

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 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 readers around the world as the finest realist fiction ever written. Tolstoy was born into nobility and wealth. As a young man he led a life of leisure, studying the law but finding no joy in it. He began to write. First memoirs about his childhood. He gambled his money, ran up debts, and joined the Army. His view of the world and his place in it changed after witnessing death and misery in the Crimean War. He wrote sketches from the Crimean front. He travelled to Europe and developed a friendship with the French anarchist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and with Victor Hugo, who was writing *Les Miserables* at the time. Tolstoy returned to Russia and wrote his epic works on Russian society that brought him worldwide recognition. He was 40 years old when *War and Peace* was published. He was 48 when *Anna Karenina* further cemented his legacy for the ages.

At the height of his fame, Tolstoy experienced a deep crisis of meaning. When he turned 50 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 melancholia and existence in a work he entitled *A Confession*. He 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 non-violence 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 82 as he sought freedom on the road.

I have never felt despair. I have never questioned the value of my life. I live confidently every day. But I have my moods. I wonder what it would be like to produce more notable work. I wonder what if I had lived more boldly. I wish I was better on my feet in front of a crowd. I wish I could stir an audience to action on the issues of the day. In darker moments I wonder how and when I will die and who will care. I wonder how friends will receive the news of my death and how quickly I will be forgotten. I wonder what will become of my photo albums, of my mementos of a life lived, of the letters and cards I have bound from friends and family from years gone by. 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 family and friends. People can feel the weight of it all. Rash decisions are made.

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.

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