Course Learning Outcomes for Unit II

Upon completion of this unit, students should be able to:

1. Evaluate the worth of the “American dream” of rising to the top, of riches and success, of bigger, newer, and more.
2. Recognize the limitations to viewing life as a game.
3. Analyze relationships to understand the role power plays in how they work.
4. Assess to what the typical American idea of freedom (being able to do what I want when I want) leads.
5. Analyze on a personal level how one deals with pain.
6. Evaluate the effectiveness in the way one deals with pain.
7. Understand the numbing effects of living an emotionally protected life.
8. Differentiate between knowledge and wisdom.
9. Assess when human knowledge and understanding have reached their limits and you must forge ahead anyway.
10. Evaluate the value of a religion in which the primary precept is “obey.”
11. Distinguish between fear and awe.

Reading Assignment

*When All You've Ever Wanted Isn't Enough: The Search for a Life That Matters:*

**Chapter 3:**
The Loneliness of Looking Out for Number One

**Chapter 4:**
When It Hurts Too Much to Feel

**Chapter 5:**
Feeling No Pain, Feeling No Joy

**Chapter 6:**
"But the Fool Walks in Darkness"

**Chapter 7:**
Who's Afraid of the Fear of God?

Unit Lesson

In these chapters, Kushner follows a path similar to that found in Ecclesiastes, a path bent on pumping some meaning into our human existence. He brings the search from the ancient world of Ecclesiastes to our modern world. What is amazing is when meaning is missing from life, we still turn to the same things in an attempt to find some.

In Chapter 3, Kushner turns to the idea of looking out for number one, which is really his way of referring to the whole American dream. It is an examination of living one's life in such a way as to “rise to the top.” He points out the pitfalls of this outlook on life noting that it makes all of life a game—a game to be won. In such a scheme everyone is my competitor and in order for me to win, you must lose. He makes very clear the problems of power differential found in human relationship that are inherent with such a scheme for life. He
ends noting that what we all want is power over our own lives and no responsibility for anyone else. He argues this leads to a meaningless life and thus an unhappy existence.

In Chapter 4, Kushner takes a whole new approach to a meaningful life. Instead of life with everything, he looks at a life with nothing. He explores striving for a simple, uncluttered life. This is a life of self-denial. He points out that this life brings no more meaning or happiness than a life of over indulgence. He uses the example of Mahatma Gandhi who lived a life of self-denial and service to others and yet had major bouts with depression and self-doubt. A life of self-denial did not guarantee him happiness at all. Kushner also explains that we Americans are children of the Greeks and the Puritans, and those two strains cause wars within ourselves. It is a helpful piece of self-awareness.

In Chapter 5, Kushner turns to a life of self-protection—a life of shielding oneself from pain. This is the path of least resistance. He argues that in order to protect ourselves from pain, we do not completely invest ourselves in anything. The danger behind this is that we manufacture emotionally flat lives for ourselves. We feel no pain, but we feel no joy either.

In Chapter 6, Kushner turns to the pursuit of wisdom. He looks to the author of Ecclesiastes who was out to answer the great question of the meaning of life. Kushner learns from Ecclesiastes that there is no one, great, final answer to life. Human reason has its limits and knowing that is the greatest wisdom a person can have. A person can spend so much time analyzing life that in the end life is not lived. There are things with no answers, and at those times, one simply has to go on and live.

In Chapter 7, Kushner turns to religion. Here is one last shot at meaning. God is eternal so maybe by latching on to God in devotion and service one can cheat futility and meaninglessness and achieve some lasting significance. The attempt to latch on to God usually comes in the form of living in some prescribed way to please God and avoid God’s wrath. Such a religious system is ultimately based on fear. Religion is a way to avoid God’s wrath, to get God “off one’s back.” A relationship built on fear is usually a destructive relationship. Kushner argues that an authentic relationship with God ought to be built on awe of God, not fear of God. Such a relationship will challenge us to always strive to change and grow, to venture out in new and different ways, and make some mistakes and trust that God has our backs.