

It's A Meaningless Life

Bill Jones let his mind wander while Ted was presenting an idea for a new way to handle customer billing. Spending day after day handling invoices and payments was boring enough as it was. He certainly didn't want to spend a couple of hours sitting in a "quality circle" talking about it. Besides, Ted didn't actually work on the billing himself, so he'd overlooked a few key issues. His proposal would wind up taking longer than the way they were currently doing things. Bill had a couple of ideas on how they could speed things up, but it wasn't his job to reorganize the process. He doubted that anyone would pay any attention to his ideas anyway.

In many ways, that was the story of his life. In high school he was the kid you passed in the hall without really noticing. Sometimes when he went to a party he wondered if he was invisible because no one paid any attention to him. On the other hand, he went out of his way to avoid attention. He would stand in one spot, just outside a circle of people, listening to bits and pieces of their conversation. Then he'd look purposefully across the room, as though someone had caught his eye, and work his way through the crowd to go stand in another spot. He tried to move before anyone noticed that he was just standing there, not really a part of the group. Once in a while, if he didn't move soon enough, someone would ask him a question out of politeness, drawing him into the group. He'd try to join in on the conversation, but somehow the conversation always lagged. One by one, the people would find an excuse to go join another circle of conversation.

After high school he found this job in the billing department and had spent the last twelve years doing the same thing. He met a girl who worked in the mail room and they started dating. It wasn't exactly a torrid romance, but he was comfortable with her. She was quiet and didn't seem to mind if he didn't talk much while they were on a date. After they'd dated for a couple of years he realized he didn't have any better prospects, so he proposed. She accepted for exactly the same reason. They married, had a couple of kids, and he remained in the billing department, working for a manager who still occasionally called him "Bob."

"Does anyone have any objections to Ted's plan?" The manager's question suddenly drew Bill back into the conference room. The manager looked at everyone in the room, but Bill was an expert at avoiding direct eye contact. Once, years ago, Bill had actually made a suggestion during one of these department meetings. The manager thought it was a good idea and put Bill in charge of implementing it. Bill quickly realized that he had created extra work for himself, but he didn't get extra pay. In this case he wasn't about to object to Ted's plan. The new plan would slow things down so there would be more opportunity for overtime. Bill didn't mind spending a few extra hours in the office every day, as long as he got paid for it.

After the meeting, the afternoon seemed to drag by. Bill had been doing the same job for so many years that he really didn't have to think about it. Usually he daydreamed as he worked, but today he was out of daydreams. All he could think about was the fact that he had been doing the same thing every day for the last twelve years, and would probably

be doing it for the next twenty years. He found the thought depressing. The more he thought about it, the more depressed he became. It wasn't that there was anything *wrong* with his life, there just wasn't anything *right* with it. It all seemed so pointless. He wondered if anyone would notice if he died and didn't show up for work one day. For that matter, if would anyone even care if he killed himself? He shuddered when he realized he was actually contemplating suicide. Things weren't that bad! Usually he wasn't a clock watcher, but today 5:00 PM couldn't come fast enough. He wasn't going to volunteer for any overtime today.

He was the first one out the door when 5:00 PM finally did come. He drove home and called out "hello" as he stepped inside. "Hi Dad" was the unenthusiastic reply from the family room. His son was doing homework in front of the TV and his daughter was sitting beside him, exchanging text messages with a friend. Bill hung his jacket in the closet and climbed the stairs. His wife was in the bedroom, talking to her sister on the telephone. She waved to him as he entered the bedroom and continued her phone conversation. Bill sat down in a chair near her and picked up the newspaper.

"You're home early" his wife said, after she finished talking to his sister. "Dinner won't be ready until seven. You usually work late so that's when I planned it."

"I just didn't feel like working late tonight. It seemed pointless. My whole life seemed pointless. Do you ever get that feeling? That there's no purpose to life?"

"You'll feel better after some pork chops." His wife didn't even look at him as she said that. She was looking at her phone as she dialed a number. "Hi Mom!" she said brightly. Bill went downstairs to his den to play solitaire until dinner.

Bill didn't feel better after the pork chops. If anything, he felt worse. He still felt depressed, and now he had a headache as well. He sat in his den and tried to watch a ball game on TV, but he couldn't get interested in it. His headache was getting worse. He started rummaging through the drawers in his desk, looking for some aspirin. He found a jar of pills, but it wasn't aspirin. It was a prescription for sleeping pills that he'd gotten years ago, when he threw his back out doing yard work. He took off the cap and looked inside. There were at least a dozen pills in there. Maybe more. He remembered that the doctor had warned him to only take one. Were a dozen enough to kill him? He often fell asleep in front of the TV down here, and no one disturbed him. No one would think anything was unusual if he fell asleep again tonight. . .

He was suddenly aware of someone standing behind him. He spun around and saw a man standing there, looking bored. He was wearing a gray T-shirt, jeans, and tennis shoes. He looked like he was maybe in his 30's, but it was hard to tell. "Who are you?" Bill demanded.

"Death" came the unemotional reply.

There was something in his voice that sent a shudder down Bill's back. He instinctively knew the man was telling the truth, but his brain refused to accept it. Confused, all he could say was "You don't look like death."

"What did you expect? Black hood? Scythe? Bony finger? That outfit was OK in the Middle Ages, when folks actually dressed like that, but now it just creeps people out."

"Why are you here? I'm not dead."

"You will be if you take those pills. My last pickup didn't take as long as I'd expected, so I'm running a little ahead of schedule." The man was browsing through a bookcase in the corner, checking out the titles as he talked.

"I, I wasn't really going to take them" Bill answered. "At least, I didn't plan on taking them. But I saw them and just thought, what's the point in going on? It just seems like my whole life has been a waste. Is there a purpose to life? Was I put here for a reason? I have a meaningless job. Nobody at work cares about me. My kids ignore me. My wife doesn't pay any attention to me. Do I matter?" He looked plaintively at the stranger as he asked this question.

"Huh?" The man looked up from the book he'd opened. "Sorry. I wasn't listening."

"You weren't listening? I'm pouring out my soul, anguishing over life and death, and you're not listening?"

"Look, this may be the most important decision of *your* life, but it's just another day at work for me. You can take those pills and we'll go for a walk now, or you can put them down and I'll come back again some other day. It's all the same to me."

"That sounds awfully cold" said Bill.

"Does it?" answered Death. "Sorry. It's an occupational hazard. But you wouldn't believe some of the trivial reasons people have for taking their own lives. A few of them are in great pain or have some horrible disease, but most are just unhappy. They're misunderstood housewives, teenagers with broken romances, and men who feel unappreciated. It's none of my business if they think these problems are worth throwing away the rest of their lives . . . well, OK. I guess that's exactly my business. But why do they feel like they have to tell me about it? Do they really think I care?"

"Maybe they just want somebody to listen" suggested Bill.

"Well it ain't me, babe. My job is just to take them for a little walk."

"This 'little walk'" Bill asked. "Does it hurt?"

"I'm afraid you'll have to find that out for yourself."

“I don’t really want to die” said Bill. “I just don’t see any way out. My whole life has been pointless, and the future looks just the same. I’m going to have to take that walk with you sooner or later. Why prolong the misery? But if there is no point to my life, why am I shaking? Why am I so afraid to let go? Maybe it would have been better if I’d never been born in the first place.”

“Huh?” said Death. “Sorry, you caught me off guard with that last part. People usually ask that question around Christmas. You know, after they’ve seen that damn Jimmy Stewart movie. I guess there’s no reason we can’t do it now. You want to know what the world would be like if you’d never been born?” He reached over and laid his hand on Bill’s shoulder. Bill suddenly felt lighter.

“My headache’s gone!”

“Of course it’s gone” replied Death. “You’ve never been born. You have to be alive to have a headache. Didn’t you notice the room was different?”

Bill looked around. None of his things were in the room. I still looked like somebody’s den, but the furniture and pictures were all different.

“Let’s check out the family room” said Death. They left the den and walked to the family room. A man was tussling on the floor with a little boy while a little girl looked on and laughed.

“Those aren’t my kids” said Bill, “although the girl looks a little like my daughter.”

“They aren’t your kids” Death replied. “You’ve never been born, remember? The girl just looks like her mother.”

Just then a woman walked into the family room. “Popcorn!” she called out, holding a large bowl high in the air.

“That’s my wife!” exclaimed Bill.

“She would have been your wife if you’d been born” answered Death. “Now she’s his wife.”

The man and the boy immediately stopped wrestling and rushed to grab a handful of popcorn. The woman sat in the center of the couch and the man and the boy sat on either side of her. The girl sat on the arm of the couch so she could reach the popcorn too. The man got up, put a DVD in the entertainment system, and started a movie. Soon the kids were engrossed in the movie and the popcorn, while the woman snuggled up to the man and lay her head on his shoulder.

“Let’s go back” said Bill. “I feel like I’m intruding.”

“Do you want to see what things are like in your office?” asked Death.

“I don’t need to” replied Bill. “I can pretty well imagine that things are going just fine.”

In an instant they were back in the den, with all of Bill’s furniture. “So the lesson is, the world would have been a better place if I’d never been born.” Bill mused. My wife and kids would be happier, and things would go smoother at the office.”

“Your wife, maybe” said Death. “But without you, your kids never would have been born. As to the office, do you really care? You haven’t shown any real interest in your job for the last twelve years. It’s not exactly your ‘calling.’”

Bill thought about this for a long time. “So if the world would be better without me, I guess there’s no point in going on” he said sadly.

“Hold on a minute!” said Death. “I showed you what the world would have been like if you’d never been born. The fact is, you were born and you do have a wife and kids. The world you saw is not the world they’ll live in if you go for a walk with me.”

“Well then what was the point?” Bill asked in exasperation. “Can you show me what the world will be like if I swallow those pills?”

“I’m afraid you’ve got me confused with the Ghost of Christmas-Yet-To-Come” replied Death. “I’m not going to spend the whole night showing you alternative futures. Let’s just say that I’ve seen a lot of suicides in my day. All of them, actually. And I can’t recall a single one where the family was better off as a result. The kids are devastated. The spouse is prostrate with grief, and the parents torment themselves with questions about what they should have done differently. Sometimes, years later, the spouse will find another love. Sometimes not. The kids are scarred for the rest of their lives, and the parents never recover.”

“But don’t people sometimes kill themselves for the good of their family?” asked Bill.

“They sometimes delude themselves into thinking that” Death replied. “They’re better off without me’ they say. Only they’re not. They don’t want the insurance money, or whatever the supposed payoff was. They just want their loved one back. Only in most cases their loved one was too selfish, too wrapped up in self pity to see how much they cared.”

Bill thought about that for a long time.

“Do you know what the difference is between you and that guy your wife would have married if you’d never been born?” asked Death.

“He’s successful?” guessed Bill.

“Not really. He owns a small local hardware store, only he’s being driven out of business by the large home improvement chain stores. He’s got debts and worries you’ve never even dreamed of. The only reason they haven’t lost the house already is because his wife works. He’s also battling cancer. The difference is, he’s enjoying the good things life does have to offer instead of focusing on the things he doesn’t have. He’s also trying to steer his course toward where he wants to go, instead of just drifting with the tide.”

“I think it’s a little late for me to start ‘steering my own course’” Bill snorted.

“You’ve got what, about half of your life still ahead of you?” asked Death. “That’s not a prediction, by the way. That’s just a statistical expectation. We just saw that the first half of your life has pretty much been a bust. Does that mean you have to throw away the second half? If you won a million dollars in the lottery and suddenly realized you’d squandered half of it, would you throw the other half away too? The gift of life is better than any lottery prize you’ll ever win. Believe me. I know a lot about the alternative.”

“I thought you didn’t care whether I took the pills or not. It’s all the same to you, right?” asked Bill. For once his voice sounded confident, almost cheerful.

“I talk a good game” answered Death. “So, does this mean you’re not going to take them?”

“Not on your life!” Bill answered.

“A poor choice of words, perhaps, but I like the sentiment.” Death looked at Bill and for the first time a hint of a smile crossed his lips. “I’ll be seeing you” he said.

Bill started to reply “Not if I see you first” but the man had simply vanished, leaving a wisp of smoke. Bill watched it slowly dissipate, then hurried to the family room. When he got to the door he could see his son sitting on the floor watching television.

“Hey sport!” he called out. “You want to take in the game tomorrow?”

“Thanks, Dad” his son replied without taking his eyes off the TV. “But I’d rather watch it in this room. I usually flip back and forth between a couple of games. Besides, this set’s bigger than the one in the den.”

“I didn’t mean we’d watch the game on TV. I thought maybe you’d like to go to the ball park and see the game live. They say there are still plenty of good seats available.”

His son jerked his eyes from the TV and looked at him with a big grin on his face. “Really Dad? You mean it? That would be great!”

“How come he gets to go to a ball game?” his daughter whined from her chair in the corner.

“You can come too” said Bill. “I was going to ask your mother as well. Maybe we can make it a family outing.” His kids ran up to him and hugged him around the waist. Then he bounded up the stairs two at a time to invite his wife. He realized that for the first time in years he had something to look forward to. It wasn’t a big thing, but it was a start.