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Meditations on Meaning

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■ Foreword

Who am I to write this booklet? (This is the part where I'm supposed to tell you about my accomplishments, publications, and other achievements that will make you want to believe me).

Here is the thing:
The goal of this book is not for you to believe me.

I have more doubts than interesting credentials. No one is prepared to write a book on a topic like meaning. And no one will do a perfect job at it.

Instead, my attempt will be to, in James Joyce's words, "forge in the smithy of my soul" something of value for human life. I hope to connect you to ideas that you may find interesting, and that might make you think about your limited time on this planet.

Some existential concerns sparked a passionate interest in me to discover what makes life most worth living. After all, when it is clear what does not make life worth living, it becomes all the more pressing to find out what does.

Throughout the years, I have read, thought, and acted on some of these discoveries I made alongside some of the world's greatest philosophers and psychotherapists. Discoveries that I would love for you to test drive.

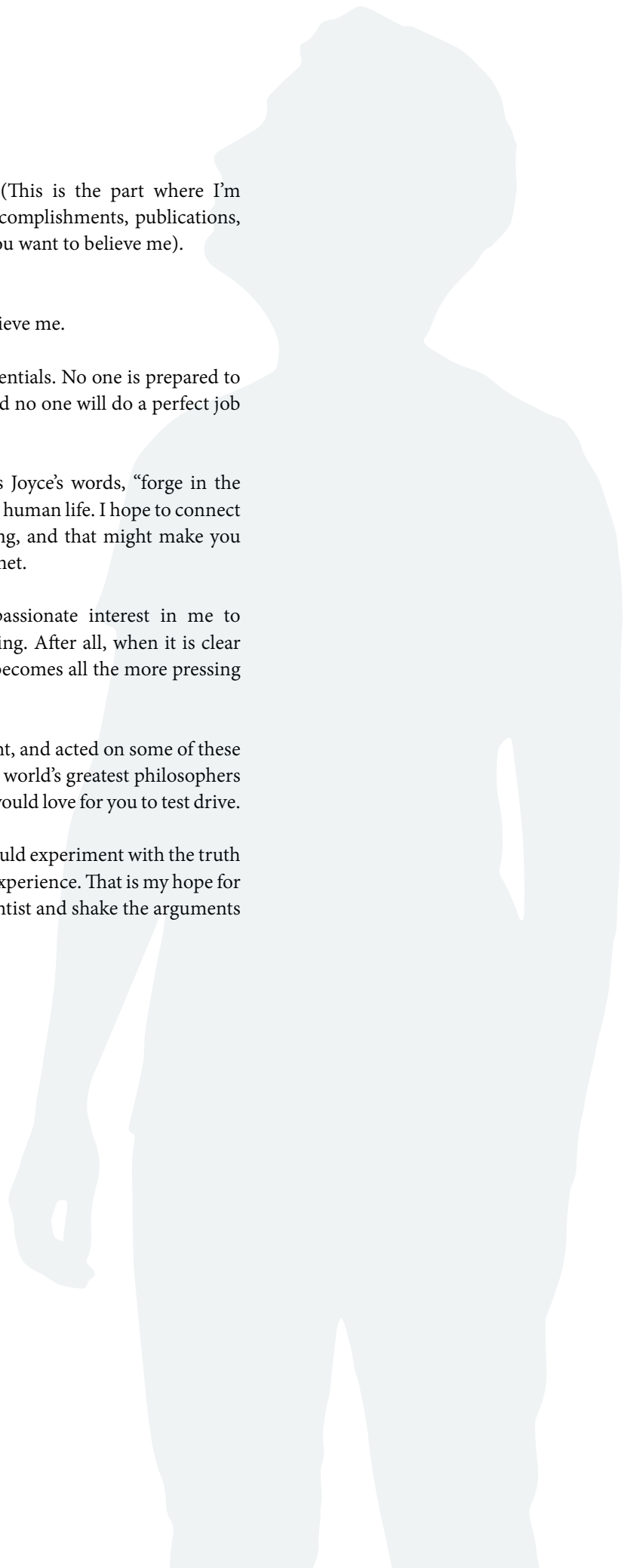
I say "test drive" because I believe one should experiment with the truth not in a laboratory, but in one's personal experience. That is my hope for you: that you will be your own inner scientist and shake the arguments I'm about to present.

Let's see if something of value remains.

And please, don't follow me.

Follow you.

Seph Fontane Pennock



01

The Rock

In a dry riverbed full of stones, a rock is just a rock, like any other. In the context of a child giving you that same rock as a carefully selected present, the rock may take on a majestic significance.

This is meaning. The placement of something, anything—real or imagined—in a certain context. By changing the context you place something in, you automatically change its meaning.

Meaningful living means placing your life and what it consists of in a context that makes it matter.



What things in your life can you make more meaningful by placing them in a different context, or by creating a different narrative around them?

02

Legitimate Foolishness

If I had to give a simple definition of ‘meaning,’ it would be: the relationship between the mind and the world. The reason for this is that meaning is subjective, in the eye of the beholder. You may not find meaningful what I find meaningful.

It’s with our perception of things that we place them in a certain context and relate to them in a certain way. The thing to realise is that because of the subjective nature of meaning, you’re in the driver’s seat. You are responsible for your own meanings. This is, in my estimation, your greatest responsibility in life: what stories are you going to be telling yourself about yourself and the rest of the world? What narratives will you feed?

Sometimes, it can be beneficial to believe in something that is not real or cannot be proven. This is especially the case when these beliefs are not harmful to you or anyone else, but serves a purpose instead.

Borrowing this term from Ernest Becker, author of *The Denial of Death*, this is what I call ‘legitimate foolishness’; to hold a belief that cannot be proven but is beneficial to your overall outlook on life.

The belief that you are your loved one were destined to meet in one way or another may not be entirely accurate but can add a level of love and romance to the relationship that wouldn’t be there if the relationship was considered a random chance event.

Beliefs like these can lead to joy, compassion and contentment. In other cases, however, these beliefs can form the relationships an individual has with the world in a way that causes meaninglessness, anxiety, or obsessive rumination. An example of this is when a person is worrying about a hypothetical future event that is very unlikely to happen.

If this is the case, it can be helpful for someone to change the relationship between his or her mind and the world, i.e. to change the ‘meaning’ he or she

attributes to something.

This does not mean that the contents of the mind should just be based on facts. It can also mean that the individual adopts more helpful beliefs to the extent that they will not be harmful to himself or others, now, or at a later point in time.

It is often the goal of therapy to examine the meaning someone attaches to something, and try to find out whether there is a more constructive meaning to be discovered or created.

Meaningful living means there is a constructive relationship between the mind and the world.



What harmless beliefs can you think of that might make life more meaningful to you?

03

Bag of Stones

Meaning is a bag of stones, waiting for us to put it down. To release the load of expectations and hopes of better times ahead—to release the pressure that there “must be something more.”

The bag of stones metaphor refers to subordinating the present moment to a hypothetical future one. We have to set that bag down if we want to continue. After all, the best way to collect gems is with an empty backpack.

This has been one of my primary insights, the idea that life will not necessarily get any better than I am currently experiencing it. When we always fixate on a “maybe future,” we lose the details and richness of the current reality.

A wise person once told me that this would be the case in life and it took me some years to discover just how right he was. When I did—because reality made this all too clear to me—I cried hysterically. The way one cries after separating from a loved one upon realizing that things were not going to work out in the long run.

I did this because, in a very similar way, I had to separate with my belief that life would get better if... [fill in the blank] or when... [fill in the blank].

This is enlightenment as I understand it: an unwillingness to subordinate the present moment to a hypothetical future one, born out of the understanding that the future one will not be much better than the present one. If anything, it is the quality of our awareness that makes one moment better than any other, an awareness that can only be experienced in the present moment.

Meaningful living means knowing that life can only be lived in the present moment.



Think of a future scenario you're hoping for or working towards. What about that future scenario brings you a fantasized joy? And what is the promise that this future scenario holds that can not be fulfilled in the present moment?

04

The Worrier

When do we worry about meaning? This is a very important question, because the answer to it gives us a lot of valuable information.

In my own experience, I don't worry about meaning too much when I'm engaged in activities with other people. I worry about it when I'm not engaged in anything, and alone.

Maybe you're like me. Or maybe you're not, and you worry about meaning when you are at a party with lots of people and you still feel lonely.

Becoming aware of when things seem meaningless to you is the low-hanging fruit of adding more meaning to your life. As soon as you're aware of those meaningless moments, or moments filled with worry, you can either spend less time in those sorts of situations, or learn to relate to them in a different way.

What does attitude of curiosity bring to your experience of meaninglessness?

Can you even welcome these moments as opportunities, knowing you have something to learn from them?

Meaningful living means being aware of why things seem meaningless at certain points in time.



When do you worry about meaning?
Why do you think it's at these particular moments?

05

Bracelet of Teeth

From my experience, people also start worrying about meaning when things get easy—after having been really hard.

When people are struggling or helping those who are, they are usually busy fixing something that they know needs fixing. Their path is clear.

But the need for meaning doesn't stop when you solve a pressing problem. It's often when you've "fixed your problems" and reach some sort of homeostasis, that you become extra concerned with meaning. Rather than exploring this space, people often find something else to devote their worries to.

Why? Because the question after "all is solved" then becomes: What have I solved my problems for?

To answer this question is to find the meaning of your life. I'll give you an example.

In his book *Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning* (different from his classic 'Man's Search for Meaning') Viktor Frankl quotes from a book of the German bishop Georg Moser:

A few years after World War II a doctor examined a Jewish woman who wore a bracelet made of baby teeth mounted in gold. "A beautiful bracelet," the doctor remarked. "Yes," the woman answered, "this tooth here belonged to Miriam, this one to Esther, and this one to Samuel. ... " She mentioned the names of her daughters and sons according to age. "Nine children," she added, "and all of them were taken to the gas chambers." Shocked, the doctor asked: "How can you live with such a bracelet?" Quietly, the Jewish woman replied: "I am now in charge of an orphanage in Israel."

Frankl goes on to add that:

"As you see, meaning may be squeezed out even from suffering, and that is the very reason why life remains potentially meaningful in spite of everything."

I think this is an accurate approach to hold: what if life could be meaningful in spite of everything, instead of because of everything?

The ability to adopt a constructive attitude towards negative events in life is crucial for this type of meaning-making. I consider this woman—wearing a bracelet consisting of the teeth of the children she lost during the Holocaust—as an ultimate meaning-making hero.

Transcending good and evil, she found people to live for, she found suffering to eliminate, and she found pain of others to ease. A pain she must have known so well.

Rather than fleeing from further suffering that brought unimaginable pain, she ran towards alleviating pain in others, and found purpose in the greater mess and "problem" of universal suffering.

Meaningful living means being able to adopt a constructive attitude towards suffering, rather than being crushed by it.



Think about your own problems and the things you have suffered through. Were you able to experience meaning or find something valuable in spite of the hardship? For instance, was there a time when you lost someone important to you, and it changed the way you relate to yourself or others?

06

A Philosophical Motivation for Living

In my youth, there was a point at which I realized that if we have the option to end our lives, we also have the option to choose to live fully.

Just because someone is alive doesn't mean this person lives deliberately, with a conscious choice to make the most of this one life. As soon as you're born, living is just the standard option, the box checked by default. But this living is not the same as living deliberately.

So when I was 19, I chose to live fully. For me this mostly meant deciding what I wanted to do with my life, instead of just going with the standard options that society provided me with. I wanted to dig into what makes life most worth living, especially with a world of suffering. This is what led me to positive psychology.

Even though positive psychology provides us with a scientific approach to what makes life worth living, it doesn't provide us with a philosophical motivation for actually living. This is what led me to research meaning.

As I have found, the fundamental question around meaning is, "Why live?"

Only when this question has been answered in a life-affirming way can we ask the second most important question, namely, "How to live?"

Meaningful living means knowing why to live—not just how to live.



Imagine at this very moment, you choose to live fully. What does this mean for you and what would you change about your life?

07

High Stakes

I don't just believe that valued living matters: I believe that the stakes are high.

What's at stake is not just the heavenly shot at a satisfactory life, but the hellish reality of suffering. What form of suffering is worse than coming to the end of your life and looking back with regrets, having to conclude that the one shot you had at life was, after all is said and done... "mislived"?

Maybe the meaningful life is a life that, in later reflection, has little regrets. We can imagine a continuum with the mislived life on the one end and the meaningful life on the other.

Mislived life ----- Meaningful life

Every time I speak to elderly people, I try to grapple with how they perceive their lives. Are they fulfilled? Are they ready for death? Had their life been, in Seneca's words, "long enough because they knew what to do with it?" Or will they die with "their music still in them?"

Is there a part of us that might die with our potential—unused, unexplored, and forever gone?

One of my favourite writers and psychotherapists, Irvin Yalom, said:

"If you have the feeling that you've done what you want to do in life, I think the idea of death comes much more easy to you."

Yalom articulated exactly what I believe.

My hypothesis is that people who are not doing what they really want to do with their lives, and who are not living up to their full potential, are more likely to suffer from anxiety about death, or one of the other cloaked forms in which anxiety manifests.

This is why I think the role of positive psychology

practitioners matters. If they can help people discover and pursue absolute potential and ambitions, then they are helping to prevent people from misliving their lives and aging with regrets.

Meaningful living means finding out what it takes to grow old in such a way that you don't look back on your life with regrets.



Imagine you have come to the end of your life. Picture yourself sitting in a hospital bed. Have you done what you wanted to do in life, or told the people who matter in your life why they matter? What specific things are you doing that you may regret later? And how do you move towards this less regretful version of your imagined older self?

08

The Sufferer

“Nothing in the world is worth having or worth doing unless it means effort, pain, difficulty... I have never in my life envied a human being who led an easy life. I have envied a great many people who led difficult lives and led them well.”

- Theodore Roosevelt

I love this quote. It reframes the way I think about effort, pain, and difficulty. Most people regard pain and difficulty as something to eliminate as quickly as possible with the least amount of effort necessary.

I do not want to trivialize the suffering that people on our planet experience. There are single mothers whose children die of a drug overdose, there are severely depressed people in my own town, and there are survivors of abuse around the world. There may be little meaning in these cases, besides admiring the resilience of these humans who persisted despite pain.

But what people come to mind if you had to name the most “meaningful lives” ever lived?

Martin Luther King Jr., Mother Teresa, Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela...

All these people suffered—a lot. One of the most omnipresent symbols in Western culture is Jesus hanging on the cross, the ultimate symbol of suffering.

I feel the need to emphasize that meaning is more related to suffering than it is to happiness. This is not to balance our contemporary obsession with happiness, but rather because I believe that nothing worthwhile comes easy.

Taken from Nietzsche’s Nachlass and the unpublished notes he left behind:

“There does not exist one beautiful surface without a frightening depth.”

Meaningful living does not mean finding an easy life devoid of suffering. It means living well despite the inevitable reality of suffering.



How do you regard the effort, pain, and difficulty in your life? Is it something you’ve worked to eliminate, to balance, or to incorporate into your awareness of suffering?

09

The Timekeepers

I believe meaning in life has everything to do with how you spend your time.

This is an everyday consideration. Let's say you sleep for 8 hours a day: that means there are 16 hours left for you to spend. How do you spend these hours?

This is the real question of meaning. Not "what the meaning of life?" but rather "how do I spend my limited time well?" To answer this question, we have to consider what it means to "spend time well." This is a subjective quest.

For a mellow soul, spending time well might mean pouring over recipes, taking hours to select the perfect plum, and falling asleep at a reasonable hour after tea. For a more active soul, all of these activities might be deemed a waste of time.

This is what the search for meaning is about: people trying to discover what they can do with their brief time on this planet.

Paying attention to your feelings is a great way of discovering what you naturally gravitate towards. What interests reappear in your life and feel good to devote precious time towards?

One of our readers, Nikostratos Fotellis, said the following about meaning:

"If you want to find meaning in life, you must pay attention to your feelings and become aware of them so you can understand what matters to you. Focus on the most intense feelings, no matter if they are positive or negative, as they are all there for a reason. If you learn to listen to these feelings, you can discover what matters most to you."

I found this reply especially applicable because as my research progressed, the role of feelings and emotions became more and more apparent.

The main point here is this:

Maybe it's best to not cognitively go out and search for what you may find meaningful, but to pay attention to your feelings instead.

You may go out to a party because you know human connection is an important source of meaning; but if you don't feel connected at the party, the activity is quite useless.

Think of the moments when you felt a strong sense of connection. When was the last time? Maybe during an intense dinner conversation with your best friends or partner. Maybe when you visited your close family. Maybe you were completely absorbed in the present moment while you were playing sports. Maybe you realize it's been a while since you last felt this.

Whatever it is, those feelings of connection are sources of meaning-making. Why not seek out those experiences more often?

Interestingly, we are often only looking for a cognitive insight to the extent that it makes us feel a certain way.

Meaningful living means spending your tiny amount of time on this planet right and using your feelings to guide you in the right direction.



When do you feel like you're spending your time well? When did you last experience flow? When do you feel most alive? Are there any ways in which you can integrate these experiences into your daily life?

10

Looking at Life through a Telescope

One of the common misconceptions about meaning is that because there is no overarching cosmic meaning for us as a species, our existence itself is meaningless.

The reasoning typically goes like this:

“If what I do does not matter in the grand scheme of things and it will all be forgotten in 100 years from now, then what does it matter what I do or do not do right now?”

Alright, congratulations! You’ve managed to come up with a timeframe across which anything can be regarded as meaningless and morals do not exist.

This perspective is like looking at life through a telescope—gone wrong. In space and time, you can always zoom-out to the point that nothing seems to matter. However, this doesn’t mean that it is of no matter to us in the here-and-now. It matters undeniably, like a parent’s existence matters to a child in a very absolute and definitive matter.

Here’s the thing: a person, event, or concept always “means” something to someone at a specific point in time. The question of the meaning of something is understood by the questions “to whom?” or “and when?”

We can imagine a future where the existence of our species might mean nothing to an alien creature. But how does this serve us now? This line of reasoning does not eliminate the responsibility for you to make your life meaningful. It’s a nihilistic and pathological way out, and an easy one at that.

Why would someone feel the need to play this space-time card, to look at life through a telescope? What motive is behind this attempt to make life seem meaningless?

It reduces the cognitive dissonance for people who

know they should claim more responsibility for their life than they currently do. In this way, it creates an excuse to not even consider making meaning, let alone live by a moral compass.

Meaningful living means avoiding a timeless cosmic perspective in which human life seems futile.



Have you ever felt like your life did not matter at all in the grand scheme of things? What happens when you zoom in from the timeless cosmic scale to your situation here and now? If there is comfort in this telescopic view, how do we balance that grand-scheme comfort with inspired living?

11

Looking at Life Through a Microscope

The opposite of looking at life through a telescope (see previous meditation) is observing life through a microscope. This is what happens when we zoom-in to the point that we can't look beyond our current life circumstances anymore.

When times are tough and people are stressed, almost everything can seem pressing and cause more anxiety. People who don't have any hope for the future often can't see the future because they are too zoomed in, consumed by their present circumstances.

That's when thought-action repertoires, the options we can think of and act out, can decrease to the point where people see no other way out than the ultimate way out. Life becomes too overwhelming, too complex.

The danger of zooming-in too much, of looking at life through a microscope and becoming too caught up in a seemingly hopeless present, is that one loses sight of a possibly brighter future.

Rather than a telescopic or a microscopic perspective, a more balanced way of looking at life is realizing that even if things do not matter ultimately, or seem pointless in the moment, there's plenty of meaning to experience in life as a whole.

"This too shall pass." -Persian adage

Meaningful living means being able to look beyond your current life circumstances when times are tough.



When you're facing difficulties, is it your tendency to zoom-in too much, or zoom-out too much? What is the consequence of taking that perspective? Think of a time when this perspective dominated your thinking or actions; is there any way to balance these two tendencies?

12

The Depth of Meaning

The phrase “depth of meaning” refers to the intensity of your relationship with a source of meaning.

For example, if making music is very important to you and you have made music for a long time, then music as a source of meaning, might well have tremendous depth to you.

Conversely, if you have done yoga twice in your life, then yoga as a source of meaning does not have the same depth to you as it may have to a master yoga practitioner.

Depth increases through repeated engagement, commitment, and dedication to a source of meaning. The more this source challenges you to become a better, stronger, and more actualized version of yourself, the higher the likelihood of increased depth.

Real depth does not come easy. Real depth challenges you. It requires repeated effort, and either metaphorical or literal blood, sweat, and tears.

“To do it right, it is the most complicated thing I know how to make. And it’s that challenge that drives me. I don’t need a sword. But I HAVE to make them.”

– Master blacksmith about making swords

As the 17th-century saying applies to today, we live in a time when we are the “jack of all trades and the master of none.” So I wonder if depth and mastery share a potential for meaning-making.

Meaningful living means having the ability to, at least at times, dedicate yourself fully to some things, instead of meagrely to many.



In what things in life are you cultivating depth? If you can’t think of any, where do you crave more depth? Amidst industrialized busy culture, how do we grant ourselves the tools to “go deep?”

13

Focus on the Process

“You know sometimes it’s best not to have what you need because then you stop looking for what you need and making what you need.[...] It’s what we didn’t have that created Hip Hop the minimum, not the maximum making a dollar out of fifteen cents.”

- KRS One - Running in the Dark

A wonderful piece of wisdom from the American rapper KRS-One. What he is essentially saying here is that the attainment of something may be the end of the joy or meaning it brought to your life. Meaning evolves from the process of building what we think we are looking for.

It reminds me of a saying we have in Dutch, “het hebben van de zaak is het einde van het vermaak,” that translates as “the attainment of something is the end of its joy.”

In interviews you often hear famous artists and musicians reminiscing about the time when they were still playing music in garages, desperately trying to make it. It’s only after becoming famous, and reaching the state they’d been striving for, that they’re able to fully appreciate the process that got them there.

Success changes the process we were absorbed in on the way to, well, success.

So we sit there, kings of nothing on our thin thrones, realizing that the process was vastly more important, more fulfilling, than our so-called “success.”

We ache for the process of the past and would trade our success in a heartbeat only to get it back.

Meaningful living means enjoying the process towards attaining what you want, realizing our sense of fulfilment lies not in the attainment of anything, but in the process that leads us there.



Does this piece resonate with you? Is there a process that you miss now that you have achieved a certain level of success?

14

Why the Verbs We Use Matter

I think the verbs we associate most with meaning like ‘searching’ and ‘finding,’ set us up for failure. Why would it make sense to ‘search and find’ meaning in your life?

That’s about the same as walking down the street when you’re single, looking for a loving, lifelong relationship. You don’t search for that, you *build* it. Better yet, the loving relationship *ensues* from all the time and effort, all the love and forgiveness, all the pain and joy experienced between two people, over a prolonged period of time.

Searching sounds so casual. Like you’re searching for the right pair of shoes.

When we use a term like “finding” meaning, we neglect that there are no quick and easy ways of attaining something meaningful.

Verbs like searching and finding also imply that meaning is to be found “outside of” ourselves like some external and rare species we hope to glimpse. What if instead, meaning was right under our noses, even built by our own hands?

So what verb can we use referring to meaning that will set us up for success?

I propose we use the verb: ‘to realize.’

This verb has a double meaning, namely to become aware of and to make happen.

This double meaning solves the problems of the searching and finding meaning paradigm; it acknowledges that the potential for meaning may already be there, thus making us an active agent in the meaning equation by reminding us to make it happen.

If meaning exists in the relationship between our minds and the world, then our role is just as important—if not more important—as the role of the

world in its attainment. We can influence the contents of our own mind, but have only a limited amount of influence over the world.

Therefore, I propose that we start understanding meaning as something to be realized, in both senses of the word.

Meaningful living means framing a worthwhile connection between yourself and something outside of yourself, instead of merely searching and hoping to find it.



What meaningful connections have you built in your life? How much time and effort have you invested in these connections? What other verbs work with this idea of crafting our own meaning?

15

Meaning Is More Important Than Happiness

Meaning is more important than happiness, because happiness is what we're willing to sacrifice for something truly meaningful.

If you want to discover what you find meaningful in your life, try to think of all the things that you would sacrifice pleasure, hedonism, and momentary enjoyment for.

Maybe it's your kids, maybe it's your country, maybe it's your love of reading, and maybe it's the people you care for.

I think that if you have nothing in your life that you would sacrifice your personal happiness for, then your life may lack meaning. This does not have to be your truth, but it may be a pause for reflection.

One reason for this is that we are not wired to sustain happiness. We have evolved with one goal: to evolve further. Why? Because the only constant in life is change, and to adapt to change is to survive.

We are, in multiple ways, wired to be dissatisfied with the status quo. This is why the parent who says "I just want my kids to be happy!" is misinformed about human nature. Happiness is, like a mood, bound to fade. Why would your deepest wish for your kids be to strive for this fleeting emotion?

To their defense, I think what most parents who say this mean that they want their children to lead meaningful lives. Lives full of ups and downs in which their kids have the strength to deal with the downs and the mindfulness to appreciate the ups. Meaning gets us through challenge, not distant memories of happiness.

At least "meaning" is the more realistic thing to strive for.

Additionally, most healthy humans find their primary meaning via relationships with other people. It is the sacrifice of personal happiness for other people, the

greater good, or some purpose outside of yourself, that is likely to imbue your life with meaning.

You can look at happiness as a reward serving the evolution of our species. You are motivated to do good for your tribe and rewarded by a sense of meaning. A sense that you did good, a feeling of fulfillment.

This is how I regard most kinds of meaning: as an *evolutionary reward* for doing the right thing.

Meaningful living means having things in your life that you are willing to sacrifice your personal happiness for.



What things in life are you willing to sacrifice your personal happiness for?
What are moments that were not happy, yet they were rich with meaning?

Afterword

That's it for me for now. I hope the ideas in this little booklet have made you reflect and think.

I fully realize that some of these meditations may contain some unpopular ideas. Ideas that may-in today's day and age-be regarded as 'harsh' or 'unsafe' by those who haven't yet 'learned to listen to the wild dogs barking in their cellars' (Nietzsche).

Let's just say I wasn't first in line when the idea of 'safe spaces' was introduced.

Because life isn't safe. Any sense of safety is either artificial or temporary. Like the Buddhist wisdom goes: 'everything is burning'.

So why not arm ourselves with wisdom, resilience, and the ability to shape constructive narratives so that we can find the courage to eliminate the suffering of others as best as we can and live a meaningful life as a result?

This is exactly what our platform at [PositivePsychology.com](https://www.PositvePsychology.com) is about and what the 8.000+ positive psychology practitioners who are working with our products are inspiring their practices with.

Unlike this little booklet, these products (tools, masterclasses) are based strictly on science and have a high applicational value.

Should you be interested to take the next step and learn more about meaning, I recommend you to try our 17 Meaning and Valued Living Exercises for just \$17 USD.

Here is the link:

<https://tools.positivepsychology.com/17-meaning-exercises>

Whether you do or don't, thank you for your spending some time with me here. Should you want to share your thoughts, I'm keen to read them. Please send an email to info@positivepsychology.com.

From Amsterdam with love,

Seph Fontane Pennock