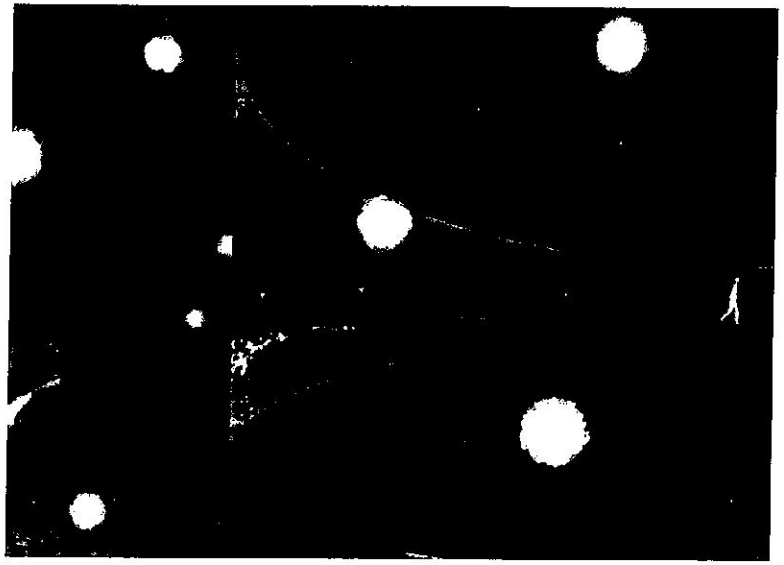


FEATURED

Facing Death without Religion

Secular sources like science work well for meaning making.

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Beyond the Nones Autumn/Winter 2019

By Christel Manning

THERE ARE NO ATHEISTS in foxholes, they say. My favorite uncle was, to all who knew him, a decidedly nonreligious man, never setting foot in a church except to bury his mother and refusing the visit of a minister in his last days. Yet the Haitian woman who tended to him as he struggled with his final breaths claims he spoke to God the night he died.

Research psychologists argue that religion was born from the fear of death,[1] and it seems like every year there's a new bestselling book about scientists finding religion in the face of their own mortality.[2] So when I tell people that far fewer elderly people than young people are nonreligious, they are usually not surprised. The proportion of religious Nones in the U.S. population has grown dramatically, but much of that growth is driven by the young: only 9 percent of those over 65 are unaffiliated, compared to 35 percent of those under age 30, and we see similar proportions for atheists and agnostics.[3] Not only are older cohorts more religious, but some people actually get more religious as they age.[4]

It would be easy to attribute these patterns to religion's unique ability to give meaning to our mortality. Many people assume that facing death without religion renders life pointless and unbearable, that only exceptionally strong and stoic individuals can face the void that is death without a religious framework. But that assumption is just that, an assumption, because we don't have much data to back up such notions. The study of Nones has focused mostly on the young, and studies of the aged have tended to ignore atheists. Secularity is growing even among the old, and yet few have bothered to ask elderly secularists how they face death without religion.

How *do* atheists, agnostics, and other seculars find meaning at the end of life? How do they make sense of mortality without religion? I have spent the last two years exploring these questions, sifting through hundreds of studies and interviewing individuals in nursing homes, senior centers, and in their homes. This article reports on some of what I have learned.

When I reviewed the literature, it seemed at first that the foxhole theory was right. A substantial body of research suggests that religion helps people cope

with dying.[5] While some of that positive impact is tied to community (the social support offered by religion), the provision of meaning is a significant causal factor: religion can offer *coherence*, a feeling of confidence that our life events are ordered or purposeful, rather than random and chaotic, which in turn can confer a sense of *control* over one's life.[6]

The end of life is frightening because it's a new experience; we don't know where we are going. If a person is ill, dying may entail physical pain and disability. Even in the best of circumstances, we may find ourselves unable to engage in basic physical activities we used to take for granted, or facing the loss of mental acuity. And for most older people, the final years bring the loss of partners, family members, and friends who would otherwise support them at this time. Religion can provide a framing for why we are in pain or why we had to lose somebody we love—for example, if suffering is viewed as redemptive or part of a divine plan. Religion also answers questions about what happens after death, whether through complex and varied conceptions of reincarnation in Buddhism and Hinduism, or through comforting beliefs that we will see loved ones again in heaven, as in some Christian traditions.

There are increased rates of depression and suicidal behavior among elderly people.[7] Religious traditions can provide supportive social networks, and offer people in the final years of life steps to work through devastating losses and to continue living a purposeful life. Reading scripture or meditating is something an individual can do, even with physical disability. And when a loved one dies, rituals like sitting Shiva or preparing for a funeral mass offer structured, familiar activities for loved ones to do.

But saying that religion helps people find meaning in the face of death does not prove that meaning is absent without religion. Recent reviews of such studies show that they focus almost entirely on religious people, usually comparing more devout people to those who are less devout. Only rarely do they study individuals who are committed seculars, i.e., those who have replaced religion with some other source of meaning.[8] The few studies that engage in more rigorous comparisons suggest that nonreligious people do just fine. Peter Wilkinson and Peter Coleman found that both atheism and religion can be a source of meaning for older people, and it is the strength of conviction, rather than being religious or nonreligious, that enables effective

coping.[9] Coleman and Marie Mills suggest that while uncertainty is sometimes linked to depression, questioning also links to growth.[10] Bethany Heywood and Jesse Bering have shown that the nonreligious do, in fact, frame life events using purposive narratives.[11] But we know very little about the content, patterns, and sources of these narratives.

What we do know is that finding meaning is an interpretative act. Human beings make meaning by telling stories about our lives.[12] Language does not just capture and reflect experience but creates it. Even when people are telling stories that are similar in content, they use linguistic, rhetorical, structural devices to create different sets of meaning. There are broader social narratives that shape individual storytelling, what Ann Swidler has called the cultural toolkit.[13] These social narratives can come from religion or science, from a particular family background, or from popular culture.

I like to conceptualize meaning making as a kind of mapmaking enterprise. The stories we tell are the way we connect the dots and orient ourselves. It's like when the ancient Greeks imagined lines between the stars and gave names

to the various constellations. Without a constellation map to life, events can feel random, and we can feel lost, frightened, and confused, especially when we are entering new territory. But when we have a map, we have a path to follow; we have agency and power. Religion has long been acknowledged as a powerful mapmaking tool because it creates meaning on two levels: it provides *generic narratives* that function as a cultural tool for constructing meaning; and these narratives inform, infuse, and frame each believer's *personal narrative*. In my current research I am seeking to understand how this works for nonreligious people. Are there generic stories that secular adults use to make meaning, especially at the end of life? If so, how do they rework these stories to create meaning from their personal experience?

If meaning making is about storytelling, then I knew I needed to listen to respondents' stories. So the study, begun in late 2017 and currently in its final phases, is based on personal interviews with elderly seculars. The two main criteria for inclusion are age (70 and over, though I include younger individuals with terminal illness) and nonreligious identification. Participants were recruited in nursing homes and senior centers, with the assistance of the AARP,

I have proposed elsewhere[16] that we distinguish American Nones into at least four categories: Unaffiliated Believers have conventional, usually Christian or

Jewish worldviews, but reject organized religion; Philosophical Secularists have replaced religion with a distinct nonreligious worldview such as atheism, Humanism, Free Thought; Spiritual Seekers claim no religion because they create their own worldviews from more than one spiritual tradition; and last, those who are indifferent to any kind of religious, spiritual, or secular worldview. This model has apparently been helpful to subsequent researchers,[17] and yet my current work on elderly Nones is raising new questions.

Science-based narratives can evoke a sense of awe and wonder, a perception that we are part of a meaningful universe that gives order to our past and offers insight for the future.

By far the most common narrative framework was rooted in the scientific understanding that we are all part of nature (more than half of the respondents used some variation of it). Previous research suggests that scientists are more likely than the general population to be nonreligious,[21] so it

was not unexpected that many of my respondents were trained in the sciences, as engineers, chemists, and physicians. More surprising was how science functioned as a meaning-making narrative. We often think of science as cold and hard and value neutral. Max Weber famously wrote of how the ascendancy of science over religion in the modern world has led to "disenchantment." Yet I found that science-based narratives can evoke a sense of awe and wonder, a perception that we are part of a meaningful universe that gives order to our past.

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A moral universe? Atheists are often portrayed as arrogant because they don't acknowledge a higher power,[22] but I generally found the opposite to be true. Perceiving themselves as part of nature, rather than created by God in his image, led respondents to a place of humility. The prevailing view about science (by nonscientists) is that it is neutral to morality, but I found that most individuals who relied on this narrative tended to see it as imposing a moral obligation. To quote Agnes one last time: "We have the power to influence the

direction of evolution by the choices we make. Humans may be at the top of the food chain but now we have overpopulated the world . . . and we've done so many things that are so destructive. I think our purpose now should be to try to make this world livable for future generations . . . at this point in history, that's what our whole goal should be." The science narrative gives a sense of moral urgency to what respondents felt they should do with the time they have remaining: to show love for their friends and children, to appreciate nature or art, to be engaged politically, even as they may become increasingly physically disabled.

There were other types of narrative themes besides science, but they generally appeared in combination with it, and space does not permit description of them here (you'll have to wait for the book!).[23] But the data I've gathered thus far suggests that the foxhole theory (fear of death pushes us toward religion) is wrong. Instead, awareness of death pushes us to find meaning, and secular sources like science can be as rich a source of meaning making as religion is.