



## Letting Meaning Flow Into Purpose, by Brother David Steindl-Rast

The only point where one can start to talk about anything, including death, is where one finds oneself. And for me this is as a Benedictine monk. In the rule of St. Benedict, the *momenta mori* has always been important, because one of what St. Benedict calls “the tools of good works” meaning the basic approaches to the daily life of the monastery—is to have death at all times before one’s eyes. When I first came across the Benedictine Rule and tradition, that was one of the key sentences which impressed and attracted me very much. It challenged me to incorporate the awareness of death into my daily living, for that is what it really amounts to. It isn’t primarily a practice of thinking of one’s last hour, or of death as a physical phenomenon; it is a seeing of every moment of life against the horizon of death, and a challenge to incorporate that awareness of dying into every moment so as to become more fully alive.

Death has to be one of the important elements of life, for it is an event that puts the whole meaning of life into question. We may be occupied with purposeful activities, with getting tasks accomplished, works completed, and then along comes the phenomenon of death—whether it is our final death or one of those many deaths through which we go day by day. And death confronts us with the fact that purpose is not enough. We live by meaning. When we come close to death and all-purpose slips out of our hands, when we can no longer manipulate and control things to achieve specific goals, can our life still be meaningful? We tend to equate purpose with meaning, and when purpose is taken away, we stand there without meaning. So there is the challenge: how, when all-purpose comes to an end, can there still be meaning?

This question suggests why in the monastery we are counseled (or challenged) to have death at all times before our eyes. For the monastic life is one way of radically confronting the question of life’s meaning. In it you cannot get stuck in purpose: there are many purposes connected with it, but they are all secondary. As a monk you are totally superfluous, and so you cannot evade the question of meaning.

This distinction that I am making between purpose and meaning isn’t always carefully maintained in our everyday language and thought. In fact, we could avoid a good deal of confusion in our lives if we did pay attention to the distinction. It takes only a minimum of awareness to realize that our inner attitude when striving to achieve a purpose, a concrete task, is clearly different from the attitude we assume when

something strikes us as especially meaningful. With purposes, we must be active and in control. We must, as we say, “take the reins,” “take things in hand,” “keep matters under control,” and utilize circumstances like tools that serve our aims. The idiomatic expressions we use are symptomatic of goal-oriented, useful activity, and the whole of modern life tends to be thus purpose-oriented. But matters are different when we deal with meaning. Here it is not a matter of using, but of savoring the world around us. In the idioms we use that relate to meaning, we depict ourselves as more passive than active: “It did something to me”; “it touched me deeply”; “it moved me.” Of course, I do not want to play off purpose against meaning, or activity against passivity. It is merely a matter of trying to adjust the balance in our hyperactive, purpose-ridden society. We distinguish between purpose and meaning not in order to separate the two, but in order to unite them. Our goal is to let meaning flow into our purposeful activities by fusing activity and passivity into genuine responsiveness.

Death puts our responsiveness to the ultimate test.