

the future, and, as tools to help combat global warming, smart machines and storing carbon as charcoal.

If not enough is done—and quickly—the future is dire. 'But there is another possibility—that we will use our intelligence to avert catastrophe and secure a sustainable future ... the unavoidable cost of success in this is that nations must cede real authority' (p. 274–280). We have to reach a point where 'profiteering at Gaia's expense is regarded and punished as the gravest of crimes'. We must strive 'to love our planet as much as we love ourselves'.

Tim Flannery is the Chief Commissioner on Australia's Climate Commission. The book was shortlisted for ABIA (Australian Book Industry Awards) General Nonfiction Book of the Year, 2011.

MEANING, SELF AND THE HUMAN POTENTIAL: An appeal for Humanism, by Kristine Millar

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Reviewer: **Patricia Mitchell**

Kristine Millar considers it likely a crisis of meaninglessness is likely to affect most thinking people sometime in their lives. How to recover meaning, especially if no religious belief consoles, is the topic of this book. It must be up to each person to create meaning for her or himself. How best to achieve this? She sees this as a complex process not done in isolation from recognizing external influences such as family and society. Some deep exploration is definitely needed and she spends a fascinating chapter on each relevant topic.

Certain realisations firstly need facing honestly: the fact of death, the sheer absurdity in life and then a brave exploration of the origins of our system of meaning creation and awareness of the forces impelling us. This is a process necessary to effective functioning. It is no good relying on the automatic pilot provided by others whether church-, family- or society-sanctioned. Our values are what provides meaning and purpose to our existence, and winnowing wheat from chaff is our human task, one providing real meaning and true integration of the self.

Millar spends valuable time sorting out likely influences on our personal values and decides that 'as no one has lived your life, they cannot share your EXACT values.' Habits of thought, family expectations and career disappointments—all contribute, and for some, a re-booting where discrepancies show up is essential before progress can be made.

In talking of our hierarchy of needs that Maslow postulated, Millar recognizes that much of this self-reflection is possible only in our first-world culture where basic needs have been met. Lucky also the person who truly loves their job, can identify wholly with the values their work represents; or whose talents have gravitated them to a role early in life where most of the problems of finding intrinsic values have been solved.

For the rest of us this book is a marvellous blueprint for undertaking such an intensely personal journey and winning our own gold medal.

Drawing on the work of existentialists, psychoanalysts, child psychologists and others, the author examines a rich weave of personal and public strands in depth and with compassion. Never judgmental, she peers through her glass at issues from society, the fear of death, the lure of ritual, belief, spiritualism and generally the paths most travelled. She asserts that:

The need for salvation and a sense of community are the two reasons people succumb to irrational faith through orthodox religion.

She acknowledges the balance of good and bad done in the name of religion and poses the central question of how non-believers can install at least some of these human needs into a non-religious life.

Can morality only come from God as Sartre and William Craig postulate? Because life ends, there can be no other real purpose for our lives, is the argument. But the author, in the chapter called 'Resolving the Dichotomy', firmly refutes this claim:

surely we can and do find value in our life, give it meaning and find purpose in life, even though it ends.

And this is a strong argument—because it ends, is what has gone before meaningless? Surely not. We also have our own psyche, inherent notions of good and bad, a conscience and compassion, born of our own experience and not necessarily springing from Christian tenets. Right through this discussion, Millar evinces a respect for an individual's ability to sort out for himself or herself ultimate values. She also looks at the thorny issue of cultural relativism so much in the news today; but finds our notions of human rights widely acknowledged and ethically triumphant.

There is no dogmatic downplaying of the great goods done by people for whom organised religion and divine belief are the touchstone. But the fact remains that much equally fine and altruistic work can be done without such sanctions.

In a chapter on 'Human potential', the thorny and relevant topic of suicide and euthanasia is sensitively dealt with, using Schweitzer's claim for the widespread 'instinctive reverence for life' as a starting point. Also here the drive for constructive use of human potential versus the destructive impulse is finely examined.

Ultimately, quoting Jung, the author sees the greatest human potential for creativity, cooperation and universal improvement having most effectiveness when a person has emerged through reflection and self-realisation, been able first to achieve that Jungian notion of 'individuation'—separation from group, tribal, societal and national influences, compelling though they seem. She looks at how corporations and even loyalty to a football club can waylay us, if these social attractions are not constantly re-evaluated as to their desirability and usefulness.

And that is what Kristine Millar very much wants to see and very much believes is achievable for each and every person on the planet. This book would make a marvellous topic for a series of discussions and good robust argument for any group of thinking folk. As it is, it provides a wonderful roadmap for identifying as a humanist; to stop, look, listen and move forward in their life's journey to that golden goal of full realization of self. Highly recommended.