

## Atheists and Agnostics – The Meaning of Life



*If there's no afterlife or reason for the universe, how do you make your life matter?*

Based on an article by Tom Chivers originally posted on [BuzzFeed](#)

**Jan Doig:** Three years and nine months ago I would have declared myself agnostic. Then my husband died without warning at the age of 47. My life fell to pieces. This is no exaggeration. As the terrible days passed in a fog the same question kept forming. Why? Why him? Why us? I was told by well-meaning friends that it was part of God's plan and we would simply never know what that was. Or from friends with a looser definition of religion, that the Universe had something to teach me. I had lessons to learn.

These thoughts caused me great fear, anger, and confusion. What sort of God, even if he had a plan for me, would separate a fine, kind, gentle man from his children? Why would God or the Universe look down and pick on our little family for special treatment? Why a good man with not a bad bone in his body who had never raised a hand to anyone? My best friend for 29 years. Any lesson the Universe had to teach me I would have learned willingly. He didn't have to die!

I thought about it a lot. I was raised Catholic so guilt ran through me like writing through a stick of rock. Had I been a bad wife? Was he waiting for me? There were days when, if I had been certain of a belief in an afterlife, I might have gone to join him. It was a desperate time. I needed evidence and there simply wasn't any. I just had to have faith and believe.

One day as I was sitting on his memorial bench in the local park I suddenly thought, What if no one is to blame? Not God. Not me. Not the Universe. What if he's gone and that's all there is to it? No plan. Just dreadful circumstances. A minor disturbance in his heart led to a more serious and ultimately deadly arrhythmia, and that killed him in a matter of moments. It is a purely

scientific view of it. I may seem cold or callous but I found comfort in that. I cried and cried and cried, but that made logical sense to me and brought me great peace.

My heart and head still miss my husband every day. I treasure everything he gave me and I love him as much today as the day he died. But I can remember him happily without wondering what we had done to deserve this dreadful separation.

So I declare myself atheist (and humanist by extension) and my friends shake their heads. I stay on the straight and narrow without the guiding hand of a creator or any book of instructions.

I'm not a religious or a spiritual person. (For some reason many of my female friends are shocked by this admission!) I don't believe in God or the Universe. I don't believe in angels, the power of prayer, spirits, ghosts, or an afterlife. The list goes on and on. I think there is a scientific meaning for everything, even if we don't understand it yet. I find meaning in everyday things and I choose to carry on.

The sun comes up and I have a chance to be kind to anyone who crosses my path because I can. I make that choice for myself and nobody has to tell me to do it. I am right with myself. I try my best to do my best, and if I fail, I try again tomorrow. I support myself in my own journey through life. I draw my own conclusions.

I find joy in the people I love. I love and I am loved. I find peace in the places I visit. Cry when I listen to music I love and find almost childlike joy in many things. This world is brilliant and full of fascinating things. I have to think carefully for myself. I don't have to believe what I'm told. I must ask questions and I try and use logic and reason to answer them. I believe that every human life carries equal worth. I struggle with how difficult the world can be, but when we have free will some people will make terrible decisions. No deity forces their hand and they must live with that.

Life is a personal struggle. Grieving is never an easy road to travel. It's painful and lonely at times but I use what I know to try to help when I can. I try to be loving and caring with my family and friends, and have fun. I will cry with friends in distress and hear other people's stories and be kind because it does me good as well. I listen and I learn. It helps me to be better. Life without God is not a life without meaning. Everything, each and every interaction, is full of meaning. Everything matters.

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**Gia Milinovich, writer and broadcaster:** Several years ago I worked on a film called Sunshine which was written by Alex Garland. He wrote the film as an exploration of the inevitable, eventual end. Every day Alex and I would have long, involved discussions about 'the end of time'. One thing he said stuck with me: 'Our problem is that, in an entirely meaningless universe, our lives are entirely meaningful.'

There is meaning in the universe. My children mean something to me. My husband means something to me. The roses blooming in my garden mean something to me. So, there is meaning in the universe, but it is localised: It perhaps only exists here on Earth.

When you start to think in universal time spans, your perception of humanity must necessarily change. Differences of opinion seem pathetic. National borders become ridiculous. The only thing that starts to be important to me is material reality and understanding how it operates and how matter itself came into being in the first place.

Accepting that not only will I die, but so will everyone I know and everyone I don't know – and humanity, and the universe itself – brought me a very deep and profound peace. I don't have to run away from the fear of oblivion. I am not afraid. I celebrate reality. I don't have to pretend that there will be some magic deus ex machina in the third act of my life which will make it all OK and give me a happy ending. It is enough that I exist, that I am here now, albeit briefly, with all of you...

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**Kat Arney, biologist and science writer:** I was raised in the Church of England. As a teenager, I 'found Jesus' and joined the evangelical movement, probably because I desperately wanted to feel part of a group, and also loved playing in the church band. I finally had my reverse Damascene moment as a post-doctoral researcher, desperately unhappy with my scientific career, relationship, and pretty much everything else, and can clearly remember the sudden realisation: I had one life, and I had to make the best of it. There was no heaven or hell, no magic man in the sky, and I was the sole captain of my ship.

It was an incredibly liberating moment, and made me realise that the true meaning of life is what I make with the people around me – my family, friends, colleagues, and strangers. People tell religious fairy stories to create meaning, but I'd rather face up to what all the evidence suggests is the scientific truth – all we really have is our own humanity. So let's be gentle to each other and share the joy of simply being alive, here and now. Let's give it our best shot.

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**Dr Buddhini Samarasinghe, molecular biologist:** I think there are two things about living in a godless universe that scare some people. First, there is no one watching over them, benevolently guiding their lives. Second, because there is no life after death, it all feels rather bleak.

Instead of scaring me, I find these two things incredibly liberating. It means that I am free to do as I want; my choices are truly mine. Furthermore, I feel determined to make the most of the years I have left on this planet, and not squander it. The life I live now is not a dress rehearsal for something greater afterwards; it empowers me to focus on the here and now. That is how I find meaning and purpose in what might seem a meaningless and purposeless existence; by concentrating on what I can do, and the differences I can make in the lives of those around me, in the short time that we have.