

Once upon a time, there was a woman who set out to discover the meaning of life. First she read everything she could get her hands on - history, philosophy, psychology, religion. While she became a very smart person, nothing she read gave her the answer she was looking for. Then she set about to find other smart people and began asking them about the meaning of life.

Her discussions with them were sometimes long and lively, but no agreement was ever reached and she still had no answer.

Finally she put all her possessions in storage and set off in search for the meaning of life. She went to South America, Australia, Japan. She went to India. People all over didn't know the meaning of life, but she began to hear about someone who did. She was told that he lived far away in the Himalayan mountains, in a high and distant village, in a little hut perched on the side of the mountain just below the tree line.

She set off to find him. She crossed rivers, she forded streams, she scaled mountains. She climbed to reach his little shack. When she finally got to his front door, with knuckles so cold they hardly worked, she knocked.

A kind-looking old man opened the door. She nearly fainted with happiness. At last she had found him.

"I've come halfway around the world to ask you one question" she said, gasping for breath, not having had time to adjust to the thin mountain air. "What is the meaning of life?"

"Please come in and have some tea," the old man said.

"No," she said. "I mean, no thank you. I haven't come all this way for tea. I'm here for an answer. Won't you tell me, please, what is the meaning of life?" "We shall have some tea," the old man said. So, she gave up and went inside.

While he was brewing the tea she caught her breath and began telling him about all the books she had read, all the people she had met, and all the places she had been.

The old man just listened, (it was all he could do anyway since she didn't leave him any room to speak). As she talked he placed a fragile tea cup in her hand, and he began to pour the tea.

She was so busy talking that she didn't notice when the cup was full, so the old man just kept pouring until the tea ran over the sides and spilled onto the floor in a steaming waterfall.

"What are you doing!" She yelled when the tea began to burn her hand. "It's full, can't you see that? Stop! There's no more room!"

"Just so," the old man replied. "You come here wanting something from me, but what am I to do? There is no room in your cup. Come back when it is empty and we will talk."

Wanting to be made complete by increasing her knowledge; her ability to understand the world and

ultimately the meaning of life, this woman came up short. When the opportunity finally arrived that she was looking for, she missed it. You could say that she couldn't see the forest for the trees...

In a similar way Nicodemus came to Jesus, wanting to know who Jesus really was and where his power came from. He and Jesus dispensed with the tea ritual, but the outcome of the encounter was similar. Jesus didn't cooperate the way his questioner wanted him to and he redirected the question to something other than what Nicodemus had in mind.

Now, understand, he approached Jesus with a certain amount of hope. Yet he was looking for just a certain kind of answer.

He came looking for a spoonful of knowledge, expecting just enough to keep him going, and Jesus gave him more; he gave him buckets full.

He knew that Jesus, this Nazarene Rabbi, had been sent by God.

That much was clear. No one could do what Jesus did unless God was very much behind it.

Yet in his approaching Jesus, Nicodemus asked much more than he thought he did... much more than he intended. He didn't frame it in these words, but this is what he ended up asking... **“What is God doing by sending you here? How does this *change* things, that you are here, and with us now. What is God saying in you being here?”**

This was no idle curiosity. He wasn't splitting religious hairs with this question -- he wasn't asking Jesus the number of angels that could dance on the head of a pin.

This was a Pharisee talking -- a learned man, a person deeply concerned about his faith and the tradition in which he was raised, bringing himself to the one person who might be able to answer this basic question about God.

We don't know too much about Nicodemus, but we know enough, by the fact that because he came at night to avoid being detected by others, he showed he was willing to risk his reputation and livelihood for this answer.

Jesus' initial answer was direct, and it was just the beginning. He spoke to Nicodemus about God. It's as if he was enticing Nicodemus to ask for more.

“No one can see the kingdom of God without being born anew.”

The flood gates of Nicodemus' curiosity were opened and he just had to follow this up.

If this Jesus was a teacher sent by God -- What in the world was he talking about? How can birth happen twice? Isn't once enough ?

Nicodemus wanted facts, he wanted to be able to get a good handle on this, to be able to understand it completely.

Albert Einstein is reported to have said that the most beautiful thing a person can experience is the mysterious –

- and that a person who can no longer stop to wonder, to stand in awe of the mystery of life -- is as good as dead.

Nicodemus was challenged by Jesus in having his question transformed from a “how-to” to a “why” question, and he had a hard time with it. He might not have been as good as dead, but he was obviously frustrated with Jesus’ answers, in words whose meaning he didn’t understand; and in glimpses of God’s Spirit in ways he wasn’t ready to look at.

Most of us, I’d guess, come at life the same way as Nicodemus. We’re comfortable with a ‘how-to’ mentality about life. As people of a technological age, we’re not comfortable with mystery. Mystery is an alien word to us. Practicality dominates our lives. We don't feel comfortable dealing with the "why's" of life - - what's more -- we don't really know how to deal with them.

Nicodemus came to Jesus by night; full of anticipation. He was looking for a word of advice, some help... It was natural for him to go to a Rabbi to find some help. A Rabbi would tell you some stories, some parables and teachings, from the Talmud or Mishnah, stories which would direct you in ways in which you should be able to begin to sort it out and decide in light of the law and tradition. But Jesus didn’t teach like other Rabbis, he didn’t teach like the Pharisees. He didn’t give options. He said, instead, “I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father, except by me.” Jesus upset people with his way of teaching. He upset the wrong kind of people. Some people just walked away -- others took his words as a serious threat.

As for Nicodemus, he stayed to listen to Jesus.

It was a classic encounter, like those described in each issue of the Atlantic Monthly between two great historical figures, like Stalin meeting Churchill, or Khrushchev and Eisenhower or Napoleon meeting the Pope.

There’s always drama in it, always two opposing viewpoints, and always something to be learned out of the dialogue which took place.

The author Fred Buechner provides some helpful images. From his book “Peculiar Treasures”, he writes. ‘Jesus told Nicodemus that unless you got born again, you might as well give it up.

That was all very well, Nicodemus said, but how were you to pull a thing like that off? How especially were you supposed to do it if you were pushing 65? How did you get born again when it was a challenge just to get out of bed in the morning?

Just then, in the midst of their talking, a gust of wind happened to whistle by, making the dying embers of the campfire burst into flame, and Jesus said that being born again was like that. It wasn't something you did. The wind did it. The Spirit did it. It was not something you do.

It *happens*..

"How can this be?" Nicodemus said; and that's when Jesus let him have it.

Maybe Nicodemus had six honorary doctorates and half a column in *Who's Who*, Jesus said, but if he couldn't grasp something like this, he'd better go back to kindergarten.

"I'm telling you like it is," Jesus said, "I'm telling you what I've seen. I'm telling you that there are people on Medicare walking around with the love-light in their eyes. I'm telling you that there are ex-cons teaching Sunday school. I'm telling you that there are undertakers scared silly we'll put them all out of business.

I'm telling you that God has such a thing for this loused-up planet that he's sent me down here so if you don't believe your own eyes, then maybe you'll believe mine; maybe you'll believe me, maybe you won't come sneaking around scared half to death in the dark any more but will come to, come clean, come to *life* in all its glory and goodness."

What impressed Nicodemus even more than the speech was the quickening of his own breathing and the pounding of his heart. He hadn't felt like this since his first kiss, since the time his first child was born or the time they'd told him he didn't have lung- cancer, but just a touch of the flu."

This is what the story of Nicodemus is all about. It's about Jesus filling his emptiness, even though this man came to Jesus thinking he was very full.

What fills Nicodemus in the end is an answer larger than anyone could possibly have been looking for. Jesus began by talking about belief and quickly moved into talking about trust.

Now there's belief and there's belief. There is intellectual assent and there is trust. The best illustration I can have for trust comes from one of the white-water rafting trips I've been on.

It was some years ago, on the Chatooga, the "Deliverance" river. They don't call it white-water for nothing. Six of us were on a raft, big & sturdy -- took a number of rapids earlier in the day, did ok, full of confidence. But we got to the rapids/ that they had warned us about/ more like a waterfall. I think it was called the "Widow-maker."

A guide had to go with us. The drop was from about here to the floor, with boulders tight on either side, and a whirlpool underneath, so that if you fell out, you could get sucked underneath & maybe not come up. It was a challenge, a thrill. We were given an option not to go over the falls- and instead to walk on the rocks, and get back in the raft down river. But the rocks were dangerous themselves, still had to wear a helmet, &

the rocks were slick, maybe even more dangerous than the falls. I don't remember if anyone opted for the rocks. I stayed on the raft, and our guide took us straight through the rapids.

It was a blast. We got wet/ drenched, but we knew that was going to happen anyway. We trusted in our guide, and she -- yes, it was a college-age girl; she got us through.

Now, in applying this story to Nicodemus, if he had been on the raft, he'd want the raft stopped and anchored right there so that he could make absolutely sure that our guides credentials checked out ok, and that she had plenty of experience on these falls. He'd likely want to watch the guide take a different raft over the falls to know that it could be done safely.

But sooner or later, it would be his turn, and he'd have to go over. Or take the rocks. Either way, there was danger ahead. His choice would be a guide or no guide.

Of all of Jesus' words to Nicodemus, the punch line comes verse 16. It's a verse famous enough to be regarded the most important verse of the whole Bible.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

Jesus is there to save us, in our rafts of life. Ready or not, Jesus is there. Ready or not.

Here is how, says Jesus. Put your trust in me. Watch me. Don't think about it too hard. Just do as I do. Trust me, and travel with me. I will be with you along the way. And when we get to the end, we'll stop and have some tea.

God is ready for us, to accept us and not to condemn us, no matter who we are.

A final story...

After his grandfather's death, Donald Hall, once the poet laureate of New Hampshire, went into his grandfather's attic and found many, many boxes, one of which was filled with short pieces of string.

The box was marked in an old hand: STRING TOO SHORT TO BE SAVED. He was astonished. The box of string had caught him completely off-guard. And from his off-guardedness and unguardedness, he was able to write a beautiful poem.

The poem states the obvious: his grandfather had saved the string that was too short to be saved. If you have ever felt like you were a string too short to be saved, you can begin to come to know what it means to be accepted by God, in Jesus Christ.

God will saved us all in a great attic. Nothing is ever lost to God. Nothing. Not a single dead Iraqi child. Not a single person who dies in a traffic accident. Not a single child who drowns in the floods of a hurricane. Not a single woman who dies of breast cancer. Not a single homeless man or bag lady. Not an estranged spouse. Not a wayward child. No one is lost to God.

We will each appear too short to be saved many, many times in our lives. And God will still save us.
This is the Gospel of God. Amen.