

On Life and Meaning

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Episode 81 – Stephen Valder – Midlife Mission

Leo Tolstoy and the Blues

And now a personal word,

One way to think about Stephen Valder is how he thinks of himself: as someone figuring out his life in middle age. Stephen is taking the time to explore himself and his community. He is seeking to develop a life authentic to his values, which are deeply rooted in his family's history, while recognizing the privilege and responsibility inherent in that life.

Another way to think about Stephen is to think of the blues, not the blues of Robert Johnson and Muddy Waters, but the literary blues of Leo Tolstoy. Tolstoy was the great Russian novelist who famously wrote *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, regarded by many critics as the finest examples of realist fiction. Tolstoy was born into nobility. As a young man he led a life of leisure, studying the law but finding no joy in it. He wrote memoirs about his childhood, then gambled his money, ran up debts, and joined the army. His view of the world and his place in it changed after witnessing the Crimean War. He wrote sketches from the Crimean front. He traveled to Europe and developed a friendship with the French anarchist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and with Victor Hugo, who was writing *Les Misérables* at the time. Inspired by Hugo and events in Europe, Tolstoy returned to Russia and wrote his epic works on Russian society that brought him worldwide recognition. He was forty years old when *War and Peace* was published. He was forty-eight when *Anna Karenina* cemented his legacy for the ages.

At the height of his fame, Tolstoy experienced a deep crisis of meaning. When he turned fifty years old, he went into deep depression. He asked, "Very well; you will be more famous than Gogol or Pushkin or Shakespeare or Moliere, or than all the writers in the world—and what of it?" Celebrity and his novels suddenly meant nothing to him. He had money, good health, a wife and family devoted to him, and the admiration of the world, all of which made him feel worse for not being happier for what he had. He knew all of it would disappear. All of it would end in his death.

On the brink of suicide, Tolstoy gathered what strength he had and confronted his existence in a work he entitled *A Confession*. Tolstoy wrote:

My question ... was the simplest of questions, lying in the soul of every man from the foolish child to the wisest elder: it was a question without an

answer to which one cannot live, as I had found by experience. It was: “What will come of what I am doing today or shall do tomorrow? What will come of my whole life?” Differently expressed, the question is: “Why should I live, why wish for anything, or do anything?” It can also be expressed thus: “Is there any meaning in my life that the inevitable death awaiting me does not destroy?”

In a near manic tour-de-force of inquiry, Tolstoy sought a resolution to living. (Albert Camus would later say that the only true serious philosophical question one must ask is whether or not to commit suicide.) The answer for Tolstoy was not in science or philosophy, or in ignorance or in pleasure, or in cynicism or resignation. His answer ultimately was in faith, the irrational offering him the only rational approach to reconciling the finite and infinite.

Tolstoy would go on to write *The Death of Ivan Ilych*, *What is to be Done?*, and *Resurrection*. He became an anarchist Christian pacifist, writing works on resistance and nonviolence that would inspire artists, spiritual seekers, and political revolutionaries. He rejected wealth and privilege. Near the end of his life, he became a wandering ascetic, wearing peasant clothes, dying in a train station at the age of eighty-two as he sought freedom on the road.

I have never felt such despair. I have never questioned the value of my life. I make do every day. But I have my moods. I wonder, what if I had produced more interesting work. I wonder, what if I had made different choices. I wish I was better on my feet in front of a crowd. I wish I could stir an audience. In darker moments I wonder how quickly I will be forgotten. I wonder what will become of my photo albums, of my books and mementos from childhood, of the letters and cards I have bound from family and friends. I wonder, what is the point of anything? Then I joke with my wife. I pull myself together. I get on with my responsibilities. I read. I write these words.

In midlife we confront the loss of youth, an endless series of tasks that don't seem to matter very much, the narrowing of what has become of our lives, the irreversibility of time, no longer recognizing ourselves in the mirror, the decline of skills and talents, and the death of friends and family. People can feel the weight of it all.

But on the other end of midlife, something happens. We transition to something better. There is more reason to hope. There is more reason for gratitude. What was once important is less so. We live into our values. We honor friends. We pursue interests. We live and let live. Life satisfaction soars.

Stephen Valder is asking questions. Leo Tolstoy arrived at answers. The blues redeem.