WHAT IS THE MEANING OF LIFE?
Program 2
Life is Meaningless
by Ernest O'Neill

We're talking these days together about the question, "What is the meaning of life?" Why are we here? What's the point of it all? How did we end up on this planet passing the time the way we're doing? What is the meaning of life?

Yesterday, you remember, we likened our situation to a group of us getting onto a bus and traveling along the freeway at about sixty-five miles an hour, being happy for the first hour or so while we broke out the drinks and shared the sandwiches. But then beginning to get worried as hour after hour followed, then as day after day followed and we kept asking the question, "Where are we going? Why are we on this bus?" Nobody seemed able to answer the question. They all just kept on saying, "Oh, keep on cleaning the windows. Keep on drinking. Keep on eating. Keep on sleeping. Don't worry about such unimportant questions as that!"

Really, that's the same situation as we are in here on this planet. The planet is traveling through space at thousands of miles an hour. It does admittedly happen to be on one orbit at the moment, but none of us knows who controls that orbit or what controls that orbit. We can't guarantee that it will stay in that orbit forever, but the most important thing is that many of us have no idea where it's going. Yet, we are on a bus that is, as it were, traveling toward a concrete wall. In about seventy or eighty years it's going to smash into that concrete wall. You and I are going to smash with it. Yet, we seem bent on avoiding the question, "Where are we going?" or "Why are we here?" It seems just a piece of almost deliberate deception on our part to keep from thinking about that question.

Our children, of course, are not as sophisticated or, should we say, as naive as we are about these things. They still think about this kind of thing. Unfortunately, many of us have so mesmerized ourselves or become so hypnotized, with our own activities on this planet that we have almost persuaded ourselves not to think about this kind of thing. I don't know if you were the same as I was, but at times my mother would say to me, "Oh, don't think about that kind of thing. Don't think too deeply. You can think too much." Of course, the truth is you can't think too much. We've been given minds and we've been given reasoning powers. It's up to us to think about these things.

It's vital that we do. It's what distinguishes us from the animals. The animal keeps on going without ever thinking why he's doing it. But we are human beings. We have minds that can reflect on what we're doing. We have self-critical faculties. It's vital for us to apply to this issue of life and its meaning and its purpose, the same reflective, critical, analytical powers that we apply to our everyday lives. So, that's why I'm inviting you to think with me a little these days about the question, "What is the meaning of life?"

One of our English poets put it like this. He was, of course, A. E. Housman, who many of us know as a Greek professor in one of our leading universities in past years. He wrote poetry. One of his poems runs like this:

Yonder see the morning blink,
The sun is up, and up must I;
To wash, and dress, and eat, and drink,
And look at things, and talk, and think,
And work, and God knows why!
Oh, often have I washed and dressed,
And what's to show for all my pain?

Let me lie in bed and rest;
Ten-thousand times I've done my best,
And all's to do again.

Though we may at first sight say, "Oh what pessimism, what dreadful pessimism!" -- some of us might wonder "what poetry" or "what doggerel". Yet, it expresses very well what many of us think in these days. We get up in the morning and we think, "yonder see the morning blink, the sun is up and up must I, to wash and dress and eat and drink, and look at things and talk and think, and work, and God knows why!" Why are we here? What is the purpose of it?

You might be like many of us. You might say to yourself, "Well, I don't know what the purpose is. I don't know what it is, but I can see one thing these days, that there's only so much in this world for everybody and I'd better hurry up and get my piece of it as well as I possibly can.

Of course, it's reinforced by our parents' encouragement when we're young. They say, "Well, if you don't look after yourself, nobody else is going to look after you." We get it beaten into our heads very firmly that the basic need we have is to supply ourselves with food, shelter and clothing, because that, at least, man has been able to do ever from his early days in the iron age, or when he was a caveman.

So, we grew up with the strong realization and strong compulsion that we had better, for whatever reason we're here for, or whatever purpose there is to life. There's nobody that's going to look after us except ourselves. We had better make sure that we get the right kind of education that will give us the right kind of job, that will give us the right kind of money, that will enable us to buy the right kind of food, the right kind of clothing and the right kind of shelter, so that at least we can stay alive. So, many of us

are dominated by simply that survival mode. That's what we're in; we're just in a survival mode.

If you say to us, "Why are you eating? Why are you sleeping? Why are you drinking?", we say, "Look, I don't know, but I can see this....that I won't be doing it very long if I don't give myself to ensuring some kind of physical security for my life." So, we very quickly descend from the big philosophical to the very practical physical necessity of keeping ourselves here.

So, we begin to give ourselves, as you know, to school and to getting the best kind of education that we can. You know how that tends to dominate our thoughts. We certainly think about our abilities: artistic ability or our writing ability, our mechanical or practical ability. We certainly think of the things that we might be able to do for humanity, but overall we tend to be dominated by one thought..."How do I ensure that I continue getting the next bite into my mouth?"

That tends to dominate our school years, you know. Then we go to school. We graduate or we get to university and we graduate or we go to technical college and we get out of that. Finally comes the "big, real world" as we were told. We would soon go out into the big wide world. We'll meet life as it really is.

So that's what we do. We get out into the job. You know how we scramble to parley our degree, or our academic qualifications or our training for the best job that we can. Then we try to ensure that it will be permanent. We try to win tenure in education or in faculties, or we try to win stability from guarantees by the union or by our employers, but we spend the next years of our lives trying to ensure security, trying to ensure the food and clothing that is needed to keep us alive. So, that begins to dominate our lives.

Actually, that not only dominates our lives, but it becomes almost a neurotic preoccupation that we have. So many of us, if we're asked, "Why are we alive?", we say we're alive to keep ourselves alive. In other words, if you ask us why we are getting a good education, we say we're getting ourselves a good education so that we can get a good job, so that we can get food, so that we can stay alive, so that we can have children, so that we can give them a good education, so that they can get good jobs, so that they can get food, so that they can stay alive, so that they can have children, so that they can get a good education, so that they can....and so on...forever and forever ad absurdum.

Until we begin to realize, wait a minute, is that why we're alive, in order to stay alive? Well, maybe you'd think about that and we could talk about it a little more tomorrow.