

The Meaning of Life, the Universe, and Everything

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In the face of a pandemic that threatens to transform life as we know it, I am going to ask you to think about the meaning of life. I hope it will enable you to have purpose as well as meaning in your life. This is a bit of my story.

I know exactly where I was at 10.30 pm on March 29th 1978. That was exactly 42 years ago today (and 42 is an important number). I was in my bed, under the covers, with an illicit transistor radio pressed to my ear. My parents thought I was asleep – I was only 15 – but I was transported to an alien landscape through the delights of the Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy.

In that episode 42 years ago the key character – and earthling called Arthur Dent – was listening to a recording of the commissioning of a super computer called Deep Thought to calculate ‘The Answer’: the answer to the meaning of life, the universe, and everything. Deep Thought was the greatest super computer of all time and after a million years it calculated the answer. Amidst a great fanfare Deep Thought announced to the world that ‘The Answer’ to everything: the answer to life, the universe, and everything was 42.

42 has become a legendary number, and over the last 42 years the Hitchhikers Guide has become part of our culture. The radio series shaped the thinking behind the internet – the ‘book’ in the story was a kind of Wikipedia. It predicted the rise of mighty monopoly tech companies, mammoth digital publishing houses, and other Silicon Valley giants where the employees are too cool to listen to ordinary people. Listening to it now is remarkable. If anything, it is more real than ever.

42 years ago, I had no-one else to share my passion with. It was an obscure show put on at a strange time with few people listening. No-one else in my school knew of the story of the destruction of Earth and the adventures of Arthur Dent and his companions. I was absolutely alone and totally captivated. The jokes were funny, the characters alive, and no radio programme has ever utilised the medium so impressively. It introduced frontiers ‘where men were real men, women were real women, and small furry creatures from Alpha Centauri were real small furry creatures from Alpha Centauri’. A character called Zaphod Beeblebrox could have two heads and three arms and on radio it made sense in a way it never did on screen.

But more than this, so much more, the Hitchhikers Guide returned again and again to life and its meaning. For me, it was formative in my own search for answers. Perhaps you are searching for meaning in a confusing world. What is the meaning of life, the universe, and everything? You could start with the Hitchhikers Guide.

The writer Douglas Adams was a ‘radical atheist’ and Richard Dawkins described him as his only convert. You might not think he would be an inspiration to a church of England Vicar, but he is to me. This is because he asks fantastic questions.

In the story Deep Thought knows that 42 as an answer to the ultimate question of life the universe and everything is meaningless. He attributes this to the vagueness of the question. The answer is simple and neat, but the problem was the question itself: it was vague and unhelpful. Asking for ‘The Answer’ is the wrong question. If that is the case what is the right question?

For Adams life does not have ‘meaning’: it is pointless. However, the Hitchhikers guide poses a different set of questions on probability and improbability. In almost every episode the key

characters are going to die only to be saved by some outlandishly impossible event and it is 'improbability' that drives the very spaceship on which they hitch a ride. It seemed to me that what keeps them going in the face of destruction is hope. It was this sense of hope that I began to explore.

I was not asking if God existed; I was asking if anyone cared about me.

When I read the Bible and talked with Christian friends, the answer I discovered was that Jesus cared about me. I discovered a God who loved me.

The Bible does not answer the question of 'if' God exists. This is not even a question that occurs to the Biblical writers. They *know* God exists. There is a question the Bible returns to again and again: ***is there hope?***

The Hebrew Scriptures emphasise that God is the one who built a nation on a childless couple, led that nation out of slavery in Egypt, and promised to restore them after exile. In the New Testament the Son of God plumbs the depth of human despair, and physical pain and then comes back to life. It is resurrection that is the promise of salvation. However bad things are, God is with us and will save us.

And things are really bad at the moment. People are struggling for breath and many are dying. Hospitals are full and people are afraid. For some, the chance to isolate is a chance to refresh and to connect with family and friends on phone and internet, but for others it means being incarcerated with a violent partner. The collapse of the economy means some with no money and facing long time unemployment. Things are bleak. I dispute anyone who thinks this is 'God's Plan'. It is not the plan of a God of Love. We are in a time where we can have faith in God in the midst of suffering.

Having faith in God is to trust in his promises of resurrection and reconciliation even in the bleakest of circumstances. It is placing trust as we walk through the valley of the shadow of death (Psalm 23), or amidst the dry bones (Ezekiel 37). It is to be with Jesus in Gethsemane and to plead like he did for God to take away the suffering in front of us, and then to discover the strength to go through because we hope for new life on the other side.

It is the resurrection of Jesus that, for me, gives meaning to life. Without it I might as well eat, and drink for tomorrow I will die (1 Corinthians 15). With Jesus alive I have hope. Hope means life has meaning and we have purpose. Purpose means I will do something. This hope inspires me to love God through loving my neighbour.

Your life has meaning if it is about loving God and loving all people.

Hope means we give up our lives for people we don't know as well as people we do. Giving up our lives can mean giving money, time, and emotional energy for causes that do not directly affect us. We work for peace, justice, and reconciliation and don't just think of our own comfort.

So here is the irony: Douglas Adams, the radical atheist, led me to faith in Christ. His fantastic comic fiction engaged my brain and my heart. Whenever I listen to the Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy, I am still that 15-year-old lapping up every moment. The answer to life the universe and everything may well be 42, but the meaning in my life is the hope of Christ.

You can listen to the original radio series on BBC Sounds: [The Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy is 42](#)

Phil will be presenting a further reflection on Hope next week.