

Finding Meaning in Life

I was tempted to call this piece “What is the Meaning of Life?” It amuses me to sound sophomoric at the age of 83. But that’s not really what this essay is about. I’m not going to try to answer the impossible question of the meaning of life. I’m just going to talk about what “meaning” means—as in, the widespread belief that old people need to find “meaning in life” after retirement and the kids grow up. We need, it is generally agreed, to have “meaningful lives” in order to achieve well-being in old age (actually, any age).

So, what does it mean to have meaning or, alternately stated, a meaningful life. In my experience, the most common answer is “purpose.”

We must, it is widely agreed, have purpose in our lives.

Of course, were that the right answer, we’d then have to wonder what “purpose” means. But it’s not the right answer. It is *a* right answer for some people, but it is not *the* right answer for all people. It’s a good Western Judaic-Christian answer, but it’s not, for example, the Buddhist answer. Buddhists, to oversimplify, are not constantly seeking to fulfill their purpose. In fact, they are seeking suspension of purpose, a kind of peaceful transcendence beyond the world of the everyday. Yes, having a sense of purpose is one way to have meaning in life, but having a sense of connection with a transcendent reality is another.

Meaning, in my view, is a subjective matter.

There’s a considerable range of views about what gives meaning to people’s lives.

Victor Frankl, revered for his book *Man’s Search for Meaning*, maintains that the fundamental drive in human life is not sex or power, but “meaning.” He claims to have survived life in a



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concentration camp because of a strong sense of meaning in his life—by which he means having something to live for that goes beyond happiness and beyond yourself. In a sense, he is pointing to the importance not just of purpose, but of **unselfish purpose**. To making contributions to the well-being of others. Having meaning is having love for others as well as having a personal purpose.

Martin Seligman, widely regarded as the “father of positive psychology,” maintains that having a sense of meaning is one of the five critical components of well-being. The others are positive emotion, relationships with people, engagement in activities, and achievement. In *Flourish*, a wonderful book about achieving well-being, he defines “meaning” as “belonging to and serving something that you believe is bigger than the self.” To him, meaning is not just purpose, it is also belonging. It is being beyond self alone. It is connection. And, contrary to my point of view, he argues, “Meaning is not solely a subjective state. The dispassionate and more objective judgement of history, logic, and coherence can contradict a subjective judgement.”

Susan Wolf, an American philosopher widely known for her book *Meaning in Life and Why it Matters*, maintains that finding meaning takes us beyond self-interest and even beyond moral motivation to focus on what we perceive as “worthy” of our love and devotion. Connection to and pursuit of what is worthy is what gives our lives meaning.

The philosophical question of meaning drives “existentialism,” and there are several prominent philosophers who attempt to find something of value in a reality without knowing meaning—Sartre, Heidegger, and others. I personally am drawn to Albert Camus’ approach. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, he poses the existential question simply and straightforwardly: “Why live?” His answer is a series of sketches of remarkable lives drawn with poetic flourishes. I actually prefer his implicit answer in earlier essays in which he describes a variety of sensuous experiences—such as swimming in the Mediterranean on a hot summer day. They, as much as anything, make life worth living (i.e., give it meaning). I also like his later fictional work, *The*



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Plague, in which he describes people working to save a city from an outbreak of bubonic plague, a metaphor for the Nazis. In essence, what Camus tells us is that both sensuality and moral courage make life worth living (i.e., they give meaning to life).

These are just four examples of highly reflective efforts to answer the question of meaning in life. Here are some simpler suggestions:

- **Ties of affection and obligation to family and friends.**
- **Commitment and connection to your communities.**
- A sense that **this is what I must do**, that it is me, that anything else is a betrayal of me.
- **Love.**
- **Connection with a transcendent reality**—a God, beauty, a cultural history with a shared past and future still to be created.
- A sense of **inner peace** and of **being at home in the world.**

And, more mundanely:

- Having a **life that matters**, not just to yourself but to others.
- **Making a difference** to the world.
- **Being important.**
- **Being recognized** as an important person (as in the New York Times' annual review of "noteworthy deaths").
- Leaving a **legacy** that is valued.

Or, for those of us who do not reach the highest levels of achievement, just working to achieve our best—**cultivating excellence**—can give us a strong sense of meaning.

It's amazing how many possibilities there are to find meaning in life. Is one of them the true meaning? I don't think so and I really don't care. Meaning in life is any of many possibilities. I



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personally found meaning in being a husband, a father, a caregiver to older family members, and, very importantly, a social worker and social advocate whose career was focused on trying to make the world a better place. More recently, I have found meaning in creative endeavors—especially jazz and photography.

Have I found **the** meaning of life? Of course not. But what I have found works for me. What works for you?

