

Purpose of Human Existence

by Herb Silverman

The Hindu Temple in Charleston, South Carolina tries to put on an annual Interfaith event, where they invite people from different faiths (in my case different values) to participate and speak on specific topics. The topic at the January 16, 2022 event was to be “The Purpose of Human Existence.”

Unfortunately, the event was canceled because of new Covid restrictions. Since I had prepared my talk, I thought subscribers of *The Freethought Society News* might like to read it. Also, I am interested in hearing about your life purpose(s), too. Should you want to share, my email address is: SilvermanH@cofc.edu

Imagine me standing in the Hindu Temple delivering the following:

I’ve been asked to tell you my ideas, as an atheist and secular humanist, about the purpose of human existence. Let’s start by defining what we mean by “purpose.” The primary purpose of every living thing, from bacteria, viruses, and plants to humans like us, is to replicate so the species will survive. Unfortunately, we’ve seen this replication with the Covid virus. You can read evidence for this purpose in books on evolution, including *The Selfish Gene* by **Richard Dawkins**.

There is no other universal purpose of human existence. And the more we learn about our natural world, the less significant humans seem to be in it. **Charles Darwin** showed that we are all animals in a long evolutionary line. But purpose for humans is about more than mere replication and survival. It’s about what we believe we should do in the brief time we’re alive. And most people have more than one purpose. I believe we all need to find individual purposes in our lives. Purpose involves having goals and activities that give us direction and meaning, and help us engage in productive ways.

For example, my wife **Sharon Fratepietro** has a T-shirt that states: “Be Good, Do Good.” She says that’s her purpose, but how does she or any of us know what “good” is?

I don’t believe in a supernatural being who supposedly created humans and inspired some of them to write rules about being good in so-called holy books like the Hebrew Bible, the Christian Bible, or the Quran. I do think part of our purpose in life should include making good moral decisions. For some conservative religions, morality is more about belief than behavior, and they view this life as a preparation for an imagined afterlife. If loving and worshipping a god inspires a person to treat others with loving kindness, that’s great. Unfortunately, love of a god all too often makes some people less loving of those who don’t believe and worship as they do. And if this life is just a religious test to get into heaven and avoid hell, what kind of morality is that?

Some religious morality is certainly worth keeping, like love your neighbor, don’t murder, steal, or lie. But that’s necessary for the survival of any culture, with or without religion. Regrettably, some religions have justified slavery, second-class status for women, anti-Semitism, executing blasphemers and homosexuals, burning witches and heretics, and genocides, to list just a few things.

So how do atheists and secular humanists like me make moral decisions, and decide on our purposes? I believe we should be guided by the expected consequences of our actions

affecting other people and our planet. We should look at what has withstood the test of time in creating a livable society. We need ongoing discussions about morality as we continue to revise and refine our views about how best to maximize happiness, minimize suffering, and promote human good.

Looking for happiness is probably a major purpose in almost everybody’s life. **Robert Ingersoll**, known as “The Great Agnostic,” said: “Happiness is the only good. The time to be happy is now. The place to be happy is here. The way to be happy is to make others so.” And I like the life purpose expressed by atheist mathematician and philosopher **Bertrand Russell**: “The good life is one inspired by love and guided by knowledge.”

I’ve had several purposes in life that have changed over the years. As a child, my purpose was to be educated and socialized as a moral member of society. As an adult, my purpose was to teach mathematics, do mathematics research, and pass on knowledge to future generations. Now, at age 79, my purpose is to write a blog on secular humanism, be a good husband and citizen, and do what I can to remain healthy for as long as possible.

I don’t believe we will have an afterlife. We have one life to live, and one chance to do something meaningful with it. We can all contribute something useful. Sometimes our choices and their repercussions live longer than we do, impacting on family, friends, people we don’t know, and even future generations. Immortality for atheists includes the good works and offspring that live long after we have disintegrated.

Here’s something we all need to consider. Life is a sexually transmitted disease with 100% mortality rate. Yes, we are all going to die someday. As for me, I’ve accepted a purpose for my death. When I die, I’m going to medical school, just like my Jewish mother always wanted me to do. I expect to use my body parts to their fullest while I’m alive, but I assume others will make good use of them when I’m dead. I also encourage all of you to make some “future” plans.

Finally, I would like to thank the organizers at this Hindu Temple for being one of the few houses of worship that would tolerate a “sermon” from me. I must confess (which I’m told is good to do in a temple) that I always wanted to be a preacher, but the god thing got in the way. That’s why I chose the next best calling and became a professor, so I could profess — if only mathematics. My favorite parts of professing, are the questions, comments, and criticisms, that develop. I would like to know about your purpose(s) in life.

Herb Silverman is a regular contributor to the Freethought Society’s ezine, *The Freethought Society News*.

Silverman is the author of two books, *Candidate Without a Prayer* and *An Atheist Stranger in a Strange Religious Land*. Both of these books are available through [Amazon](#).

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