnerable and unloved.

Why is that? Because I am weak. I am vulnerable. And in many ways, I don't have the love that I am unlovable in many ways.

But Jesus still loves me. Right? So the motivation is different now. So the fact that Jesus loved people whom the world doesn't love is a deeply Christian idea.

And these days many people, including myself, care a lot about social justice. But what is, why do we do social justice? I think many of us would say, well, that's the right thing to do. But our society is a little schizophrenic on this.

On one hand, we say, yes, all people are equal. On the other hand, we still find ourselves valuing the doctor more than the laborer. We still find ourselves valuing the opinion of rich people or the opinion of popular people.

And so how is it that we're able to navigate where our sense of morals come from? So if you ask me then, and I think a little bit about it, if you believe that you're not justified by your accomplishments, if you believe that your dignity doesn't come from yourself, it has to come from outside yourself somehow. And I would say it comes from God. And social justice efforts have power because you realize your dignity doesn't come from anything you do, doesn't come from the dignity of your skin, it doesn't come from how much money you make, it doesn't come from whether you're an intellectual or not.

And so I would say that that's from God. And it gives me a greater understanding and appreciation of why I care so much about social justice. So I guess I'd maybe finish by just saying that if you think about every meaningful thing in your life, whatever that is to you, in some way I can point to every meaningful thing and say, you know, then some ways that's a pointer to faith for some people.

Right? Like if you say beauty is meaningful, being beautiful is meaningful. Well, the reason that that's meaningful, often the underlying reason is that you want to feel loved, right? So the good news, part of the good news of the Christian gospel that I embraced is good news. I don't have to be loved for my beauty.

I can be loved because God loves me. Or if I think a little bit about success, the reason I

prized success so much earlier is because I felt that somehow accomplishment was what I really thought was significance. And now if I realize I can be free of that, then it just frees me to be passionate about mathematics because it's a beautiful thing.

And I enjoy studying it, enjoy doing it. I don't have to worry about how much I publish. Well, I have tenure too, so I guess I'm going to do it.

But everything, everything meaningful, if you think a little dig underneath a little bit, I would say is a pointer to faith for me. Thank you. [applause] If you like this and you want to hear more, like, share, review, and subscribe to this podcast.

And from all of us here at the Veritas Forum, thank you.

(gentle music)

[buzzing]