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Engineering The Good Life | Joseph Clair

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The Veritas Forum

George Fox University professor of Theology, Joseph Clair, ask, "Do we need God to have the meaningful lives?" From the stage at Montana Tech. • 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 gonna 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 in God.

Today we are from George Fox, professor of theology, Dr. Joseph Clare, as he takes to the stage at Montana Tech University in a discussion titled Engineering the Good Life. Do we need God to have meaningful lives? How many of you this evening feel the pressure to discover your purpose or your calling in life? Anybody here feel the pressure a little bit? Some college hands going up? Discover the purpose and the calling and then find the major that leads to the career. Find the right relationship that maybe leads to spouse and family and place to live in the country and get all the elements to add up to discover your unique purpose.

College has always been a special season of discovering one's purpose. I'd say there's always been three reasons for college. One is an intellectual reason.

You gotta learn something. There's an economic reason most of us are thinking about career and jobs and livelihoods. There's a deeply personal, moral or spiritual reason.

If you want to discover how and who you are, where your talents line up with the world's needs. There's an intense, infinite pressure on the college years to figure all that stuff

out. Let me assure you, the pressure doesn't go away after you get out of college.

I'm kind of reporting midstream, maybe mid career in my own life, halfway down the track, perhaps. One of the most accomplished people I work with at work just gave me this book *Designing Your Life* by Evans and Burnett out of Stanford. Great application of design thinking to the prospect of crafting a meaningful, well lived life.

It just doesn't go away folks. You keep asking the question, even when you think you've got like, "Yeah, that was the job. That was the thing." And then the question seems to bubble up from within.

In Americans, we've made like a cottage industry about it. We're obsessed with discovering our purpose and the meaning of our lives and making sure somehow that the outer circumstances of our lives match the interior convictions of who we think we really are. And so, fuckers, we can tell who we really are.

Every day I get home from work, I leave work and I head home and I live in a little country town where like 30 miles outside of Portland. So we're not in the suburbs. We're in Agtown.

It's not Oregon line industry. But it's a pretty humble spot. And I live off a country road.

A lot of little mini would be wannabe hobby farms out there. People like Raisin Cowles in the front yard, you know, they're one acre lot. It's that kind of town.

In just this past year, something very strange happened, a huge billboard went in right at my turn on Fox Farm Road. This huge billboard with the guy's face and his Dr. Manuel. And Dr. Manuel provides new hands, new body, new faces, plastic surgeon, Dr. Manuel.

One, eight, seven, seven. Seven, seven, seven, new you, and EW you. So we drive out of this thing all the time and my little daughter, a few months ago, we're driving, she's seven and she's kind of picking up on like, okay, Dr. Fates hands and she just asked me out of the backseat of the truck.

She's like, Dad, are you going to get a new face? Which I thought was like, wow, are you suggesting something? But honestly, there's kind of an American obsession. We do want to know and want to, we want to discover who we truly are. We want to discover our purpose.

We want the external circumstances of our life to match the internal world that we live in. And we become somewhat obsessed with crafting meaningful lives, with chasing our purposes. And sometimes I fear that that obsession that I'd share as a good American can turn into a form of anxiety.

Like it's a special breed of anxiety. We'll call it meaning of life anxiety. And I think

meaning of life anxiety, if there is such a thing, it happens when you're caught between, you're caught on the horns.

One horn is saying, you know you have an innate purpose inside. Like you know you need to discover it. It's almost the sacred aura sort of sense of like, you've got it in there, find it, and then make sure you've lived it out.

And find the right person, the right job, the right place to live the right neighborhood that matches that. And then on the other hand, we have a sense that the meaning of life is utterly open-ended and innovative. It is up to you to craft, to self-create, to work out all the details.

And there's actually a really, I think, clear philosophical and theological line that you could trace over the past 500 years since the Protestant Reformation. And it goes something like, as soon as the idea of calling became very democratized, that all of us as individuals had a kind of infinite transcendent sense of value in the work we do in the world, that once everybody has that, and slowly through philosophical and scientific changes, the world becomes more secular, less religious. There's less open public awareness that there's a transcendent framework, a God framework we live in, that feeling gets turned inward on us.

We're left with the infinite burden of figuring out what that calling is, but we don't have the framework, the sacred canopy, the resources, even the conversation with friends and the terminology to talk about what it would mean. What it would mean to discover that sense of purpose. So we get kind of stuck between an eight-purpose and innovation.

And I love the subtitle of the talk tonight. I know who came up with it, "Engineering the Good Life at Montana Tech." A bunch of engineers. Very nice.

But I think that actually perfectly encapsulates where we are, especially in higher education, but as a culture, we have a profound sense of the plasticity and malleability of nature. Like we have learned through scientific knowledge more about the what of the material universe than ever before in history, and then the how of application, including how we can apply that knowledge and manipulate and make malleable the human person, the human body. And yet we are not clear as a culture, or even as individuals, what the end that we're aiming for is.

We know we can change and rearrange and make different and transform, but we're not sure what we're actually aiming for. And the struggle that I found is the more we get traction on scientific knowledge of the particulars of the material world that we live in, which is fantastic, the strange thing is that those descriptions of the material constituents of our experience are not very illuminating of the human experience. For example, if I really understood the neuro brain chemistry involved in the pheromones in my brain and relationship to my wife, and I took that description home with me from

Montana Tech, and I said, "Hey babe, want to get home tomorrow night?" The pheromones were just swishing in my brain, and those pheromones are so glad to be able to swish next to you, you know, back in our room or whatever.

You would take that as kind of a perverse misapplication. Furthermore, if I posited and actually understood the serotonin that is associated with all the positive experiences, especially around faithful marriage and family and all those things, and I put that as the end goal for my moral or spiritual life. Like I'm just trying to get that right proportion of serotonin to line up in my head.

That's really what I'm aiming for babe. That also would strike her as sort of a perverse. It's not that that knowledge is not valuable.

We know, especially through psychology and medicine, how valuable it is, but it doesn't actually work to provide a framework of the kinds of things we should aim for to do and be with our lives. The kinds of goals to pursue and the kind of person that you want to become in the world doesn't get touched, unfortunately, by some of our descriptions. So I submit to you tonight that there is a kind of restlessness that's set loose on your soul when you find your stuff stuck between the innate purpose, pursuit, and the open-ended innovative of a well-crafted, curated, meaningful life.

I have this experience all the time when I pop onto social media. Does anyone else have this experience? You go onto Facebook or Twitter, and I feel like the friends, maybe it's just my feeds that I look at, but it's like this profound highlight reel of other people's achieved meaningful lives. The achievements of a meaningful life pick whichever you want people who have really great-looking kids down at the beach, you know, playing baseball, you can find that right now.

You want to find the dudes who got the perfect engineering job when he finished the tech, you can find it right now, shaking the hand, signing the deal. You want to see someone having a really meaningful study abroad experience when you're stuck in the 10 below degrees? Yep, you can find it right now. You want to just pick what you want.

For me, Montana has always been this place where I go online and I see some dude who's always younger, better looking with his fly rod doubled over with a huge ground on it. So I feel like Glenn, we're in the same boat. It's not a picture of Glenn.

Dr. Suttergill, but it's a picture of someone other than both of us. And it just gives you the sense of like infinite fear of missing out, the sense of purpose chasing, the sense that the meaningful life is always just out of reach or at least it's being lived more robustly by someone other than you. And that that actually produces a kind of bottomless anxiety.

There's this great quote by one of my favorite philosophers, 17th century French philosopher Pascal. And he says this, so remind, is in the 1600s. He says, "We are not

satisfied with the life that we have in ourselves and our own being, and we want to lead an imaginary life in the eyes of others." And so we try to make an impression.

We strive constantly to embellish and preserve our imaginary being and neglect the real one. It's a strange human predicament to find yourself more interested in the curation and presentation of a certain life rather than the actual ins and outs of the real life that you're living right now. This hummed realm is a can feel as real as it is.

So my sense is that the obsession with a meaningful life with discovering a purpose can induce a kind of anxiety. And I also love the question that was posed for the talk tonight, but I didn't come up with either. It's awesome.

Do we need God to have meaningful lives? But consider the framework of that question. Do we need God to have meaningful lives? You can see the architecture there is that we all know the main thing that we should be aiming for is a meaningful life. And possibly God or faith or spirituality could fit in as an accessory to make that possible.

There's a really interesting story to be told philosophically, so if someone wants to write this in a writing and philosophy class for Dr. Southern, it would be great. But how we as a culture within 100 years went from the pursuit of a framework of ultimate reality which required religious faith in the early part of the century to spirituality in the middle part of the century to meaning or meaningfulness at the end of the century. A meaningful life is one of the last kind of shared, modern, okay things to say about this deep felt spiritual longing or need that we all share.

Or at least I feel like we all share. And so in some ways we might be entering into an age in which meaning becomes the thing that we're after. And in a really garden variety sense it's the thing that we worship.

If you think about it, I mean worship doesn't need to entail lots of their religious relics and services and liturgies, it's just like we tend to worship the things that we give our attention to, our thoughts to our care, our affection. So if meaning is that thing then in some ways it's an idolatry of meaning that we're participating in. I'm participating in.

The thing that scares me about that is that the term meaning is actually empty. It's a signifier or placeholder, like what's the meaning of meaning? Whoa, it's like a hoo hoo hoo hoo, philosophy class kind of thing, meaning of meaning, exactly. It's a standard meaning, the meaning of something is that which it points to, signifies, direct something, concrete and answer a thing.

So if we're actually really pursuing meaning but meaning requires a description, something more concrete, then we're just filling that in with all the stuff for ourselves and then giving all of our time and attention, affections to that kind of feedback. You have a kind of restless acquisition and distraction and pursuit of maybe ourselves,

maybe stuff, maybe nothing, and that's kind of a haunting thought, maybe too haunting for how cold it is outside. But I want to turn now and ask the question, do we need God to have meaningful lives? The only way to answer that would be to be clear in what we mean by need.

What do you mean by need? Do we need God to have some modicum of success or emotional satisfaction or health or a beautiful garden, etc.? Probably not, or at least not explicitly, if you look around at the lives that people are leading. But if the question becomes, do we need God to know and fulfill our truest, deepest purpose, then the question from Christianity has always been yes, because in this sense, need refers to our nature as human beings. So Christianity has this very complex, robust, philosophical, theological story about God as a creator and how human beings fit into that, but here's like the 90s snapshot.

God himself, in the Christian tradition, is capital being the source of everything that is. Everything that exists in the totality of reality has its being and existence partly because God, the source, has allowed these things to exist. Now God as being itself has the perfections of being, this is all sort of a theology class, right? We're going to wheel back to reality in a minute, but the perfections of being are things that we all implicitly desire, or at least pay lip service to desire, things like truth.

Things like goodness, things like beauty, things like love. We end up thinking knowledge is better than ignorance. We end up thinking that a really good meal or a good nap or a good golden retriever is better than a really bad meal or a bad goal for a retriever, or bad master if in the case.

Why do we naturally pursue these things? Well, we just do, you know, that's the philosophical answer, but at a deeper level, there's actually the sense that because God, the source of being, has created human beings in his image, this is the mystery of creation and the biblical story is that human beings are in some ways this apex of the creative story. We are those creatures that not only have a little bit of that truth, a little bit of that beauty, goodness, love, like all of creation, participates in various degrees, but we have the minds that can actually recognize it. And we have the hearts and the wills that we can actually love it and pursue it.

So we're unique creatures, but in that uniqueness, the Christian story says, we're also filled with the kind of infinite longing to get back to and know the source of all that goodness, truth, beauty and love, and to direct our lives toward that end as the fullness of human existence. Now that is a heavy responsibility, weight, but also glory and opportunity. And so we ourselves, just as you would feel or some have felt in not knowing your own parent, being adopted, going your life never having met, your genetic parents might have this longing at some point if possible to know, to meet.

To engage in relationship, that's the strength of the longing, the Christian story says, in

the human heart, to find our way back through grateful recognition and awareness of the source of he who is, whereas my favorite philosopher, theologian, Augustine says, you God have made us for yourselves, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you. So there's that sense of restlessness, but it's a restlessness that comes through our status of being creatures. Now I fear that my experience in culture, in this American culture, makes the meaning of life that rest that we're looking for.

But the meaning of life ends up being a fundamentally elitist project in which we all have to get the additives of our life put together to add up to this elusive sum that we call the meaningful life. Like you're way better off living in this country, this state, this city, having that education, having that possibility of that job, having this marriage, having that house, having that help, you start to add all the additive bits up to the elusive sum of a meaningful life. And it's a fundamentally competitive project, folks.

It's zero sum. There's winners and losers, and that is the world we live in, and you can feel hairy by it. You can feel restless.

You can feel anxious. I can feel tired by it. The Christian story, edits and twists and says, actually, all those good things you might do as a human being, like discovering your talent, using it for good in the world, learning, growing, having a healthy body, being married, having a family, all those additive bits are awesome, but they ultimately don't touch the central infinite longing in the human heart.

They end up being shadows, voices, echoes of a world that is within this world of a God who is within this world that we're actually longing for. That sense that you can always already, anyone, anytime, anywhere discover the true meaning of life, the high purpose in calling through the soul's awareness and return to your creator. You can have great luck with your career, great luck with marriage and family, great luck in where you end up in Montana, or not, but the purpose, the really big purpose is always available to you under any circumstances or conditions.

That is a hard thing to wrap your head around. I didn't really realize it until I met my friend Joshua. Sometimes it takes a friend for you to actually understand the truth.

Have you ever had a friend who you feel like just got way more of the potential, the little bits of potential placed into them, like the super lucky friend who's just good at absolutely everything? That was my friend Joshua. Joshua I met and undergrad, we were on a study of Rob Tripp when we stayed really close. He was one of those guys he started at West Point, went to the University of Iowa.

He went into the military, learned Arabic, learned interrogation, went to Iraq, came back, and what did he do? He went to the University of Iowa again to the writer's workshop to become a playwright and to write an own fiction. He thought, "Well, I could be a playwright, but I think I'll get my PhD at the University of Chicago. I might as well do

that.

I think I'll teach one of those people that you meet him and it's just not fair." He's like an alt-comer, but he started the Shakespeare play. It just doesn't make sense. It just keeps going.

Joshua was one of those people that the talent and the magnanimity and the magnetism were just so intense, just a truly talented guy. Joshua and I kept in close touch when he was in Iraq, and he was sent to do interrogation in Abu Ghraid. He probably remembered some of the stories that the tactics used at Abu Ghraid wasn't pretty.

He actually went through a period where he converted to Catholicism. He decided that what he was being asked to do in Abu Ghraid was against his conscience and he decided to leave the U.S. Army with honorable discharge. It was just kind of like, "Well, of course." He puts out a memoir about this experience that he had in Iraq.

Just unbelievable. We were in grad school and our PhD programs together side by side. I remember the call.

He'd had pneumonia at Thanksgiving and finally went to the dock. It was just one of those worst case scenarios where it's like, "Oh, you don't have pneumonia. You've got stage four lung cancer." We have no idea why.

Perhaps from tending burn pits in Iraq, we don't know. There's actually this month's Smithsonian magazine has an article on him, the priest at Abu Ghraid's, which is called about his experience leaving the U.S. Army. I could tell you many, many things about my friend Joshua, but he gave me the most tremendous gift that a friend could possibly give another friend.

That is, he got his diagnosis, which was one of those death sentences. He will die in six months and assured that it was six months later and then he passed away. But it was as if I saw what was really going on inside of his heart all that time as his life and breath and physical strength were stripped away.

All the purpose and potential was just in front of him, right out there. He's one of those people who's like, "I can't wait to see what you do in the world, man." You know, it's just like, "You've got it." And as it was stripped away, there was nothing but courage, and joy, and kindness to his family, through the suffering of the therapies. It was just like, "I saw he already had a purpose going, which transcended all the little purpose and potential and talent I thought he was headed for." And his own death and suffering was just like this moment for you to actually see what was really going on in his hard parts.

It was like he cracked a door into another world for me, a kind of eternal opening. And I can only say as a Christian, that sometimes the only way we can see in grasp who Christ is, is through the witness and testimony and friendship with another. And so it was like

he was cracking a door that allowed me to see Christ in a new way, which cracked a door into eternity.

And what is that? The door into eternity that Christ has cracked is this fundamentally paradoxical door that you and I are given lives and the goodness of creation to pursue our talents and our purposes and make a difference in this world and find meaning. And yet, there is a mysterious way in which our projects here and now are all fundamentally only opening up onto something much greater and much bigger. And the witness of those who suffer and those who face death squarely and bravely in faith and in hope opens up a different window into what is really going on.

It's like you find these statements by Christ in the gospel that I relish where he says things like, "If you would like to save your life, you'll need to lose it." He doesn't talk about the meaning of life. He talks about a saving of life through losing. And so that is the challenge that I want to wrap my head and my heart around.

That I think college especially gives you a really unique opportunity as you think about discovering your own purpose, discovering majors that lead to careers and relationships that lead to spouses and families and places in the world. And as you think about crafting and curating a life, consider devoting yourself to not the project of meaning but to something much bigger, something much higher, something much beyond ourselves. Committing your life to something which won't seem trivial in the face of death.

That's the challenge that we all ultimately are going to face. So in some ways, if a guston of hippo is right, that our hearts are restless until they find rest and God, then possibly our obsession and our anxiety with meaning is actually the thing that's most making us unhappy and restless. And there might be a different invitation to rest.

Thank you guys so much for listening. [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)