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## ***The Seekers' Attempts to Transcend: Some Reflections on Boorstin's History of Seeking and Ikeda and Toynbee's Life Discourses***

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### **Abstract**

Using some stories from Boorstin's book *The Seekers* as points of departure, this paper presents the different attempts of the intellectual figures to seek and define the meaning of human existence which began in the Age of Enlightenment. Even if majority of these seekers promoted science as the systematic approach in seeking, further reflections would show that the said enterprise is still not enough. And so the question about faith is put forward for consideration. Further, Toynbee and Ikeda's dialogue on the book *Choose Life* implies that the process of extracting meaning of life is from life itself thru different discourses and middle grounding. Also, one of the views of this paper reveals that even for a workaday individual, the endeavor of seeking or transcendence of the *umwelt* or middle grounding is an innate need and potential.

**Keywords:** enlightenment, umwelt, science, social science, transcendence, life

We are all seekers. It is as if we are made to live the life of seeking. The toddler is a delightful seeker who tries to make sense of his *umwelt* (subjective world) and of himself by way of exploration. As he grows older his *umwelt* expands and that makes his asking nature demand a wider path for his seeking. He attempts to widen his physical space, cross distances, form relationships, attend to novel things and learn the universe while driven by the conscious or unconscious motive of searching the meaning of his existence. This human endeavor is able to produce in him discoverers, inventors and creators. The discoverers according to Boorstin are the Columbuses of the natural world, the inventors and creators the Leonardos of the human world. While the discoverers ventured in stretching their *umwelten* in an attempt to reveal more there is to be revealed, the creators endeavored to represent and communicate their *umwelten* in different beautiful tangible ways while hoping that these would give them the meaning they have long been searching. But what is this search all about?

The search encompasses the fundamental questions of human existence i.e. its beginning, end and everything in between. As fragments of nature, our life's pattern is no different from other living things. The magazine Watchtower aptly demonstrated this concept picturing a squirrel as an example (32). After its birth, the mother cares for it for a few weeks and then it would grow some fur and may start exploring outside. Observe how it strives around learning the ways, playing and enjoying its young life. When it reaches adult stage after growing for a year or so, it will reproduce, build a nest and feed its litters. Then its family may grow big and enlarge its dwelling. For a few more years it grows old, becomes weak and eventually expires at about age ten. With slight differences across its 300 kinds, that is its life cycle. Similarly, we are born and cared for as babies. We grow, explore and play as kids. Then at adulthood, we locate a mate, build a family and earn a living. At the latter part of the cycle, our biological embodiment

weakens, we struggle and before long, we cease to exist. A sober fact but per science findings, that is all we have.

Apart from this nature however, we have the built-in capacity to transcend our physiological existence. Is it a boon or a curse? Still, the fact remains that we are sentient beings who happen to be conscious of this seeming cycle of birth, growth and demise and this gives us much physical and spiritual pain. For the past six millenniums of our struggles, we have been bombarded with sufferings, confusions, discontent and deaths. And we ask “What could be the meaning of all these?” Interestingly, Paul Gauguin’s “*final affirmation of artistic force*” in his painting “*Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?*” depicts the mystery of human life. These three problems could be summarized into what NOBEL Prize winner and Nazi Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel called as “the most important question a human being has to face,” that is, “Why are we here?” (The Watchtower 32)

We are all seekers of answers for the above question. We may or may not be aware of this internal endeavor but we traverse different paths of seeking; some less traveled while some are crowded. Too much preoccupied with the burdens of life, a lot of us have succumbed to the prescribed conventional pattern of seeking a meaningful life e.g. get educated, be liberated, do good things, live healthy, teach the progeny and then die fulfilled. Some, seemingly bored with this pattern, turned to thrill-seeking boggled with rebellious acts, antisocial ways, life-risking endeavors. Others too disillusioned with the offers of the scientific world, returned to the metaphysical and unorthodox ways i.e. religions and paranormal entities.

Boorstin’s seeker traverses yet another unorthodox path – the path of transcendence. This refers to the attempt of the seeker to go beyond her *umwelt*, Uexküll’s *umwelt* is a German term for environment which conceptually represents the subjective perception of the individual of her own universe and often translated as self- centered closed universe (Kull 299-310). As the seeker would not want to be boxed by her subjective environment, she struggles beyond the discoverer’s expansion or the creator’s actualization of their *umwelten*. Her attempt is to conquer her own by making herself larger than it. And this path like any other is tantamount to a living pain of the spirit.

Boorstin’s biographical sketches of his ‘big’ seekers show the agonizing struggles, downfalls, recoveries, losses and unfulfilled dreams of limited vulnerable humans. However ‘big’, as fragments of nature, they are still victims of fleeting existence within the human cycle – here for a while and then gone eternally but unfinished. If only they are still here they could have transcended further and who knows, might have found some answers. But then, what we only have of them, for which we could be grateful, are their stories they left for our appreciation, for our reading, response and re-creation.

Boorstin’s book *The Seekers* focused on the Western thought and stories. But this fact I think should not be a handicap for us in our attempt to examine our approaches to history. With this limitation and while considering my dearth of knowledge, I could only come up with a categorization of human history into two parts i.e. that of the period of seeding and the latter part, the period of harvest. This is anchored in the idea of human progress. The first is the piling up of human experiences when progress seemed stagnant and there was, according to the wise king Solomon of the Bible, “nothing new under the sun”. The latter part which began in the Age of Enlightenment is the search for meaning using the knowledge of the past and present.

## The Role of Science in Seeking

Before the Age of Enlightenment, seekers seemed to focus on the meaning of the "present" e.g. Job asking about his miseries flooded with whys, Greek thoughts focusing on the ways of the mind, Jesus founding Christianity for the codes of moral life, and Descartes' *cogito ergo sum*. It was the period when history was more of just a chronicle of events rather than a rich source of meaning. It was only in the Age of Reason when the seeker halted for a while and about-faced to realize that the stockpiled human past has already accumulated enough stories that should have given him the momentum to seek the meaning backwards and use the found meaning forward, if ever it would be found, with the present providing the foothold. It was like '*Too much have happened already for the past 5 millennia of our existence, so why don't we dig the wealth of our past and use it to understand our future. There is more to come that is deemed unknown. We have seeded enough and it is time for the harvest.*' Analogically, the time of the harvest began when the seekers realized that they could transcend more with the help of history. When the seekers were left wondering with the question: 'How are we going to do that?' it was then that the science of history and future found its momentum. The answer was Science.

Looking at the past, and witnesses of their present, the seekers of Enlightenment were disillusioned by the authority of religion in providing meaning to human life. Instead of providing a truthful answer for the question of purpose, religions as embodied by the dominant entity – the church succeeded in providing proofs of its immorality, tyranny and malevolence. God's relations to mankind were tainted with these acts resulting to seekers blazing other trails by way of science. Believing science to be accurate with its rule in giving consideration to our transitoriness and delimitations of our senses, seekers fenced history and the search for meaning within the bounds of rationalism and empiricism. Science since then became an answer to every question, even the quest of the future.

Science surpassed studies of nature, as it began to include culture in its domain. Culture refers to all human ways and facets beyond the natural. It begins where nature ends. The study of culture (its present, past and future) is now referred to as Social Science. Aside from Vico and Turgot, Condorcet was one of those who turned around and defined the progressive path his ancestors crossed. His *Sketch of Human Progress* introduced the idea of progress. Considered religion as an enemy of progress, he brushed it aside deemed as futile and pushed on his theory that progress is inevitable.

There are some inconsistencies here that make Condorcet a little vague. If progress is inevitable then there is not much choice since individuals could do little to deflect the momentum of its movement. We could conclude that the presence of religion and science would not really matter since progress though indefinite is to come no matter what. But then he also implied that the society would soon dispose of religion and accept science as the agent of progress. Maybe this is just a prophecy for the coming of the 10<sup>th</sup> stage, the future which according to him, would be characterized by equality and perfection of mankind. The future was still too large for him to comprehend and so he was not able to elaborate further as to what he meant by perfection. Nevertheless, Condorcet was an optimist in this view.

Like Condorcet, Comte esteemed the power of Science highly enough for him to introduce Sociology which was inspired by his Social Physics which he deemed as the highest science of his time. This made him the founder of Social Science. He believed too that theological religion would soon become obsolete as the casualty of progress. His readers and other social scientists like Durkheim, Weber, Marx and Spencer followed this secularization thesis that the coming of Age of Positivism would free mankind from the slavery of theology and superstitions. In this age, God would not have a role. Progress is purely a human endeavor with the help of science.

For Marx, progress does not follow a linear pattern. As elaborated by his dialectical materialism, which again exploits science, progress is a spiral cycle of thesis, antithesis and synthesis characterized by opposition, negation and transformation in which humans though considered as the primary participants of progress have no power to change the course of events. Culture -- God, institutions, interactions, and ideologies et.al is just a product of the spiral cycle of opposing *material forces (matter)*. Progress like Condorcet's, is destiny-governed. Thus, socialism as the progressive product of opposition between the laborers and capitalists was not actually advocated by Marx for change. Rather it was only prophesied by him as it was believed to be destined to be part of the cycle.

Spengler's culture, which represents human existence of the past, present and future, undergoes the same natural cycle of birth, growth and decline of living things. If history for him is just a biography of different cultures of the past, we would understand that the future is the making of another new set of biographies, which would be just stories of the same cycle. Thus, our global culture of today which was his future is fated to end the same way -- decline-- to give way for the birth of another culture. His theme of progress is painted with the same color as Marx's is, that is -- destiny -- that what humans could do is slightly change their lots within the cycle but nothing to alter the cycle itself. With this, the rays of hope the seekers cling into easily lose their brilliance.

The hope that was put into socialism-communism, Marx's synthesis, immediately reached its decline during the series of revolutions and after the world wars. Capitalism, which was prophesied by Marx to be the historical ruin of progress, instead survived it and gained control of the growth of Spengler's culture. Our capitalistic society becomes an authority of progress -- its prescriptions and definition. It was able to conquer Marx's spiral cycle and defeated his prophecies.

The foresight for a scientific religion-less society has to be questioned and modernized. Albeit the global society engrossed in scientism disregarded other ways e.g. by faith, of establishing truths as religion now to which faith is closely associated, is being put in the sidelines due to its reputation of imposing authority and *puppeteering* human actions revealed by history, there are still apparent elements of our existence that science dared not to touch. We have to be humble enough to accept the fact that this human enterprise is boxed by our *umwelt* and shared *umwelten* and thus, limited. In spite of science prevailing in our intellectual milieu, paranormal experiences and theological beliefs e.g. ghosts, angels, demons and God are embedded within our current popular culture. Technological advances, rationalism and empiricism did not succeed in erasing these so-called sediments of the past animistic culture. In a



2006 presentation hosted by the Pew Forum and the Council on Foreign Relations, World Values Survey chair Ronald Inglehart argued that “modernization has not had the effect of shoving religion off the map. In fact, religion is alive and flourishing, and by calculations that are pretty straightforward, the percentage of the world's population that has traditional religious beliefs is a larger share of the world's population today than 20 years ago.” Findings reveal that religion still does a lot in molding our present society and is unlikely to decline.

### Science with Faith

One of the products of the Enlightenment seekers’ attempts to transcend is science. It helps a lot in our discoveries and inventions but unfortunately does little in establishing truths or answers about our most fundamental questions. It teaches our women about the techniques of abortions, our military strategists on the amazing feats of atomic bombs, our physicians on advancing cures and our kids the complexities of the earth; but could not elaborate meaningfully the realities of death and thereafter, the purpose of life and its beginning. Like Darwin’s theory and other attempts, it expands the universe but however they try, could not go beyond the *umwelt*. Natural Selection just complicates further and exacerbates the pain that we experience in our attempt to seek for the meaning of life. Expansion just brings the realization that man’s knowledge is too limited to know the expanding universe and the complicated life. The more knowledge we acquire, the more we realize how little we know and the more the discomfort it brings to us. Are we really here just as part of the cycle? Or are we, should be larger than the cycle? Which of the above would elicit a more meaningful answer? Science would say that indeed we are fragments of the cycle. But I say that we could not trust this tool for a significant explanation. Would it be faith then? Could this relic human endeavor provide the truthful answer?

Faith, unlike science goes outside our subjective material world. Hebrew chapter 11 verse 1 of the bible aptly asserts: “Faith is the assured expectation of things hoped for. An evident demonstration of realities though not beheld.” Understandably, in our age of science, this may not be easily comprehensible and acceptable. Still, being senior than our current intellectual enterprise, it is worth our approach. Unlike the theory of cycle, the idea of theological faith involves faith in the free will. This does not dismiss the significant role of the human free will as this implies that human future is a choice. That is, culture – its past, present and future is a story of choices humans made and to be made. Marx downplayed the role of the free will which could not go against material forces larger than humans. With this theory, human life being just a material force, if deemed as no longer necessary a participant of the social evolution is not too far to becoming a casualty of historical materialism in the future, thus may cease to exist accidentally. It emerged as mere accident, thus may fade following the same process. This presents a purposeless existence. Free will on the other hand, is God’s gift. It opposes destiny and allows humans to choose their futures for a purpose. The Creator being the provider of life and free will has the provision of purpose.

Some seekers did not readily abandon religious faith as the original path to traverse. Toynbee the seeker, in his attempt to understand history and mankind’s struggles, encountered this idea of faith. As he anchored his search to the biblical Job’s stories and questions, he argued in his book *An Historian’s Approach to Religion* that “man’s true end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever” (The Watchtower 32). We have in some way seen the road of science and

should be humble enough to accept the point that this is not sufficient for the seeking. It should be in harmony with faith and substantially, this pair is the most rational choice so far.

We are in the middle of moral chaos, broken homes, corruption, death and sickness, ecological threats and senseless pursuits. So what would give us the reason to live? Psychiatrist Viktor Frankl wrote: “The striving to find a meaning in one’s life is the primary motivational force in man. . . . There is nothing in the world, I venture to say, that would so effectively help one to survive even the worst conditions as the knowledge that there is a meaning in one’s life” (Awake 6). In his personal note to the reader of his book *The Seekers*, Boorstin observed: “In this long quest, Western culture has turned from seeking the end or purpose to seeking causes --- from the *Why are we here?* to the *How did we get here?*” (italics are mine). Either way, answering the first answers the other, and vice versa. That is also, being unable to find the answer for the first entails not finding the other.

And so we strive, in almost all our endeavors either consciously or unconsciously, to extract the answers. Toynbee and Ikeda have shown that the process of this extraction may come in the form of discourse about life itself.

### Life as Humanity’s Common Ground of Discourse

‘*Mga buhay-buhay*’ (Filipino phrase which means “those things about life” when asked about the topic of a conversation) is a Filipino concept that encompasses the common *tao*’s (gender neutral word for a human person) diverse topics in his everyday discourse. It says about his family problems, the school fees, the rising prices of canned goods; whispers about his neighbor’s intriguing affairs or the new mayor’s vote buying; talks around his favorite actress’ new movie, even his daughter’s second hand cellphone series, and sometimes, mentions about God’s will – either heaven or hell. *Buhay-buhay* is dominated by personal and social life. With the advent of globalization, it now involves broad economic and political issues particularly triggered by major events. In some cases too, it opts to include philosophical and religious depths. It is a microcosm of what constitutes a common human life. However clumsy, it represents humanity’s attempt to grasp the essence of human existence, that is -- life.

*Choose Life* is a book of dialogue between Ikeda and Toynbee that presents most of life’s discourses. It defines our concept of *buhay-buhay* with a deeper approach as it exposes the two seekers’ pivotal perspectives about human animality, interconnectedness of nature and universe and man’s perennial struggles ranging from wars to death and immorality. As I see it, the gist of the dialogue implies that life is more of a process than a substance. While a substance is more of an unchanging essence, process manifests continuity. This extraction is anchored with the idea of transcendence.

To transcend would simply mean surpassing or going beyond something. In this theory, the something implies the nature of life. The dialogue encompasses at least three natures of life as a process viz., pre-transcendental life, transcendental life and the post-transcendental life.

The book presented what Freudian tradition defines as instinct and what Maslow implies as physiological existence --- our animal aspects --- all about our material body i.e. food, sex, mobility, rest, genes et al.. This is what science defines as nature that is capable of metabolism, maintenance of homeostasis, reproduction, growth, adaptation and response to stimuli. This is

obviously the pre-transcendental life which when taken for granted usually results to dehumanization or fragmentation. Freud's psychosexual theory asserts that physical pleasures should be properly provided as early as infancy stage of human development, otherwise the individual would suffer a fragmented human life e.g. addiction or sexual promiscuity. This is clearly an attack to human dignity, which is an imperative quality for maintaining a humanized state as posited by Toynbee. Sex is one key aspect that is extrapolated in the dialogue. Considered an animal thing just like food intake and excretion, it has to be humanized in order for it to be conquered. Rules and norms in the form of marriage as such are imposed to protect humanity from going back to this pre- transcendental state. We call a cannibal or a rapist or a glutton inhumane, thus, fragmented if not dehumanized. We have these values and standards because of our higher state we call as humanity.

At transcendental life, we are no longer living as animals but assuming a human life. We have already transcended and consciously see ourselves as larger than the *umwelt* of an animal which is trapped in its small existence of routine vegetative activity and seasonal reproduction. Even in the worst condition and given the opportunity, a mentally sound human would not want to assume its undignified life. Our culture which encompasses our political life, economic aspects, education and social life, gives us this dignity.

As extrapolated previously, the human life is actually a life of seeking for as we know it, the animal does not seek. This is due to our built in capacity and need to transcend. It is also pointed out that seeking and transcendence should go hand in hand as a parallel path. When a person is to seek, she has to transcend and vice versa. The individual of a workaday life is a human who is seeking but is trapped by her immediate political, personal, economic and social life – her *umwelt*. She might be a full -pledge career or family person, a lucrative capitalist or a poor worker, a dedicated politician or a critical consumer but all the same knows only one way to give essence to her existence – get educated, earn a living, get married, may or may not build a family, buy things, be happy, do some things and then die. She is still a human as she struggles to dignify every aspect of her being; she is nurtured to love, feel compassion and grasp abstract things. But with the tendency to follow the conventions, she is prone to be controlled by politics and economics which are two strong pillars of society. In education as such, Ikeda pointed out that individual's choice of education that which will greatly influence her way of life is readily concurrent to the demands of the political and economic institutions. These made her education a political or economic tool instead of a path for seeking. She is expected to serve in exchange of a living and become busy spending most of her energetic waking time for the maintenance of the institution. She is made to accept that aside from her personal and social life, there is nothing more in the larger world but politico-economic life wherein she is prescribed or made to choose a part either as a rightist or a leftist, a worker or a capitalist. Her time to seek and transcend into the larger human life is therefore bleak.

The failure to transcend while trapped in this narrowed existence gives us existential discomfort, anxiety, confusion and doubts which make us grope clumsily for the meaning of life and always the cry for change. War is one result stimulated by politics and economic factors within this system. Unlike the Freudian assumption positing that war is a tendency brought about by naturally aggressive instinct, Toynbee asserted that it is purely a human thing and thus not a carryover of the pre-transcendental life. While animals tend to be instinctually violent in time to



fight a rival male or female, or kill for food, they do not kill their kind systematically and as massively as humans do. Humans however, do so by choice and without pity in the name of religion, power, money, loyalty or even just out of whim. Our economic life too exploited our relatively limited earth resources and caused depletion, pollution and backlash of nature in the form of natural disasters and global warming. This politico-economic setup also subtly compromises our personal and social life as it demands sacrifices of some these factors e.g. family time, spiritual well-being, philosophical life, morals, principles and even physical welfare. This results to broken homes, moral chaos, misguided youth, insecurities or suicide etc. With this stagnated life, the future of the world to be left is really almost bleak as Toynbee blatantly expressed his pessimism when at 85 he uttered; “It is notorious that in old age people tend to think that the world is going to the dogs” (Gage ed 10). This is foreboding while the workaday life – the life of conventions in the box remains unsurpassed.

### **Middle Grounding for Transcendence**

There are however, seekers who attempt to transcend further. Not easily swayed by the conventions, their endeavors are summarized as primarily that of transcending the workaday life into the larger human life i.e. life of discovery, life of creativity and further, the life of seeking. This is elaborated in the first paper. Examples were given to show that it is not the workaday individuals, but the discoverers, creators and the seekers who made phenomenal contributions in the course of historical changes. They were made conscious of the devastating state of workaday life by their intellect and desired to seek more there is beyond life. Toynbee and Ikeda imply the role of these humans to be the middle grounds who “ought to be neither wholly aloof from these topical problems nor wholly engaged in them” (Gage ed 85). They should not be trapped by politics and economics that they may “lose their souls to the evil of power and thus destroy themselves and others” (Gage ed 85). For one, Toynbee’s example of middle ground is Socrates while Ikeda’s is Gautama. Both were seekers who reflected on the human ability to conquer the workaday life and attempted to explore the possibility of a post-transcendental life. Boorstin too mentioned about the life of the seekers who concentrated on the philosophical and religious life with the primary purpose of transcending the transcendental life.

Conquerable or *transcendentable* is how Toynbee and Ikeda see life. For Ikeda, life is different from tangible existence of living and nonliving things. While science agrees that the living has life and the nonliving does not, he asserts that the living indeed has life and manifests it, the nonliving too has life although not yet manifested. It is not a mere substance of organic things. It has different natures which undergo a process of manifestation and non-manifestation. Implicitly, machines too have life not manifested organically.

We grasp only 3 kinds of manifested organic life i.e. plant, animal and human life, but Toynbee did not rule out the possibility of life beyond these psychosomatic tangible states. Although the hypotheses about this life could not be verified by the space-time dimension which is our current limited tool for understanding the universe, he believed that we are “bound to act” and “take these hypotheses on trust” in order to give human life more essence and dignity (Gage ed 275). He called this nature as the ultimate reality, the Buddhist Kō which is the all-encompassing life. I call this as the post-transcendental life, the end of higher seeking.

The middle grounds seek because of the calling desire to continue the process of transcending the human life which encompasses the workaday, discovery and creation, and higher seeking. At this point of human historical life, our middle grounding seems to be stranded owed to the fact that the present human life is dominantly workaday, unsupportive and not conducive to a life of higher seeking. Consequently, the post-transcendental life which should be the next in the process remains incomprehensible. What we only have, thanks to our seekers, are ideas and hopes that this life could still be attained. Albeit Toynbee admitted pessimism, I gather that he was not at all claiming that humanity's lot is hopeless. He believed in human capacity to conquer evils and struggles. Like Ikeda, he asserted that human dignity and values would do a lot to challenge mankind's seemingly stagnated strait.

At post- transcendental life, we have the vantage view and advantage to conquer the human life and thus will be able to grasp the life-universe outside the space -time perspective. There, vast potentials await us e.g. meaning and nature of existence, happiness or goodness in its ultimate reality et al.. But for now, what we only have is the transcendental life wherein the highest nature is the life of seeking as it attempts to give meaning to our existence. This life always begins in discourse about life itself.

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