



The Opportunity for Meaning
Final Paper

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It was the beginning of April when we first saw them – a pair of cardinals flitting about the yard. The female was light brown, with an orange beak brighter than any tangerine. The male was a radiant red hue that would make Clifford turn green with envy. Cautiously darting from tree to bush to bird bath and back, they assembled a mass of lawn debris. Each item was carefully carried to the bush right beside our back door. A withered leaf from the dogwood tree, and a piece of lint dislodged from the dryer vent took up residence in the amalgamation. Twig after twig was woven into a dainty home. As the female made her final adjustments to the nest and nestled in, the male presented her with one more twig to liven up the spring décor.

A few days later, a sly peek into the nest revealed two tiny, blue speckled eggs. The week after, a featherless pink baby could be seen curled in the bottom, screaming for a fat grub and its mother's warmth. Two weeks later, the baby bird I watched grow up left the nest for his first flying lesson. Naturally, I grabbed my camera like a proud parent and snapped dozens of photos, savoring the moment and recording it for posterity. Even in quarantine, I still had my favorite pastime. Returning to my moral moment that summer evening on the Bay Bridge, I reflect on the things which brought me joy in my normal life, and now what brings joy in the age of COVID-19.

My back yard is filled with life and greenery - evidently the birds and chipmunks didn't get the quarantine message. Such animated sites boost my spirits and remind me that life continues despite the global pandemic. The seasons have become a beautiful metaphor for the contemporary world. Dormant in winter, bears hunker down in their dens and flower bulbs rest deep underground. But just as COVID will one day recede, the light breeze of spring rushes over the dark winter. For the past two months, I've planted a garden and watched each seed poke its green head above the soil. The seedlings do not come out to find a harsh world and retreat back under ground, but rather they push forward against harsh wind, rainy downpours, and chipmunk raids. They strive with a single meaning in their life – growth. But what gives the human life meaning? Why do we persist?

As plants burst forth toward the sky and baby birds take their first frantic flaps, the world is abuzz with growth. It is a laboratory of trial and error, where people resurrect their long-forgotten hobbies and amateur chefs test their skill with a loaf of sourdough. I pick up my camera again,

wiping off the dust it gathers each semester in my dorm room, and take it outside to commemorate each wondrous moment. The baby cardinal's crash-landing in the azalea and eventually its first successful flight suddenly become the thesis of my creativity. My deepest connections to my thoughts and self have been while peering at the world through a camera lens. Life melts away. The good and bad morph into one, and all of life's focus is squarely on a single spot. My heart rate slows, and my breath times to the metronome of the subject. The silent peace within, just before closing the shutter, is deafening. I wait patiently for the perfect moment. With a slight ruffle of feathers in the soft breeze, the cardinal leaps from the branch into the air. Click!

I once heard of a philosophy professor who, for the final exam, placed a can of Coca-Cola at the front of the room. He gave his students a single challenge – prove that the can was not really there. While some went floundering about to explain molecular structure or the perception of reality, one student answered with but two words: “What can?” Such a profound answer. Both blatantly obvious and seemingly absurd. Brilliant response, yet fraught with risk. Throughout the semester in *The Meaning of Life*, I have come around to a very similar and somewhat dissatisfying conclusion: there is absolutely no inherent meaning of life. Bluntly put, on its own life is in fact meaningless. Yet when paired with opportunity, there exists ambition. And where ambition prevails, hopes and dreams breed meaning. Life is but a vessel for humanity – filled with the hopes and dreams of a lone sailor on spring tides.

So what separates humanity from the plants or birds? Presumably, plants cannot ponder their reality, rather they blindly follow the sun's journey across the heavens. The baby cardinal does not consider its place in the world, but only concerns itself with the stability of its perch. Humans are unique. We question life. We seek to explain the unexplainable, creating religion, science, and philosophy to fill gaps in that which we do not understand. Maybe the meaning of life for humanity is profoundly life itself. Not fulfillment, but rather the ability to be fulfilled. Not achievement, but the ability to achieve. To explore, imagine, and create. To choose our own meaning and our own destiny. Life's meaning lies in our ability to grasp opportunity.

In the 2007 comedy *Evan Almighty*, there is a passing, yet deeply moving segment. God, portrayed as usual by Morgan Freeman, explains of a troubling situation:

“It sounds like an opportunity. If someone prays for patience, do you think God gives them patience? Or does he give them the opportunity to be patient? If they pray for courage, does God give them courage, or does he give them opportunities to be courageous? If someone prayed for the family to be closer, do you think God zaps them with warm fuzzy feelings? Or does he give them opportunities to love each other?”

- Morgan Freeman as God, *Evan Almighty*, 2007¹

Despite the comedic context, these words resonate with an air of truth. Opportunity abounds in this world, and the meaning of life blossoms along with our ability to grasp each instance. Coronavirus quarantine brought this world to a screeching halt. Economies and societies grappled with the thought of living indoors for months on end. But out of the darkness has risen the strength and goodness of the human spirit.

Presented with tragedy, humanity found the opportunity for love. I was inspired by the plane-loads of doctors and nurses who flew to New York and other pandemic hotspots to assist in the relief efforts. The donations of food, homemade masks, and good cheer that lift us all up. The applause that rings out each day in cities across the world for the medical workers who lay their lives on the line every second to save those of us who are most vulnerable.

In darkness, humanity found the opportunity for clarity and illumination. Photos from across the world show scenes we never thought possible. The streets of Paris, empty and silent. Times Square but a ghostly shell of its former glory. Silent streets in China that are usually teeming with thousands of tourists and locals. But directly beside these pictures, beauty is also found. The

¹ Scene from *Evan Almighty*, 2007: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DxPKjruTuxw>.

Himalayan Mountains, visible from India for the first time in decades because the pollution has cleared. Canals of Venice running with clear, pure water from the lack of tourism. And the Los Angeles skyline, smog-free for the first time in recent recollection. Illuminated are humanity's destructive tendencies. I only hope we recognize this as an opportunity for enlightenment, and effect change to prevent future relapse.

Faced with the ticking clock of death, humanity found the opportunity of time. Quarantine has given us the strange gift of free time. While stuck inside, relationships have been forged. Bonds have been made in person and across media platforms. We have resurrected old hobbies and picked up new ones. Everyone and their brother is trying their hand at bread-making, and physical activity has suddenly become accessible to those who previously were stuck in the office. This time has helped people to slow down, reflect on their lives, and take opportunities that give them meaning.

In this historic moment, humanity found the opportunity to add meaning to life. We have built relationships. Across the globe, we connected and worked together for the betterment of all. We have each sought out opportunities within our lives. Be it spending time bingeing our favorite shows or taking care of an elderly loved one, we are each creating meaning by embracing opportunity. Life would be meaningless without opportunity for hopes and dreams.

As I stare out of the kitchen window writing this reflection, I hear the male and female cardinal calling to each other from the treetops. They have built a second nest this spring, and three tiny, blue speckled eggs sit neatly inside. The natural world continues to flourish in the age of COVID-19, and I've got my camera ready to capture the next opportunity that life presents. Like the tiny seedling in the warmth of spring, we must rise unabashedly to meet the day.