

CHAPTER 8

Searching for Meaning

Imagine that you could connect your brain to a machine that would give you every experience you could possibly desire. Would you want to do that? Would you be happy after the initial pleasure and enjoyment? Probably not. It is part of our nature to want to act and accomplish something and not merely to have pleasurable experiences. We also want to be someone, a person of greatness and noble deeds. Neither of these is possible, if we are attached to an “experience machine.” The desire to be someone and do something, to lead a meaningful life, is why a person is ready to go through suffering and difficulties. This is not to say that it is necessary to suffer to find meaning but that sometimes suffering is unavoidable, and that life remains meaningful in spite of suffering.

In a survey, nearly 8,000 students were asked what they considered “very important.” Sixteen percent chose “making a lot of money,” whereas 78 percent said their first goal was “finding a purpose and meaning to my life.”

Yet sometimes people feel that life has no meaning. Life seems empty and they cannot see any point to it. It is just a boring routine — getting up, eating breakfast, going to work, eating lunch, working, coming home, eating dinner, watching television, going to bed — Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and maybe even Sunday. They feel like the Greek character Sisyphus who was condemned to each day push a rock to the top of a hill, only to see it roll down again each night. What is the point of it all? Why earn money when one doesn’t have the time to enjoy it? Sometimes people work for the sake of their children. But why have children? Why bring children into a meaningless world where everything is absurd?

There is something tragic about a person who has lived a busy life and after retirement begins to feel that he has wasted his life, that it has no meaning or value. There is a saying, “Live as if you were living for the second time and had acted as wrongly the first time as you are about to act now.” If we were to reflect in this way upon the decisions we make and the actions we take, we might do both differently.

People who cannot find meaning in life may try to fill the emptiness by seeking money or power. Alternatively, since it is so painful to admit to oneself that one’s life has no meaning, they may try to keep themselves busy, filling up every moment of the day with work, with reading, with music, with conversation, with anything that will keep their minds occupied and stop them from having to listen to themselves. Inside there remains a void that needs to be filled.

The meaning of life

Different people see life differently, and each of us has to find his own pathway to meaning. The meaning of life should not be something abstract, but should help us to live our own unique life to the fullest. Here is a selection of different views of the meaning of life.

Life is a path toward victory: *“Veni, vidi, vici — I came, I saw, I conquered.”*
— Julius Caesar, Roman emperor

Life is a mission: *“The search for meaning is the search for a goal, a cause, a common task.”*
— N.F. Fedorov, 19th century Russian religious philosopher

Life is a drama: *“All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players.”*
— William Shakespeare, 16th century English playwright

Life is a journey toward God: *“Thou hast created us for Thyself, and our heart is not quiet until it finds rest in Thee.”*
— Augustine, early Christian saint

Life is doing good: *“If there is any meaning and purpose in life, then this meaning and purpose are not in our own happiness, but in something much greater. You need to do goodness!”*
— Anton Chekhov, 19th century Russian writer

Life is love: *“We live in this world only if we love.”*
— Rabindranath Tagore, Indian poet of late 19th—early 20th century

Life is happiness: *“Life is a gift, life is happiness, every minute could be a century of happiness.”*
— Fyodor Dostoyevsky, 19th century Russian writer

Life is a maze: *“Life is an uneven, irregular and complicated movement.”*
— Michel Montaigne, 16th century French philosopher

Life is always new: *“Human life should always be like this river that is in front of me: all the time one and the same bed, but every moment there is fresh water in it.”*
— Henry David Thoreau, 19th century American thinker

Life is constant change: *“You knew ecstasy — you need to learn suffering. I live until I keep changing. Only a monument can stay still, not a living being.”*
— Igor Severyanin, early 20th century Russian poet

Life is labor: *“Labor is the first basic condition of human life, to such an extent that we even need to say: Labor created the human being himself.”*
— Friedrich Engels, 19th century German philosopher

Life is work: *“Work is liberating us from three great evils: boredom, vice, and poverty.”*
— Voltaire, 18th century French philosopher

Life is duty: *“The greatest pleasure in life is knowing that you have fulfilled your duty.”*
— William Hazlitt, early 20th century English publicist

Life is suffering: *“I was born in tears, lived in tears and am dying in tears.”*
— A. P. Sumarokov, 18th century Russian poet and dramatist

Life is a path to death: *“All men are brothers, and the same end awaits them all — death.”*
— Albert Camus, 20th century French existentialist

Life is creativity: *“There is hardly any bigger joy than the joy of creating.”*
— Nikolai Gogol, 19th century Russian writer



Which statements do you agree with? Are there statements that you don't like? Try to give your own definition of the meaning of life. What does your answer say about you and how you see yourself? What are your ultimate goals? Expectations? Hopes? Fears?

Why search for meaning?

We've already discussed the difference between animals and human beings in the chapter called "Human Nature." As humans we are conscious of ourselves, and so we strive to understand the meaning of our own lives and what is happening around us.

Viktor Frankl, a psychologist who spent several years in a Nazi concentration camp, recognized the importance of living a meaningful life. He was struck by the fact that those inmates for whom there was no meaning in life soon became depressed at their situation, lost hope and died. The only people who survived were those for whom life was meaningful, even life in the camp. In the concentration camp finding meaning in life became an issue of life and death. In his book *Man's Search for Meaning*, Frankl writes:

Whether the inmate had the courage to live or became sick and tired of life always depended just upon whether the person could see meaning in his personal life. In the desperate situation of the concentration camp, meaning had to be deep enough to embrace not only life but suffering and even death.

But let us return to normal life. Why is it impossible to live just for sake of living without thinking of the meaning of events?

First, one needs to recognize that every person attaches some meaning to his life. It is just that sometimes we are unaware of it.

Imagine a man who has never thought about his life's meaning. Nevertheless, the only reason for any of his actions is that he considers it meaningful, whether it is as simple as having morning tea or taking the bus to the office, or making some serious decisions. His actions correspond to his own unconscious concept of life. If we bring to light the deepest meaning in everything that we choose to pursue, we can gain self-confidence and peace of mind.

Well, then, what is the problem? Why do we have to think of "eternal questions"?

First of all, sooner or later everybody wonders, "What am I living for?" And if we start to think about these questions while we are young, we will be prepared in the future to find the deeper dimension of meaning in our life's path. Our answers and belief can provide strength to help us withstand the blows of fate, to overcome our challenges and difficulties with dignity.

Suppose you live according to the laws of goodness and try to love only because you were taught this way, but not because you had decided that this was the right way. A time of trial comes in your life: Your friend has betrayed you, or you have become seriously ill. Then you face questions you have never thought about before. Why has this happened to you? What is the meaning of it? Finding no answer, you may be ready to deny your previous beliefs (which really have never been yours) and change your philosophy of life. You think, "If life is cruel to me, I also have the right to be cruel."

It sometimes happens that a person declares that life has no meaning or purpose. In some cases perhaps, this is due to some action that violated his innate sense of right and wrong. As a result of his own weakness he is sometimes plunged into the

depths of despair. For example, Macbeth, not long after murdering his king, declared:

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
To the last syllable of recorded time,
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out brief candle.
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

— William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*

Empty words?

Maybe discussions about the meaning of life seem a waste of time. Often lofty words hide shallowness or a lack of will to solve real problems.

Certainly, if you spend your whole life lying on the sofa, discussing the general problems of the universe, nothing will come out of it. But it's important to understand the following: In order to find meaning in any concrete situation, we have to view it in its larger, even global context.



Imagine the following scenario: Your goal of entrance to a competitive university was blocked because of your low scores on the entrance exams. How would you react? If you look at it only from the point of view of your immediate purpose — studying at this university — then your failure is very depressing and of no benefit at all. At best you will waste a year waiting to retake the exams. But if you adopt a broader perspective, perhaps you will find new meaning in it: Thanks to your failure you have started working more diligently, and new opportunities are opening up. You have gained some experience and learned more about yourself and your abilities. You are now able to reconsider whether or not your choice of university or field of study is best for you. Maybe you will find new friends or some unexpected opportunities for your professional growth. However, all this can happen only when you consider that your exam failure might not have been a tragedy, and that your new work is an opportunity, not just a duty to be fulfilled until you can become a student.

Even this simple example shows that the way we look at this or that situation depends upon our general attitude about life and its purpose. It's not we but life itself that raises the question of meaning. However, a human being has to answer it daily — and not by his words but by his actions.

Everyone's path is unique

Sometimes we are tempted to rely completely on someone else's advice, to surrender to someone the responsibility for our life. It can be one of our friends, our parents, or even an idea from a book. Yet it is wise to listen to the advice of a person who has more experience and more wisdom. Why not?

It's good to listen to advice, and another person often can help us to take a

broader perspective on our own situation. But we shouldn't forget that nobody can give us the unique meaning that we ourselves can find in life.

Every human being is unique, and our life path is unique as well. We can learn a lot from others, but it makes no sense to try to blindly imitate the way of another person.

In the same way, we ourselves do not have the right to force the answers we've found on anybody. What proved to be right and vitally important for us can be harmful for others — simply because it will stop them from their own search. We have no right to reject anybody in need of our help, and we may be able to help him or her see what has gone unnoticed, but we shouldn't try to live their lives for them. Everyone must pass through his own path in search of truth.

Is there meaning in suffering?



Everyone has suffered in life. Is it possible to find meaning in suffering?

First of all, it's important to understand that it's not suffering itself that is so crucial, but our attitudes toward it. In identical difficult situations, one person may become more wholesome, compassionate and deep, while another may be completely smashed by the burden. It is our attitude to life and what we believe in that will decide how we cope with difficulties.

Religious people find that faith in God gives their life meaning and purpose and helps them find courage and strength to bear suffering and

disaster. One Anglican priest dying of cancer reflected upon the value of suffering as he had experienced it in his own life:

Suffering can often produce great depths of character, mature understanding, warm compassion and rich spirituality. Of course, we should always strive to heal the sick and relieve the oppressed; and we should rejoice that in heaven we shall finally be set free from all pains and tears. But a diamond is caused by a lump of coal being subjected to extreme pressure and heat over a long period of time. Again, a beautiful pearl emerges when an oyster has to cover an irritating object with layer upon layer of smooth mother-of-pearl lining excreted from its own body.

It is sometimes only through suffering that we begin to listen to God. Our natural pride and self-confidence have been stripped painfully away, and we become aware, perhaps for the first time, of our own personal needs. We may even begin to ask God for help instead of protesting about our condition or insisting on explanations.

I still do not know why God allowed my cancer, nor does it bother me. But I am beginning to hear what God is saying, and this has been enormously helpful to me.

I am content to trust myself to a loving God whose control is ultimate and whose wisdom transcends my own feeble understanding.

— David Watson

Sometimes we put all our trust in one person and then he betrays us. Or we grow old and our beauty fades. Perhaps a family member dies at an early age, or we are wrongly accused and punished. Or we invest our life in making money but then lose it. In each of these situations we will suffer, feeling incredible pain if we see in the situation the only meaning of our lives. That is why many people search for a meaning in life that transcends the impermanence of everyday existence. And this search may bring them to a belief in God.

No easy way

What do you think is waiting for a person who decides to think over his destiny, to find the meaning of his life? One thing can be guaranteed: It will be difficult. We need to not only search for meaning, but also fight for it, and this fight is not an easy

*When we suppress our internal angel,
he turns into a devil.*

— Viktor Frankl

one. Why is it so? In his book *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis wrote on the law of human nature, explaining about the most essential human contradiction, namely, that all of us want to live according to the internal law of love and goodness that gives meaning to our lives, but no one lives that way all the time. We exist in constant internal struggle. And if a person loses in this inner

fight between good and evil, then deceit, betrayal and even murder can seem meaningful to him.

But then is there any hope that we can overcome this contradiction? What can help us on this way? It is conscience that is our internal guide, our most reliable support. If we listen to its voice, then our search for meaning will never lead us into cruelty or the humiliation of others.

And what is happiness? Fulfilled pride...

There is incredible joy in possessing a young soul that has just started to blossom! It is like a flower, whose fragrance is the best when received by the first sunbeam; it has to be picked up at this moment, and after you breathe in its fragrance, you can throw it away on the road — perhaps somebody will pick it up! I feel within myself this hunger that takes in everything it meets on its way; I look at the sufferings and joys of others only in their relation toward me, as the food that supports my strength. I cannot be influenced by any passion any longer myself, my pride is suppressed by circumstances, but it expresses itself in a different form, for pride is nothing but desire for power, and my first pleasure is to subdue everything around me to my will; to induce in others love, loyalty and fear of me. Isn't it the first sign and greatest celebration of power? To be the source of sufferings and joy for somebody — isn't it the sweetest food for our pride? And what is happiness? Fulfilled pride ...

— Mikhail Lermontov
A Hero of Our Time

This passage encompasses the life philosophy of Pechorin, Lermontov's hero. What do you think about it? Do you agree with this kind of understanding of the meaning of life, or is there something about it you don't like? Would you like to be like Pechorin?

If after a long and difficult search you find meaning — the meaning of life for you — then it's important not to stop here but to fulfill it in your life. For example, if becoming a scientist will give your life meaning, then you need to take some concrete steps that will lead you to reach your goal — enter university, do scientific research, read scientific journals, and so on.

In this way you will gain more experience, and most likely you will be led to a broader understanding and see new horizons. That is why it is important, after having found some meaning, not to close yourself off to new understandings that might affect the balance you have found, but instead to be open to further searching.

Often those who face many obstacles and overcome many difficulties in life find the greatest satisfaction in their personal lives and the greatest understanding of the life we all share.

You can compare the life credo of Pechorin that was quoted above with the understanding of 20th century sociologist Pitirim Sorokin, who was born in Russia but at the age of 23 had to emigrate to the West:

Whatever happens in the future, now I know three things that I will keep in my head and heart forever. Life, even the most difficult one, is the best treasure in the world. Following one's

duty is the other treasure; it makes life happy and gives one's soul strength not to betray one's ideals. The third thing that I understood is that violence, hatred and injustice cannot and will never be able to create anything eternal in intellectual, moral or material realms.

Confession by Leo Tolstoy

All the great writers of Russian literature discussed themes dealing with the purpose of man and the understanding of human life.

In 1881 Leo Tolstoy completed his *Confession*, in which he honestly and sincerely tried to describe his own life's path. Tolstoy's spiritual search can help us to think about our own life, to see how important and difficult this search is.



Coming to the end of our discussion about the search for meaning, let us try to follow this path together with Tolstoy, especially because in *Confession* we can see those stages of self-understanding that can be found to some extent in every person's life.

When talking about his childhood, Tolstoy emphasizes that his outlook inherited from his parents was not truly his own: "I had never believed very seriously but had merely trusted in what I was taught and in what was professed by my elders."

Childhood is followed by the teenage years, when one often rejects one's previous childish beliefs. The soul awakens; one faces the questions about the meaning of everything for the first time. "I ceased to believe in what I was told in my childhood, but I believed in something. ... Now, looking back at that time, I can clearly see that the only real faith I had was a belief in perfection. But what this perfection consisted of, and what its aim was, were unclear to me."

Years pass. They encompass Tolstoy's participation in the war, his coming back to St. Petersburg, and the start of his career as a writer. "During this time I began to write out of vanity, self-interest and pride. In order to achieve the

fame and money for which I wrote, I had to conceal what was good in myself and display what was bad. And this is what I did."

Many people follow such a path. Having entered a profession and achieved a certain position in society, they accept blindly the existing norms and rules and never doubt them. The thought of excluding oneself from the general rhythm of life is too frightening to do otherwise.

But Tolstoy didn't merely start to have doubts; step by step he came to a state of deep personal crisis. And what is even more amazing, it happened when his talent was blossoming, when he was at the peak of his success as a writer. (Perhaps it's not so wise to believe that external success guarantees peace of mind.)

All this was happening to me at a time when I was surrounded on all sides by what is considered complete happiness. I had a kind, loving and beloved wife, lovely children, and a large estate that was growing and expanding with no effort on my part. Relatives and friends respected me far more than ever before. I was praised by strangers and could consider myself a celebrity without deceiving myself. ... And in this state I reached the point where I didn't want to live. ... I couldn't give any reason either to any of my actions or to my life in general. ...

What will come out of my life? What should I live for, why should I desire anything, why should I do anything? ...

And I started to look for answers to my questions in all the knowledge that people gained. I was searching passionately, not out of mere curiosity, not casually, but was searching desperately for days and nights as the one who is about to die searches for salvation.

Tolstoy describes how first his desperate search for meaning led him to the realm of empirical knowledge, and then to the realm of philosophy, and nowhere did he find an answer. Was there any meaning to life?

I searched through human knowledge for an answer to this question, which is the same whatever way it is expressed. I found that according to their relation to the question, all branches of human knowledge are divided, almost into two opposite hemispheres. ... One branch of knowledge does not even seem to acknowledge the question and yet gives clear and precise answers to its own independently posed questions: This is the realm of empirical knowledge. The other realm of knowledge recognizes the question but does not answer it. This is the sphere of speculative philosophy. Empirical disciplines ignore the questions of life. They say: "As for what you are and why you live, we have no answers and do not involve ourselves with it. On the other hand, if you need to know about the laws governing light, or about chemical combinations, or about the laws governing the development of organisms, then we have clear, precise and irrefutable answers to all this. ..."

And whenever the other side of knowledge, the speculative realm, sticks firmly to its principles and gives direct answers to the question, it has always, throughout the ages, given the same answer: The universe is something infinite and incomprehensible. Man's life is an inscrutable part of this inscrutable whole ... and instead of an answer all one gets is the same question, only put in a more complicated form.

The agony of his search for meaning brought Tolstoy to the brink of suicide, and it is faith that helped him to come back to life — that very faith that he had rejected in childhood.

In addition to rational knowledge, which I hitherto thought to be the only knowledge, I was inevitably led to acknowledge that there does exist another kind of knowledge — an irrational one — possessed by humanity as a whole: faith, which affords the possibility of living. ...

Faith is the force of life. If one lives, he believes in something. ... One cannot live without faith.

I understood that I had lost my way and how I lost it. I lost my way not so much because my thinking was wrong, but because my life was evil. I realized that in order to understand the meaning of life, one needs to lead a life that is not meaningless and evil, and only then to apply the intellect so as to understand it. ...



I looked at myself and at what was going on inside me. I recalled the hundreds of occasions when life had died within me only to be reborn. I remembered that I only lived during those times when I believed in God. What are these deaths and rebirths? It is clear that I do not live when I lose belief in God's existence, and I should have killed myself long ago, were it not for a dim hope of finding Him. I live truly only when I am conscious of Him and seek Him. What, then, is it you are seeking? asked a voice inside me. There He is! He, without whom it is impossible to live. To know God and to live are one and the same thing. God is life.

Live in search of God and there will be no life without God! And more powerfully than ever before, everything within and around me came to light, and the light has not deserted me since.

And I was saved from suicide.

This was not the end, but only the beginning of a new stage in Tolstoy's search for meaning. It's not necessary to expect that our own spiritual search will lead us to the same answers as those of Tolstoy. The most important thing is to search for our own way.

Footprints

One night a man had a dream. He dreamed he was walking along the beach with the Lord. Across the sky flashed scenes from his life. For each scene, he noticed two sets of footprints in the sand: one belonging to him, and the other to the Lord.

When the last scenes of his life flashed before him, he looked back at the footprints in the sand. He noticed that many times along the path of his life there was only one set of footprints. He also noticed that it happened at the very lowest and saddest times in his life.

This really bothered him and he questioned the Lord about it.

“Lord, You said that once I decided to follow You, You’d walk with me all the way. But I have noticed that during the most troublesome times in my life, there is only one set of footprints. I don’t understand why when I needed You most You would leave me.”

The Lord replied, “My son, My precious child, I love you and would never leave you. During your times of trial and suffering, when you see only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you.”

Author Unknown