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February 9, 2014: The Death of Meaning

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Title: The Death of Meaning

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2/9/2014—I've been thinking of titling a new book "Secular Law, the Death of Meaning and the Christian Story." The book will chronicle my unyielding commitment to secular law, along with my growing concern with the foundations of secular civilization. I call that concern the death of meaning. The title also points to my romance with Christianity as propounded by Karl Barth, despite my resistance to, or reinterpretation of, core Christian motifs, such as incarnation and resurrection.

I have found little resonance among nonreligious young people—I just mean younger than 60, which is of course not necessarily young at all—to my fear of the death of meaning. They are busy living, thank you very much, and do not need God to find meaning in life or to be good people.

I know that is the case at the moment. But the reason for that seems to me to be that religion, and specifically the Judeo-Christian tradition of monotheism, form the framework of American life. Will that still be true a century from now? Will that still be true given the remorseless attacks on religious frameworks?

The issue is a kind of materialist naturalism. Ironically in the name of science that distrusts the senses, nonreligious thinkers insist that what we can sense is all there is in reality. This viewpoint not only removes a God who does tricks with the laws of nature, a conclusion that I also endorse, it also rules out at the start anything like meaning. The universe must be an accident and our lives a meaningless blip because there is no norm or telos or end or goal that the universe is striving for. We still have a feeling that self-conscious life has a significance that mere physical existence does not, but we no longer have an ontology in which that judgment is coherent.

Here are two recent examples of what I mean. In a recent issue of the magazine *Mental Floss*, the physicist Neil deGrasse Tyson, the astrophysicist director of the Hayden Planetarium, explains why he is creating a new *Cosmos* series, after the one by Carl Sagan. He says of the new series, "Its real contribution is that it shows how and why science matters." (page 46).

Do you think Carl Sagan would have thought that way? Sagan wanted people to see how beautiful the universe is, how worthy of awe. Tyson probably feels the same way, but the culture is no longer capable of such a reaction. Tyson is fighting against the death of meaning. It used to be obvious that learning the truth of reality inherently matters.

Someone who feels the death of meaning, though his frame is quite different from mine, is Stephen Harrod Buhner in his book, "The Lost Language of Plants." (2002). The book was recommended to me and I have not read much of it yet. But here is how Buhner introduces his understanding of how lost we have become from viewing the universe as a thing without consciousness: "And in the stillness I ...saw the wound laid down within all of us. The damage to our interior world from the belief that we somehow crash-landed or inexplicably emerged on a ball of rock hurtling around the sun, the only intelligent inhabitants of Earth. The wound that comes from believing we are alone amid dead uncaring nature. And then I took breath and began to share stories of a time when the world was young, when everyone knew that plants were intelligent and could speak to human beings." (page 22).

The Christian story by the way is like that too. It is a story of reality alive and in relationship with us. Buhner would not use terms like God and religion. His is an Earth-based spirituality. That may seem like a big difference to others, but not to me. Anyway, the death of meaning is Buhner's wound. The naturalist account is Buhner's "inexplicably emerged."