

The Meaning of Life
A 10- minute play

By Sophy Burnham

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After that never sent out, as I got involved in other writing projects (my story, alas!)

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CAST:**Mom****Ellie (teenage)****A male voice offstage: doubles as the actor giving stage directions.****The impression by tape or on stage of Buddhist chanting monks**

The Meaning of Life

An empty stage. From the chamber next door comes the sound of Buddhist chanting.

Enter an Actor, giving STAGE DIRECTIONS:

We're in a Buddhist monastery, and this is the large and spacious reception hall. Look how high the ceilings are! All painted with brilliant colors – blue and orange and pink. Look at the intricate designs. Over there is a scene of some god -- or is it a goddess ? -- sitting on a cloud, and over there are wall hangings showing other gods and demons. Here is a statue of the Buddha, smiling in serene meditation. He's so calm and beautiful.

The place is filled with monks in their orange robes, and the atmosphere is highly charged, expectant. Everyone is waiting.

Enter, creeping, and feeling a little out of place, an elegant white woman, beautifully and expensively dressed, teetering on her high heels, and her teenage daughter, perhaps with nose-ring and tatoos.

MOM

(whispering) Stop that. What are you doing?

Ellie

I have a hangnail.

MOM

Well, stop it. At least try to behave with some semblance of decorum.

Ellie

I can't believe I'm here to watch a man dying!

MOM

You're not. You're here to hear a very great Buddhist – and not just any monk but a great lama—

Ellie

Vicuña, alpacas and llamas, Oh MY!

MOM

Ellie!

Ellie

Alright alright, I'm sorry. I know it's serious. (*whispering*) Otherwise there wouldn't be all these people. Do you know what they're chanting?

MOM

{shakes head, No} I only know that his last words—the last words of a great lama – will reveal the true meaning of life. Because when a lama dies – and it's an enormous honor for me to be here, for us to be here, and I am so *{close to tears}* -- I am so *moved*. Your uncle, my brother – well, we were all horrified when he went off to be a Buddhist monk, and then he was made a lama. It wasn't easy for me, let me tell you, having a brother ... go Native. He could have made a mark in the corporate world. But after a while you accept everything. At least he rose to the top. Your uncle, my brother, is a very important man, Ellie. Fully enlightened. He's written five books. *Vogue* did an article about him. Don't slump, Ellie, stand up straight. Look, the entire community has gathered. And I am so *honored* to be asked to his bedside.

Ellie

I think it's strange; you haven't seen him in years.

MOM

That's neither here nor there. Death is the great leveller. Death is what gives meaning to life. How you die – that tells everything about how you lived. Anyway he gave up his inheritance when he became a Buddhist, so that's all right.

Ellie

{Laughing} So the meaning of life is money?

MOM

Ellie! That is NOT what I mean.

Ellie

Or maybe it's social propriety, holding your head up in public and being dressed right, so you don't embarrass your friends with tasteless out-of-fashion clothes.

MOM

If you're going to mock me... *{that's all right, I don't care}* But beauty. That's one important thing on this earthly plane, isn't it? Beauty. Truth. To appreciate beauty, to spread beauty around, to be grateful for the beauty of this world. I can think of worse meanings. Please stop playing with that hangnail.

Ellie

Sometimes a hangnail is the most important thing. Sometimes THE WHOLE MEANING OF LIFE HINGES ON A HANGNAIL.

MOM

QUIET! Shh. Don't raise your voice! Everyone is looking at us. . . . Really, you can be so exasperating. . . . *{regaining control}* Just stand quietly. This is a magic moment. In a moment we'll be ushered into his room with the others, and then he'll see us. He'll remember me, his sister. We were children together. We fought and played and loved one another, my only brother. And then he'll give us his blessing and . . . the meaning of life. I think he'll say something about love and kindness, and "Do unto others," or "Love one another as I have loved you." Or perhaps, "Feed my sheep, feed my sheep." I've always loved those words.

Ellie

That's what Christ said.

MOM

I know it's what Christ said!

Ellie

Well, he's a Buddhist.

MOM

The meaning of life is the same for everyone, Ellie. Otherwise it's not the true meaning.

Ellie

I don't know about that. Maybe it's different for everyone. Maybe everyone has a different task, or a different life, or a different meaning.

MOM

Love, compassion, kindness. That's the essence of Buddhism and the core of Christianity, although of course the Christians have killed an awful lot of people in the name of loving-kindness

The Buddhists say there are 5 things that every human being needs. Do you know what they are? This is so beautiful. Everyone needs {*ticking them off on her fingers*} food ... shelter ... sleep ... sex . . .

Ellie

What if you're celibate? Celibates don't need sex.

MOM

No, you're right, I said it wrong. It's not that everyone *needs* them, but that these are the five essentials or attributes – they're important to every life. Of course, sexual energy can be sublimated into creativity. Sex is just an expression of the Life Force. They're all important in one way or another: food, shelter, sleep, sex – and I bet you can't guess the fifth. Do you know? Guess. It's so beautiful.

Ellie

{no}

MOM

Acknowledgment! To be SEEN. We have to be recognized. We die if we aren't heard, if our existence is not acknowledged, if we're not important to someone else. Maybe he'll tell us that, he's so wise. Maybe that's the meaning of life, acknowledging others, deep listening.

Ellie

Maybe it's just survival, Mom. Maybe we're just organisms and the meaning is to live and breathe and try not to die, and maybe that's the whole meaning of everything, just to do everything in our power to stay alive. Eat, sleep, fuck—

MOM

El-lie??

Ellie

-- OK, procreate – just keep living. Individually or as a species. Like the salmon that swim thousands of miles to spawn in one particular river. They aren't thinking about the meaning of life. Or like the eels that swim from the Sargosso sea all the way to the Seine river in France, back to their own breeding ground across the entire Atlantic Ocean. For no reason at all. Breed, eat, sleep, fuck, shit.

MOM

Elinor!

Ellie

Well, it's just a thought.

MOM

Well, I think it's an ugly thought. Or at least you can express it with more. . . grace! I wouldn't mind if you said the meaning of life is to live every moment with absolute *awareness*! To be *alive*, emotionally, mentally, physically. To do the best you can and to expect the best. To live an ethical, compassionate life.

Ellie

Oh, mother!

MOM

Your aunt Jessica thinks that life is a school, and we choose to come into this life in order to learn some lesson, and when we've learned the lesson, then we die.

Ellie

What lesson?

MOM

Well, I don't know. I guess it depends on the individual. Every person has a different lesson. Or a different mission. Or maybe we all come in order to learn trust, unconditional love, honesty, creative integrity, how to be tactful in speech and kind in actions. Just not to hurt anyone.

My brother, your uncle, who is right there in the next room, the abbot of this monastery, who has spent his whole adult life in meditation and philosophical studies – he'd probably say all this is done in order to get off the wheel. He'll probably say that when we go in. Get off the wheel.

Ellie

What wheel? *{I don't even know what you're talking about!}*

MOM

The wheel of suffering. The Buddha said that life is suffering, and the reason for suffering is our attachment to desire and that the way out of the suffering is by letting go of desire. Not necessarily to have no desires, I mean, but just not to be attached to having them. Let - Go - Of - That - Hangnail !!

Ellie

Well, I haven't seen you operating unattachedly in your life.

MOM

If you can't say something nice –

Ellie

You know what I think? I think there's no meaning at all. I think it's just something we make up. I think it's all a matter of perception. Something happens and we can't bear the idea that we're not in control, so we give it meaning, assign it a cause and an effect. If we hadn't done such and such, we say, then so and so wouldn't have happened. I think life's just an event, and we give it meaning to make ourselves feel comfortable. What if there's no meaning? What if –

MOM

You mean no god?

Ellie

No god, no fate, no destiny, no predestination, no school of life, just miscellaneous events thrown up by the dice of being, and then we attach some meaning to utterly meaningless events. Just to make ourselves feel important. Just to keep control. Because we think there OUGHT to be a meaning to life. Be born, live a while, die: that's it.

Beat

{Holding gaze}

MOM

I don't believe that. I believe in love and beauty. I believe in the miracle of a tulip thrusting itself up from the living earth in spring, and in God and in angels and archangels – a spiritual cavalry riding to our defense, to aid and keep us. I believe we live in a spiritual ocean with beings, visible and invisible, surrounding us. I believe in Intention and, yes, in purity of intent, and I believe I'm going to kill you in a minute if you don't stop chewing that hangnail! Can't you act like a lady for a change! Just once? For me. Because it's important? *[near tears]* To me. I can't believe in that kind of cynical pseudo-existentialism you young people think is so ... is so *sophisticated!*

But what do you know about sorrow? You haven't lived long enough. You don't know how hard – you've never suffered –

Ellie

Hangnails--

MOM

Oh Ellie! I'm trying to be serious. Well, you'll see, don't say I didn't warn you, and when you're facing some loss – and it will come – there will be losses and disappointments don't roll your eyes at me young lady I know what I'm talking about – someday you'll remember this and you'll be sorry for making fun of me, because I'll tell you, when you've lost something you dearly, dearly love, and if you love at all, you'll have both pain and loss – well, frankly I believe in Faith. Faith and prayer. I don't WANT to live with nothing, like you young people, all doped up—

Ellie

We're not doped up—

MOM (*topping*)

In an effort to fill the hollow at the heart, to forget the pain and fear –

Ellie

Hey, non-attach!

MOM

No, now you listen to me. In a few moments we're going in there and you will hear a Great Master, an Enlightened Being tell you what it's all about, and I want you to listen, do you hear? And to remember. Remember what he says. You'll need this in your life. I want you to have a good life, Ellie, I want you to be happy. Promise –

Ellie

MO-O-OM

MOM

Promise me you'll pay attention. Promise you'll listen! He's your uncle, but he's very wise, and in one minute you have the chance to hear something important – something that can change your life. Have you any idea--?

Ellie

Oh-Kaa-ay! Look, shh. They're opening the curtain.

Moving toward the other room. Sound of chanting stops. Utter silence! They are standing before a doorway, looking into the off-stage room--

MOM

Oh I think I'm going to cry. My own brother. George. George?

Ellie

Can he hear us?

MOM

(whispering) I don't think so. Look how pale he is. His eyes are closed. He's already half-way to the other side.

Ellie

Shh.

MOM

Look! He's sitting up! He's reared up. Oh Ellie. (*Dropping to her knees*) George! Your Reverence. I'm here. It's me. He's going to say something. They were right. He's going to tell us the meaning of life! (*hands folded to her chest*) I can't stand it. He's looking around. What extraordinary eyes, look at his eyes! Oh Ellie, he's seeing ... everything.

Ellie

Mom? (*reaching for her mother's hand*)

