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Seminar for Freshmen: The Meaning of Life

Collection of Quotes and Questions

Ecclesiastes

1. "The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing."

What truly satisfies a person? Are we ever truly satisfied? Are we more satisfied with what we hope to have one day, or what we actually possess?

2. "That which is crooked cannot be made straight: and that which is lacking cannot be numbered."

Can you truly ever fix your mistakes?

3. "If two lie together, then they have heat: but how can one be warm alone?"

Do people rely on each other too much? Can a person be satisfied and single?

Aristotle: *Nicomachean Ethics*

1. "The life of money-making is one undertaken under compulsion, and wealth is evidently not the good we are seeking; for it is merely useful for the sake of something else."

Why do we stress so much about money? When did being wealthy become such a priority?

2. "For one swallow does not make a summer, not does one day; and so too one day, or a short time, does not make a man blessed and happy."

Why does time factor in to happiness? What about the men and women who are serving our country and only get 10 days of leave for a long amount of time? I believe a short amount of time can definitely make one happy. It's all about appreciation.

3. "...For the man who is very ugly in appearance or ill-born or solitary and childless is not very likely to be happy..."

This quote almost feels judgmental to me. How can one say that without knowing their personality? When did happiness become something so easily definable? Can everybody achieve happiness?

Epicurus: *Letter to Menoecus and Principal Doctrines*

1. "...Hence it is that the greatest evils happen to the wicked and the greatest blessings happen to the good from the hand of the gods."

What about all of the innocent people that lose everything? How do you justify all of the awful things that happen to great people? Is karma an absolute?

2. "We must remember that the future is neither wholly ours nor wholly not ours, so that neither must we count upon it as quite certain to come nor despair of it as quite certain not to come."

Who is more control- our fate or us? Can we truly ever plan/have certainty in our future?

3. "When we are pained because of the absence of pleasure, then, and then only, do we feel the need of pleasure."

Can you truly ever experience happiness without knowing pain?

Epictetus: *The Enchiridion*

1. "You are but an appearance, and not absolutely the thing you appear to be."

Looks are deceiving; personality truly is the most important thing. Your body is just a possession.

2. "If, instead of an onion or a shellfish, you are given a wife or child, that is fine. But if the captain calls, you must run to the ship, leaving them, and regarding none of them."

I agree and disagree with this statement. I do feel it is important to not fear death and that some things are bigger than life itself. However, I do not think you can compare a wife to an onion! If it were myself, I would fight for my life and my husband instead of easily accepting death as my fate.

3. "Don't demand that things happen as you wish, but wish that they happen as they do happen, and you will go on well."

With dating someone in the military, I had to learn this the hard way. Everyday is a risk for my boyfriend, so I cannot plan out my future with him, but rather just hope I have the strength to go on no matter what happens.

4. "When walking, you are careful not to step on a nail or turn your foot; so likewise be careful not to hurt the ruling faculty of your mind."

I never thought of it this way, but it is very true. We forget to be kind to ourselves. We always make sure to avoid physical pain, but we often are the very cause of our own mental pain. Why do we do this to ourselves? Is it conscious? Can it be stopped?

Marcus Aurelius: *The Emperor's Handbook*

1. "First thing every morning tell yourself: today I am going to meet a busybody, an ingrate, a bully, a liar, a schemer, and a boor. Ignorance of good and evil has made them what they are... None of them can harm me, for none can force me to do wrong against my will..." (Book 2)

People will always do things differently than you or find a way to upset you- but you have the power to ignore them and not let them control your emotions.

2. "Your days are numbered. Use them to throw open the windows of your soul to the sun. If you do not, the sun will soon set, and you with it." (Book 2)

I love this quote! *Carpe diem*!!

3. "Because you have chosen not to respect yourself, you have made your happiness subject to the opinions others have of you." (Book 2)

Does self-respect truly solve this issue? If I respect myself, but my loved ones still do not approve, would their opinions still have no affect on me?

4. "How swiftly everything disappears-bodies in space and the memory of them! So it is with anything that touches our senses, especially those that entice us with the promise of pleasure, or terrify us with the threat of pain, or puff us up with pride and self-importance. The mind readily grasps how worthless and contemptible, filthy, fleeting, and moribund these things are." (Book 2)

One of the most beautiful things I have ever read. I can't even tell you exactly what it means, but I love how it sounds. I think it means that in the grand scheme of things, nothing is permanent, no matter how big they might seem now.

5. "It is not enough to watch the days we've already lived pile up on one side and those that remain melt away on the other." (Book 3)

Another great *carpe diem* quote.

6. "Show by a cheerful look that you don't need the help or comfort of others. Standing up- not propped up." (Book 3)

I love what this quote is trying to say, but at the same time, it makes me wonder... is Marcus saying it is bad to ask for help? Is getting the help and comfort of others a bad thing? What if I love to be comforted by others-is that a bad quality?

7. "Simply and freely choose what is best, and never let go of it." (Book 3)

This quote is self-explanatory, yet so powerful. I think a lot of people forget this. Never settle, and when you have something worth fighting for, let go of your pride and fight for it.

8. "We live only in the present, in this fleet-footed moment. The rest is lost and behind us, or ahead of us and may never be found." (Book 3)

BEAUTIFUL!

9. "The world is change; this life, opinion." (Book 4)

Is life more opinion-based or factual? What is more important- how one feels or how something is?

10. "Don't act as though you'll live to be a thousand. Your days are numbered like everyone else's. In what remains of your allowed time, while you still can, become good." (Book 4)

Yet another quote about living life to the fullest! I love how he says, "become good." It is so simple, but so true. People forget to be "good." They hear the words "*carpe diem*" and use that almost as an excuse to party hard or skip homework or do something reckless because "you only live once," but that is not what is important. To me, "YOLO" means becoming good, serving your country, or rightfully earning your degree, not getting drunk at a frat party.

11. "Every thread of your life was woven on the great loom of destiny from the beginning." (Book 4)

I love this quote and the idea of pre-destiny, but I always wonder how true it is? Do we truly have no control over the course of our lives?

12. "The man who fails to understand what goes on in the world is as much a stranger to the world as he who is ignorant of how the world is made." (Book 4)

Coming from a Journalism major, this rings true. I always read the news and stay up to date on what is happening in the world around me. It makes me feel proud because most of my friends don't, but in all honesty, I shouldn't feel proud- it should be something we all do without question. It's actually sad that I feel pride in this because so few of my peers are aware of the world we live in. It's scary.

13. "In the morning, when you can't get out of bed, tell yourself: "I'm getting up to do the work only a man can do. How can I possibly hesitate or complain when I'm about to accomplish the task for which I was born?" (Book 5)

Ha! I do love the idea of this quote, but it is easier said than done!

14. "So you don't dazzle them with your blazing intellect. Get over it!" (Book 5)

This ROCKS. I will have to keep this in mind if I ever get a bad grade on a test or feel defeated by something. There will always be people who don't value you, but that doesn't mean you aren't worth anything. You're worth a lot.

15. "Learn to concentrate on what those around you are saying. Enter as deeply as possible into the mind of each speaker."

In a society where everyone is texting or looking down at their phones, I really love this quote. I wish more people focused on what people were actually saying. And not texting, I mean face-to-face communication. If people got off their phones and listened to the world around them, their ears, hearts, and minds would be open to so many new things.

16. "Soon you will have forgotten everything, and everyone will have forgotten you."

I disagree with this quote. While in the grand scheme of things this may be true, I think you have the power to touch someone's life in a way that is eternal. I don't think any of us will forget about MLK or other influential leaders anytime soon!

17. "Whatever happens, either you have the strength to bear it or you don't. If you have the strength, stop complaining, be grateful, and bear it. If you lack the strength, there is still no reason to lose patience, for once the strength is consumed, the struggle will end. But remember, you have the power within you to endure anything." (Book 10)

MY FAVORITE QUOTE OF THE READING! Being in a military relationship is the hardest thing I have ever gone through, and I will be dealing with it for as long as I date Ben. I did not choose this life, but he is worth it. Why should I complain about never being able to see him or talk to him when I KNOW deep down I can handle it? This journey is making me stronger day by day, so I should be grateful that I CAN handle it instead of being selfish and wishing he was with me everyday. I believe I was destined to go through this crazy experience because God or some higher being knows I have the strength to handle it. This quote means a lot to me.

Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: *Oration on the Dignity of Man*

1. "We have made you a creature neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, in order that you may, as the free and proud shaper of your own being, fashion yourself in the form you may prefer."

This quote is stating that human beings are wonderful because we have the power to choose who we become in this life. However, just because we can pick whom we are and what we want to accomplish, can we truly ever choose our own destiny? Or are multiple paths laid out for us already, and our decisions slightly alter which road we are destined to follow?

2. "...If, finally, a pure contemplator, unmindful of the body, wholly withdrawn into the inner chambers of the mind, here indeed is neither a creature of earth nor a heavenly creature, but some higher divinity, clothed in human flesh."

Is he saying that humans have the capability of being more powerful or more divine than angels in heaven? How can one achieve that status?

Francesco Petrarch: *The Ascent of Mont Ventoux*

1. "...So rare a thing is absolute congeniality in every attitude and habit even among dear friends."

I love when he talks about this. Today in relationships, instead of accepting your partner for who they are, people nit-pick and try to change everything about them until they are "perfect" in their eyes. Instead, people should accept that fact that absolute congeniality is so rare. They should embrace the differences, compromise, and grow from them.

2. "What is it, then, that keeps you back? Evidently nothing but the smoother way that leads through the meanest earthly pleasures and looks easier at first sight."

Even if we deeply want to achieve something, we hold ourselves back because we are lazy and do not feel like going through all of the battles and hardships in order to achieve the end result. We should rather just take shortcuts, but the best things in life that have the highest achievements and happiness; there are no shortcuts to.

Lao Tzu: *Tao Te Ching*

1. "Hope is as hollow as fear."

This seems really negative to me. Sometimes hope is the only thing that makes life worth living.

2. "When you are content to be simply yourself and don't compare or compete, everyone will respect you"

What about someone who is a murderer, homeless person, or a prostitute? Would we respect them if they are 'content' themselves? I highly doubt it.

3. "When her work is done she forgets it, that is why it lasts forever."

I think this quote is beautiful. To me, it means to be modest with your work and always strive to do something better than what you previously have accomplished.

4. "When peoples see some things as beautiful other things become ugly. When people see some things as good other things become bad."

Why does everything have to be about competition? Good vs. bad, beautiful vs. ugly... Why can't we just appreciate everything for what it is individually and not let it affect each other? I like to think I would still be able to appreciate the good without experiencing the bad. Example: The taste of burnt popcorn doesn't in any way shape how chocolate tastes to me.

Chuang Tzu: *The Way of Chuang Tzu*

1. "She must run a hundred steps
Before she takes a sip of water.
Yet she does not ask
To be kept in a hen run
Though she might have all she desired
Set before her.
She would rather run
And seek her own little living
Uncaged."

I LOVE this quote! It is better to struggle and become your own person than to accept everything handed down to you. You have to fight your own battles and grow into your own being. You cannot live your life in the shadows of someone else. While that may be the easiest option, it definitely is not the best one.

2. "No one seems to know
How useful it is to be useless."

Just because something is not the center of attention does not mean it is not valuable. Every little thing serves a purpose. You may not realize or appreciate it, but if you lost it, you would definitely notice and want it back.

3. "To organize is to destroy."

Instead of trying to organize everything we have to "live and let live." The most beautiful things are often surprised or occur due to spontaneity. Once you let go of your grip, you will be able to enjoy life more.

Arthur Schopenhauer: *On the Suffering of the World & On the Vanity of Existence*

1. "...We generally find pleasure to be not nearly so pleasant as we expected, and pain very much more painful. The pleasure in this world, it has been said, outweighs the pain; or, at any rate, there is an even balance between the two."

I disagree with this statement. I believe it is all entirely mind over matter. You can choose to be happy and appreciate of the little things, or you can choose to mope over the bad things. It's all perspective.

2. "So it is that in our good days we are all unconscious of the evil fate may have presently in store for us-sickness, poverty, mutilation, loss of sight or reason."

Really creepy to think about...

3. "A certain amount of care of pain or trouble is necessary for every man at all times."

Completely agree! If one's life is 100% perfect all the time, how will you ever grow?

4. "A man finds himself, to his great astonishment, suddenly existing, after thousands and thousands of years of non-existence: he lives for a little while; and then, again, comes an equally long period when he must exist no more."

This is both depressing and beautiful.

5. "Continual Becoming and never Being is the sole form of existence."

To me, this quote means the purpose of life is not whom you end up as, but what you do along the way to become the best version of yourself. It's about striving and growing, not necessarily achieving.

6. "It is only in the microscope that our life looks so big. It is an indivisible point, drawn out and magnified by the powerful lenses of Time and Space."

This is such a beautiful and very honest quote. As immense as our problems may seem, in the grand scheme of things, we are just very small fractions of a very big universe. Our problems are tiny.

Albert Camus: *The Myth of Sisyphus*

1. "What makes Sisyphus a hero is that he uses what freedom he has left to rebel against all restrictions on his freedom"

To me, this quote is saying that in order to be a hero, you have to use your limited freedom to fight for absolute freedom. However, I associate heroes as people who help others, not themselves. Was Sisyphus a hero to others, or just his own self? Can you be your own hero? Or is that selfish?

2. "All Sisyphus' silent joy is contained therein. His fate belongs to him. His rock is his thing."

One might look at Sisyphus' fate and cringe because it seems so monotonous and depressing. However, he has learned to love it because it is HIS. For better or worse, this is his destiny, no one else's. He has accepted his fate and is coping with it. I'm going to go out on a limb and say he is even trying to find happiness and meaning in his destiny... but that might be the eternal optimist in me speaking. ☺

Tolstoy: *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*

1. "Ivan Ilyich's life had been most simple and most ordinary and therefore most terrible."

Why is ordinary terrible? Does everyone have to be life changing and superstars? What if he was HAPPY being ordinary?

2. "Life, a series of increasing sufferings, flies further and further towards its end – the most terrible suffering."

Very depressing, but I feel this quote sums up exactly the point Tolstoy was trying to get across. It is both pessimistic and dark.

3. "It occurred to him that his scarcely perceptible attempts to struggle against what was considered good by the most highly placed people, those scarcely noticeable impulses which he had immediately suppressed, might have been the real thing, and all the rest false."

He is realizing his life was wasted. He did not live for himself. He lived to please others, thus never pleasing himself or indulging in pleasure. He realizes now that all of his happiness, which was approved by others, was not real and did not bring him true happiness.

Walpola Rahula: *What the Buddha Taught*

1. "As a beautiful flower that is full of hue but lacks fragrance, even so fruitless is the well-spoken word of one who does not practice it."

Practice what you preach! Actions speak louder than words.

2. "According to Buddhism for a man to be perfect there are two qualities that he should develop equally: compassion on one side, and wisdom on the other."

I really love this! I find it fascinating that out of all human characteristics and qualities, these are the two personality traits that would make someone "perfect." This is definitely something to think about.

Viktor E. Frankl: *Man's Search for Meaning*

1. "This intensification of inner life helped the prisoner find a refuge from the emptiness, desolation and spiritual poverty of his existence, by letting him escape into the past. When given free rein, his imagination played with past events, often not important ones, but minor happenings and trifling things."

This reminds me of my boyfriend, Ben! While he was in boot camp, in all of his letters he would reminisce about our relationship. He said he missed the little things the most, like when we would go out for coffee in the morning or when we would fall asleep on the couch together. It's the little things that end up meaning the most in times of despair. I think this is because people take all of the little things that make life wonderful for granted.

2. "The crowning experience of all, for the homecoming man, is the wonderful feeling that, after all he has suffered, there is nothing he need fear any more-except his God."

This quote kind of creeps me out. At first, it seems very optimistic and uplifting- that he has overcome all obstacles and has nothing left to fear! But when he says "except his God" that makes me wonder, is his suffering over? Is it ever over for anyone? Is God or fate or whatever you believe in something to fear? Or embrace?

Hermann Hesse: *Siddhartha*

1. "He looked around him as if seeing the world for the first time. The world was beautiful, strange and mysterious. Here was blue, here was yellow, here was green, sky and river, woods and mountains, all beautiful, all mysterious and enchanting, and in the midst of it, he, Siddhartha, the awakened one, on the way to himself."

This is such a beautiful quote! Not to be corny, but this is how I felt when I first arrived in Boston. It was such a change from my small suburbs town- I would walk around for hours here and just let the smells, sights, and sounds of the city intoxicate me. I also LOVE the end of the quote when he says "on the way to himself." I truly feel in these past three months I am more in tune with myself and have learned so much about myself than I have in my whole life. I can't wait to see what second semester will bring!

2. "She taught him that lovers should not separate from each other after making love without admiring each other, without being conquered as well as conquering, so that no feeling of satiation or desolation arises nor the horrid feeling of misusing or having been misused."

I love the phrase "without being conquered as well as conquering." A relationship isn't about conquering, it's about being equals. I think we forget that nowadays. Especially at this age, where teenagers are overwhelmed by the freedom and often take advantage of each other, this quote reminds me of the lack of chivalry in college. People forget about the golden rule and they forget how spiritual and sacred making love truly is; it is not something that should be taken lightly or thrown around.

3. "When someone is seeking it happens quite easily that he only sees the thing that he is seeking; that he is unable to find anything, unable to absorb anything, because he is only thinking of the thing he is seeking... Seeking means: to have a goal; but finding means: to be free..."

It really is true that you find what you are looking for when you least expect it, and when you go out searching for something in particular you will not find it, but you will find something else instead!