

Anonymous

Crisis of Meaning interview

Jack is a retired Colonel of the United States marine corp. He is 58 years old, and after his service got a job as an executive with a prominent defense contractor. He has raised three children, completed over three dozen marathons, and lived in over a dozen countries. He is friendly, and rarely raises his voice. He doesn't have to, when he speaks everybody else quiets down. He has that charisma, that sense of power behind his every word. While his hair is all gray now his back is straight; he is still over six feet of hard muscle, and he holds himself with a certain quiet surety, an absolute confidence in himself which has no need for boasting.

Q: What decision in your life has had the greatest impact on your identity?

A: Obviously joining the marines, it got me out of my home town and gave a real drive to excel. Before I enlisted I didn't feel like I could get anywhere. But once I went through I saw opportunity, so I took classes when I could and made the jump to officer.

Q: Do you remember when you decided to join?

A: Exactly when actually. I was sitting at the counter of a bar two streets down from my house. I ordered the same drink that my father, a regular there, got and the bartender laughed about how I was just like him. My father was an alcoholic who hated the world and had long ago given up. I decided not to be like my father.

Q: Would you say that you were struggling with your identity before you joined?

A: I suppose you could call it that. It's not that I didn't understand who I was, I just didn't like it. I was a high school athlete but on the other side of twenty that didn't matter much and I didn't have much going for me at home. It was comfortable and it taught me a lot, but there just wasn't much room to grow.

Q: Do you think the marines made you a better person? How so?

A: Unfortunately it's not quite that simple. It does bring out some admirable traits, but don't make the mistake of thinking that everybody goes through there as a good person. There are just as many assholes in the marines as anywhere else.

Q: Well if it isn't a moral distinction what draws you to that identity?

A: Probably the harshness of it. No matter what kind of person they are we have gone through trials that most people will never understand, and come out the other side. Coming from the kind of place I do, surviving means a lot.

Q: So you weren't motivated by any kind of greater good when you enlisted?

A: Well I am proud to serve my country, and I hope what I have done can be considered good. But honestly I was born to be a soldier, and I joined for myself, and only for myself.

Q: Do you ever wonder what your life would have been like without that experience?

A: Nope, I saw the whole damn thing. It never got farther than the bar down the street, and it ended in an early grave from lung cancer or liver failure

Q: So you have never regretted your decision?

A: Regret is not something I've ever had much time for.

Comments:

The most remarkable thing about this interview was how little these topics seemed to affect him emotionally. His voice did not waver and he talked in the same even tone the entire time. It was as if he was talking about a character in a show he watched instead of his own life. As far as what has been covered in class, he clearly falls in with the Stoics. His drive to keep going, his disdain for regret, and his objective view of his own experiences shows this stoic detachment. Even talking about his alcoholic father he reported the facts objectively and dispassionately. This was reinforced when I asked him after the interview how these topics didn't make him emotional. He said that they did, but that it wasn't appropriate to the discussion. This is textbook stoicism, where he suppressed his emotions to deal with his practical situation.

His outlook as a whole was extremely practical, and his recovery was a very matter of fact one. His decisions were clearly motivated by a pragmatic outlook on life. This was part of the reason why I wanted to interview him, as he didn't seem like the kind of person to have a crisis of meaning. It was fascinating to see the factual crisis happen without much of the accompanying emotion. His statements about regret were the most fascinating, as he clearly had many things to regret, but realized that it wouldn't change anything. I admire the way he goes through this crisis, and hope I can make my decisions as pragmatically.