

Jonathan Power

When Are You Going to Get a Proper Job?

Sixty Years in Journalism

The World Was My Oyster

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For my children, grandchildren, sister, nieces and nephew, and Anne and Jeany— and those to come.

Also grateful thanks to my editor, Jessica Haunschild, for a job well done.

"We will never have peace in the world until men everywhere recognise that ends are not cut off from means, because the means represent the ideal in the making, and the end in process, and ultimately you can't reach good ends through evil means, because the means represent the seed and the end represents the tree."

Martin Luther King

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Chapter 1

I and Me

My life would have been so good – if only I had been more lucky, wise, sensible, stable – use any adjective you want. It did not happen the way I wanted. I never found the clarity of mind, the right sound or perfect female. I died with no money in the bank. I had nothing I had written that I wanted to pass on to the next generation. In love I had failed time and time again. In truth my life was long – I’m 83 – but I had nothing much to say. My father often asked, “When are you going to get a proper job?” From his perspective, as a free-lance journalist with a family, on a low income, I was wasting my life away. He said I would end up in a dusty room, looking at a naked lightbulb.

Don’t be so bleak, I told my inner self. All this is not true. You are twisting the facts. You *have* done well. And the pursuit of love has had its successes, as well as momentous failures. You must have had a bad night – or a bad day. At least true in part, I answer back, but then I had high ambitions. “A man’s reach must exceed his grasp or what are heavens for?” wrote the Scottish poet, Robert Browning.

My life was by no means pure when at fourteen years old I prayed on my knees for the first time in a serious way. But I did, instinctively, lean towards goodness and justice. Christianity, adopted during a wonderful summer in a boys’ camp on the Welsh Island of Anglesey, run by a Baptist preacher, exploited that yearning very well, offering also a bonus with its promise of eternal life.

In life I didn’t find the perfect human being – although I met some great ones in my life – Martin Luther King (for whom I worked in Chicago’s black West Side ghetto), his closest aides, Andy Young and Jesse Jackson, (both long-time friends who I regularly talk to), Nigerian president, Olusegun Obasanjo (a friend for over 40 years), Julius Nyerere, president of Tanzania, Mahub ul Haq, fi-

nance minister of Pakistan, Sartaj Aziz, foreign minister of Pakistan, Buddy Weiss, my first editor at the International Herald Tribune who gave me the greatest break of my life and at the tender age of 33 made me a foreign affairs columnist and commentator—which I was for 17 years, Jim Grant, the head of UNICEF who along with Barbara Ward, the great political and economics writer, liked to mentor me and make sure I had enough money to live on when the International Herald Tribune would only pay me peanuts, and Valeria Rezende, my nun friend and one time near-lover from Brazil who spent most of her adult life working with the poor in Brazil and ten years ago became the author of two novels that both won Brazil's top prize for literature.

I found some good women including two very loving wives, one of whom, Anne, was my partner in working on Martin Luther King's staff and afterwards living and working in a Dickensian neighbourhood in London. She taught me how to write and backed me up with my journalism, even though she wasn't very taken by the media. She rather despised its bias towards simplifying and dramatizing too much, and its rather rightward political leanings, especially its bias against Russia and China. We shared the essential social and political ideas over the 20 years of our relationship. She is a workaholic—the poor of Britain rarely have had such an intelligent and strong-willed champion. Enormously kind and generous too. She started in London organizing playgroups for poor mothers and their children, went on to develop housing coops on the model I'd recommended in Chicago and eventually became a professor at the London School of Economics. We had three children.

I was faithful to Anne for 20 years, (we were boyfriend and girlfriend for three years before we married), until I met Mary Jane, a stewardess on an American Airlines plane flying from Jamaica to New York. After months of continuous travel from one end of the world to the other that year, in which I was often very lonely, (the foreign correspondent's lot) I took her to dinner, and before the evening was out she invited me to bed. I refused but promised to see her again on my next trip to New York. We went to Jamaica

where I wanted to write about the volatile political situation. The seduction worked. I was caught up in her femininity—the marvelous figure, the bikini she wore on the beach, the flimsy way she dressed, her dress ruffled beguilingly by the gentle tropical breeze.

Mary Jane lived in New York and Oklahoma but seemed to prefer being up in the sky than with me. Her main accomplishment, looking back, was that unlike most southerners she was totally non-racist. At the end, after our breakup, she lied to the judge in our contest for the possession of the houseboat I owned on the Thames in Chelsea. (My daughter's second name is Chelsea, so attached was I to the boat I'd rescued from the knacker's yard.) But she wrenched it off me.

Anne had a multitude of virtues but making an effort to look feminine was not one of them. Over the years that had irritated me more and more. Despite all my encouragement she wouldn't change, and it gradually sapped the sexuality out of me. The problem was compounded by the fact that the beginning of our sex life only began on the day we were married. For the three previous years I had had to suffer Anne's Catholic fundamentalist morality which only allowed, she maintained, kisses on the cheek. So, on our marriage day when the green flag was hoisted, I couldn't do "it" for the first few days. That gave me a sexual nervousness that has lasted on and off all my subsequent life.

We had three lovely daughters and it grieved me more than I can ever write that she made it so very difficult for them to see me. I refused to go to court about anything. I gave her the house lock, stock, and barrel. I refused to legally fight for access to the children hoping that she would ameliorate her stance, but she never did. Above all, I wanted to avoid a bitter confrontation, not least for the children's sake.

I was badly torn but in the end I chose the pull of femininity and sex. I thought I could not go through life without passion. I'd read about it in novels and seen it on film and in the theatre and opera house. I had to experience it—the great, luring, overpowering,

unknown. Yet to leave Anne and my children pushed me into a profound depression, the deepest one of my life. Only when, after three weeks of damning indecision, I decided in desperation to cross the Atlantic to Mary Jane did the depression lift – within an hour of the plane leaving Heathrow. I had felt I was in a dark pit with no way to escape. I realized my religious belief had deserted me – the very thing that should have saved both me and my family. I was crucified by what I was doing to my girls. Can the urge for good sex overwhelm all other feelings? Apparently, it can and I know I'm not the only one, although, praise to God, 90% of mothers and fathers would never do what I did and leave their children to cross the Atlantic and live there, if only half time, once I had bought my house boat on the Thames in Chelsea. No wonder nearly all my friends deserted me. It took me 20 years to recover from my feeling of profound guilt. In the end my eldest daughter, Carmen, pulled me out of it – well, most of the way. The guilt still lingers on. I know I did evil.

My second wife was Jeany, a successful Swedish opera singer based in Germany for many years, the country of opera. The relationship in its first phase lasted 17 years. We have one daughter, Jenny. Jeany not only has a voice to dream about and has performed all over Germany in its major opera houses, she is a great actress and a very warm, gentle, self-effacing and caring wife and hands-on mother. Although divorced – the Alfia story which I'll come to – we get closer and closer as the years pass and do a lot of things together. Twice a week we have dinner with Jenny and that is the best thing of all. Now she has Alzheimer's. Along with Jenny I care for her. Recently she moved into my flat so I can look after her more easily. More about Jeany later.

Luckily, unlike in London, I have made good friends here in Lund, an ancient university town from where King Canute lorded it over my country. They are mainly non-Swedish – the reserved Swedes are difficult to make friends with – although paradoxically some of my best friends are Swedish – I welcomed their tolerance in matters personal and the support they gave me when the tears were gushing from my eyes.

I often wish I could meet up with a handful of friends I've stayed close to over 40 years. I see them rarely since they are scattered around the globe. I feel a special affection for Peggy, the widow of Buddy Weiss, the late editor of the Herald Tribune. (What sizzling, drunken, conversations we had in the bars and restaurants of Paris waiting for Buddy to put the paper to bed at midnight!) I could also add Paul McCartney and my former editor at the intellectuals' magazine, Prospect, David Goodhart, who I occasionally see for a catch-up chat. And Chris Holmes who died too young who worked with Anne in the slums of Holloway and then became a very dynamic director of Shelter, the powerful housing advocacy group. When I decided the first time (there were two occasions) to break up with Mary Jane I went to live with my widowed father in Boars Hill, up above Oxford. An old acquaintance from my early BBC radio days, the professor of international relations, Adam Roberts and his wife Prinkey, took pity on me, I think, and often invited me for dinner which sometimes included a long run. We returned the dinners when Jeany, Jenny and I later moved to Oxford. We share a common interest in non-violent solutions to conflict.

Jenny Barraclough has to get a very special mention. She and I were a great team at BBC TV making pathbreaking documentaries about Black America. Together we won the silver medal at the Venice Film Festival. I was the reporter, she was the director. She is widely regarded as one of the BBC's great documentary-makers and won a BAFTA and numerous other awards. She taught me everything I know about filmmaking. More than that she was a great family friend and took it badly when I left Anne. For her part, in a BBC interview she singled me out as one of the most important influences in her life. Jenny continues to read everything I send her and often praises me for a particular column. Her enthusiasm for how well written my novel was helped keep me going as the rejection letters piled up.

I've written a lot, circa 2,500 articles and 13 books. (See my website: jonathanpowerjournalist.com.) Probably I'm the European who has written the most often for the most influential American

papers—the International Herald Tribune, the New York Times, the Washington Post, the Boston Globe, the Miami Herald and the Los Angeles Times, (but not the Wall Street Journal owned by the corrupt Rupert Murdoch).

I've also written for the London Times, the Guardian, the Observer, the Sunday Times and the Economist, as well as the British intellectual monthlies, Encounter and Prospect magazines. Also European magazines and newspapers, from Spain's El Pais, to Germany's Die Zeit and Russia's premier foreign policy magazine, Global Affairs.

I've had influence on the presidents of the United States, Tanzania and Nigeria as well as on UNICEF, the International Institute for Strategic Studies, the World Council of Churches and on the UN's Security Council. And, I presume, for 17 years with my weekly column on foreign affairs, the readers of the International Herald Tribune, a paper that justifiably liked to think, with its excellent high-powered reporting and editorializing together with printing plants all over the world, it reached the elite of Europe and Asia (and to a lesser extent Africa and Latin America). Presidents and prime ministers read it with their breakfast.

I've always argued for charity, love, non-violence, justice, human rights and the end of racism, war and poverty—many of them subjects most newspaper editors—with the notable exception of Buddy Weiss are not particularly interested in, especially if the columnist goes on about these themes week in week out.

In love, as I inferred, I've had some successes and some failures—"Better to have loved and lost than never have loved at all!" I've had some wonderful companionship, especially from my wives. I've produced four girls, Carmen who has just finished her PhD and is an expert on the impact of birth upon the baby, Miriam, a swimming instructor who tutors in Lanzarote and has regular clients from all over Europe, and Lucy who, a first class degree in her back pocket, with her husband runs a program (Rowanbank) to introduce small children from low-income communities in Scotland and elsewhere to the joys of the forest and the need to tackle

the phenomenon of global warming, plus their offspring, my quite amazing and loving grandchildren, Jasmine, Sophie, Lucia, Isabella and Isla Rose, all very different but all good members of humanity with superior talents. (For starters, the oldest, Jasmine (Jazzy Power), has launched a startlingly promising singing career, mainly jazz and folk – Paul McCartney has praised her voice. The second, Sophie, gained a first class degree at the University of Sussex.)

With Jeany I had Jenny, who after completing a year in her first job at the university hospital in Lund, preparing a website for the department dealing with arthritis, now copywrites for one of Sweden's largest travel companies. She is widely admired for the quality of her English prose.

The four daughters, I think, perhaps too proudly, are all recognizable chips off my old block. I'm very, very proud of what each of them has achieved. They all love each other. Not least is my kind and caring sister, Judy, living in Dublin. Over the years we have got closer and sometimes I have had to lean on her for advice.

Most of my current close friends are women, scattered around the world – Mathia, two Peggys, Mary, Indira, Kemi, Jessica, Jenny, Olga, two Karins, Lindsay, Valeria, Negar, Kyriaki, Kushi, Patricia, Barbara, Myrna, Cheryl, Paromita and my friends (half women) at the book club and the musicians at Cyrus restaurant. (Of all these only four are Swedish and the Swedish ones have all lived abroad.) I do have men friends, some of whom I've mentioned in the text above, but only three here in Lund

Alfia is not on that list. My break-up with Jeany was finally triggered by Alfia. But after three years of tolerating her bad temper and violence the curtain came down.

I had no idea at that moment what Alfia was thinking about "the other man". When I went to see her, three days after she sent me an email and gave me her news, she shouted at me, "I am fucking him". "I hate you", Alfia, the Tatar, said again and again. She then

hit me over the head with the French drawing I had brought her, shattering the glass and bloodying my forehead. (I had left her weeks before after many other assaults, some worse than this, but for two or three months I half regretted it and was, paradoxically, profoundly hurt and jealous when she found another man.)

Every morning for three weeks I woke up with her sordid lines in my head.

I must tell you a bit about Alfia's Tatar ancestry. The Oxford dictionary defines Tatar in two ways. 1) a group of Central Asian peoples including Moguls and Turks, now living in Russia. 2) a violent-tempered or intractable person. She was both 1 and 2. She was a spitting cat sometimes. Once after a New Year's party which we had left she started beating me for reasons I could never understand. Little in stature but possessed with the strength of a mad woman she beat me for a good 600 meters as I walked fast towards my flat and she tore my thick, mohair, coat into pieces. So I decided to turn tail and run back to my hostess at the party, knowing if I continued home she would force herself inside. Alfia, hot on my heels, pushed herself inside my friend's house, grabbed a large jug of cold water and poured it over me. My friend distracted her by getting one of the men to ask her to dance and smuggled me out of the back door and I ran home. Ten minutes later Alfia was trying to bang my flat's door down. At three a.m. she phoned me to apologise, to tell me how much she loved me and asked me to take her to the psychiatric hospital. I told her to take a taxi. For the next two days I sat in a chair, hardly moving.

A few years ago I got to know a Danish woman, Linda. It was mainly a platonic friendship that filled in for my limited number of Swedish friends. We did get close, but it wasn't a normal friendship. She was like a bird, sometimes soaring, lifting my soul, sometimes diving as if looking for another fish in the ocean or dropping me on some protruding rock, sometimes just hovering, sometimes just fluttering her wings. It was disorientating and upsetting. I told her she was like the Scandinavian spring—sometimes the sun is out or it's raining, with dark clouds fast scur-

rying across the sky. We have now lost touch. She decided to push me out of her life. In retrospect I now realize she was just filling a hole until a man she could love came along.

Close to my heart is Luba, a Russian. She lives in Moscow and works as a producer for the rather good TV station RT (“Russia Today”) that from time to time, despite it being a government-owned station, does broadcast critical reports on Russian foreign, economic and health policy, although it is caricatured in the West as a loud propaganda machine. I met her nine years ago when I was at a conference in Moscow and she approached me in the street and asked me to do an interview on Ukraine and Crimea. She tore into me with sharp questions. I was rather knocked over by how pretty and intelligent she was. Every time I go to Russia we meet up. On one visit I was asked to speak—only one of two Europeans—there were also two Russians speaking and two Americans—at the unveiling of a statue of presidents Reagan and Gorbachev shaking hands to mark the end of the Cold War. Gorbachev was meant to be there but cancelled because of not feeling well. TV cameras from all over the world, including the BBC, filmed it. Four years ago Luba and I went and had a sublime weekend in my favourite city, St Petersburg, arriving there on the sleek, silver bullet train from Moscow in almost half the time it used to take. Only Paris equals it. Besides having a unique grandeur including the Hermitage museum and art gallery, once the Tsar’s splendid palace from whose balcony Lenin egged on the revolution, it has the best ballet company in the world, the Mariinsky. Ballet is my favourite art form—so graceful and just simply beautiful. (Opera is second, which is how I met Jeany.) Luba came with her 7-year-old son, Danya. She’s quite a bit younger than me so, unfortunately, a romantic relationship is not realistic. But for a long time, we texted each other two or three or four times a week, sometimes for half an hour at a time, other times just a quick one. I got to know her pretty well in our very honest and probing text conversations. We were supposed to go to St Petersburg again but the Covid virus messed that up. Then came

the war and she wrote to me a text that I still can't understand: "I have decided I don't like you anymore".

What is the future? There are, I believe, some decades to go since I'm so fit, healthy and well exercised, surviving happily on a frugal diet, so positive and optimistic by temperament (a trait I learned. I was certainly not born with it), enjoying my work, loved by my children—the eldest, Carmen, just wrote on the inside cover of a book she has just given me for my birthday, "You are the best dad and granddad. Thank you for always being there for me and the girls". Jenny, the youngest, gave me a mug at Christmas, also emblazoned, "The world's greatest dad". Miri, the second, used to tell me she was looking for a man like me to be her husband and Lucy, the third, likes nothing better than for me to give her a long cuddle and have her hair stroked! I'm at peace and good friends with Jeany with her generous forgiving heart. (Anne until very recently refused to properly forgive me, despite my many pleas. Finally, on my 80th birthday prodded by our daughters and Jenny Barraclough she did write to me, although she still does not want to meet me.)

But death is a certainty. What will my dying thought be? I joke that I want to die in the saddle, making love and writing until the last moment. I don't fear death. I've had a good innings. If I have a soul, which I sort of doubt, I hope it might live on in my children for I am not convinced there is a heaven. I like the idea of my great-great-grandchildren reading this one day.

It had been a long time in coming but today it hit me as I ate the last dish of bitter, crimson, damsons from the garden. The old tastes, the old smells, the lane, the one acre garden with the great oak under which my father would sleep on a hot summer's night, the drive down to the town of Oxford from Boars Hill, past where Turner painted the dons wandering up from a college dinner at the university, memories of an even more evocative past age, down to the ring road with its pounding lorries, then along past

Sainsbury's supermarket, often stopping there, and into the town. Now all this was about to end.

We had bought boat tickets to Sweden—me, Jeany and our little daughter, Jenny. Everything was in the van, crammed full, furniture, books and all our stuff to drive it over to my Swedish wife, Jeany's old but un-lived in inheritance, a badly neglected house by the river in the untouched, pine-forested, lake-filled county of Blekinge.

I had endured for too long trying to pay the mortgage on my father's bequest, his beautiful house with the big garden where our daughter, Jenny, now six, played in a children's paradise with the boy and girl from next door, the children of filmmaker Pawel Pawlikowski, who besides being my (always losing) tennis partner won an Oscar for best foreign film. Every day for the last sixth months of living there I had pains in my head as if a needle has been pushed right in—the luxury house standing against the struggle for the money to keep the bank's bailiff from the door because of my inability to pay a quite high mortgage. Not only daily life worries seem to press, but in fact the shadowy, sometimes grim scenes from childhood. We just had no choice but to sell and leave.

We drove the van onto the boat at Harwich heading for the continent driving up north to a new chapter in our lives. Except there was a caveat. Jeany had said she would fulfill my wish of living in the Canary Islands for a while—but not too long—if I agreed to move to Sweden afterwards. I felt my back was against the wall. We couldn't afford the Oxford house. A perpetual melancholic, I wanted badly to be in the sun and by the sea. I "signed" her contract.

So it was then back to pick up the two cats and off we departed for a glorious year under the volcano, by the Atlantic, in a house in the banana grove of a small, untouched village, with time to swim off the rocks (no beach so no tourists), to write a new book on the history of Amnesty International, "Like Water on Stone" (published by Penguin), to learn Spanish and to get healthy in body

and soul in order to flush out the accumulated tension and exhaustion

We had a very good time. Jenny went to the village school and learnt accent-less Spanish. Jeany kept her singing going and I finished my book. In the end we stayed three years in Tenerife.

I thought I would never have to honour this promise to a wife I loved and admired and was so kind to me, and nearly everybody she met. I thought like me she would fall in love with Spain. She never did. She was often irritated by the Spanish and their slow, sometimes irresponsible, way of life.

When time was nearly up we argued in our gentle way about it. I told her that I would get depressed in Sweden. I was always a melancholic until I lived in the Canary Islands – and there it disappeared. We had lived for three years in Sweden before (Jenny was born there). I hated the dullness of both weather and people. It was difficult to make friends with native Swedes and when I was writing I was shut up in dull rooms with not much light. I told Jeany that if we went back I would be depressed and maybe, I said, provocatively, without really believing it, our marriage wouldn't be able to take the strain.

She was adamant. There was better work for her there and the schools and universities would be better. As it turned out the Swedish school was much less good than the one in our Tenerife village. In Sweden Jenny found that she was a year ahead of her class in maths, such was the worth of our Spanish village's headmaster.

I did get depressed. Our sex life deteriorated to almost zero, my work became harder, I found we had little to talk about, and finally our marriage did break up. After three years of being in Sweden I started my affair with Alfia whom I met in the park. We had only been seeing each other a week when Jeany found out, thanks to Jenny cracking my email. Very un-Swedish-like she threw me out without more ado. I was homeless and had nowhere to live but at Alfia's, even though that's what half of me wanted – but not

the other sane half. Not for the usually very broad-minded Jeany, the Swedish way of toleration when erring partners are usually forgiven. Still, we remained close friends and often ate together with Jenny and, in summer, went swimming together in a nearby lake. Two years' ago she was diagnosed with Alzheimer's. Jenny moved out three years ago so she was often lonely, and Alzheimer's makes it worse. I try and do something with her almost every day for a couple of hours to keep her spirits up. Jenny sees her twice a week and deals with her accounts and welfare arrangements—Recently I decided she must move into my flat. Jenny took over the family house, much better than her living in Copenhagen.

What is love? St. Paul, often a bit of a sour philosopher, wrote to the Corinthians and made a masterful, soaring, interpretation. "Love suffers long and is kind. Love does not envy. Love does not vaunt itself, is not puffed up, thinks no evil, does not rejoice in iniquity, believes all things, is hopeful about all things and endures all things." St Paul is probably writing about Filial and Platonic love. But the description also applies to the interpretation of good, giving, sexual love—Eros.

I first read that when I was 15 and have tried to implement it through all my stages of belief and now unbelief. Over the last thirty years I have moved from a strong religious bent to agnosticism. Not for me is post Emperor Constantine Christianity with its propensity for unrelenting and unforgiving war, "maturing" to the point in 1914 and again in 1938 (both unnecessary, avoidable wars, a theme I've written about many times) when opposing Christian nations with mighty industries and armies engaged in all-out war with each other. And with one other Christian nation using a nuclear bomb to obliterate two Japanese cities. Certainly not Judaism with all its sanctified, apparently God-given, commands to Moses to tell his generals to slaughter the women and children who stood in the way of the Jews' push out of Egypt towards the milk and honey of the promised land. (All recorded in the Bible's Book of Numbers.) Not Islam, even with its generosity, sense of forgiveness (mainly to defeated Arabs, Christians, Jews

and Persians) and its belief in colour-blindness. Islam has been from the start under Mohammed's banner a militaristic religion using the sword to capture and subdue parts of Europe, North Africa, the Persian Empire and eastwards to the lands of the Moguls in present day Pakistan. To me, mixing violence with religion, as all three religions have done, betrays the values and principles they supposedly teach.

Nevertheless, I greatly admire Jesus and his teaching—against violence, compassion for the poor and ill, generosity both financial and in caring, and above all the sense of loving—“love your neighbour as yourself”. If you want to know what inspires me today and every day it is his teaching, the Buddha's and the relatively modern-day teachings of Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Mother Teresa of Calcutta—and my beloved friend, Valeria, who you will read about in my chapter on Brazil. (The heart of this benign philosophy is best expressed in King's book, “The Trumpet of Conscience” (Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1967.))

The space probe, Voyager 1, reaching past the outer edges of the solar system and moving into interstellar space, further than any man-made object before, sent back photos of planet Earth. Our world looks like a pinprick of light, just as Saturn looks to us. How Earth will look now that Voyager 1 has left the solar system and travels further is only to be wondered at. Our sun will be a bright spot in a dark sky—it is a star and shines but we, its dull acolyte, will have seemingly disappeared, so small and insignificant are we.

Only since 2013 and the taking of this photo has it become quite so apparent how little importance we should attach to our planet and its peoples. Yet many of our religions point out that, in the eyes of God or the Supreme Being, every one of us is significant. Human beings take their own existence very seriously. We regard ourselves as the centre of the universe, together with those we love. Romantic passion which enables humankind to procreate and make our Earth populated underlines our sense of exclusiveness.

Our cities are regarded as monuments to mankind's endeavour. Our art, literature, sculpture, and music prove we have soul and profound imagination.

But we are unable to square our existence with the nothingness our galaxy and universe impose upon us. We are truly lost in the Milky Way.

Does it matter if we have fought wars or made peace, committed genocide or rescued people from death, sought justice or perpetuated injustice, prosecuted war criminals or let them hide in Paraguay, Argentina, Chile and Brazil, built good or bad architecture, damned the greatest rivers or rolled back the sea, built ships, cars and planes, invented electricity, mobile phones, computers and invented the Maxim gun and nuclear-tipped rockets? Does it matter that America dropped nuclear weapons and obliterated two Japanese cities or that Britain has conquered at one time or another 80 per cent of the world's countries? Does it matter that Japan disemboweled the innocents when it invaded China in 1937? In the light of our nothingness are these not much too?

Another question: If there is a God of the universe—and some astronomers are now saying there could be multiple universes—why should this God need to make us? We may need Him. But vice versa?

It seems we are an arrogant people, obsessed with ourselves and sure that since many of us need a god that God exists. It could be it is we who have made that decision, not Him. Or perhaps we are God's experiment—to see if He could create goodness not just stars and planets. Then clearly it failed. Maybe now, sad as He must be, given mankind's propensity for evil, He would welcome us destroying our planet as we seem to be trying to—with nuclear weapons and climate change. Then in a million or so years from now He may give it another shot on some other planet in another galaxy, of which there are millions.

We are left with the unanswerable conundrums: What are we for? What are our artifacts for? What are our love affairs and marriages

for? Can we ever find an honest, science-based answer to these questions?

Not if we live a million years are we likely to – although I could be wrong. Well, let us say a thousand years. Certainly, many centuries. Perhaps the answer will come in the time of our children’s children’s children. I tend to think there is no answer.

Meanwhile, most of us Earth-dwellers try not to be arrogant and arrogate for ourselves the answers to the perhaps unanswerable. So, we just get on with the life we have: getting as educated as we can, finding a mate, rearing our families, tilling the soil or inventing and producing countless products.

What is it ultimately for? We truly have no idea.

Yet this is the only existence we know or are ever likely to know. Most of us try and make the best of it. And so we should, which should mean not enjoining war, war crimes, and crimes against humanity, thuggishness, destructiveness, criminality, discrimination, exploitation, and infidelity.

We want in our world, honesty, compassion, responsibility, love, fairness and justice. And good governance of home, nation and world. How many of us can put their hand on their heart and say they have never failed these ideals?

We had better get with life for all its faults and complexity. Worrying over the fact that we are less than a pin prick in our galaxy, much less our universe, gets us nowhere. We must give of our best, make the best, adore our world and its peoples and then peacefully fade away, our job of living on this quite insignificant planet well done.