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## BOOK BREAK

# Author asked the wise about life's meaning



ESTHER  
LITTMANN

When William Elliott was 12 years old, both his mother and father died within six months of each other. The priest said, "It was God's will," but those words gave cold comfort to a young man whose trust in the goodness of life had been severely shaken.

"I began to search for the meaning behind the workings of the world," writes the author of "Tying Rocks to Clouds" (Quest Books, 1995, \$22). "I didn't understand why there should be such pain and suffering."

But questions posed to friends and relatives about the meaning of life and death usually drew blank stares or embarrassed stammers. A traffic cop who once pulled an errant Elliott over for speeding told him bluntly, "The purpose of life is to survive it."

Maturity only intensified the author's quest for meaning. As yet devoid of academic and professional credentials, without even a decent typewriter to record his request, the psychology major decided to address his questions to people who had a reputation for wisdom and spirituality. He composed a list that included the likes of Mother Teresa, the Dalai Lama, B.F. Skinner, Rabbi Harold Kushner, Norman Vincent Peale and a host of others.

Whether nerdy or just plain naive, Elliott dared to ask each person on his list for a personal interview. Some greeted his request with silence; others with refusals, pleading illness, time constraints or lack of interest. Yet as positive replies began to trickle in, Elliott organized his life accordingly.

To raise money for travel, the would-be author worked the night shift in a psychiatric hospital, moved into a trailer park to cut expenses and sold his blood for needed cash.

"Tying Rocks to Clouds," subtitled "Conversations with Wise and Spiritual People," is a compilation of Elliott's interviews, representing a wide spectrum of religious and philosophical thought, from Eastern mysticism to Western rationalism. In addition to the luminaries already mentioned, Elliott spoke with Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, famous for her work with death and dying; Robert Schuller, minister of California's Crystal Cathedral and Sunday telecast "The Hour of Power"; Swami Sachidananda, founder of the Integral Yoga Institute; and Albert Ellis, author and creator of the Institute for Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy.

Besides the fundamental questions about the purpose of life and the origin of evil, Elliott approached his interviewees armed with a battery of 24 insightful questions: "If you were on your deathbed, what advice would you give to your son or daughter? Do you think

there is a basic difference between maleness and femaleness, besides the body? What are the three greatest problems in life? What do you feel life still has to teach you?"

The responses from world-famous thinkers and doers are thought-provoking and uplifting. Yet there is much more to Elliott's book. Interspersed among the interviews is the story of the author's gradual emotional and spiritual transformation. It begins with the image of a self-effacing hero worshiper, content to dissect life rather than live it, and ends with a man confident of his worth, able to acknowledge that the alienation he feels from life can be overcome only when he no longer needs to question its meaning.

Paraphrasing Zen philosopher Toni Packer, Elliott writes, "When there is no feeling of separation, then there is just living, just life, no one standing outside of it and worrying about the 'meaning of this.'"

"Tying Rocks to Clouds" is a bedside book, not to be read in one sitting, but to be sampled and savored a bit at a time. The metaphor of its title reveals the author's intention: to connect the real with our vision of the ideal. The "wise and spiritual people" of this book give no pat answers; they stress the need for each of us to embark on a personal spiritual journey. And perhaps, as Elliott and others have reminded us, the best answers are in the questions themselves.

From the book:

"The only thing that counts in life is love — not just how much love we can give, but we must learn how to receive it, because we can only give as much as we allow ourselves to receive." Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross

"Religion is not so much a matter of having the right answers, but of being part of a community through which we grow to be human." Rabbi Harold Kushner

"Do everything for God . . . God has given you many gifts — use them for the greater glory of God and the good of the people." Mother Teresa

"We don't do anything because of what is going to happen; we do things because of what has happened." B.F. Skinner

"Humans take their preferences, desires, wishes, wants and likes (almost all of which are fairly legitimate), and they foolishly change them into Jehovietic commands, demands, shoulds and oughts, which really don't exist in the universe." Albert Ellis

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