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EDITOR'S NOTE: Please read these magnificent Oratories by our President Mandy Bauer and our Trustee Frank Vickers

Individual Highlights

Thesis: Existential Angst by Mandy Bauer 1

Antithesis: After the Telos: Response to Amanda Bauer's Mid-Life Crisis by Frank Vickers 6

Synthesis: by you dear reader? Next time?

Existential Angst

(Oratory from Sunday, July 6, 2014)

By Mandy Bauer

I feel somewhat guilty bringing up a topic that is so heavy on a weekend that is otherwise characterized by celebrations and levity, but I guess a good existential crisis waits for no one. What's funny is I feel like this is a topic that when I bring it up, everyone over a certain age will be looking at me, kind of the same way Erik's folks looked at us when we were going on our first dates. Oh how cute. She is having her first midlife crisis. Our little girl is growing up. Well, welcome to the club!

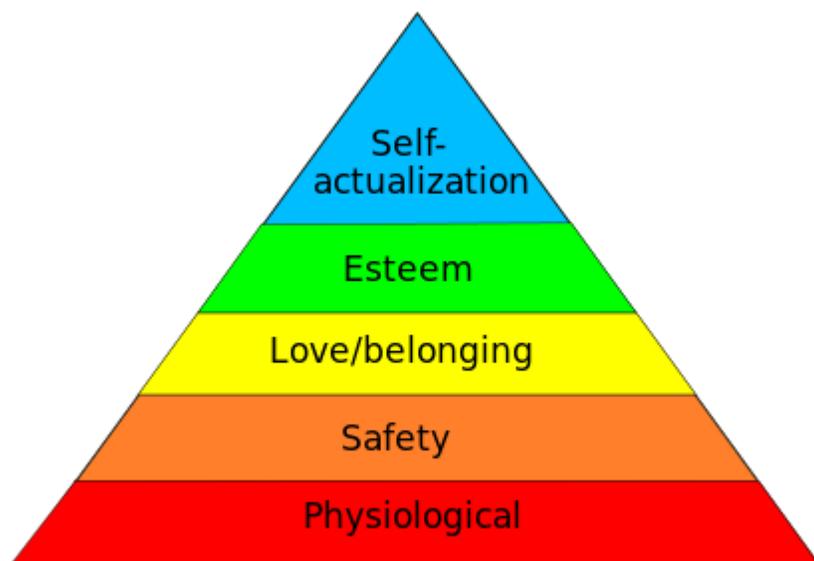


Edvard Munch (1863-1944) "The Scream"

I wanted to start this talk by referring to Maslow's hierarchy of needs triangle. At the bottom are physiological needs: air, shelter, water and food. The next level up is safety and security. The third level up is social needs such as friends, family and intimacy. The next level up is esteem such as self-esteem, confidence and achievement. Finally, at the top, is self-actualization, which is creativity, problem solving, authenticity and spontaneity. Or, to modify this diagram to apply more accurately to my family, it would look like this:

Existential Angst

(continued from page 1)



When I joined the Fellowship of Reason, I would say I was somewhere in the middle of the esteem category. Well now, I would say I have filled this whole thing up. I have got a fulfilling job that pays well, earns me respect from my co-workers and clients, gives me opportunities to help others, and offers a great deal of flexibility in my schedule. The one-day a week I do have to leave the house and travel an hour to work is completely worth it, as it provides me a break from my home routine and allows interaction with a terrific group of people. My friends and family are incredibly supportive and loving. I am enriched by a variety of hobbies and activities such as being president and contributing regularly to this group, training for a marathon while raising money for a charity, and actively working towards a goal on the piano. I have achieved and maintained my 20 lb. weight loss goal. Our kids are happy and well-adjusted and we are able to travel to places on a regular basis and explore what the world has to offer. Finally, the sought-after pinnacle of my eudaimonia has been reached. Drum roll please. The constant scourge of the piles of laundry and dishes have vanished! My husband and I are overjoyed and my mother-in-law cannot believe it. I have been dealt a great hand in life and think I have played it pretty well.

But, here is the rub. Every accomplishment and little step towards accomplishment is associated with a little "high" or endorphin kick. However, I have been at this high level for several months now and have been starting to feel something unsettling. At first, I could not pinpoint it. I figured it was maybe because I took a little dip in my running in April and early May to rest up. Or, I explained it away because of the trauma and sense of violation associated with our car break-in and property loss during our early April trip to San Francisco. But then this feeling of ennui or uncomfortable restlessness truly came with a vengeance during our recent cruise to the Iberian Peninsula. Having felt

About the name "The Eudaimonist"

A eudaimonist (pronounced "yoo-DIE-mon-ist") is one who believes that the highest ethical goal is individual happiness and personal well-being. The term derives from the ancient Greek word eudaimonia, which means, roughly, "well-being."



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Fellowship of Reason, Inc.

Mission Statement

The Fellowship of Reason® is dedicated to the personal flourishing of our members through reason.

Fellowship of Reason, Inc. is a Georgia nonprofit corporation and a tax-exempt 501(c)(3) corporation

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Existential Angst

(continued from page 2)

unsettled the whole trip, we were sailing into Lisbon. It should have been magical, but I felt nothing. Even my friends and husband were wondering what my problem was. The problem was I did not know what my problem was! Well, a few weeks back from my vacation, I pondered and thought and pondered some more, and it finally occurred to me that this has to be existential angst. I will describe exactly the details of this angst in a bit.

Clearly, this is an enviable position to be in. Existential crises occur when you have reached a breaking point in the hierarchy triangle, and the vast majority of time you have a crisis when it is empty on any level. In fact, it is very likely that in the next few months or years, something will happen to knock me significantly back down on this diagram and I will likely look back wistfully on today when I had such a high-class problem as this. In fact, the mere existence of this problem in my consciousness can be viewed as an imbalance of self-actualization caused by bumping up against the top, resulting in my being knocked back down again.

So why is it, then, that this angst is arising when life is going so well? Well, one possibility is that the brain has a limited capacity to maintain a high level of attention. This means that when it is exposed to the same things over and over again, in this case, hits of euphoria, it becomes desensitized. Another term for this is hedonistic adaptation. This has been a feature favored by evolution so the brain can, for instance, discount the delightfully fragrant flowers of the jungle and smell a predator or disease, or it can see past the vast glorious expanse of the savannah and spot its next prey. It also, fortunately, exists for negative aspects as well, so the ding on my windshield or scratch on my car's side panel is no longer nearly as bothersome as it once was. So, this tolerance capability improves survival by keeping us attuned to new stimuli and helping us cope with bad things, but as with other products of natural selection, the adaptation of a pre-existing system to a new purpose comes with side effects. The things that once excited us no longer do. Our brains and our culture are always on the lookout for the Next Big Thing. So, we must invent and reinvent. So now, while the act of successfully inventing and reinventing is great, it has recently been losing its luster.

There is another plausible theory. Frankly, I like this one better because it is more optimistic. In this scenario, my subconscious brain has repressed these thoughts of angst until this time, since it has had other goals to work towards. Now that life is very stable, it is seeing that coming to terms with this problem, which it had previously calculated would not enhance my life and happiness, can now be elevated to my conscious mind and tackled as a long-term goal. In the short-term, it is unsettling, but in the long-term, it will hopefully be beneficial.

Ok—So, what exactly is the issue at hand? I guess one of my issues is that I cannot clearly define the issue, so let me to try to work through this. I guess it is an issue with individual achievement through reason as the only absolute.

Existential Angst

(continued from page 3)

Aristotle said that to live in accordance with reason, properly developing one's own best abilities and predispositions and putting them into action to achieve excellence, was the path to Eudaimonia, which for him was the greatest good a human could attain. It is the ultimate, but in the grand scheme of things, it seems so insignificant. So what if we achieve? I know it delivers happiness and personal flourishing. I have been there time and again. But, say a gigantic meteor strikes the earth, and the entire planet, and every living creature on it, is annihilated tomorrow. I guess the idea is that Eudaimonism supports that we only have the here and now, since if we are not around to react to our own lack of existence, we will no longer care anyway. But, I have a problem with the fact that human legacy really is insignificant on a universal scale, yet rational individualists put all our eggs into that basket.

When describing this to Erik, he suggested I look up Carl Sagan's "Pale Blue Dot." This describes the earth viewed from a satellite amongst the rings of Saturn. Here is that description:



Quote from Carl Sagan:

Look again at that dot. That's here. That's home. That's us. On it everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives. The aggregate of our joy and suffering, thousands of confident religions, ideologies, and economic doctrines, every hunter and forager, every hero and coward, every creator and destroyer of civilization, every king and peasant, every young couple in love, every mother and father, hopeful child, inventor and explorer, every teacher of morals, every corrupt politician, every 'superstar,' every 'supreme leader,' every saint and sinner in the history of our species lived there-on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam.

The Earth is a very small stage in a vast cosmic arena. Think of the endless cruelties visited by the inhabitants of one corner of this pixel on the scarcely distinguishable inhabitants of some other corner, how frequent their misunderstandings, how eager

Existential Angst

(continued from page 4)

Regular membership:
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they are to kill one another, how fervent their hatreds. Think of the rivers of blood spilled by all those generals and emperors so that, in glory and triumph, they could become the momentary masters of a fraction of a dot.

Our posturings, our imagined self-importance, the delusion that we have some privileged position in the Universe, are challenged by this point of pale light. Our planet is a lonely speck in the great enveloping cosmic dark. In our obscurity, in all this vastness, there is no hint that help will come from elsewhere to save us from ourselves.

The Earth is the only world known so far to harbor life. There is nowhere else, at least in the near future, to which our species could migrate. Visit, yes. Settle, not yet. Like it or not, for the moment the Earth is where we make our stand.

It has been said that astronomy is a humbling and character-building experience. There is perhaps no better demonstration of the folly of human conceits than this distant image of our tiny world. To me, it underscores our responsibility to deal more kindly with one another, and to preserve and cherish the pale blue dot, the only home we've ever known.

End quote.

So, I have come to realize that not do I necessarily have a problem with the philosophy of Eudaimonism, but I do take issue with relating it to the scale on which it is applied. In the last sentence of the Sagan quote, he offers a straw to grasp at—even though the Earth on a cosmic scale is just an insignificant tiny speck of nothingness, it's **our** speck. It is the only thing we have, especially for those of us not inclined to give credence to divine beings or other supernatural phenomena. We may not matter to the universe, but we matter to us. And, on our scale, the infinitesimal fraction of space and time which we inhabit, where we strut and fret our hour upon the stage, that has to be enough.

Having gotten this far in identifying this issue, I am somewhat consoled. Trying to grasp this problem is something that may take weeks, months or years to fully understand and embrace. It may take a lifetime and I still will not be able to wrap my mind around this. But, this is at least my attempt at a start to understanding. In a future oratory, I hope to expand on this.

By giving this talk, I hope to have inspired. If this talk seems very basic and you feel you have moved beyond this level of addressing this universal issue, I ask that you share additional resources to provide us with inspiration. Thank you.

Contact Information

To talk to somebody about
Fellowship of Reason call:

Martin at 770-471-9800
Susan at 678-358-8415

After the Telos: A Response to Amanda Bauer's Mid-Life Crisis

by Frank Vickers (Oratory from November 2, 2014)

This is a response to what Mandy called her “heavy” oratory on the most recent and otherwise celebratory July Fourth weekend. Here, with the adjustment of a solitary expletive, is Mandy’s own summary of her oration:

“I was feeling crappy but really had no good reason to feel crappy, which actually in some ways is crappier since I can't blame it on any one thing. So I started seeking the root cause of crappiness. I finally honed in on a feeling of meaninglessness. That was disturbing, since our philosophy of Eudaimonism is all about providing meaning to one’s life and, after a few years of this philosophy really helping me out, it is starting to lose its luster.

But I realize blaming other things is really one’s way of deflecting internal conflicts, so in digging deeper, it's not our philosophy so much as the scale on which our philosophy is placed that bugs me. I have a problem with all our eggs being placed in the human basket; since when viewed from a broader scale, it is so vastly insignificant. Religious folks have the one-up on us in this regard, as they can tie in humanity to the greatest all-powerful God of the supreme universe. (Jealous that so many people just can easily accept that SHINOLA.) Nonetheless, what I have not found yet in Eudaimonism is a spiritual tie-in to the universe. We're about reason, not necessarily spirituality, though I think Martin's emphasis on "the beautiful" is trying to make that connection.”

Martin’s ideas aside for the moment—he will have to address that accusation himself—one thing I would like to point out, other than that adjusted expletive, is the appearance here of another “S-word” not in Mandy’s original presentation: *Spirituality*. I do not “do” *spiritual*, myself, and I have no deliverance, salvation or redemption, no transcendence to offer. But, I think that idea of a tie-in to the universe, and the use of the word *spiritual* may point to ways to address Mandy’s topic. This present oration is not intended as a remedy for Madame President’s malady, much less a public psychoanalysis, or an exposition of flaws in her argument or premises, if they exist. It is, as mentioned, a response. An admittedly and almost deliberately unsatisfactory and very personal one.

Mandy promised to share her progress on this issue—to, as she phrased it, expand on her grasp of this problem—in a future oratory. She also hopes to have inspired responses to this perpetual and universal question. [I do not know where *yours* is...] Here is mine:

“The act of writing is in itself an affirmation.” We will come back to that thought.

Did you ever notice how it *just never stops*? How, down the road, there is just more road and the New Jerusalem or whatever utopia or paradise never seems to rear its ugly head above the horizon? And after a while you get to realize that, at some point on this road, the semi-self-directed, bone-scaffolded sack of microorganisms that you are will deteriorate and decay, and the younger sacks will march happily around and then *over* the stain that once was you, toward a perpetually-reloading horizon on the surface of this half-cooled magma crust hurtling pointlessly and aimlessly through space, in circles and circles around a medium-small star—itsself circling pointlessly—that will not even have the decency to burn dramatically out in confirmation of your passing, until millennia and millennia after those who have forgotten you are long forgotten?

There is a Greek word, *Telos*, which the etymologists tell us means “end.” But not “end” as in “the finish” or “moment of doom.” It means “end” as in “goal” or “purpose.” From that word comes another that one hears in philosophy: *teleology*. Teleology is, indeed, considered one of the branches of philosophy: the study of the *Telos* or purpose or goal of anything. There is another word, that comes from the Greek word *eskhatos* [when not written in those wiggly little mathematical symbols that Socrates spoke in] *eskhatos* or “last.” Eschatology refers to what happens at The End Times. This word typically only appears in theology. I think the world’s great religions pretty much all have some form of teleology and eschatology. I will bet all the crappy religions do, too. Some of the mediocre ones seem to go “lite” on these subjects. It suggests, nonetheless, that pretty much everybody has been thinking about this.

But, I have always had a problem with this concept of the *Telos*. It makes a kind of sense if you think of it as a sort of ideal state a person or thing is supposed to achieve temporarily. Sure. But, what about after that? If the person or thing is intended to reach a certain goal, to achieve a certain purpose, why then don't they stay there? Why isn't that the *eskhatos*?

After the *Telos*: A Response to Amanda Bauer's Mid-Life Crisis (continued from page 6)

the end? So many questions ... when you were *nine*, or *twelve*. What about after the *Telos*? What about a few minutes before the *Telos*? Is the *Telos* the same as perfection? If so, why does the organism or object keep on changing? Why doesn't it keep on moving toward something even better? Is the *Telos* the end? Is DEATH really the *Telos*?

What this concept of the *Telos* reminds me of is when we were kids and you tried to take literally the concept of Heaven. C'mon, you know you did, only you didn't have the fancy words for it. You remember: How old are you in Heaven? Are you the age you were when you died? What if you died young, and your twin or your best schoolmate died old? So many questions ... Are there lawns in Heaven? Do they have to be mowed? Is a perfectly mowed lawn the *Telos* of a lawn?

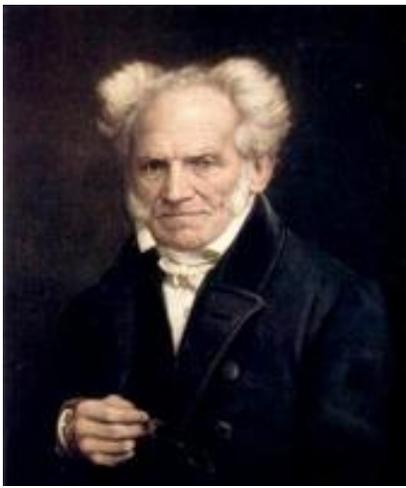
Is the *Telos* a thing, or is it a moment? Or, is it a moment and not a thing?! Why is the mighty oak the *Telos* of a chestnut, and not the splintered, termite-ridden carcass, if not just because that's what we like best? This is of course an unsubtle take on the idea, but nonetheless it is perhaps no wonder I quite young gave it up as a bad job, even before I knew the fancy words.

There is another word one hears in philosophy, "dysteleology," which maybe sounds like something I made up. It isn't in either my computer or my ancient papyrus dictionaries. That is the idea that "it"—anything—does not go toward anything else in particular, it just goes, and works out the way it works out—plays out the way it plays out—holds together for as long as it holds together. The *Telos* may well be not in nature, but simply in the imagination.

One philosopher who is characterized as a dysteleological one is Arthur Schopenhauer. Schopenhauer is often referred to as "the philosopher of pessimism," but this being philosophy the jargon has a special meaning that changes with each philosopher. It does not mean he was always in a bad mood, or that he was ready to give up on everything. Far from it, with Schopenhauer! It seems to boil down to the fact that he did not believe in the existence of progress in human affairs. I have a bumper-sticker or elevator-speech version of Schopenhauer's philosophy, as I understand it, that goes, "Life sucks, then you die. But in the meantime listening to music is kind of cool." He considered the arts, immersion in the aesthetic realm, an excellent—if only temporary—respite from the suffering he says defines human existence. When he is not recommending symphonies and the like, Schopenhauer says that asceticism and renunciation like that of Hindu and Buddhist saints is the best way to go through life. Not that he took his own advice. But, the idea of art as a way to go will do for here.

This would not be the place to expound upon the often difficult philosophy and delightfully nasty writing of Arthur Schopenhauer—as if I understood it all, anyway—but his idea is that the aesthetic realm is a place of disinterest, where there is temporary release from the drive of the unrelenting blind *Will* that underlies the universe. A place where we can see the reality behind appearances a little more clearly for a moment, without the pressures we are normally subject to. Like hunger, those pressures always come back. I am using this loosely for my purposes, here, not in the strict Schopenhauerian sense. This idea of escaping from life through the aesthetic realm is *one* approach to dealing with the inherent meaninglessness of life.

When I was a boy, I saw the title of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* repeated almost as a mantra in various circles, sometimes with a smirk, sometimes more seriously. You may know the joke about it, that it is a play in which nothing happens—*twice*. In it, two



After the *Telos*: A Response to Amanda Bauer's Mid-Life Crisis (continued from page 7)

tramps wait for this Godot character, who represents we-don't-quite-know-what, and a young messenger arrives at the end of both acts to announce that Mr. Godot cannot come today, but he will surely come tomorrow. I finally read the script twenty-five years ago, in a book edited by drama critic and director, Harold Clurman, and it has stuck with me. I have seen it performed twice since, as well as a few videotaped productions (I highly recommend the crackle of live theater to taped productions for this play). But, there was also Clurman's thought in his 1962 introduction to *Seven Plays of the Modern Theater*:

“As Albert Camus once made clear, there is really no such thing as nihilistic literature. The act of writing is in itself an affirmation, and when one affirms one does so in behalf of something ... ‘there is hope of a reprieve.’”

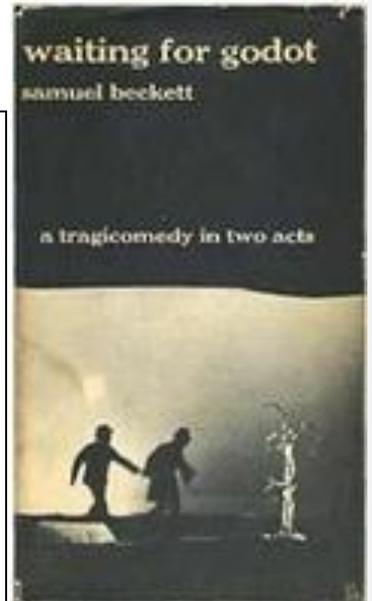
There is no such thing as nihilistic literature; the act of writing is in itself an affirmation. This also has stuck with me. It was a liberating thought, even as late as age thirty, that all the propaganda and disdain over what I found stimulating, was worthless criticism. And, this idea that writing itself is an affirmation, no matter how much a tour-de-force of the dismal it seems - *and* no matter that Clurman didn't specify *what* should be affirmed - is *another* way of dealing with the meaninglessness.

As old as I ever get, I will never run out of things to do. I have my friends. There will still be too many books to read, too much music to hear, too many things to look at. A poem to read or an oratory to deliver once or twice a year. Is it enough?

Will it *be* good enough, knowing that one day the world will chug quite happily along without you, your accomplishments, and all the things you loved and any good you did, as if you never existed? When what is coming is the loss of all the quirks, all the defects and peculiarities, all the nuances and distinctions, all the conformities and deviations, all the markers, all the data, all the things that make you, you. The complete annihilation of all sensory input, all processing of information, all impulses and inhibitions, all sense of achievement or frustration. The end of all sense of story, of all memory, all history and all narrative. All feeling, all awareness. Finis, baby! With the interim knowledge that the present is always slipping through one's fingers, and the future just keeps getting shorter and shorter, leaving you slipping into unaccountable lethargy, a leaden-weighted doldrums, pining for a narcotopia due to the present sense of futility about being soon left with the absence of everything, of even a sense of absence, a nothingness even less than dreamless sleep?

Mandy says that it is the insignificant scale of the human legacy within the big cosmic picture, and the fact that the philosophy of Eudaimonism is limited to that scale, that bothers her, rather than her personal scale in the scheme of things. But, that stuff has always kind of bugged me.

Either way, the sense that it all fits together, that it will all finally fall into place, has its appeal. The idea of an afterlife where it all finally goes right, where you have a comprehensive understanding of why your desires were so thwarted. The Promised Land hope of that old-time religion that “in the sweet by and by we will understand it better.” That there *is* an evolution “toward” something instead of one that “just goes.” I suppose it would be good to sometimes have that belief in a *Telos* beyond the *eskhatos*, a sense of purpose I could experience after the end, in a state of perfection. But, I never really had that. It never held together or made sense, irrespective of whatever I might desire. What happens after that becomes another idea in the graveyard of dead dreams? So many questions...



After the *Telos*: A Response to Amanda Bauer's Mid-Life Crisis (continued from page 8)

What if this is it? What if this is all there is? What if, like the writing of this oratory, assembling it with all the attention and detail of the movements of a full symphony, it then plays out like a three-minute pop song and everyone says, "Hahaha, that was good," then you go and get pizza and it's gone?

So, we have Arthur Schopenhauer's idea that art is a temporary escape, and Harold Clurman's insistence that art is an affirmation. Is there here a calculus of limited hope in an unpromising land? These may not be quite an either/or choice, and maybe not even incompatible. This may not either be quite the "half empty vs half full" dichotomy. It might be more like the choice between SUGAR and SHINOLA as a euphemism for an expletive. The two thoughts, the two ways of dealing with meaninglessness might blend. I am not here to make declarations or tell you what to do. I am not going to stand up here and chant at you. (If I could make money standing up here chanting at you, I would. But, I hear the field is crowded and the competition is fierce.) I am presenting it this way because I want to know, what do *you* feel, and think? What do *you* have to say?

Do you, like Schopenhauer suggested, make a temporary escape into the aesthetic realm? Do you spout Clurman's rash affirmations? Do you just deflect it with excessive use of exaggerated, ironic humor, and dress it up with a couple of sour jokes about happy endings? (Who would do that? ...)

Another dysteleological philosopher, Nietzsche, wrote of his version of The Eternal Recurrence, the idea that with the numerically limited possibilities of the universe, sooner or later, this life just as it occurred will occur all over again and again, so you'd better learn to embrace it now. Camus used the Myth of Sisyphus to illustrate the same thing. This guy, Sisyphus, was doomed to day after day start pushing that same rock up that same hill before it rolls again to the bottom, and yet again, he still does it day after day. Leonard Cohen's earliest songs were derided as "wrist-slitting music." Well, the eighty-year-old Cohen just released a new album less than two months ago. Beckett was considered by the too-literal a depressing playwright. Well, okay, so yah, "when you do the math, life's not for wimps who can't handle the truuuuth!" But, like our philosopher of pessimism, who lived a long full life, none of these folks jumped off a cliff. (We know some do. The poet Hart Crane is still off on that long swim in the Gulf of Mexico that he started decades ago. Similarly, Virginia Woolf did her own Ophelia act in the River Ouse, in Sussex, about ten years later. There is the cliché that staying alive would not mean much if, like the angels in heaven, you had no choice but to do so.)

This may not do much to address, much less provide a route to, a "spiritual tie-in to the universe." I am not a spiritualist ... I am a materialist. I am not sure this helps get any closer to identifying and understanding the issue Mandy talked about. She may have presented her "midlife crisis of existential angst" as if it were a case of her having passed the *Telos* marked on the side of her carton, if she believes that. Or, as if she has already scaled the highest pyramid and peaked against her ceiling, in the Maslow-hierarchy of needs and self-actualization that she used as an illustration in her oratory. But, if she could expand the base of her diagrammatic triangle, why not the ceiling, too?

Now, I know I said in the introduction that I wasn't going to personally attack Mandy, But in her talk, she suggested a couple of (for me) entertaining but I think admittedly unconvincing hypotheses regarding "the root cause of crappiness!" that our time today

**Join us for our
next monthly
FORum:**

**4775 N. Church
Lane, S.E., Smyrna,
GA 30080**

**December 7,
2014**

Sunday 11 a.m.

(Meet, Greet at 10:30 a.m.)

**FOR Children's
Babysitter**

from 9:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.
Organized Educational
Program from 10:30 a.m. to 11
a.m.

Adult Sunday school
10 a.m. to 10:45 a.m.

After the Telos: A Response to Amanda Bauer's Mid-Life Crisis *(continued from page 9)*

won't allow repeating. But, in some versions of that pyramid of needs and self-actualization, "acceptance of facts" or "self-sufficiency" appear along with "authenticity" and "spontaneity" and the other virtues in that pinnacle segment. I am supposed to be a big fan of reality ... Let me rephrase that. I am a big fan of being *realistic*. I have never been a fan of reality. We may have to settle for coloring and decorating the eggs down here in the human basket, rather than hoping for some sort of resurrection. Mandy may be asking for inspiration. She may be looking for some definition of spirituality. But, she may be already "on" this, engaging in the essential act. She *wrote*. She created.

This may have been a dysteleological, or purposeless (but hopefully not endless) response to Mandy's oratory (And if it did seem endless, will I suffer some eschatological consequences? Am I gonna get it in the end?) But, I hope to dole you out enough SHINOLA to inspire you to engage in the act of writing, to accept President Bauer's mission of responding to her oratory, to contribute.

[Incidentally, those *other* Board members and Trustees might tell you that we need to get some new blood up here, but you know, that is not true—it's lip service. The truth is, we *do not* need you up here. The people who appear up here regularly will happily listen to ourselves talk: All. Day. Long. In addition, if you do not think so, you have not been to breakfast or pub night with us. *You need to make yourself needed.*]

Mandy said she would expand on this in a future oratory, and I too might be inspired, might have a future expansion on the grasp of this problem, depending upon what we hear. Writing one of these puts me into the aesthetic realm, gives me an opportunity to foolishly affirm, without specifying what I am affirming, although I am not naive enough to affirm that success is inevitable. It is difficult, it takes time, it is work, it is challenging. It is also gratifying, it is rewarding. I find it enjoyable, but why should I be the only one? Create. Affirm something. **CONTRIBUTE!**

Thank you.

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