

Are We Trivial?

The other night, a young friend of mine who was traveling in the mountains texted me, “I saw four shooting stars tonight. Everything is impermanent and trivial. How nice to remember!”

I realized that I had not thought in these terms for many years.

When I was young, I too marveled at the size of the universe and how infinitesimal we are in the expanse of space and the unfolding of time.

I wondered about the meaning of life. I dabbled in existentialism and found consolation in Sartre’s idea that we create our own meaning and in Camus’s reconceptualization of the meaning of life as what makes a life worth living. (I never understood Heidegger, and in any event couldn’t find anything comforting in the thought of a member of the Nazi party).

I’m an old man now with very few years left to live. It would make sense for me to wonder about the meaning of my life, especially what it will be after I’m gone. But I don’t.

Some years ago, I met a young woman who was majoring in comparative literature at Yale. I mentioned Lionel Trilling. She asked who he was. Well in his time—the mid-20th century—Lionel Trilling was arguably the most important literary critic in America. She had never heard of him! Stunning! I began to joke that in 50 years I would be as famous as Lionel Trilling. No one would remember either of us.

So yes, I’m drifting towards oblivion and insignificance. But I don’t feel that my life is, as my young friend put it, trivial.

Yes, everything is impermanent and unimportant in the universal scheme of things, but not trivial.

Relationships are not trivial. Love especially is not trivial. Caring for others is not trivial. How we live our lives is not a trivial matter.

At one point in the intellectual history of the 20th century, how we live our lives came to seem arbitrary and not subject to moral judgment because of skepticism about the existence of a demanding and judgmental God and the growing awareness of the size of the universe and the magnitude of time.

But that was before the rise of fascism and state Communism, the Holocaust, and the 2nd World War. Then it became clear that morality is not arbitrary. There is evil and there is a human obligation to resist it. Camus, I think, offers great clarity about this as he moved from writing about “the absurd” in *The Stranger* and *The Myth of Sisyphus* to writing about “revolt” in *The Plague* and *L’Homme Révolté* (generally mistranslated as *The Rebel*).

Love, family, community, and the moral dimension of human life give it important meaning.

And there is also a transcendent dimension of human experience. I find that in music and art, both of which can lift me—sometimes—beyond the everyday, beyond relationships, beyond ethics and politics to a sense of connection that I cannot quite articulate. Sometimes I play the connection in my music. Sometimes my photographs connect me not just with the people I photograph but with an aesthetic reality. Then I am not lost in the vastness of space and time. I am connected with it.

One ^{very} Old Man

Many people find their connection in their experience of God or of oneness with the universe, powerful connections that give their lives meaning.

From the perspective of the history and future of the universe we may be unimportant; but from the perspective of our actual lives, we are not trivial. We matter—in love, in relationships, in our communities, in doing our best to live well, and in our connection to the whole of what is.

Ponderous thoughts, perhaps. And they do remind me of the story of a man at an astronomer's presentation on the expanding universe who interrupted to ask, "Did you say that the universe will end in 500 million years?" "No," the presenter responded, "I said 500 billion years." "Ahh", the questioner sighed, "What a relief!"

