FINDING PURPOSE IN AN AGE OF EMPTINESS

THE MEANING OF YOUR LIFE

#1 *New York Times* bestselling author of
FROM STRENGTH TO STRENGTH

ARTHUR C. BROOKS

The Meaning of Your Life

Finding Purpose in an Age of Emptiness



ARTHUR C. BROOKS

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From Quixote to Dulcinea, who still beguiles my soul

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INTRODUCTION

Unheimlich

In the fall of 2019, I felt very *unheimlich.*

That's a German word that's hard to translate precisely. It means the gut feeling of uneasiness you get when things just…*aren't right at home*. Like if you walk into your childhood house after being away at college and sense that something is very wrong. Maybe it smells off, or your parents are acting weird, like they have bad news to tell you. A feeling of dread is triggered, but you can't quite put your finger on what exactly is up. You just feel, well, *unheimlich*.

I had just returned home after a decade away. Not home as in my *hometown*, which happens to be Seattle, which I left unsentimentally forty-four years ago. For me, "home" means *campus*, because that's where I find my people. I was born to be a college professor and, in fact, have been on campuses since I was a baby: My dad was a professor. His dad, too. For me, academia is the family business, and mine as well since I took my first professorship nearly thirty years ago. The research is interesting and rewarding, but even more, the students are *my people*—ambitious strivers just starting out on what promise to be terrific careers and lives. They give me energy because they always are so inspired by ideas, so purpose-driven, and so enthusiastic.

In January of 2009, I temporarily left my campus home, taking a ten-year hiatus to be the president of a big nonprofit organization in Washington, DC, and didn't return until the fall of 2019. I always intended

to return to academia, and after a decade, I quit my executive job and accepted a position at Harvard University. My intention was to get back the optimism and vigor students had always given me in times past—to get back home.

But when I returned, it was very *unheimlich*. The atmosphere had darkened, as larger and larger percentages of students were suffering from depression and anxiety. At some colleges and universities, more than half of students were receiving mental health treatment. My office hours were more like counseling sessions than tutoring. Hope and optimism seemed like they had been replaced by anger and sadness. And *fear*: students feared exposure to ideas they found objectionable and made them feel emotionally unsafe, and faculty were terrified to lecture on anything that might offend the students.

It's not that bad, I reassured my *unheimlich* self. But I was wrong. Soon after my return, the COVID-19 lockdowns shuttered most colleges and universities, and things got even worse. My students languished in their childhood bedrooms in their parents' homes or lived by themselves in campus housing, as most of their contact with the outside world consisted of Zoom classes, social media, and YouTube videos. And even after the lockdowns, the problem persisted and worsened.

I saw the crisis on campus, but that was just where it was most obvious and visible to me. Depression, anxiety, loneliness, fear, and anger were cropping up everywhere, especially among young adults. Pretty soon, everyone was talking about a mental health crisis. According to the American Psychological Association, the percentage of American adolescents with symptoms of major depression nearly tripled from 2005 to 2019, while anxiety almost doubled.[1] The percentage of American adults of all ages who are "not too happy" about their lives had more than doubled from 2000 to 2023.[2] Women were hit especially hard: 45 percent of female Americans between ages twelve and twenty-six had received a formal diagnosis of anxiety or depression by 2024.[3] From 2004 until 2024, the percentage of women thirty and under who said their mental health was "excellent" plummeted, from 48 percent to 15 percent.[4]

A Search for the Explanation

What the data show—and what everyone has seen with our own eyes—is what we social scientists call a *psychogenic epidemic*, a phenomenon that causes tremendous suffering but has no organic cause, meaning the onset is social or psychological, not biological. As a specialist in the science of happiness, I naturally began writing and speaking publicly about this epidemic, searching for its cause. And as I did this work, I found something even more mysterious: those who should be the *best* off—the hardworking strivers at places like my university—were actually suffering the *most*.

Over the course of my investigation into the cause of the epidemic, I started by looking at the popular explanations we all hear. A very common one is that young adults have gotten a bait and switch from older generations, who promised them that if they worked hard and played by the rules, they would have a great life. Instead, they found that houses are impossibly expensive in the cities that offer the most rewarding jobs, and raising kids gets harder every year. Meanwhile, the social security and medical systems they are paying into will be bankrupt by the time they are old. On top of that, there are looming environmental threats, rising inequality, and a host of other problems. Thanks for all the empty promises and the screwed-up world, boomers.

On the other side, older people claim that the problem is young adults themselves, with their supposed culture of indulgence, narcissism, and entitlement. When many people my age hear the complaint that life is so much worse today, and that they had things so much easier in the old days, they just roll their eyes. When their adult kids talk about environmental problems, they recall growing up with smog-choked freeways, burning rivers, and nuclear-bomb drills during the Cold War. When they hear how unaffordable housing is, they’re likely to point out the lousy apartment they rented—with a rolled-up futon in the corner and a two-ring burner to cook on—when they were starting out.

But neither of these scapegoating explanations holds water. They just blame a deep philosophical and psychological problem on another

generation's selfishness. There's nothing new about that: *every* generation resents their elders and then looks down on "kids these days."[5] But this psychogenic epidemic is real and unprecedented.

A more scholarly explanation focuses on what people are doing to entertain and distract themselves—generally, staring down at their phones. Citing stacks of studies and data in his bestseller *The Anxious Generation*, Jonathan Haidt of New York University has argued that rather than interacting with other people in real life, young people now look at screens, and that this has led to the explosion of depression and anxiety.[6] His analysis is totally convincing. In my own research, I find a clear relationship between social media use and emotional problems. As a general rule, the more time you spend looking at your phone, the more depressed, lonely, and anxious you will become.[7] We will talk a lot about this—and how to solve it—later in this book.

It still leaves the big mystery, however, of what people are missing—what they truly want but can't find while they scroll away the hours. The overuse of tech is a soothing behavior because something important is absent in their lives—and this behavior is probably also making that *something* harder to find. It's like alcohol or recreational drugs, which people often abuse when what they really want in life—hope, opportunity, love—is absent, but which makes their problem worse.

What is it that the young strivers so deeply crave but can't find? And *why* can't they find it? I needed more than data and statistics to answer this, so I started asking people to tell me their stories. This isn't hard to do—because of my work and writing, people reach out to me all the time. I reached back, and, well…I'll just let a few of these people speak for themselves.[*]

The Garbage Disposal

Marc, age thirty-two, is exactly what you would conjure up in your mind if I asked you to imagine a textbook striver: He's college-educated,

hardworking, and healthy. He's a "bootstraps" guy, too. His parents broke up when he was young, and they never had much money, but Marc avoided trouble, went to a small state college (unlike most of the people he grew up with), and landed an excellent job as a data analyst. He is physically healthy, eating right, and exercising a lot. If you were writing an advice column for young men on how to succeed in life, Marc would pretty much be the poster child for what you'd recommend.

But when we spoke recently and he told me all this, something sounded off. As he described his situation—on paper, a list of carefully managed accomplishments—his voice was hollow, as though he were describing a scenario he didn't really believe. I pressed him to go deeper.

He paused and then said, "My life feels empty."

I asked him what was missing. He thought for a minute, then told me a story. A year or so ago, he was on a first date with a woman he'd met on one of the dating apps. Over dinner, she mentioned to him in passing that her garbage disposal was clogged, and she didn't know what to do about it. He volunteered to help her with it and ended up fixing it for her that very evening. He said that this gave him a deep sense of satisfaction. Later, at his own apartment, he remembered that his own garbage disposal was clogged as well. The fix was easy, but he had just never gotten around to doing anything about it. A year later, he still hasn't.

Maybe that sounds like a random anecdote, but I understood that he was expressing something profound. He wasn't saying that he felt some existential need to be a handyman. What he craved was the sense of purpose and significance that came from being *needed* by someone.

The garbage-disposal date never went anywhere, unfortunately. Nor had any of his dates in years, he told me. The only way to meet women, he felt, was on a dating app; by his own count, he'd gone on fifty first dates. But the connections always felt somehow fake. He never felt any authenticity with people he met that way, so he'd given up on the idea that his soulmate was somewhere online. Maybe, he feared, his soulmate simply didn't exist.

His friendships haven't fared much better. During the lonely coronavirus lockdowns, he moved to a new city he'd never been to, hoping to meet new

people. He didn’t, at least not real humans in three dimensions. His job went fully remote and never came back in person; his work colleagues were and still are two-dimensional avatars on a Zoom screen. He established only a few social relationships in the new city, and now rarely sees anyone more than once a week. He feels stuck on the outside of life, viewing the world through a double-paned window.

To pass his overabundant free time, Marc, like almost everyone these days, is online a lot: scrolling social media, watching videos. To simulate a social life, he spends hours listening to podcasts of other people having interesting conversations, but it leaves him feeling empty. He calls it “social pornography.” But like all digital distraction, it’s hard to avoid without something better to do. And most of the time, there’s nothing better to do. He craves a big, meaningful project—building something, writing something—and dreams of finding that project and immersing himself in it. But he can’t come up with any ideas for what that project might be…so it’s back online.

Occasionally, he panics. *Is this it forever? Will I die alone? Will I ever find what I’m looking for?* But when the fear inevitably subsides, he falls back into the Zooming, scrolling, and isolation. And the months click by.

Just Stay Busy

Maria’s parents are probably bragging about her to the neighbors right now. Their twenty-seven-year-old daughter has always been a bright light: top grades in school, never in trouble. She was always a leader and ambitious, completing a bachelor’s and a master’s in mechanical engineering, joining the military, and rising fast as an officer in the cyber and information sciences. She holds multiple associations in prestigious academic societies and think tanks.

On the personal side, however, things aren’t going well for Maria. Her extraordinary energy—the envy of others—isn’t her way just to succeed but also to distract herself. The hustle diverts her attention from an intense

sense of emptiness that grows every year. She appears hyperfocused, a woman on a mission, but she confesses privately that her life has no coherence: She has no idea where she is going, nor what she even wants. She hopes that through her work, a sense of purpose will emerge, but it never does. She feels no passion for it, no calling, no sense of vocation.

When we speak, I ask her what big change she would like to see in her life in a year's time. She pauses for a long time and fails to come up with a definite answer. Big questions like this make her feel afraid, she says, so she avoids them by staying busy. "What if I never find the answers?" she asks me. "Or if there *are* no answers?"

What about her relationships? Maria has a boyfriend, but she doesn't know where that relationship is going. It's just okay for now. She is an extrovert and has friends but, she says, they are more "deal friends" than "real friends." She rarely goes deep with anyone in her circle. She is not very close to her parents or siblings. Although she is in theory a religious believer, she doesn't practice her faith at all. I ask why not. She doesn't know.

When she's too tired to work, Maria tells me that she would like to read books or do something productive and creative but somehow doesn't know how to get started. Instead, she finds herself simply on her phone—scrolling social media and watching YouTube—sometimes for hours at a time. This fills her with guilt for wasting her time, but it keeps her mind off something she knows she's missing but can't quite name.

A Long Hike to…Somewhere

Marc and Maria are among the typical young adults I have met in my teaching and travels over the past seven years. Their lives look enviable from the outside, but they feel empty on the inside. They are waiting for their purpose to find them, but it never does. As they wait, they distract themselves with work and soothe themselves with tech.

I feel a paternal concern for Marc and Maria; after all, I am old enough to be their father. Paul, however, is closer to a peer—he could be a younger sibling to me, in fact—and because of that, his story leaves me still more shaken than the others.

At forty-seven, Paul would appear to have everything figured out. He is smart and friendly, is married with three kids, and has a successful career as a social scientist at a top university. Before I met him, I knew about him and admired his work.

But scratch the surface, and a darker narrative emerges.

Paul's parents divorced when he was very young, and he grew up in poverty, without much adult attention. A clever kid, he quickly figured out that adults gave him the approval he craved when he excelled in school. Love, he figured out, is earned through achievements. So all of his sense of purpose came from getting good grades, good test scores—"the next gold star," in his words. And to maintain that sense of purpose, he essentially never left school, winding up as a professor.

Ten years ago, Paul was ambitious and full of passion for ideas, writing a series of books in his academic field. They weren't bestsellers because they were too specialized and academically rigorous to sell by the millions. But he was proud of them and, he told himself, the "right people" were reading them. The recognition he got for these books were his grown-up gold stars. But their luster faded over the following decade as his career progress slowed. Each new book began to feel like the one before, and they all began to seem "pointless" and "rote." Today, he feels like his research has little impact, that it makes no difference to the world and wins little recognition from other scholars. He is way behind schedule on a major writing project but doesn't have the motivation to work on it. His sense of purpose and direction are fading away.

It's not as if Paul has no time to work. The problem is how he spends the time he has. It's as if something is eating his brain, so that he can't focus. An hour that he would have once used to read a research paper he now uses to anesthetize himself, looking at social media to block the growing ennui. This distracts him from his melancholy but, like Maria, he feels enormous

remorse for wasting the time. With the eloquence of Franz Kafka—he is a thinker and writer, after all—Paul sums up his absurd-feeling predicament: “Life is like a factory churning out days of my existence, indifferently prepackaged for my mandatory consumption.”

“What do you *want*?” I ask him. He pauses, struggling to find the words. “I want to go hiking,” he says at last, “for a long time.” I ask him where he wants to go hiking. Paul’s answer might be literal, or it might be metaphorical—I can’t tell: “To where I might find what I’m looking for.”

The Penny Drops

Marc, Maria, and Paul are real people, and these are their real stories and words. There are dozens more. On the surface, nothing seems wrong with any of their lives. On the contrary, they haven’t experienced terrible deprivation or grave trauma. Their needs are met, and then some. They are strivers—not necessarily graduates of elite schools or earning a fortune, but taking life seriously—and on paper at least, should be living a good life and looking forward to an excellent future. Many of them actually express a sense of guilt over being miserable, given all they have going for them. As one told me, “I have everything but feel nothing.” They have a sense of deadness about life, as if One Big Thing were missing.

There is a core emptiness to life as they drift from day to day. What they describe to me is something akin to waiting in an airport terminal for a delayed flight that never leaves; they try to stay occupied to keep themselves from going mad, always in the hope that boarding will finally be called and the flight will take off. That’s where their distraction tactics come in—filling time with social media or streaming video or simply by working grinding hours at their jobs in the hope of the next gold star—which keep them from thinking too much but which make their sense of emptiness worse.

When I do interviews like those with Marc, Maria, and Paul, I just listen. What generally happens is that people say the same things over and over.

But then, out of the blue, somebody says one thing that illuminates the real problem. One of the young strivers I talked to—not one of the three above—had a hard time expressing his feelings. Most of his interview isn't worth recounting. Matter-of-factly, he told me about his virtual job, dating apps, social media friends, and video gaming.

But then, flatly, he said this: "I feel like I'm living in a simulation."

I asked others if they felt the same way. "Yes, yes—that's it," they told me. Life felt *unreal*: full of false rewards, empty accomplishments, therapeutic talk, and fake experiences, all curated to pass the time as painlessly as possible. I drilled down further: What exactly was missing? And this is where the penny finally dropped for me. What was missing was the one thing that can never be simulated: *meaning*. Again and again, people said that life was busy but not *meaningful*. That experiences and relationships felt *meaningless*. Or that they didn't know what they were *meant* to do in work and life.

The meaning of life: such a big question that it is the root of a lot of jokes. But it's no joke in real life, especially when you can't find it, like millions of people today. To understand why, let's back up a little to talk more broadly about happiness, which happens to be the subject I study and teach.

Researchers define happiness in a variety of ways, but the clearest characterization for me is one that brings meaning into the happiness equation, literally:

Happiness = Enjoyment + Satisfaction + Meaning

In other words, the happiest people enjoy their lives, take satisfaction in their activities and accomplishments, and have a sense of the meaning of their existence. Enjoyment, satisfaction, and meaning are like the macronutrients of happiness. I use the metaphor of macronutrients for a reason. If you're feeling tired and run down, you might go to a nutritionist to ask about your diet, and they will start by trying to figure out if you're getting your dietary macronutrients (protein, carbohydrates, and fat) in good

balance and sufficient abundance. If you're found to be underconsuming protein, say, you will get instructed on how to add more of it to your diet so that you feel better.

When I see an explosion in unhappiness, which I do in the United States and so many other places around the world, the first thing I look for as a researcher is a lack of one of the macronutrients above. I have found zero evidence indicating that enjoyment and satisfaction have declined at all. Young people have as much fun as older people—maybe more. And they accomplish a lot—especially the strivers I teach and meet every day.

But *meaning* has collapsed.

More and more people—especially young adult strivers—have expressed an increasing sense of meaninglessness over recent decades. For example, the research group Monitoring the Future has shown that from 2008 to the present, the percentage of teenagers who agreed with the statement "Life often seems meaningless" approximately doubled, to more than one in five teens, exactly in tandem with the increases in depression and anxiety.[8] Move up to college students and the pattern is the same; indeed, most have given up even looking for life's meaning. According to data from the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California, Los Angeles, the number one goal of American undergraduates in the mid-1960s was "developing a meaningful philosophy of life," an aim that was shared by nearly 90 percent of students.[9] Today, fewer than half of undergraduates say this is their goal.

Among my students and their friends—strivers, all—these alarming numbers clearly underestimate the problem. While one in five straight up say their life is "meaningless," when I ask people if their sense of meaning has risen or fallen over the past five years, I *never* hear the former.

More than the other elements of happiness, meaning predicts active engagement with life and an ability to cope with suffering.[10] If your life feels meaningless, you will be disengaged and unable to deal effectively with your problems. You will almost certainly be depressed and anxious.[11] Your life will have a void to it, a hollowness. Maybe you will seek the salve of therapy, which might help a bit with the symptoms of unhappiness but

which can't instill the deep meaning you crave. To pass the time and distract yourself, you will probably scroll or watch videos or game. But these self-soothing behaviors are in fact self-defeating, because they are just a simulation of a life with meaning, not the real thing. And thus they will only make your feeling of emptiness grow more acute.

Why? Because meaning cannot be simulated.

Why Are Strivers Hit the Hardest?

When I talk about strivers, don't make the mistake of thinking I'm talking about someone else who went to a fancier college or has a higher-paying job. I'm talking about *you*: someone who is tenacious, clever, and motivated enough about life to pick up this book. Someone who is trained to figure out concrete solutions to life's complicated problems, using ingenuity and technical skills. For strivers, meaning is one more problem to crack, and they should be able to do so better than anyone, right?

Wrong. Today's hypercompetent young strivers like Marc and Maria—and many other strivers who are not so young anymore, like Paul—are suffering the most in the crisis of meaning. In the richest, most technologically advanced countries, where the Marcs and Marias are most likely to live, the *greater* percentage of the population will answer "no" to the question "Do you feel your life has an important purpose or meaning?"[12]

Here's why: Strivers like the people you met above are absolutely *great* at solving technical problems and answering specific, hard questions. They have been educated and trained to believe that, while the world is incredibly complicated, with enough knowledge and hard work, every problem can be solved. And the truth is, many big, complicated problems can be solved with knowledge, technology, and sheer intellectual horsepower.

But *meaning* is not one of them. "What is the meaning of my life?" is a question that cannot be answered like "How do I build an app for finding concert tickets?" or "How do I create an effective six-month weight-loss

program?" Those are earthbound, rational questions with specific, technical answers. Meaning is a different species of question: one that must be lived, not solved with a Google search or simulated using AI. It requires deep contemplation and a commitment to living a real life, full of unsolvable secrets, puzzling riddles, unexplainable bliss, and terrible suffering.

People today—especially the most highly accomplished young adults in the most economically advanced nations—increasingly struggle with meaning because they have been deskilled in the deepest mysteries of life—mysteries that are deeply human because they could never even register with any other species. In their technical excellence, strivers trivialize their humanness by reducing life's magnificent inscrutability to a series of complicated but solvable problems. They aren't just living in a simulation; they are also *creating* the simulation they are living in.

It's not like I'm so different, by the way. I'm no young adult by a long shot, but meaning has been a struggle for me, too, as you will learn in this book. As a behavioral scientist—and a lifelong striver par excellence—I am all about data and science that reveal why people act the way they do. Ask me a question about the mysteries of life and I will usually go looking for research that reveals a clear answer. My favorite phrases are "Studies show…" and "The data say…" I have run many thousands of statistical analyses and have published research papers with titles like "Genetic Algorithms and Public Economics."[13] And that approach has gotten me pretty far in the study of human behavior. I can tell you who are the people who appear to be happier than others and what their habits are.

But when it comes to understanding the actual meaning of life, including *my* life, my quantitative-analysis approach comes to a screeching halt. My intellectual vehicle can no longer be the experiments and models I learned in my PhD. It has to be, instead, the deep mysteries of life itself. That's why this problem of meaning has vexed me more than any other in my career, and this is the hardest book I have ever written. I've kept at it so long because I need the answers, and most likely, so do you, fellow striver.

The Road Ahead

There are many reasons you might have picked up this book. Maybe you have a "something is missing" sense in your work and relationships—a longing you can't articulate. Maybe you have huge philosophical or moral questions, such as "Does God exist and love me?" or "Is everything permitted in life?" As a child you assumed that someone could answer these for you, but you now see that no one can. Perhaps more practically, you don't like how addicted you are to your devices and wish you could focus on something more satisfying and creative—less fake—than scrolling social media and watching reels. Or maybe you recognize that you're a workaholic, caught in the trap of dissatisfaction, never doing or achieving enough to feel worthy and lovable. Mostly, you allow yourself to be distracted from thinking too deeply about it. But occasionally you panic and wonder if you ever *will* find meaning, or if it even exists.

You are not alone. The psychogenic epidemic is real. Today, the data clearly show that there are many millions of Marcs, Marias, and Pauls. There actually *is* something missing in people's lives, and people really *are* wasting huge amounts of time in a what amounts to a simulation of life. For some, especially high-achieving young adults, the condition is like a malevolent possession that robs them of joy and the hope of a meaningful future. For others, it can feel like a low-level virus, rendering the world gray and colorless.

This growing inability to find meaning in life is, I believe, the most important phenomenon in the behavioral sciences today. For six years, it has been my work's primary focus. And this book is, at long last, my report.

Let me cut straight to the headline: *your life does have meaning, and you can find it.*

But to find the meaning of your life requires thinking and living differently from how you have been trained by school, work, media, entertainment, and culture. In this book, I will ask you to explore parts of your mind and brain that may have been inactive for a long time, where the sources of meaning reside. I will ask you to pay attention to aspects of your

life that you have been trained to ignore. The following pages are a guidebook to a journey into the deep realms of your consciousness.

First, we have to make clear what we are seeking. Imagine I told you, "What you're looking for is in Sequim." Your first question would probably be "What is Sequim?" For all you know, Sequim could be a secret language, or a virtual reality experience, or a meditation technique. I have to define what the word *Sequim* means. (It is a town on the Olympic Peninsula of Washington state, pronounced "Squim"). Likewise, we need to know the meaning of *meaning* so you know what you are looking for. That's what we'll do in the next chapter. Then you will take a test to find out how far away you are from it in your life and whether you are really looking. This will situate you on a map so you can start your journey.

After that, we will talk about this disastrous *simulation* of real life that so many are living in, hijacking our brains so that the mysterious parts of life —love, calling, faith, beauty—are filled with fake experiences: swiping right instead of courtship, virtual acquaintances instead of friends, screens instead of nature, and on and on. As you will see, you have probably become "stuck" on the wrong side of your brain, where an understanding of meaning is no longer apparent or accessible.

Finally, we will discuss precisely what to do to fix this problem. This actually begins with a chapter on what to *stop* doing—how to rebel against the simulation and fight back against the addictive distractions and trivialities of the world, which keep your life floating along at a surface level and make you unable to go deeper. Then you will see how six specific ways of living allow your mind to open up to deep meaning. These are practices that have been increasingly neglected in modern life.

All this makes for a long and sometimes arduous journey—a lifelong one, in fact. And that is very good news. A journey of progress toward deep meaning is what it means to be a fully alive human being. To let meaning unfold before you is to make the most of every day—even the bad ones.

Let's get started.

Skip Notes

*I have changed one of their names to preserve privacy.

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CHAPTER 1

The Meaning of Meaning



At the age of fifty-one, the novelist Leo Nikolayevich Tolstoy wanted to kill himself.

You might think that, because nineteenth-century Russia was a very poor country, and writers are notoriously poorer than average, this self-destructive impulse was caused by hopeless poverty. Or because he felt his genius was unappreciated. Or because he had mental illness, which has afflicted so many great artists and writers.

But none of these was the case. On the contrary, Tolstoy was arguably the most successful and celebrated author of his time. His novel *War and Peace* was a huge bestseller; he lived in aristocratic luxury; he was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature multiple times. Nor was his despair the result of a crisis in his personal life: His marriage, though complicated, was stable and enduring and produced thirteen children. He had no addictions or ruinous personal habits.

But all this outward success left him feeling empty.

Tolstoy hoped that his work would fulfill his need for…well, he wasn't quite sure *what*. He focused on his writing obsessively, to the exclusion of everything else, but it never gave him what he craved. So he looked to

science, which seemed to many in the late nineteenth century to promise the answer to every question, just as technology does today. As he studied, he expected to find the meaning of life buried in the complicated formulas of chemistry, physics, and biology. For a long time, Tolstoy assumed that not finding it was a function of his ignorance. But as the years passed, he was confronted with the reality that, as he put it, life's *why* was not to be found in "the laws of light, of chemical compounds, the laws of the development of organisms."

As he exhausted his intellectual options one by one, he sank deeper into despair. By the time he reached his fifties, he feared that "life [was] meaningless…. Now this was horrible. And in order to escape this horror I wanted to kill myself."[1]

In so many ways, Tolstoy was way ahead of his time—including in his suffering, which is a lot like that of the people we met in the introduction. His situation sounds grim, and maybe yours feels that way, too, at least on your worst days. But in fact, life was going to get a lot better for Tolstoy, for one simple reason: he was looking hard for his life's meaning. True, he hadn't found it yet. But as desperate as he felt, he did not stop hunting, and the best predictor of finding something—including meaning—is looking for it. In the end, Tolstoy found what he was looking for.

Psychologists would say that Tolstoy was low in the *presence* of meaning but high in *search*. In this chapter, we will see where *you* are on these two dimensions. This is important as you set out on your meaning journey, because it creates a map of your meaning quest so you can find yourself on it. In this chapter, you will take a test of where you are in presence and search, which are your starting coordinates. But before we do that, we need to figure out the destination of the meaning journey as well. That requires defining what meaning, well, *means*.

The Meaning of the Meaning of Life

If you need to find something important, there are two questions you need to answer. The first is general; the second, specific. For example, if you are keen to find a spouse, the general question to answer is "What are the characteristics of an appropriate mate?" By that I mean figuring out the general features of a person with whom you would, ideally, spend the rest of your life. That means someone with the right basic demographics (who is the gender you seek, for example, and not fifty years older or younger than you), who seems sane, who more or less shares your values—that sort of thing. That's super important so you can start trying to answer the specific question "Who is *my* mate?" You must have an idea of what you are looking for in general to have any kind of fruitful search for the specific person. Of course, the person you wind up with will differ in many ways from what you had in your mind, but having something in mind makes it possible to start the journey toward your goal.

Similarly, while the main goal of this book is finding the meaning of your life, you first need to know what you are looking for generally—the meaning of *life's meaning*. If that could be anything, from a feeling to a Ferrari, you will spend your life on a wild-goose chase, going after anything and everything, and probably ending up with something silly or completely trivial.

You might even conclude that it is all some sort of cosmic joke, like in the 1983 Monty Python movie titled, appropriately, *The Meaning of Life*. The film opens with six fish swimming in a restaurant's tank, greeting one another. When one of them (named Howard) is taken out, cooked, and eaten in front of the others, the shocked fish begin to question the meaning of life. The movie moves through various comedic sketches that show life's absurdity and finishes a couple of hours later with a woman opening an envelope containing the answer to the question. "It's nothing very special, really," she reads blandly. "Try and be nice to people, avoid eating fat, read a good book every now and then, get some walking in, and try and live together in peace and harmony with people of all creeds and nations."

Deep down, though, none of us believes that the definition of the meaning of life is just a silly joke. We crave it, which indicates to us intuitively both that it exists and that there is a way to define it. Until recently, the definition probably wasn't so important, because of the way people lived, just naturally going about life in ways that delivered meaning every day—more on that later. People today need to be more explicit about what we are looking for before we start out on the journey to find it.

The Three Elements of Meaning

About twenty years ago, I set out to write my first book. It felt like I was standing at the base of Mount Everest, looking straight up. I asked a friend who had written a lot of books how to get such a huge, complicated project done. "Simple," he told me. "Write one paragraph at a time." In other words, don't think about it like one big, unmanageable project—think of it as a bunch of smaller, manageable projects. That really helped me a lot, and I wrote the book over the next year—one paragraph at a time. That's a technique called *decomposition*, which is a fancy term for taking an enormously complicated endeavor and breaking it into smaller, more manageable pieces. This technique is used a lot in computer science, but the concept is as simple as the Chinese proverb "A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step."

Decomposition isn't only about work, though. It can also apply to personal questions such as "How do I improve my marriage?"—a daunting challenge that can seem too complex to even begin. Experienced counselors say that the best approach is to see marriage not as one huge puzzle but as an interlocking set of challenges: how to communicate more clearly; how to be more considerate and thoughtful; how to manage conflict better; and so on. By looking at one challenge at a time, they can imagine making progress, bit by bit.

This is how psychologists tackle the challenge of defining meaning: as a set of interlocking elements. For example, Professor John Vervaeke of the

University of Toronto believes that there are an infinite number of potential parts of our lives, and through the process of "relevance realization" we decide which of these parts truly matter. This process of figuring out which ones is what constructs the meaning of our lives.[2] Or consider the approach taken by psychologists Frank Martela and Michael F. Steger, who sort all these potential parts of life's meaning into three big elements:[3]

Meaning = Coherence + Purpose + Significance

The first element of meaning is *coherence*, or how the events of your life fit together. This is an understanding that things happen in your life for a reason. That doesn't necessarily mean you can fit everything into your narrative the moment it happens. Sometimes things still seem to come out of left field—nasty surprises still occur, and it doesn't seem to make sense when someone you love gets sick or you have an ugly breakup you didn't expect. But you usually are able to make sense of things afterward, so you have faith that you eventually will, even when life feels chaotic.

In contrast, life feels meaningless when you see it as totally random and incoherent. You feel powerless and utterly irrelevant in an oppressive universe, thrown about by dumb and blind forces. To believe your life has meaning makes about as much sense as believing a single particle of space dust a hundred light-years away has some special meaning.

We naturally resist this randomness, however, which is why people adopt all kinds of theories of life's coherence. Some people turn to science and put their faith in the idea that there are well-ordered natural forces in the universe that explain why everything happens, even if we don't quite understand them. Others turn to religious metaphysics, believing that supernatural forces, perhaps a cosmic consciousness or divine being like God, have a plan for the universe and their lives. Still others keep their focus firmly in the world and believe shadowy people and powerful conspiracies are the organizing factor behind much of what they experience.

Some of these approaches are more associated with happiness than others, but all of them are an attempt at finding coherence. I am not saying

that they are all simply human inventions, however. As a Christian, I believe God exists and has a plan for my life and the universe, a lot of which we can learn about by studying science but much of which will also always be a mystery to me. Faith knits together for me the parts of my life that make sense with those that do not, and it has helped me to make some radical changes over the years. For example, I left a twelve-year career in classical music to become a social scientist. For a year or so, I searched for what I thought was the divine will about how I could lift others up best. This made these two disparate career paths cohere.

The second element of life's meaning is *purpose*, which is the existence of goals and direction in your life. This is the belief that you are alive in order to do something. Think of purpose as the map of your life, telling you where you are in your journey and where you want to go. Your map can change as your destination changes throughout life, but you always need one. Without it, your journey becomes a big problem, just as any trip would become a problem if you didn't know where you were and didn't know where you wanted to go.

I remember once as a little kid, probably four years old, I had a scary experience of getting lost in a big hospital. My dad had to visit a sick friend and took me with him. Unfortunately, children weren't allowed up to the floors where the patients were. So he sat me in a lobby and told me to wait there. After what seemed like nine hours (but was probably twenty-five minutes), I decided to look around a little. I went through one door, then another, and down a hall. I decided to turn back but couldn't find the lobby and found myself wandering farther and farther down corridors that all looked the same. I couldn't read, so the signs were no help at all. When a sympathetic nurse asked what I was looking for, I couldn't say anything beyond "My daddy." I remember it was a terrible feeling of hopelessness. Together, we found my dad after another four hours (or maybe it was ten minutes), which made me happy.

To lack purpose in your life is like never finding your dad and just wandering the halls of the hospital forever. It means you have no direction and are just meandering. Progress is impossible because there's no clear

goal. Maybe you'll find something fun or interesting from time to time through sheer luck, but you won't have anything to look forward to and won't feel like you are making improvements in your life. This is the case when you don't have educational or professional aspirations; when you don't have any sense or desire about building a family; when you have no aims to deepen your spiritual or philosophical life; when you don't have any ambition about your health and well-being.

The third element of meaning is *significance*. This refers to the inherent value of your life to yourself and, even more important, to others. To be significant doesn't mean that when you die, you will have a long obituary in *The New York Times* or a street named after you in your hometown. It simply means that the world would be worse for someone you love if you didn't exist.

One of the most popular movies of all time is *It's a Wonderful Life*, director Frank Capra's 1946 Christmas classic starring James Stewart as George Bailey. This film is all about finding life's meaning by discovering one's significance. The movie starts on Christmas Eve, at what appears to be the end of George's life, as he contemplates jumping off a bridge to end it all. He is facing bankruptcy and arrest for a series of business events at the bank he manages that were not of his doing. He sees his life as having been one of failures and missed opportunities, and he honestly feels that it would have been better for everyone if he had never existed. At this point, he would be of greater value to his family dead than alive, he believes; then at least his widow would have his life insurance money.

At this moment, an angel from heaven, assigned to save George, appears and shows him what the world around him would have looked like had he indeed never existed. A brother he saved from drowning in childhood perishes instead; his uncle is committed to an asylum when the bank George ran becomes insolvent without him; instead of being a wholesome place, his town is a disreputable place full of dishonest people and immoral entertainment; his wife is an unhappy woman who never found love. He realizes through this counterfactual miracle that he truly is significant to the people he loves the most, and thus that his life has deep meaning.

The biggest error people tend to make (as George Bailey did in the movie) is to assume that their significance is all about what they do in worldly terms—their success at work, for example—as opposed to whom they touch in deep and positive ways. This distinction is the point the author David Brooks makes in his book *The Road to Character* when he talks about *résumé virtues* and *eulogy virtues*.[4] The former are your accomplishments and worldly rewards like money, power, and professional prestige—things like your high salary, job title, and professional awards. To attach your sense of significance to these things is begging for trouble. First, they come and go, as George found out in the movie; you can be the hero one month and reviled the next because of a mistake or bad luck. Just ask any CEO who was once at the top of the market and was fired a year later when the stock price tanked. Second, no one you truly love actually cares about these things at all. You really think your grandkids will care that you were a Forbes 30 Under 30 or a Rhodes Scholar?

This second point leads to the eulogy virtues—what people would say at your funeral—which are the true source of your sense of significance and thus at the heart of your life's meaning. In the movie, the angel shows George how people around him were uplifted by his humanity and kindness. Here's an exercise to help you understand this. Think about the relationships you treasure. Then imagine these people loving and appreciating you, even after you pass away. Finally, write down why these people have these loving memories. *That* is your significance.

To find the meaning of your life means seeking your life's coherence, purpose, and significance. You are probably asking how you are supposed to do this. That involves pondering three very big "why" questions.

1. Why do things happen the way they do in my life? (Coherence)
2. Why am I moving in this direction? (Purpose)
3. Why does my life matter? (Significance)

If these questions sound philosophical and hard to answer, it is because they are the kinds of questions philosophers have been banging their heads on for millennia. You will take them on for your own personal life in chapter 4.

Finding Yourself on the Map

Our first assignment was to identify the general destination—to define the meaning of meaning. The second task is to figure where *you* are in relation to that destination so you can chart your course over the coming chapters.

If you were in school between the late 1960s and the early 2010s, you probably remember taking the Presidential Fitness Test. A staple of childhood physical education, some may remember it less fondly than others do. Its general aim was to determine minimum fitness levels, but also told you where you stood compared with other kids your age. I administer a lot of tests with similar aims to my happiness students, one of which measures where you are with respect to meaning.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, psychologists measure meaning in two dimensions: *presence* and *search*.[5] Presence is the extent to which you feel like you know the meaning of your life, whether you can articulate it clearly or not. That is highly correlated with well-being, for all the reasons we have already covered. Tolstoy was miserable because his presence of meaning was very low. In contrast, search refers to the extent that you are actively looking for your life's meaning. For Tolstoy, this was extremely high, which is why, in the end, he found what he was looking for—and so, I believe, can you.

A good way to measure presence and search in your life is the Meaning in Life Questionnaire, which tells you where you stand at the present, and what you need to be thinking about and working on as you continue reading this book. The test was developed by Michael F. Steger—the same psychologist who codeveloped the decomposition of meaning into coherence, purpose, and significance.[6] This quiz will tell you whether you

have a stronger or weaker sense of your life's meaning than others, and whether you are searching for it more or less than other people.[7]

To take this test, start by relaxing for a few minutes, without distractions. Then answer the following questions as truthfully as you can. Don't take the test when you are feeling unusually gloomy or excited, because it will bias the results. For the most accurate assessment, take the test once a week for a few weeks at the same time of day, and average your scores.

Each question receives a numerical answer from 1 to 7.[*]

7 = absolutely true

6 = mostly true

5 = somewhat true

4 = can't say

3 = somewhat untrue

2 = mostly untrue

1 = absolutely untrue

1. I understand my life's meaning. ____
2. I am looking for something that makes my life feel meaningful. ____
3. I am always looking to find my life's purpose. ____
4. I have a clear understanding of my life's purpose. ____
5. I have a good sense of what makes my life meaningful. ____
6. I have discovered a satisfying life purpose. ____
7. I am always searching for something that makes my life feel significant. ____
8. I am seeking a purpose or mission for my life. ____
9. My life has a clear purpose. ____

10. I am searching for meaning in my life. ____

Notice that this test doesn't demand that you have a clear answer to the question of your life's meaning, just that you have an understanding, a sense. So you can get a "high" score without being able to say, *The meaning of my life is X.*

You will actually get two scores from this test.

- Presence score: this measures whether you already have a strong sense of your life's meaning. For this, add your scores to questions 1, 4, 5, 6, and 9.[8]
- Search score: this measures how actively you are seeking your life's meaning. For this, add your scores to questions 2, 3, 7, 8, and 10.

The critical number for each score is 24. Here is the meaning of the results:

If you are below 24 on both, you are *Lost in Place*. This means your sense of meaning is low, but you aren't actively looking for it, either. Perhaps you truly do agree about life with the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, that there is no essence to life, so the secret is to have fun and not worry too much about it. On the other hand, it might mean you have given up looking. In truth, you haven't given up. I know this because you are reading this book! For you, the key is to make a commitment to start your quest—to start actively searching.

Above 24 on search and below 24 on presence makes you a *Hopeful Wanderer*. You don't know your life's meaning, it's true, but you figure it's out there and have already been looking for it. Maybe you are frustrated because there have been so many false leads and blind alleys. It's like you have been driving around looking for something with your GPS turned off, hoping it appears before you. This chapter probably helped you the most, because it showed you the focus of your search: the three parts of meaning. This book is your GPS system.

Most readers will have fallen into these two categories, but there are two other possibilities. Above 24 on presence and below 24 on search means you strongly sense your life's meaning already, and so you aren't spending a ton of time and effort searching. You would be called a *Happy Homebody*. This will be the least likely reader of this book for the obvious reasons. However, if this is you, you might be reading because you love someone who is struggling with a sense of meaning and want tools to help them. Keep reading—you will finish with a big tool kit.

If you are above 24 on both scores, you are what we call a *Relentless Seeker*. You are above average on your presence of meaning but are still seeking it aggressively. This is a typical portrait of many successful people, because even if they know themselves well, they can't help but think there's more to find. *Yes, I have sense of meaning*, you say, *but I want more*. That is great, and you will find it in these chapters.

One word of caution to the Relentless Seekers, however—the "grass is always greener" folks who keep searching even when their meaning is clear and present. This tendency can lead to dissatisfaction because of what social scientists call the "paradox of choice": when you see too many options and can't settle on anything.[9] Relentless Seekers can also be hard to live with—even for themselves—because they are never satisfied. A good strategy as you read is to lean into the meaning you already sense as opposed to looking for something better.

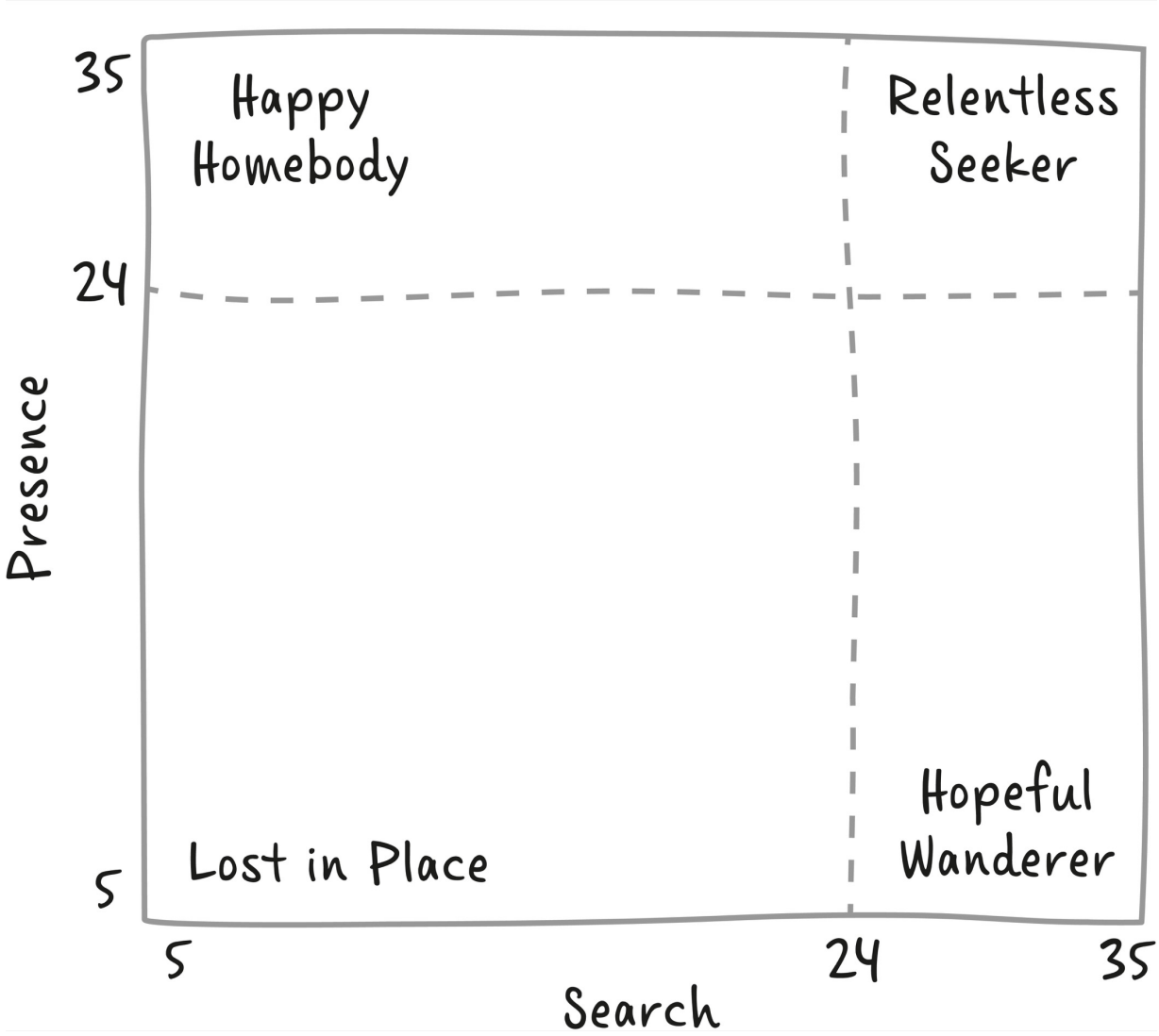


Figure 1. The four portraits of meaning

You might wonder where I fall on the graph. The answer is slightly above average on presence (27) and way, way above average on search (34). I am a true Relentless Seeker, which is why I just gave you that caution. As a young man, I would have been a Hopeful Wanderer, lacking a clear sense of meaning but searching hard. In fact, that is why I became a behavioral scientist—not to do research but to do *me-search*. I learned the tools of social science so I could understand myself and know how to look for my life's meaning. Now I am fairly solid on presence, with some big

dips over the years (more on that later). But search is my vocation and passion. It can make me a bit nomadic, looking for something new and questioning everything. Sometimes it drives my wife crazy, I confess. And I do suffer from discontent if I wander too far from the practices you will learn in the coming chapters.

Where Tolstoy Found Presence

Leo Tolstoy's struggle with life's meaning seemed quite bleak. He had searched far and wide, through his own work and that of the greatest scientists of his day, and come up empty. Fearing that life might, in fact, be meaningless, he was poised to kill himself. He didn't, however, *because he hadn't given up searching*.

He tried one last strategy. Not finding life's meaning among the greatest and most sophisticated people and ideas, he ran away to a small Russian village filled with uneducated, simple farmers. They were not scientists and scholars but ordinary working people who didn't know he was a famous author and couldn't even read his books. They didn't know that the weird guy who had moved into their town was the world-renowned Leo Tolstoy. Day after day, he got to know them. He watched them work, talk to one another, and pray. Here's what he noticed: They had no crisis of meaning in their lives at all. They lived at peace with the universe in the simplicity of their love for God and each other. They seemed untroubled by the existential crisis that tormented him.

Perhaps, he thought, that was the secret to living well: to embrace the irrationality of life itself, without asking questions. *Ignorance is bliss*, as they say. But on reflection, he found this perception was incorrect. The peace of the faithful unschooled, he learned, was *not* that they didn't wonder about the meaning of life. They wondered plenty. It was that they did not insist on finding neat answers someplace. Through the way they lived, they sought instead an *understanding* of life beyond what any intellect could articulate, and this understanding brought peace. He called

this “irrational knowledge.” As he concluded, “Rational knowledge, presented by the learned and the wise, denies the meaning of life, but the enormous masses of men, the whole of mankind, receive that meaning in irrational knowledge. Irrational knowledge is faith…. It is God.”[10]

Tolstoy didn’t spend the rest of his days in the village. He returned to high-powered intellectualism and his life as a famous writer. But this knowledge never left him. While still writing his masterworks, he came to live by simple convictions he learned from the Russian peasants. And he died a happy man.

Today, we know what happened to Tolstoy—his sojourn in the village opened up his capacity for deep meaning. Tolstoy had stumbled onto not just the secret to his own life’s meaning but also the reason you might not have found yours. In the next chapter, we’ll look at our capacity for perceiving meaning and examine why it is getting harder and harder today to find this elusive and mysterious irrational knowledge.

Three Big Things to Remember

We have covered a lot of ground so far, and you might be worried about forgetting something important. In truth, I need you to remember only three basic formulas, so I will repeat them here for you to refer back to as you read.

1. Happiness = enjoyment + satisfaction + meaning. Meaning is the element of happiness in crisis today.

2. Meaning = coherence + purpose + significance. In other words, to understand the why of your life, you need to ask why things happen the way they do around you, why you are doing the things you are doing, and why your life matters.

3. Meaning is experienced in two dimensions: presence (whether you have found meaning and how deeply you experience it), and search (how hard you are looking for meaning).

*You may also take the test online at themeaningofyourlife.com.

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CHAPTER 2

The Right Side of Your Brain



No doubt you are familiar with the 1999 sci-fi thriller *The Matrix*. It is set around the year 2199, but the characters *think* it is 1999 because they are living in a simulation created by sentient machines. While their bodies subsist in pods and their energy is tapped to power the machines, their brains are stimulated to experience a life that is indistinguishable from reality. One man, Neo (played by Keanu Reeves), learns the truth from a band of people who have freed themselves, joins them, and becomes determined to destroy the simulation and free humanity—not because it isn't pleasant but because it isn't *real*. Life is fake. Empty. Meaningless.

Marc, Maria, and Paul aren't living in a pod, of course. But they *are* living in a simulation of real life, and like Neo in the film, they hate it because despite its outward appearance of being exciting and fun, it feels profoundly empty. Remember what they said: That they felt disconnected from others; behind a virtual pane of glass. That they wanted something *real* to create with their lives but couldn't find it. That they wound up distracting themselves with fake life online, where meaning is absent.

A malevolent alien force has not taken over our world to sap our energy (I'm *pretty* sure), but how different is life today from the movie? As the

cultural critic Ted Gioia has written, we have moved from playing sports outside with friends to computer gaming; from reading newspapers to scrolling clickbait; from watching full stories on film to scanning reels; from writing letters to cranking out disappearing short texts; from sweetly suffering romantic courtship to swiping right.[1] I would add to this: from searching for a calling to just making a living (over Zoom); from pondering life's mysteries to running internet searches; from spirituality to technology; from being mindfully engaged in the real world to being distracted by a virtual, digital world created and curated to maximize "time in app." We have implemented easy substitutes for the experiences we crave, but they don't deliver a sense of life's meaning.

In this chapter, I am going to explain how this modern life is affecting our brains—and especially the brains of the young adults who don't have a memory of life in the before times, prior to the simulation. I will show you why the one thing that simply can't be simulated is the meaning of life, and how that gaping hole in the experience so many people are having is driving the psychogenic epidemic today.

You Have Two Brains

My parents were, in many ways, the Odd Couple. My dad was a mathematician with a PhD in biostatistics. His intellectual lineage (based on his doctoral dissertation adviser, his adviser's adviser, and so on) reached back directly to Johann Friedrich Carl Gauss, whose early-nineteenth-century advances revolutionized mathematics. He loved the elegance of math and statistics and talked about these subjects constantly. During dinners when I was a kid, he would describe great unsolved problems and give us math puzzles to think about.

My mom, on the other hand, was an artist through and through—a painter of some renown in the Pacific Northwest and an excellent amateur violinist and pianist. When I came home from elementary school as a kid, I would practice my French horn and then join her in her studio, painting and

listening to the music she loved—mostly late-nineteenth-century Russian composers like Tchaikovsky and Rimsky-Korsakov. She carried a sketchbook wherever she went and would take it out whenever inspiration struck her, such as when my dad started talking about math. Later, the sketches would become paintings.

Back in the 1970s when I lived with my parents, we would say with great confidence that Dad was "left-brained" (analytical and logical) and Mom was "right-brained" (artsy and creative). This designation was based on a neuroscientific theory called *hemispheric lateralization*, which posited that different sides of the brain process different functions, and that some people show a preference or aptitude for using one side over the other.

I clearly took after my mom—at first. In my twenties I thought I was a very right-brained guy, because I made my living as a musician while painting and writing poetry for fun. I had zero interest in anything quantitative. But then, at thirty, I began to study math and science, and ultimately I became a very left-brained professor. Did I switch hemispherical dominance, going from right-brained to left-brained as an adult? Not really. That old hypothesis of hemispheric lateralization turned out to be a clumsy and inaccurate account of neural processing, and over time, it largely fell out of favor among neuroscientists.

In recent years, however, the concept has come back—in a new and much more precise form. That is due, in no small part, to the work of the British neuroscientist and psychiatrist Iain McGilchrist. In his 2009 book, *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*, McGilchrist argued that the two halves of the brain do not so much have different functions; each hemisphere deals with just about everything. But they do so in consistently different ways. He presented evidence that the right side of the brain is the "master," which asks big, transcendent questions such as "Why am I alive?" The left side—which he calls the "emissary"—addresses such practical questions as "How do I get food so I can *keep* being alive?" In the right hemisphere we ask the *why* questions about life. On the left side, we ask what to do now and how to do it.

Both hemispheres of the brain are relevant to the business of living, but the right side's mysterious questions need to take precedence over the left side's more mundane ones, for life to make sense. After all, without an answer to the big issue of the *why* of life, a human may ultimately have no good reason to find food and stay alive.[2]

The left side of the brain manages what is clear and straightforward in life—the necessary but prosaic tasks you do all day. The right side deals with what is spiritual, mysterious, and awe-inspiring in life. A good word for this is *numinous*, which means a feeling of wonder with a touch of the unknown. This is where you understand things that defy description and precise definition.

Take, for example, emotions. A lot of your emotional life is in this numinous space—easy to understand but impossible to articulate. Not surprisingly, the right hemisphere governs a lot of your emotions. This explains why we ascribe emotions to the activity of certain organs (such as the heart, spleen, and stomach) which sit more on the left side of the body, which is controlled by the right side of the brain.[3] A compassionate person is "all heart"; a grouchy person is "splenetic"; someone "doesn't have the stomach" for a fight.

This is where love resides. My wife, Ester, and I have been married for thirty-four years. We know each other deeply and have no secrets. This morning, she told me she loves me, and she meant it. But this evening, she might get mad at me. I can't predict exactly, because I don't know what will happen between now and then. And even if I could predict what's going to happen, I can't predict her moods. There is no way to "solve" my marriage—only to live it. Our love is numinous.

McGilchrist has shown in his research that religious experience is largely a right-hemisphere, numinous phenomenon as well.[4] This is where you sense the existence of the divine without being able to find or define it like you would, say, your car or your house.

How can you recognize the numinous, right-hemisphere experiences in your own life? Here are some clues.

- Something moves you inexplicably, even if outwardly it seems silly. Say you hear a beautiful song and get choked up. If someone asks why, you can't say. Or you hear a train whistle and it evokes a childhood memory that is sweet to you but would sound trivial to anyone else.
- In a conversation with your partner, you understand their words perfectly. But something isn't "sitting" quite right, and you know that there is a problem.[5]
- You know intuitively that something exists but you can't adequately describe it. For example, you are sure you are called to do something with your life—something bigger than yourself. But you can't say what it is.
- You have a craving for an experience much deeper than your ordinary day-to-day existence. For example, someone describes a spiritual retreat and you badly want to go, even though you aren't especially religious. You have an inchoate sense of a divine presence you might be able to reach.
- Something is vitally important to you—the center of your life—but you can't put that importance into words. Someone asks why you love your spouse and you say something silly like "She is good to me," which could apply equally to your third-grade teacher.
- You are beguiled and attracted by something that reminds you of your suffering. Perhaps it's that sad song that takes you back to a miserable breakup but that connects you with your heart and reminds you that you are still alive even after all that pain.

These experiences cannot be simulated, only lived and experienced in real life. They are also, not coincidentally, where you find your life's meaning—and what we obliterate today in our real-life version of *The Matrix*.

The Palace of Crystal

One way to understand the numinous right hemisphere is that it manages life's *complexity*. Complex challenges in life are easy to understand but impossible to *solve*, so they can only be *lived* and *understood*. This is in contrast to the *complicated* parts of life (managed in the left hemisphere), which can be hard to understand but are solvable once and for all.

Life is full of both kinds of challenges. I need to understand others' emotions (a complex challenge), but I also need to make smart decisions, which in many cases means acting in spite of these emotions (a complicated challenge). I perceive God's love (complex) but also have to figure out how to get to church (complicated). My love for Ester is complex, but we have a lot of complicated challenges as well, such as raising our kids and taking care of household finances.

Here's the thing to notice: The things you really care about the most, which can never be "solved," are complex. The things you care about less but can solve with knowledge and technology are complicated.

Obviously, to live and function, you need both sides of your brain working so you can address both complex and complicated problems in life. If you hang out, neurologically speaking, only on the right, you will have all of life's complex questions of meaning front of mind, but you will be incompetent at doing anything practical to take care of yourself and others. Think of an absent-minded philosopher like Immanuel Kant, who was so absorbed in his big questions that he had to be reminded to bathe and eat.

But you may fare even worse if you get stuck on the left side of your brain, which will allow you to focus only on life's complicated details. Lacking any sense of purpose, you'll spin in circles, distracted by whatever small stuff comes across your field of vision. Only by sheer luck will you make progress in life, hoping that your microfocus alights on a productive course, without any sense of meaning to guide you. Think of someone who becomes übercompetent at a technical task like playing a video game but never thinks about what they actually want to accomplish in work and life, leading to total dysfunction in their relationships and a lack of purpose.

Hemispheric lateralization explains the acute crisis of meaning today. In our increasingly complicated, technology-dominated, and endlessly distracting world, people are shoved to the left side of their brains. They are stuck in a complicated simulation of their complex lives, where there is a lot going on, but which is bereft of mystery and meaning. Here's how Iain McGilchrist put it to me after reading an early version of this chapter. Instead of naturally encountering mystery and meaning as your grandparents did, today we are stuck "in the 2D realm of representation" as well as with "an obsession with mechanism, reductionism, lumpen matter; an emotional coarsening; the loss of higher values such as goodness, beauty, and truth."

When smart people mix up complicated and complex problems, they make ridiculous errors. The Russian cosmonaut Gherman Titov, the second man to orbit the earth, famously visited the 1962 World's Fair in Seattle the year after his achievement. Asked by a reporter about his experience in space, he made a statement that made headlines. "Sometimes people are saying that God is out there," responded Titov. "I was looking around attentively all day but I didn't find anybody there. I saw neither angels nor God."[6] No doubt he was simply parroting the Soviet government's official atheism, but it was a nice synopsis of how the left hemisphere's view of life is blind to the mysteries beyond our scientific comprehension.

His Russian countryman Fyodor Dostoyevsky, author of *The Brothers Karamazov* and *Crime and Punishment*, had this error figured out way back in the 1860s. He even had a term for it: "the palace of crystal."[7] Like Leo Tolstoy, from his youth, Dostoyevsky searched for the meaning of life—you'll learn more about his struggles in the next chapter. He was committed to understanding deep human needs, whether they could be described and measured scientifically or not. Over the course of his work, he concluded that most of what we truly care about in life is somewhere outside the scientific map and rational calculation, but that much of our misery comes from looking for it inside that map—the palace of crystal—"all ready-made and worked out with mathematical exactitude."

What Dostoyevsky didn't know was that the palace of crystal wasn't just a vain philosophical error but a neurobiological glitch that since his time has exploded and spread misery among millions who are looking for meaning but who are, like Titov, staring into space and seeing nothing supernatural. The modern world of technology is literally changing the way people use their brains, rendering them less and less capable of finding life's coherence, purpose, and significance.

This hasn't affected everyone equally, of course: At least people my age *remember* the before times, when meeting a potential mate for the first time involved a real-life conversation, and a big question of life's meaning couldn't be reduced to a Google search. Most young adults today have never known any domain other than Left Brain Land. And this is especially true for the strivers. They know every complicated nook and cranny of that technical dystopia, but the mysterious realm of meaning seems mythical, like the lost kingdom of Atlantis.

Antiboredom Machines

Stuck outside the realm of the numinous right hemisphere, life becomes just an endless loop of complicated left-brain routines and habits—a simulation of a life that is deep, mysterious, and authentic. It's frustrating and empty.

Worse: It's *boring*.

And humans absolutely despise boredom. We find it so unpleasant that we will literally choose physical pain to pass the time. In one famous 2016 study, researchers ran an experiment in which they assigned participants to watch movies that were either sad, neutral, or boring, during which they could self-administer painful electric shocks.[8] Those who had to watch the boring film shocked themselves more frequently and at higher intensity than the people watching the other films. In a similar study, psychologists found that when people were put alone in a room for just a few minutes with nothing to do, but with an option to give themselves painful shocks, many—two-thirds of men and a quarter of women—chose to shock

themselves rather than sit with their thoughts.[9] One participant shocked himself 190 times in fifteen minutes.

The increasing misery of boredom, of course, presented a lucrative entrepreneurial opportunity that extends the simulation into every nook and cranny left in life: create antiboredom machines.

Enter the distractions that now dominate our lives. People are baffled by the speed at which screen-based personal technologies have utterly taken over our personal lives. Not that long ago, no one had a smartphone—the first iPhone was delivered in 2007. Today, five billion people around the world have one in their pocket—most of them all the time.[10] And how often do we pull them out to look at them? The average American looks at their phone 205 times every day.[11] That's 13 times per waking hour, or more than once every five minutes. Three minutes until the Uber comes? Your phone is out. Waiting for an elevator or stopped at a red light? Same.

Why? The answer is not "Because they are addictive." While what we do on our phones is highly addictive, and in the next chapter we will talk about how to cope with that, that doesn't explain why people get addicted in the first place. It is that people are bored out of their minds. Boredom is one of the biggest predictors of all types of addiction; in fact, people who are bored are much more likely to abuse drugs and alcohol.[12]

Why are we so bored? Because life feels repetitive and meaningless, and even a minute here or there with nothing to do feels like an hour. So out comes the phone, every few minutes, all day long, changing our brain chemistry in dangerous ways. And what side of our brains are we on as we do all this? The mundane left, of course, not the mysterious right, where questions of meaning are worked out. The remedy we've created to avoid the boredom of modern life—this app, that video—reinforces our inability to ponder the complex abstractions necessary to formulate any concept of our lives' meaning.[13]

Don't believe me? Well, did you ever notice that you tend to solve difficult problems and come up with good, creative ideas in the shower? It's because you don't have the phone in there (I hope). So while you soap

yourself up, a little bored, perhaps, your right hemisphere flickers on, and creative, meaningful thoughts start to appear.

The Doom Loop

For millions, especially highly educated and ambitious young people, work and life are organized as complicated left-hemisphere problems. This eats away at happiness by degrading the ability to seek and experience the questions of life's meaning—the mysteries comprehended in the dark matter of an increasingly dormant right hemisphere. This makes life boring and raises depression and anxiety.

This is where the vicious cycle starts. To alleviate the boredom and self-anesthetize from sadness and anxiety, people turn to their devices, making things worse. This is the *meaning doom loop*: distraction with easy, addictive technology; a lack of the sense of meaning; feelings of emptiness; numbing with even more use of our addictive devices.

There is nothing especially novel about this doom loop—it's the same with almost all addictions. For example, when people are bored and unhappy, they often drink too much or take recreational drugs. The trouble is that abusing drugs and alcohol tends to crowd out your other interests and isolate you from your family and friends, making your boredom and unhappiness worse—so you drink and drug even more.

This doom loop is exactly what Marc, Maria, and Paul described. I see it every day, and probably so do you. Thousands of parents intuitively know it is a problem when they witness their adolescent kids catatonically staring at their devices for hours at a time, neglecting human interaction.

Doom loops like the one in figure 2 feed on themselves, accelerate, and at some point explode. This explains what looks like a sudden upsurge since 2008 in people saying "My life feels meaningless" and in symptoms of depression and anxiety. We might call this the "Campbell effect" after the character Mike Campbell in Ernest Hemingway's 1926 novel *The Sun Also Rises*. Mike, a veteran of the Spanish Civil War and a drunk, is asked how

he went bankrupt. “Gradually, and then suddenly,” he says.[14] This quip is much cited because it so aptly describes how almost everything bad in life seems to occur. Wars are lost little by little, then all at once. Marriages fray gradually, then rapidly come apart. The 2008 financial crash seemed to come out of nowhere, happening virtually overnight, but trouble had been quietly brewing in the real estate market for years before the whole economy tanked.

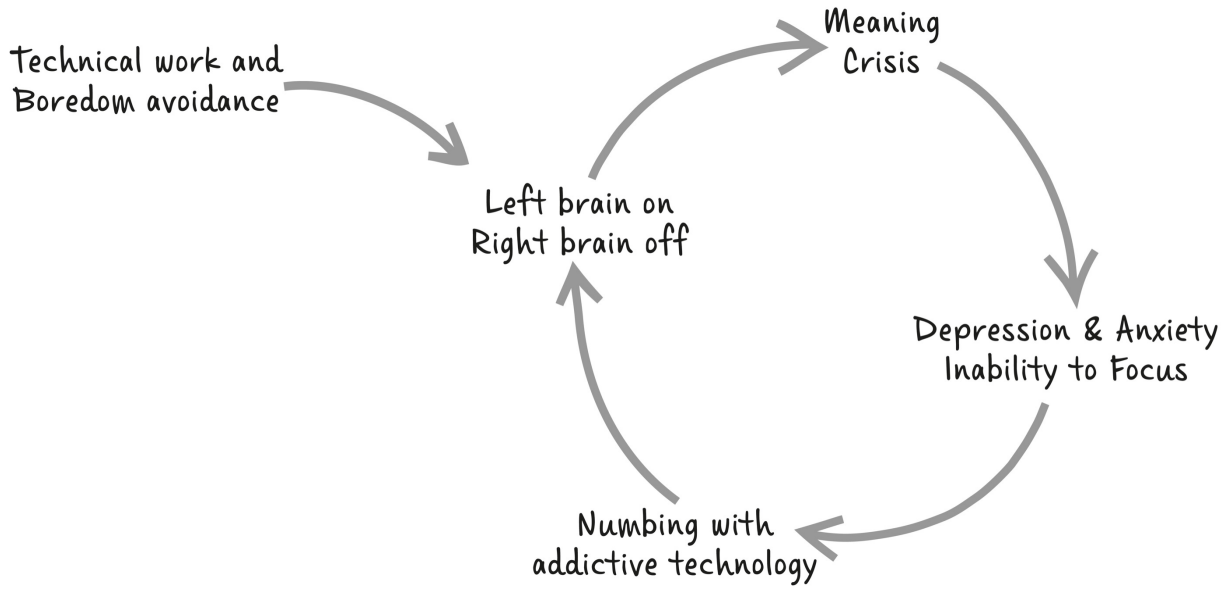


Figure 2. The meaning doom loop

Around 2010, the economy was truly centered on technology, and its capital was Silicon Valley; the fastest-growing companies in world history were the left-brain behemoths that today can make the whole stock market tank. Meanwhile, millions of people were spending hours a day on their devices instead of in person in the company of others. Technology was mediating human interactions more than ever before, and a whole generation had been raised to adolescence and adulthood without building human bonds the old-fashioned way, in real life.[15] A plaintive cry like

Dostoyevsky's warning about the palace of crystal was unusual 150 years ago, but the problem is everywhere today.

Our world, and each of our lives, quite suddenly became overwhelmingly technocratic, sucking millions into the simulation. Scientists like to say that human knowledge is doubling every twelve months. That is explosive, exponential growth. But let's clarify that: *Complicated* knowledge is doubling every twelve months. *Complex* knowledge, which must be lived in real time and can't be discovered or stored by computers, is not increasing at all. This asymmetry explains why we're bombarded with ingenious solutions to age-old problems but never seem to make progress toward greater happiness. In fact, it's the reverse: We are losing our sense of life's meaning faster and faster.

Two Nonsolutions

All this can make you wish there were no personal devices in our lives—or conclude that getting rid of them is the solution. In some parts of our lives, that is true. In a sane world, for example, with competent political leaders who had just a tiny bit of courage, there would be no phones in any schools, from the beginning of the day until the end (especially during lunch, when social interaction occurs).

But getting tech out of your life entirely is not practical or desirable. I am not an antitech Luddite at all, have every device known to mankind, and use them in ways that have made my professional life better and easier. I love what personal computing power—including the computer in my pocket right now—has done to help me solve the complicated problems in my work. The solutions I want don't reside in turning back the clock.

But neither are they found in the technology itself. Some in the entrepreneurial world have concluded that the emptiness of modern life indicates that the complicated solutions simply haven't gone far enough. At some utopian point, they believe we will finally crack the meaning code scientifically to manipulate with certainty both life and death, happiness and

sadness, love and loneliness. The simulation will become perfect. It will give us the friends we want and the love we crave, and all will be well. Your AI boyfriend will be *better* than the flesh-and-blood kind who forgets your birthday.

Most ordinary people intuitively reject this. Once, around midnight, I was taking a taxi from the airport to downtown Seattle, the city where I grew up. We were passing by the huge Boeing Field plant, where the famous aircraft manufacturer stores a lot of planes. Sometimes, when I was a kid, my dad would take me there to look at them from outside the fence. I marveled at how incredible these enormous machines were.

That particular night, on my taxi ride by the field, we could see a new 787 jet brilliantly illuminated in an open hangar. The driver, a Pakistani man about my age, remarked how much he admired the aircraft, and I asked if he minded stopping for a while, so that we could really take it in. We pulled over and got out. We leaned against his car, chatting. He told me his view that science seemed to be solving every problem in life. He'd just read that in twenty years, we would be able to upload our brains into a huge cloud storage site and live forever without our bodies.

I asked him how he felt about this techno-utopian idea. He thought for a minute. "It wouldn't be me at all," he said, "because no one can upload my soul." In other words, he didn't believe that the transcendent meaning of his selfhood could ever be preserved digitally. He was an everyday Neo from *The Matrix*.

I loved the wisdom of that. The spark of inspiration about how to live a full life depends on the fact that it *doesn't* go on forever, so we must make the most of it. And the mystery of faith is that divinity cannot be proven or disproven—as though it were a complicated problem—but must be embraced as a complex, mysterious proposition about the human condition, a supernatural love that transcends earthly evidence, the digital preservation of the soul, or even the ability to explain.

We have a left brain hemisphere for a reason, and it has led to miraculous human ingenuity, making all our lives longer and healthier. The problem is the *mismatch* between our right-brain need for meaning and the

left-brain bias of the world we've made, which encourages us to seek technological solutions to most of the challenges in life.

Breaking Free from the Simulation

The Matrix ends with Neo flying into the sky and delivering a speech to the terrible machines, in which he promises a world without their control or boundaries, signifying the beginning of a world where "anything is possible." Your own future is a little more earthbound than that, I know. But you can declare your independence from the simulation that has increasingly occupied so many lives, provoking the doom loop that has kept life's meaning at a distance.

The strategy we all need—especially young adults starting out on their life's journey—doesn't involve quitting the modern world. Instead, to escape, we must put the complicated parts of life in their proper place, unlearning a bunch of bad habits that have made the search for meaning frustrating and fruitless. Then we need to give our attention to skills that can develop our capacity to find meaning in the mysterious spaces of life. That is about how to live, day to day, with an open mind and an open heart so you can take on the complex and the unknown as they come at you, and meet them with a spirit of love, courage, and adventure.

So what you will get in the following pages is not a list of complicated tools—buy this device, take that supplement, listen to these beta-wave noises while you fall asleep—because, as you know very well at this point, that won't work. What you will get is a new way to see and pursue your relationships and experiences—which is, in fact, a very *old* way of living that was the *only* way until fairly recently—to get "behind" the technical aspects and experience them in a more transcendental, philosophical, spiritual way.

In other words, to experience real life—not a simulation. One note of caution, though: If you escape the Matrix, you will be facing real life, with

real questions that are hard, maybe even frightening. It isn't the easy way to go along and get along in modern life.

But of course, if you want to leave the simulation, you don't really want the easy way, do you?

Key Ideas to Remember

1. Modern life pushes you into the brain's left hemisphere—focused on solving technical, discrete problems with technology and detail obsession—while neglecting what is "numinous" in the right hemisphere. This is where meaning, purpose, and deep human connection reside. This shift results in a sense of emptiness and boredom.

2. The meaning doom loop is a self-reinforcing cycle where people turn to addictive technologies out of boredom and emptiness, leading to even less engagement with life's deeper questions. This exacerbates the crisis of meaning—as well as the sadness and anxiety that come from it.

3. The solution is to reclaim the mystery of real life: love, beauty, faith, and the unknowable aspects of existence—what Tolstoy called "irrational knowledge" and which cannot be simulated. Rather than quitting the modern world, we need to put technology in its place, intentionally foster meaning, and live with openness and courage in the face of life's unanswerable questions.

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CHAPTER 3

Interrupt the Doom Loop



When Fyodor Dostoyevsky was forty-five, his life was a mess. But not for philosophical reasons; his problem was addiction. In fact, he was in a doom loop of his own. In the fall of 1866, to pay off his gambling debts, he had thirty days to finish a novel—about a man suffering from a gambling addiction. Which he had not started, due to his obsessive gambling.

Over the preceding two decades, casino gambling had spread massively around continental Europe and become the fancy pastime for nearly everyone of status, such as Dostoyevsky, who was becoming very famous for his early novels. He became addicted to wagering but, unlike writing, was terrible at it, and lost more money every year throughout the 1860s. As he described a typical night at the tables to a friend in a letter,

> I started with four napoleons [$314] and won 35 napoleons [$2,748] within half an hour. This extraordinary piece of luck went to my head, and I risked those 35 napoleons and lost the whole 35. After paying the landlady, we had six gold napoleons [$471] left for our journey. In Geneva, I pawned my watch.[1]

By the fall of 1866, recently widowed, depressed, and gambling more than ever, Dostoyevsky was in massive debt and facing prison as a result. To come up with the money he owed to his creditors, Dostoyevsky made a deal with a predatory publisher named Stellovsky that he would submit a novel of at least 160 pages by November 1 of that year. Should he fail to do so, per the contract, Stellovsky would take the rights to all his works for ten years, free of charge. This would utterly impoverish the writer. In a panic, Dostoyevsky set to work at the beginning of October, not writing it out by hand but, for speed, dictating it to a stenographer he hired—a young woman by the name of Anna Grigoryevna Snitkina.

Dostoyevsky's subject was the only thing on his mind—a man like him, ruining his life with a gambling addiction. He described in exquisite detail the psychology of a man named Alexei Ivanovich who is in a downward spiral of compulsion and hopelessness. He sees his addiction as "a most foolish and imprudent pursuit." Yet he can't stop, and disgusts himself. "I have simply ruined myself," he concludes.[2] His life is utterly bereft of any purpose beyond roulette. The novel ends with Alexei's conclusion that he will quit gambling…tomorrow.

Dostoyevsky himself ended up better than Alexei, however. Working feverishly, he and Anna produced *The Gambler* with four days to spare, falling in love in the process. They married shortly after submitting the manuscript to the unscrupulous (but disappointed) publisher. And armed with his love for Anna and his deep religious faith, he finally beat his gambling addiction.

Dostoyevsky's recovery started with an epiphany not about gambling per se but about the society he kept, where it was a normal and stylish thing to do. He realized that the sophisticates at the casino were just as wretched as he was. "Hang them all!" he declared. As an individual thinking for himself, he realized, "There are still the makings of a man in me."[3] His recovery took time, with slips here and there over the next four years. But in the subsequent years he learned about his own mind and why gambling had so gripped him, and also learned that his life's true meaning lay in the ordinary parts of his existence—what he had once found boring compared with the

rush of playing roulette. He went on to publish his greatest novels, including *The Brothers Karamazov*, and had a truly good life with Anna and their children.

There are valuable lessons for us in Dostoyevsky's story, or any story of someone who has been able to break out of an addictive cycle and go on to find life's meaning. Doing so always has three elements to it. First, they rebel against the popular behavior and thinking that kept them enchained. Second, with knowledge, willpower, and the help of others, they break the hold that addiction has on their brain. Finally, they learn to appreciate the life that once seemed boring to them—but that was, in truth, filled with intense purpose and significance. In Dostoyevsky's last moments before dying, he read from the Bible to his family and then turned to Anna, saying, "I have always loved you passionately and have never been unfaithful to you ever, even in my thoughts."[4]

You probably aren't a gambling addict like Dostoyevsky, nor hooked on drugs or alcohol. But if you find yourself stuck in the distractions of modern life while feeling bereft of deep meaning, before doing anything else, you need to get unstuck—to interrupt the doom loop. That requires declaring your independence by rebelling against the herd thinking that is creating the quiet desperation of millions; refusing to be just another statistic in the scourge of depression and anxiety; and defying the economic forces that productize and monetize every moment of your attention. It also means detoxing from the addictive properties of the tech we have adopted to anesthetize ourselves in a world that once felt boring—but that most definitely is *not*. Finally, it means refusing to give in to the antiboredom devices—and, indeed, getting bored in a productive, healthy way, perhaps for the first time in a long time. These steps will unshackle your brain, heart, and soul to seek the mysteries of true meaning.

Start Fighting Back

"Hell on earth."

That is how one former opiate addict bitterly described her prior life to me. People previously hooked on something tend to talk this way about what they once believed was normal and even good—but which they ultimately came to realize was making their lives a misery. They tell you that they are baffled by how they didn't see the truth about how dangerous it was while in the middle of it. They hate it and are resentful that they were once sucked in. In fact, it is this very anger that is part of their escape—rage gives them the courage to leave their old life.

If you saw yourself in the epidemic of meaninglessness in the previous chapters and recognized powerful addictions and behaviors keeping you in a doom loop, then you will need some righteous anger yourself to spur a rebellion in you. You will need emotional energy to make it possible to walk away from the rest of the world who are numbly staring at their devices and missing their lives.

In truth, you *should* be angry about the status quo in America today. If you are simply average, you are checking your phone a couple *hundred* times per day and spending more than five hours or more looking at the device.[5] You probably check it within ten minutes of waking up and almost always have it with you on the toilet. You spend more time with your device than with anyone in your life—like Marc at the beginning of this book, you might not see anyone in real life for days at a time because of technology.

You can blame this behavior on yourself, and you are responsible for your own decisions, of course. But you are also part of the epidemic of acute addiction that has befallen billions of other people, many of whom have lost their sense of life's meaning.[6] Unfortunately, this addiction is arguably harder to kick than many traditional ones we always hear about, because it is so widespread. A recovering drug addict once told me that getting off cigarettes was harder than getting off heroin, because smoking is legal and cigarettes are available every place you look. It's hard to break away from a tech addiction, because you literally can't go anyplace or do anything without seeing another addict using right next to you. Plus, you increasingly have to use the addictive device for almost every normal part

of life, from opening a high-tech locked door to getting into your bank account.

That's why the first step is not about abstinence—throwing away your phone and living without screens. It is, instead, declaring your independence while still living among a nonsober majority who will find what you are trying to do strange. The first step in breaking the doom loop in your life is, then, adopting the spirit of rebellion against a culture that is harming you.

Defiance and Self-Reliance

If you read philosophy, some of it probably doesn't really grab you, because the ideas seem foreign to your way of thinking. Others, however, light you right up. For me, the philosopher who does this the most—the thinker who thrills my soul—is Ralph Waldo Emerson, the nineteenth-century American writer and Unitarian pastor. Emerson founded the American philosophical school of transcendentalism, which taught that people should be self-reliant, rugged individualists. He influenced a century of quintessentially American thinkers, including his close friend Henry David Thoreau, author of *Walden* and "Civil Disobedience." For me, reading Emerson is like drinking a tall glass of cool water on a hot summer's day.

Emerson was a notorious freethinker, unburdened by the conventions of his time. He was basically a walking middle finger to the dumb traditions and sheeplike thinking that held people back. If he were alive today, he would be appalled at the educational uniformity, technological distraction, and immediate gratification that keep our most ambitious young people anesthetized and unable to find their life's meaning. He saw a version of the problem in his own time, in fact, and wrote a handbook for breaking out, in the form of a long essay called "Self-Reliance."[7] It was published way back in 1841, but it is still fresh today. I have found no better manual than "Self-Reliance" on how, in seven steps, to rebel against a psychogenic epidemic.

Step 1, according to Emerson, is to reclaim your privacy. “My life is for itself and not for a spectacle,” he wrote. “I much prefer that it should be of a lower strain, so it be genuine and equal, than that it should be glittering and unsteady.” Emerson, of course, could have had no conception of the technologies that have enabled our era of unrestrained sharing, yet his words speak directly to the risk of gaudily advertising ourselves online. The common tendency toward oversharing on social media, especially by young adults, is associated with anxiety, attention seeking, and addiction.[8] So don’t make a spectacle of yourself; respect your own privacy. Stop oversharing.

Step 2 is to stop conforming to others’ thinking. “Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist,” Emerson said. He believed that even if you’re inclined to agree with the conventional wisdom, you should still be a skeptic. Think and act independently, because to embrace the wisdom of any party or clique is, he said, to put on a “prison-uniform.”

Emerson did not mean you must do everything for yourself, such as growing all your food or removing your own appendix. He meant making choices about your life and welfare based on independent beliefs and convictions. So don’t conform to conventional wisdom—question everything. Beware of technological fads and ideological panics. If “everybody’s doing it,” run the other way. Think for yourself.[9]

Step 3 is to be true to yourself. As Emerson put it, “the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude.” But be advised that going your own way (by, say, deleting your social media accounts) can be costly, which Emerson acknowledged when he wrote: “For nonconformity the world whips you with its displeasure.” However, when you stop trying to assimilate and champion yourself as an individual, then you won’t feel hurt when you do differ from the group. So make independence your goal. Walk alone when necessary. Choose solitude over the false friends of “online community.” Take pride in *not* fitting in when the crowd is acting idiotically.

Walking your own path in life means doing the work to be happy and successful by yourself; no one will carry you. “If the finest genius studies at

one of our colleges," Emerson wrote, "and is not installed in an office within one year afterwards in the cities or suburbs of Boston or New York, it seems to his friends and to himself that he is right in being disheartened." He goes on to contrast this instance with the case of a "sturdy lad" from the countryside who builds his own life as he sees fit and "always, like a cat, falls on his feet." He is worth "a hundred of these city dolls." So don't depend, like the city doll, on any outside intervention or technology for your happiness.

That leads to Emerson's step 4. "Instead of the gong for dinner," he writes, "let us hear a whistle from the Spartan fife." This means deferring gratification: choosing to pursue long-term purpose with passion and perseverance, even when doing so is arduous. Set long-term goals and make progress toward them each day. Once again, this isn't the easy way, but that is exactly Emerson's point: Does it hurt to tackle hard things? Of course it does. Good!

You might think Emerson is arguing that you should abandon any idea of winning the admiration of others. He is not. He simply advocates that you discriminate between what is good and true and everything else. "If you are noble, I will love you," he writes, but "if you are not, I will not hurt you and myself by hypocritical attentions." In other words, give noble, good people their due, but devote your attention only to what is edifying and uplifting. That's step 5: things that are trivial, immoral, or silly—the ridiculous distractions keeping you hooked—are not even worth condemning. You should just eliminate them from your life. Ditch all the empty cultural calories and focus only on what nourishes you. Be remorseless.

Step 6 is to be willing to change your mind and say you were wrong. This is hard: people hate to appear inconsistent, because they think it makes them appear weak or unserious, even hypocritical. Emerson dismissed this fear with one of his essay's most famous lines: "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines." He thought that you should say what you believe to be true without apology, whether or not it matches what you said yesterday.

Another way to exercise this lesson is to refuse to participate in ideologically polarized culture at all—especially online.

Changing your mind openly is an important form of being honest, and complete honesty is step 7. You can make your own decisions and form your own beliefs only "by speaking the truth," a serious matter that, accordingly, he calls "the state of war." Before you dismiss this phrase as hyperbolic, consider how much lying and appeasement are involved with taking the path of least resistance in life; it is incredibly costly.[10] To be truly self-reliant, you must have the courage to stand up to this placatory tendency and be prepared to say that the culture of distraction is harmful and walk away.

Read "Self-Reliance" (when you are done with this book, of course); it will give you courage, energy, and strength to rebel against the epidemic-ravaged culture in which life feels meaningless for millions of talented, ambitious people. It was written for you, a striver who craves life's purpose. Emerson concluded "Self-Reliance" with one more lesson to give you strength as you go your own way: "Nothing can bring you peace but yourself. Nothing can bring you peace but the triumph of principles." Amen to that.

Thinking for Yourself Isn't Easy

Guard your privacy. Think for yourself. Go your own way.

I have taught Emerson's ideas for many years, and try to live by them. Emerson makes it sound easy, but of course it isn't easy at all. Breaking out of a psychogenic epidemic is hard, even when you know the beliefs and behaviors behind it are stupid. Most young adults today openly agree, for example, that screen overuse is hurting their mental health and that they spend too much time online.[11] They don't like the higher education system that trains them to be workaholic drones while simultaneously indoctrinating them to be politically aggrieved. They feel empty and lonely. Yet to reject it all and go their own way feels scary and hard.

If you feel this way, it's not because you are weak or timid. The problem is evolution. *Homo sapiens* are a kin-based species. Throughout nearly our entire history, until just a few thousand years ago, we lived in relatively small groups of twenty to fifty individuals, called bands by anthropologists. Everyone in a band knew everyone else, usually intimately, and the relationships were ones of reciprocity and mutual interdependence. You have kids; I hunt; she gathers berries; he keeps watch for other bands in the area who might want to loot our camp. This arrangement sounds hopelessly ancient now, but it existed until about ten thousand years ago almost everyplace, and still does in some places.

This is our ancestral environment, and our brains were, and are, built to help us survive under these conditions. Among other ways they did so was with a little chunk of tissue in the limbic system called the dorsal anterior cingulate cortex (dACC), which has one very important job: making you feel pain when separated from *your people*. In the ancient world, to be excluded from a group you cared about would be lethal, because you would wind up wandering the savanna or frozen tundra by yourself and either freezing to death or getting hunted down. You need an incentive to stay in the good graces of your band.

That incentive is avoiding the sadness and anguish of social rejection, which proceed from the dACC.[12] Your brain in today's modern world is the same one you would have been outfitted with thousands of years ago, so when you are not following along with your social group, your dACC lights up and says, *Careful! This might get you killed.* You know consciously that the stakes aren't so high for going your own way today, but your limbic system doesn't know that at all. It tells you that it is a matter of life and death to get the education everyone else does, think the way they do about culture and politics, work, date and find a mate like everyone else, and spend hours posting content to gain followers on social media—all to *fit in*.[13] Does this suck the meaning out of your life? Of course it does. But that's a lot better than getting kicked out of your camp and becoming a leopard's lunch.

But this instinct leads to a lot of unnecessary suffering in modern life. If you ask older people what they regret about their lives, many will say it was not following their heart or conscience when what was going on around them was stupid or harmful to themselves or others. In fact, long-term regrets tend not to be for something you did but rather something you *didn't* do—like rejecting a psychogenic epidemic and taking your own path in life in order to find meaning.[14]

Digital Detox

You might be thinking that since your urge to fit in is biological, in the last section I was telling you to fight against your humanity. On the contrary, I am asking you to stand up to your animal impulses so that you can achieve your loftiest humanity, which is in your moral aspirations. And now we'll take this even further by defying the neurochemistry keeping you hooked on your devices.

Dostoyevsky described his gambling addiction as being like a fever that took away his reasoning capacities. It took hold of him like a possession. In fact, that is how all addicts talk about their habit, and it may resonate with you when you have an overpowering urge to pull out your device the moment you think about it, which happens every couple of minutes all day long. Let's talk about what is actually happening in your brain—knowledge you need to help you break away.

Scientists define an addiction—be it to alcohol, drugs, gambling, pornography, or social media—as behavior with five components. The first is that it is *compulsive*, meaning it features an overwhelming urge. The second is *loss of control*, meaning you give in to the compulsion even if you don't want to. The third is *continued use in spite of the harm* it does. The fourth is *craving*, which is a preoccupation with the behavior or substance. The last is *tolerance and withdrawal*, meaning you need more and more over time (escalation), and it gets harder and harder to stop.

Awful, right? Like a mistake in our evolution? Addictions are actually a side effect of the brain's ability to learn things that are good for us, using a neurotransmitter—a chemical released by neurons to communicate with one another—called dopamine. This is a chemical that makes you feel anticipation of a reward from doing something you like, as well the reward itself. The anticipation and rewards create patterns of behavior based on *wanting* and *liking*—leading to *learning*: I want to find a gazelle to eat (a little spritz of dopamine, which feels great); I like it when I find one (bigger spritz—awesome!); I learn to go back to where I found it (so I get more of those sweet dopamine spritzes).

This was a great way to learn how to get food or mates in the ancestral environment, which is why your ancestors passed on their genes to you. But of course, like all good things in life, there's a cost to all this. The *wanting-liking-learning* mechanism you inherited is why you spent four hours last night scrolling memes and silly reels and were filled with self-loathing because it wasted time you could have spent reading a book, talking to friends, or getting a good night's sleep.

In fact, this amazing neurobiological mechanism drives all addictions. Say you're feeling a bit bored—tired after work and unmotivated to do something fun that requires mental or physical effort. Boredom being a real drag, you pick up your phone to see what's going on online. After a few minutes of scrolling and chuckling, liking posts and leaving comments here and there, you are mentally engaged without any effort, which you *wanted* and you *like*. Your dopamine system just taught you a lesson. Tomorrow, when you feel the same way, you remember yesterday, and that gives you the desire to pull out your phone again in anticipation of the reward.[15]

But here things become a problem. If you get exactly the effect you did in the past, it's just…OK. That's *tolerance*. But your brain doesn't want to feel *just OK*—and it certainly doesn't want to feel worse than normal. It wants another nice dopamine bump, which comes only from upping the dose. That's *escalation*. To get the payoff and keep feeling really good, you naturally spend more and more time looking at your device. This pleasure seeking leads to addiction. And paradoxically, that actually wipes out the

reward it seeks and simply yields habits. As the psychiatrist Anna Lembke, author of *Dopamine Nation*, puts it, "The paradox is that hedonism, the pursuit of pleasure for its own sake, leads to anhedonia, which is the inability to enjoy pleasure of any kind."[16]

Humans, in their ingenuity, have taken the natural learning mechanism of dopamine-moderated wanting and liking, supercharged it to smooth the ups and downs of life, and, in so doing, turned it into a threat to our well-being, and even to our lives. For example, sugar-loaded chocolate raises dopamine levels above baseline by 50 percent—more than would the sweet fruit that your ancestors gathered for easy calories to stay alive. Alcohol raises it by 150 percent. Methamphetamine raises it by 1,000 percent.[17] Meanwhile, certain behaviors can boost dopamine levels as well, which is why they, too, can be addictive. These include—you guessed it—pornography, gaming, and social media.

Tech addiction is so potent precisely because it has been specifically engineered to tap into our ancient dopamine system.[18] And that addiction is one of the principal reasons why millions of people lack access to the part of their brain they need to contemplate life's meaning, staying stuck in the doom loop.

As you can imagine, this dynamic disproportionately affects lonely people, especially adolescents and young adults, accelerating their meaning crisis.[19] Even for older, supposedly well-adjusted people, it can have disastrous consequences. In my academic world, I see any number of once-productive professors who haven't published a book in a decade but who post online more than twenty times a day. Inevitably, they're unhappy about their work and their lives, but they can't quite say why.

Digital addiction is a meaning killer. And that's not the only problem. Mess with your dopamine system and you're messing with your ability to regulate all sorts of behavior. Such interference is correlated with smoking, drug use, and alcohol use.[20] In other words, the addictions are all linked. If you're hooked on your devices, you may be more likely to drink too much as well. That pushes life's purpose further out of reach and multiplies your problems.

As we discussed in the last chapter, you aren't going to get rid of all new technology. You are still going to have a phone with apps on it. It just isn't realistic to think that a ban on tech is in the cards. There are a few ways that researchers have found, however, to limit the addictive qualities of technology and thus interrupt the doom loop. First, make personal rules that ban the distractions during critical times each day. For example, I have a no-device policy during meals. I also keep the phone out of the bedroom and put it away well before bed. If I need to, I set notifications so someone really important (my wife and kids, when I'm on the road) can reach me, but no one else. I promise you that you won't be missing anything if you do this, except the screams from your addicted brain to look at silly nonsense and check compulsively for tedious emails.

Second, you can set aside device-free short breaks each year. Maybe this is a week during the month of August when things are naturally slow. Personally I do this during a multiday silent religious retreat. I know it sounds hard, and it takes some logistics and planning, but the benefit for your brain will be substantial. And after the difficult first few days, you will feel like you are waking up from a coma. You will notice sounds and smells for the first time in a long time. Food will taste better and conversations will seem more interesting. The second year, you'll be looking forward to it.

Third, consume mindfully. Most screen overuse is caused by mindlessness. If you find yourself reaching for your phone anytime you're not otherwise occupied, you are simply killing time. The minutes add up: you're probably shocked at how high the number is if you get a notification on your phone about your weekly screen time. Ask yourself honestly how much of that time is *not* mindless consumption.

Try to establish a rule of set times when you look at social media, and then be mindful about it. Adapt the Buddhist master Thích Nhất Hạnh's instruction in *The Miracle of Mindfulness*: "While washing the dishes, one should only be washing the dishes, which means that while washing the dishes one should be completely aware of the fact that one is washing the dishes."[21] The practice of mindfulness has been found very effective in

treating addiction—not least because it can reveal how little you actually enjoy the addictive activity.[22]

Fourth, turn off the cues that hijack your brain. Dopamine spikes when we think spontaneously about whatever we are addicted to, but that process doesn't have to be spontaneous. If something else prompts the thought, the mechanism is the same. That's why tech companies like to build in notifications to get your attention: to activate the dopamine cycle. They know that a ping from a message or a mention will trigger the response that *you must look right now* to satisfy your curiosity. But ask yourself: Is this mechanism controlling your behavior? Is it really worth the payoff? The solution is simple: turn off all notifications, except perhaps the ringer for when your mother is calling.

Fifth, physically separate yourself more from your devices. A piece of advice nutritionists always give patients is to avoid having snacks in the house. The idea is that if an unhealthy eating habit costs effort, that will cut down on consumption. The same idea can apply to the phone. The digital-technology scholar Cal Newport advocates the "phone foyer": He leaves his phone by the front door when he walks into his house, and doesn't put it in his pocket until he leaves again.[23] If he needs to look at it, he does so only in the foyer.

Get Bored the Right Way

Boredom is a paradoxical thing. We hate being bored by our daily lives, as I pointed out in chapter 2. But we need to have times of stillness and inactivity, where we "do nothing" and defocus.

This is hard and even scary. When people have too much time on their hands and nothing to do, they are at risk for using drugs and alcohol. That's why parents try so hard to keep their kids busy outside school with sports, clubs, and all sorts of activities. "Idle hands are the devil's workshop," as they say. Relatedly, you might say that idle brains are the internet's workshop—same idea. But inactivity is incredibly important for the proper

functioning of our minds. When your mind wanders, you involuntarily dig into complex right-brain topics. As we discussed in the last chapter, if you avoid boredom because it is uncomfortable, you will fire up the doom loop of meaninglessness. You relieve monotony with left-brain distractions, all of which push meaning further out of our reach.

The long-term goal of this book is to eradicate a boring, meaningless life. Ironically, to achieve that, we need to embrace the discipline of boredom, invited on purpose and used to enrich your life.

Professor Ellen Langer, a psychologist at Harvard, may be the world's leading expert on the virtues of voluntary boredom vis-à-vis the practice of *mindfulness*. Langer brought the idea of mindfulness to Western audiences decades ago, long before most meditation coaches and self-improvement gurus took up the idea. She defines the practice as "simply noticing new things" in a way that "puts you in the moment."[24] Say you're on the train: Put away your phone, fold your hands in your lap, and look out the window. Make a conscious note of what you see passing by—*Wow, trees*. As simple as that, mindfulness. Is it boring? *Good*. It means the right hemisphere of your brain has a chance.

Lean into the boredom that being deviceless in the moment brings. Remember, this is naturally uncomfortable, like exercise. Treat boredom as you do the gym—something you do every day (or most days) as a matter of basic maintenance, without which you will deteriorate. Speaking of the gym, try working out without headphones. It will become like the shower, and you'll find that you have your best creative ideas while pumping iron, when the right hemisphere fires up. Get a boredom buddy with whom you go for deviceless walks and drives. Become committed to excellence at being bored.

I was amused last year when, in my graduate happiness seminar, one of my students—a young striver par excellence—asked how he could measure his progress in boredom. In fact, some are actually becoming competitive about doing that. A new "extreme boredom" trend among some young men involves doing nothing but staring at the seat in front of them for an entire long-haul flight:[25] no entertainment, no snacks, no sleeping, no

conversations. You can decide for yourself if this sounds wonderful or ridiculous.

Obviously, the primary objective isn't actually the boredom itself, any more than the point of lifting weights is the pain in the midst of a lift (the objective is the muscle protein synthesis that occurs as a result). The primary point of allowing boredom into your life is the effect it has on your brain, even if, in the moment, you don't like it. But you will find that a funny thing happens when you do: you start to like it. In the idle, deviceless moments you experience, your senses become attuned to the details around you, the tiny miracles, like a spider walking across the floor (don't step on it!), that you would have missed.

Either way, you can almost certainly benefit from more empty time and blank space in your life, which allow your brain to ponder questions of meaning. If a red-eye is not for you, start modestly. Try the train exercise whenever you're a passenger (the bus or subway will do). You could take a walk or do your workout without podcasts or music. You could even (gasp!) do nothing while waiting in line. If that's too much of a boredom challenge, just start by going to bed, turning off the lights, and lying there. You might like what happens.

This Is Just the Beginning

Fyodor Dostoyevsky was a fine writer in his thirties and forties, when he was still gambling compulsively. But when he escaped his gambling problem, his work changed, because his novels now dug deeply into the meaning of life that he himself was experiencing for the first time. And that is when, by the estimation of most scholars, his work became truly great. I have no doubt that you, like Dostoyevsky, are a high performer, even if you are in the grip of compulsive device use. Marc, Maria, and Paul are high performers too, doing good work. The problem is not that they are unemployed or lying in a ditch somewhere. The problem is that their lives

don’t feel meaningful, but when they do, their work will be even better. But more importantly, they will find their lives truly worth living, as you will.

The solution starts with the steps in this chapter: rebellion, detoxification, and getting comfortable without your devices. That interrupts the doom loop keeping you on the left side of your brain and keeping you distracted from what your heart and soul are craving. But then the real work starts. The rest of this book will show you what you can do that will ignite the right hemisphere of your brain—the complex, mysterious parts of life that are increasingly absent from the way people study, work, and relax.

We can identify these parts of life by following a very common scientific technique when there is an epidemic afoot. When a virus is sweeping through a population, even when almost everyone gets sick, there are always a small number of people who, for some reason, resist the illness. Researchers always take a great interest in these outliers, asking how their immune systems differ from those of the general population—and whether a vaccine could mimic this resistance.

Similarly, even in the worst psychogenic epidemics, you can always find some resisters. In my work, I meet people suffering like Marc, Maria, and Paul almost every day. But occasionally, I meet a young striver who nonetheless has the social antibodies that protect her or him from the ravages of the meaning crisis. What these people do by accident—and what your grandparents did in the course of their ordinary lives—you need to do on purpose in order to stimulate your right hemisphere, where meaning is to be discerned.

- ***Aporia.*** This Greek word means a state of puzzlement or impasse, in which no clear resolution is apparent. People whose lives are rich in meaning spend a lot of time asking big, philosophical, often unanswerable questions.
- ***Romance.*** People find meaning in the pursuit—even the unsuccessful pursuit—of romantic love.
- ***Transcendence.*** Meaning comes when you stop paying attention to yourself, through spiritual activity, focusing on the welfare of others, or both.

- ***Calling.*** People who experience deep meaning almost always search for their calling—what they are meant to do with their work and lives.
- ***Beauty.*** Meaning appears when something profoundly moves you, be it a beautiful song, a breathtaking landscape, or an act of moral beauty by another person.
- ***Suffering.*** People who have meaningful lives do not try to eliminate the suffering from life but rather have learned how to manage it and grow from it.

Not surprisingly, these are exactly the dimensions of life most notably absent in the stories of people suffering from a lack of meaning. Modern life is about finding answers, not asking questions. Romantic love is often absent, or "solved" using technology. There is little or no spiritual seeking. Work is a job, not a calling. There is little natural or artistic beauty in daily life. And suffering is something to be eliminated.

The journey to finding meaning requires taking on each of these tendencies. Some are probably more salient to your life than others right now, but if you are in a meaning crisis, all of them can be adopted, as you will clearly see.

Does tackling these parts of life scare you? *Good*. That means you are on the right track. Adopting each habit involves a difficult—even scary—challenge. But if you take them on with courage, you will be fully alive, and meaning lies ahead.

Questions for Reflection and Self-Assessment

1. When was the last time you made an intentional decision to break away from "herd thinking" or cultural expectations (online or offline)? What happened as a result?

2. Are you a bit of a "pleaser" and afraid to quit doing what everyone else does, even when you hate it? If so, why?

3. How willing are you to change your mind, admit you were wrong, or honestly assess your flaws and hopes? What holds you back from being completely honest with yourself and others?

4. What personal technology rules (if any) do you currently follow? Are they enough to protect your attention and well-being?

5. When was the last time you set aside device-free time (an afternoon, a day, or even a week)? How did it make you feel, and what did you notice about yourself during that period?

6. Are there times of day or activities during which you could realistically implement a “no device” policy, such as meals or before bed? What would it take to commit to that rule?

7. What role does stillness—even boredom—play in your life? Do you treat boredom as something to be avoided or as an opportunity for reflection and creativity?

8. Which distractions—digital or otherwise—most often keep you from doing what is truly meaningful and purposeful in your life? Are you ready to “get mad and get free”?

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CHAPTER 4

Three Big Questions You Must Ask



Koko, a western lowland gorilla, was born on July 4, 1971, at the San Francisco Zoo. She was fostered and trained by the animal psychologist Francine “Penny” Patterson, who theorized that apes were capable of communication far beyond what had been observed in the past. She set out to prove her thesis by teaching Koko sign language, and she succeeded: over more than four decades, Koko learned more than one thousand words in signing.[1] Koko became an international celebrity and a mascot for wildlife conservation, featured twice on the cover of *National Geographic* and as the heroine of a bestselling children’s book, *Koko’s Kitten*. When Koko died of natural causes in 2018, at the ripe old age (for gorillas) of forty-six, millions of people mourned her loss, and an obituary appeared in *The New York Times*.[2]

The reason Koko so captured the imaginations of people all over the world was not that she was actually writing poetry or composing speeches but rather that her development of an expansive vocabulary in a human-devised language seemed to blur the line between *Homo sapiens* and nonhuman primates. Indeed, those associated with Koko took great pains to emphasize Koko’s quasi-human qualities. Koko was capable of

understanding her environment and expressing her wants to her human caretakers.[3] But there was one thing Koko never did with language, even once. Most people never noticed it.

Koko never asked a single question.

This gets overlooked because asking questions seems so basic; it is such an ordinary, everyday part of life. But no trained ape, nor any other nonhuman animal, has ever done this. What sets *Homo sapiens* apart from other living beings—and, I believe, gives us a spark of the divine—is not the ability to give answers to increasingly complicated problems. That's amazing and requires a lot of brainpower. But it is the willingness and capacity to wonder and inquire about things large and small that are the essence of our uniquely human consciousness.

This is what Socrates meant when he said, "The unexamined life is not worth living."[4] In other words, a life that is not deeply questioned is bereft of meaning. The deeper the questions without easy answers—or any answers at all—the better. Living a life unquestioned is to live like Koko—meeting immediate needs, but without a trace of the mystery of what lies behind it all. And not surprisingly, therefore, this is the first habit of people with meaningful lives: they ask a *lot* of questions. In this chapter, I will give you three to start pondering to help you discern your life's coherence, purpose, and significance.

The Path of No Path

A couple of years ago, I started noticing a subtle difference in how people my age remembered their college years, compared with people who attended university much more recently. Older people reminisce all the time about late-night philosophical bull sessions with their friends—deep conversations about life's unanswered questions. No doubt the conversations would sound hilariously pretentious if they were heard today, but they felt profound and significant at the time, and left behind deep friendships and fond memories. Today, in contrast, young people rarely

have these memories, and you already know why: late-night sessions with friends have been crowded out by the ever-present use of devices. Why have a conversation about the meaning of life when you can watch forty hilarious YouTube shorts instead?

What is missing is what the ancient Greeks called *aporia*, which means "no path."[*] In other words, it is a state of puzzlement you invite on purpose, usually by asking and considering very deep but unanswerable questions—the late-night dorm material. As Aristotle wrote, "For those who wish to get clear of difficulties it is advantageous to discuss the difficulties well; for the subsequent free play of thought implies the solution of the previous difficulties, and it is not possible to untie a knot of which one does not know."[5] In terms we have developed in this book, complex and unanswerable life questions lead to *aporia*, which stimulates numinousness, leading to the sense of your life's meaning.

People have known this for millennia, which is why perplexing, unanswerable questions figure so prominently in almost every philosophical and religious tradition. In Plato's writings, he recounts an interaction between Socrates and an Athenian citizen named Euthyphro, who was in the process of prosecuting his own father for an alleged crime.[6] Socrates, believing that Euthyphro was flouting his filial duty, sought to enlighten the man by asking a series of philosophical questions involving how piety and justice differ in one's mind and heart. His aim was to use this interrogation not to get specific answers but to help Euthyphro grasp a better understanding of himself.

Four hundred years after Socrates, in Judaism, Rabbi Hillel the Elder taught that one must ask difficult, confusing questions to open life's truths: *If I am not for me, who will be for me? And when I am for myself alone, what am I? And if not now, then when?*[7] Later, Christians took up the practice, exhorting the faithful to ponder what Saint Paul meant when he told the Thessalonians to "pray without ceasing."[8] This question stimulated one of the masterpieces of Christian mysticism, *The Way of a Pilgrim*, which chronicles a Russian pilgrim's wandering while considering this puzzle.[9] On the other side of the globe, Japanese Zen Buddhists

developed the system of koans, or riddles, such as “What is the sound of one hand clapping?,” without clear answers to train the minds of junior practitioners. Hindu Vedanta poses similar mysterious questions to its adherents to open their minds to the divine.

These traditions might at first seem very different from one another. But in fact, all of them share important similarities: first, they all focus on questions themselves, not answers. This is one of the most common misperceptions of people who are ignorant of mystical religious traditions and see only dogma.

The second similarity between the traditions is that no “right” answers may exist at all—and that is fine. The great psychiatrist Carl Jung considered “no good answer” to be precisely the right way to understand what matters most: “The greatest and most important problems of life are all fundamentally insoluble,” he wrote.[10] In other words, no charismatic influencer on YouTube, no app, and no complicated technological breakthrough can enlighten you.

And this leads to the third similarity, which is that *aporia*, the state of puzzlement, makes you seek understanding, which is *felt* and changes your life, whether you can communicate that understanding in words or not. This is because it is working in the right hemisphere, where truths are understood rather than articulated. (In the vast majority of people, language is processed in the left hemisphere of the brain.)[11] This explains why the twentieth-century Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein observed that language itself is incapable of expressing subtle truths, metaphysical ideas, or anything subjective. In fact, to insist on answers is to rule out an understanding of deep meaning. Why? “The limits of my language,” Wittgenstein wrote, “stand for the limits of my world.”[12]

Saint Augustine of Hippo got this point across when he argued that God is what people naturally want, but His divine nature evades human expression—in fact, merely to talk about the God is to trivialize Him.[13] And yet we go on and on about God, don’t we? We ask big questions about the divine that, we imagine, will someday be answered. And as we do, the

asking, the seeking, somehow creates an understanding that defies words and a sense of meaning that transcends the limits of our words.

If you are ready to invite *aporia* to open your mind, you might think it is necessary to join a monastery or convent. Not about to do that? All right, then, let's take apart the method and pose a series of meaning questions you can start contemplating right now, no matter what you are doing in life.

The *Why* of Your Life

"Know thyself" is the most famous maxim of Greek philosophy, carved into stone on the Temple of Apollo in Delphi. Why? In his tragedy *Thyestes*, the Stoic philosopher Seneca writes, "Death lies heavily on him who, though to all the world well known, is stranger to himself alone."[14] To know yourself is your best defense against making all kinds of terrible errors in life. More to the point, you can't know the meaning of your life if you don't know yourself.

And yet most people don't know themselves very well at all. Researchers demonstrate this by showing, for example, that self-ratings of skill and performance—how good you are at doing something—are moderate to meager in their accuracy and are generally less reliable than others' assessments of you.[15] Similarly, you yourself are no more accurate at predicting your future behavior than other people's predictions of how you'll act.[16] If you don't even know what you are good at or going to do next, it's not a big surprise that you don't know deeply philosophical things like the coherence, purpose, and significance of your life.

The biggest reason for this self-ignorance is because we are urged to focus on the wrong questions about ourselves. Meaning requires knowledge of our life's *why*. But we spend almost all of our energy on the *what* and *how* instead. This is especially true for strivers.

Think about what you tell someone you don't know in order to introduce yourself. "Hi, I'm Arthur," I might say. "I'm a university professor." This is a *what* statement. This is true, but totally inadequate to explain anything

about myself as a person. That's fine at a cocktail party, because depth is not what anyone is really looking for. It is a problem, however, if this is how I know *myself*. If I wake up each day, look in the mirror, and say, *That's Professor Brooks!* then I am *way* too invested in my career and am in for a terrible crisis when, inevitably, I am no longer a professor. (That, in fact, is what happens to many strivers when they have a career setback or are forced to retire.) And yet that is how many people know themselves—as a walking *what*. They self-identify with their jobs or some other exterior identity, such as a religious affiliation or activist cause.

The *what* question imparts information and is answerable very concretely but is inherently bereft of meaning. If I tell you I am a professor, it tells you nothing about the true me; and if I see myself only in that way, in terms of my outward accomplishments, I will feel a lack of meaning. This is why strivers often have such a hard time with meaning: they are primarily about the *what* of their lives.

It is also the reason that so much modern talk about "identity" is so emotionally corrosive. To reduce yourself primarily to an identity, whether based on religion, race, cause, or political ideology, is about as meaningful as reducing yourself to your hobby or favorite sports team. Political activism in particular leads young adults to experience depressive symptoms, and that is no surprise. One of the great errors many people make today is trying to find meaning in life in the *what* of a political or activist identity.

Some people go a little deeper by moving from the *what* to the *how* of life, which means thinking of yourself in terms of the way you fill your time—the things you do all day. For me, professionally, this *how* is writing, teaching, speaking, and doing media. For meaning, this is more informative than the *what*, because how you spend your time says a lot about you, especially when the two are in conflict. For example, if someone tells me he sees himself as a "family man" (*what*) but spends every weekend golfing instead of with his spouse and children (*how*), I will question whether his family is truly how he finds meaning in his life.

Still, the *how* leaves a lot to be desired in finding meaning. In fact, many people are constantly busy in the hope that meaning will find them, but in fact are crowding meaning out in the process. (Remember Maria in the introduction? She was a case in point—busy every minute but feeling emptier every year.) The *how* of your life is your *doing* self. To find and understand meaning requires your *being* self.

The being self centers on your *why*. The *how* and *what* are concentrically further out.

This is exactly what the author Simon Sinek means in his famous book *Start with Why*. As Sinek shows in depth, when people ask the *why* questions of their lives and work, even without precise answers, they start to understand their values and beliefs, which illuminates their core purpose. Similarly, *why* questions about existence, suffering, and the nature of evil enlighten us on the coherence and significance of life.

Asking *why* about yourself is a lot more difficult than *how* or *what*, because it requires self-honesty, not just observation. People lie a lot to others but even more to themselves. This is called willful ignorance. We choose not to know ourselves deeply—and just live behind a title or stay busy—to protect our egos and our self-esteem. For more than a century, psychologists have observed the human tendency to rationalize bad choices, disregard information that reflects negatively on us, and maintain positive illusions while evading negative emotions. This is our "psychological immune system."[17] In fact, when people are presented with negative information about themselves, it stimulates their brain's fight-or-flight responses.[18] That's why, if I challenged your *what* self-characterization as a "family man" by presenting you with data that you avoid those people like the plague, you might get offended and start giving me all sorts of rationalizations and excuses.

This predilection for willful ignorance in the face of possibly negative self-knowledge does provide temporary relief. But like so much human comfort seeking, it is a short-term strategy that ultimately short-circuits the search for meaning. Greater self-awareness, which has the capacity for honest appraisal of both positive and negative information, improves self-

development because you know what to work on, based on your *why*.[19] This enables better personal decision-making that is rooted in accurate information.[20]

Here are a couple of things to consider if you are committed to getting beyond your *what* and *how* and want the truth about your *why*. First, stop protecting yourself. Think about self-knowledge like going to the gym: inflicting regular, systematic physical discomfort on yourself will build your muscles and improve your strength and endurance. In the long run, this physical fitness will make you feel much better—and more comfortable than if you'd never left the couch. Likewise, a consistent program of honest self-assessment will hurt at first, but it will make you personally stronger and more at ease with your life in the end. Try asking your friends and family for honest criticism on a regular basis, and insist that they not hold back. Call it your emotional workout.

You may be wondering if this will hurt your self-esteem. Yes, it might, and that's just fine. The conventional wisdom propagated by the self-esteem movement in education and psychology has not stood up to scientific scrutiny in the past two decades. For example, although people who are high in self-esteem believe they're more likable and attractive than those low in self-esteem, objective measures show that this simply isn't true.[21] This mismatch leads to a lot of failure and frustration. Boosting self-esteem based on inaccurate information is harmful, not helpful.

Second, embrace a narrative of change in your life. If you have a fixed mindset about your strengths and abilities—*I am good at this, I am bad at that, and that's just the way things are*—negative information will surely trip your psychological immune system, so that you will then employ whatever tricks come to hand to deny contrary data. Instead, when people are able to see their strengths as malleable and having potential for growth, they are much more likely to accept negative feedback and use it to stimulate positive effort.[22] I find that the people who are truly on a path to finding their life's meaning are impatient with empty compliments. This is because they've adopted a mindset of aggressive improvement and prefer criticism, seeing it as a secret tool they need to achieve progress.

Ready to invite *aporia* into your life? Let's pretend it is late at night in your college dorm, and we'll take on the three *why* questions of your life's meaning.

1. Why do things happen the way they do in my life? (Coherence)
2. Why am I moving in this direction? (Purpose)
3. Why does my life matter? (Significance)

Why Do Things Happen the Way They Do in My Life?

In 2005, the magazine *Nature* published a science-fiction short story that captured my imagination and made me question why things happened as they did in my life. By the writer Ted Chiang, it was about a toy called the "Predictor."[23] Roughly the size of a car's key fob, the Predictor had a button and a green light. The green light would turn on a second *before* the operator pressed the button. No one could outwit it, because it worked by reading the operator's predetermined behaviors before they were apparent to the operator themself.

At first, people goofed around with the device as a simple amusement. But in time, its effects on many users clearly became serious, because they realized from playing with it that their free will was an illusion. They tried and tried to outwit it but never could. The Predictor always knew what they were going to do before they became aware of it themselves. This revelation was devastating to millions, who could not get over the fact that they were not in conscious control of their own lives. A third of the population developed a pathology known as "akinetic mutism," a kind of walking coma in which all meaning and motivation is absent from life. Some people had to be hospitalized because they stopped feeding themselves.

Crazy fiction, right? Well…maybe not entirely. Today, many neuroscientists believe that experiences and consciousness emanate entirely from the brain, so, as the Stanford neuroscientist Robert Sapolsky puts it, "What we call 'free will' is simply the biology that we haven't understood

well enough yet."[24] As Sapolsky points out, our brains contain about 86 billion neurons, with an estimated 100 trillion links among them. The activity and connections are mind-bogglingly complicated, far beyond the conscious control of your lumbering will. By the time you "decide" to eat that cookie, your brain has already initiated the action of putting it in your mouth.

This rocked my thinking, because it made me question the coherence in my life—why things happen the way they do. It made me ask whether I do, in fact, have free will. I had never questioned that at all; rather, I assumed that my free will was the only important reason things happened the way they did for me.

Naturally, the short story—plus the science that supports the underlying notion that free will is often an illusion—doesn't exactly make me happy. On the contrary, it makes me feel unsure of what I always assumed. And that's why I used the example. *Aporia*, the fruit of deep contemplation, is best when it disequilibrates your thinking in an uncomfortable way. It sends a bottle rocket into the right hemisphere of your brain. (This is another reason that our modern universities, which often shield young people from strange and alarming ideas with "trigger warnings" and "safe spaces," actually stunt the search for life's meaning.) And based on what emerges, you may have no choice but to make some major changes to your life.

So, what do *you* think about free will—and thus coherence? If you conclude that free will is truly an illusion, it logically rules out a lot of other beliefs, such as that what happens in your life depends on your—or anyone else's—conscious decisions and spontaneous actions. It also means that it doesn't make a lot of sense for you to get angry when someone eats the cookie you wanted for yourself. If you haven't thought about this before, you may be realizing that some of your beliefs and actions are at odds with each other, which scrambles your sense of coherence and makes it harder to grasp your life's meaning.[25]

This is a huge opportunity for you to think deeply about what exactly you *do* believe and *why*. To get you started, here's a method I give my

students. Consider five alternative explanations for why things happen in life.

1. Things happen because of the decisions I make freely.
2. Things happen because of the decisions others make.
3. Things happen because of the determined physical properties of the universe.
4. Things happen because of the will of a higher being.
5. Things happen out of sheer randomness.

These are not mutually exclusive explanations. You might reject some and accept others. And among the ones you accept, you probably can put them in order of importance. Here's the first part of the exercise: Cross out the ones from the list you reject completely. Then put a number in front of the others, from most to least important.

Sometimes this leads to surprising beliefs that don't appear to make sense—but do. For example, my father would have chosen number 4 (the will of God) first and secondarily number 5 (randomness). Does that seem contradictory to you? As a statistician, he believed that God built randomness into the universe by creating the statistical distributions of events. (He thought miracles were real but just really far out on the tails of the distributions.) Similarly, you can believe that events in your life are primarily contingent on your decisions and secondarily on those of others. If you think a higher power has no hand in anything, that would get crossed out. You can even believe that free will doesn't exist in little cookie-eating decisions but does in the big decisions like where you live or whom you marry, meaning number 1 is first and number 3 is second—or vice versa.

If you are curious, I believe in all five, but in this order: 4, 1, 2, 5, 3. In other words, I believe God exists and has a plan for my life first and foremost. But He gives me limited free will: perhaps not about the cookie but certainly to follow His plan as I understand it—or not. God allows others to affect my life with *their* free will as well, including in ways that

harm me. Things do happen randomly at times (I am still the son of a statistician). And there are physical properties that affect all this, but without determining all the events.

Here's the second part of the exercise: think about how your habits match your beliefs. For example, if you put the will of God first but never pray, that may represent an inconsistency, depending on your religious beliefs—and it is definitely hurting your sense of life's coherence. If you think events are primarily about your decisions and aren't random, but you worry yourself to death over everything in life as if they were, or don't make plans to improve, it means your actions aren't matching your beliefs.

One caveat: as you undertake this exercise, you will probably not find that you can explain with exactitude why you believe what you do. That isn't the point, because these are complex questions for right-brain understanding. You have to live with ambiguity. When you do this, you will find that almost immediately you have a heightened sense of the true meaning of the things going on around you in your life. You can then start to work on your habits and alter them to be consistent with your beliefs as you currently understand them.

Personally, I try to align my habits to my beliefs by praying every day. I tell God what I desire but also ask that my will be conformed to His will and that He have mercy on me. I try to act with honesty and virtue, and encourage others to do so as well. I attempt to laugh at the random events that come my way, while also working to understand the world as scientifically as I can. When I succeed, my sense of coherence rises, which raises meaning and thus happiness. But when I fail—which I do!—I get the opposite effect and have to go back to this exercise.

Why Am I Moving in This Direction?

The second *why* question—why you are moving in a particular direction, doing what you are doing day after day—gets at your motivations and sense of purpose, which is the second element of meaning. You might think you

have a rock-solid understanding of this one. After all, you can write down all your goals, right? (You probably have them printed out and taped to your computer screen. Such a striver!) Even if you can, this dimension might be a lot less solid than you think it is. Even very successful people often don't know their true purpose, in fact, which is why they work so hard to achieve goals that, when reached, leave them feeling empty and cold—or worse.

Let me explain this idea by way of a weird mystery: why diets don't work. Weight-loss diets are a more than $75 billion industry in America, but (at least before the advent of GLP-1 drugs) diets have at least an 80 percent failure rate, meaning that the weight lost comes back within one to five years.[26] Some explain this as an example of the American triumph of hope over experience. But that's not it at all. It's actually an example of the progress principle of happiness: people get enormous satisfaction from making progress toward a goal—even progress as arbitrary as a number falling on a bathroom scale. It makes the sacrifices in what you eat feel worthwhile. The problem is what happens when you hit the goal: the reward for hitting your target weight is to not eat what you love ever again—but now without more progress. You lost your main motivation, which was progress, not weight loss per se.

The mistake people make in not understanding this is called the "arrival fallacy": the assumption that once you hit a goal or reach a destination, the bliss you get will be the best reward ever, and it will last. This is impossible because of humans' evolved inability to maintain any strong emotional state: you move back to your emotional equilibrium quickly to be ready to process whatever new circumstances you face. The problem is less that you "can't get no satisfaction," as Mick Jagger sang, and more that you can't *keep* no satisfaction.

The result of all this is that a lot of life's striving winds up in pathological behavior. Continuing with the example above, roughly a third of dieters develop unhealthy dieting behaviors, and a quarter of those people end up with partial or full eating disorders.[27] They want to keep the good feelings flowing, so when they hit their weight-loss goal, they keep

going so the scale will keep falling; they also will go to unhealthy lengths to make sure it doesn't rise again, because negative progress is the *worst*.

No one falls prey to the arrival fallacy in life more than strivers, who are absolute progress addicts. They take on huge, audacious goals and work themselves to death to meet them—but then feel depressed when they do. They grind harder than anyone to get great grades, enjoy the results for two hours at graduation, and then move on to grind even more in some job. They break their backs working sixteen-hour days to start a company but find frustratingly little satisfaction when it is successfully acquired for a big profit. In my own profession of academia, young professors dream about tenure and strive for it for many years, only to find that it's…*fine*, but that they feel weirdly let down after they get it.[28] The day in 2004 that I was granted tenure at Syracuse University, my wife and I went out to dinner to celebrate and spent the evening fretting over the fact that one of our children had bitten another child at preschool that day.

None of this is to say that you shouldn't have goals or should become some kind of a slacker. (It wouldn't matter if I recommended that, actually. I have the data on strivers: you are going to strive, no matter what.) What I am saying is that to achieve a well-ordered sense of purpose, you need to set the right goals. All too often, hard-charging people do not, leading to the Striver's Curse: *the more you achieve, the emptier you feel*.

Disordered life goals come from the distinction I made before, between *doing* and *being*. Strivers are, by nature, doers. They most value points on the board and forward progress. What kind of points, and progress toward what, you ask? It hardly matters, because the dopamine hits are all from the forward motion per se. The result is that they are always thinking about the future and never truly alive in the present. This can lead to wealth and power, it's true. But no matter how you answered the quiz in the last section, even if you believe there is no God and it is all up to you, doing without being does not lead to a sense of meaning at all—on the contrary, it leads to the Striver's Curse and an inability to find meaning.

Life goals that are truly meaningful are, to use the terms I introduced earlier, intrinsically rewarding. This means that the satisfaction they bring

comes from inside you, not outside. For almost everybody, the intrinsic goals that lead to meaning are to love others deeply and to be loved. And this is precisely why so many strivers struggle with their love relationships. They subordinate these relationships to extrinsic rewards, which constitute measurable progress and points on the board. As one striver put it to me, half jokingly, “Any loser can have a family, but almost no one can start a successful company.” But then he acknowledged, with real sadness, that what he most wanted was the love of his family, which he had sacrificed through long hours, days, and weeks away.

This man earned his rewards through very hard work, merit, and personal responsibility. His mistake was thinking that this would also “earn” him what his heart truly desired—the love of his family. This is a classic error of strivers, who, through their efforts, based on mistaken goals, are asking *Am I lovable yet?* of their spouses, their parents, God—and themselves.

I know what I am talking about here, which I will admit without hiding behind a bunch of studies. Purpose is the dimension of meaning that is by far the hardest for me, because I have been trying my whole life to earn my heart’s desire through hard work, achievement, ambition, and accomplishments. This mental model has been tremendously hard on my long-suffering wife, who watched me over the years obsess over everything and idiotically try to earn her love through accomplishments. It has been hard on my kids, who missed having a dad who was around enough and not thinking about work all the time. And it was hard on *me* because—surprise, surprise—there is no finish line to that race, and thus no ultimate purpose that aligns with any sense of deep meaning.

This approach to life is an exercise in futility and frustration, because it simply isn’t how love works. Your spouse will never love what you achieve but rather who you are. The same goes for your kids, your parents, and your real friends. Love is about *being*, not *doing*. The more you obsessively *do* to earn love, the more you run around trying to earn it, the less you will simply *be* as a person, and the less love will be able to find you.

Here is a discernment exercise that helps you understand whether your purpose, expressed in your goals, is in alignment with your life's meaning. I often recommend it to others, and I use it when I find myself—or am reminded by my loved ones that I am—running flat out on the *doer* treadmill.

1. Imagine yourself in five years' time. You are thinking about your life and saying, *I have a much stronger sense of my life's meaning than I did five years ago.* Take a few minutes and imagine the satisfaction this brings.
2. With this in mind, write down the main improvements in your life that are most responsible for this heightened sense of purpose. Put them in order of importance.
3. Now classify each of these improvements as an intrinsic reward (love, relationships, personal growth, joy) or extrinsic reward (money, power, fame, prestige).
4. Ask yourself honestly: Are my focus, decisions, and actions today in alignment with the top of this list? Is the direction I am moving in in my life leading to this or away from it?
5. Now make some resolutions on how to bring your actions into alignment with this more meaningful version of yourself.

Why Does My Life Matter?

A few years ago, I was making a documentary film about people who had pulled themselves out of hardship, addiction, and poverty. I traveled to a slum in India, a little town in Kentucky, and a homeless shelter in New York run by a nonprofit called the Doe Fund. In each place, I heard incredible stories that lifted my soul and gave me optimism about the future. One man in New York—formerly homeless, addicted to drugs, and in prison—summed up how he broke free and started to rebuild his life. Having been

reconnected to his kids, he said that one day, he realized, for the first time in his life, *My life matters.*

Maybe that sounds obvious to you, or trite. It shouldn't, because it is the essence of significance, the third element of meaning. If your life does not matter, your life does not have meaning. Therefore, this is a question you must contemplate: why does your life matter—and to whom?

In the last section, we talked about the intrinsic rewards of loving and being loved, and how you can't find purpose without this as your primary life goal. But this raises questions: Loving whom? And being loved by whom? That is the essence of significance: real love comes because your life matters to others. To find this facet of meaning is to know why this is so by identifying these people and deepening these relationships.

We all have a lot of relationships, but they aren't all significant in a way that leads to deep meaning. Aristotle was especially good at making this point. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, he noted that there are three levels of depth in relationships. At the most superficial level are *friendships of utility*, in which people are useful to each other for something they each want. For example, these are work colleagues who help you succeed in your job or career. You might like them but aren't intimate with them in any meaningful way. Here's a test to see if a friendship is of this kind: Do you know their kids' names? Would you text them on the weekend just to say hello? If not, this is a friendship of utility. There's nothing wrong with these friendships, but they don't bring significance, because they aren't about your *being*, only your *doing*. And once you stop doing, the friendship will probably cease. This is not *significant*.

At a slightly more significant level are *friendships of pleasure*, which are based on the joy and fun you bring to each other. These might be people in your friend group with whom you go out to a bar on the weekends for enjoyment, or people who like to spend time with you because of some particular characteristic you have, like physical beauty or sense of humor. These are very nice relationships to have, but they can't give you a sense of meaning because, once again, they are about doing, not being. If you are no longer beautiful or funny, you probably won't see this friend anymore.

The relationships that bring true meaning—they define why your life matters—are called by Aristotle *virtuous friendships*. These are based on mutual respect and admiration based on character and values. They love your being and you love theirs. These are the people who know you very deeply and vice versa, and the relationship can span a long time, even a lifetime. This goes beyond friends as traditionally understood: spouses in a healthy marriage have a virtuous friendship, as do many siblings. When the man in New York said, *My life matters*, he was reflecting on the people in his life who truly cared about him as a person—his being. That is truly significant.

For strivers, this Aristotelian friendship framework uncovers a lot of the meaning problems they experience in their lives. Working, doing, earning, striving; these are good and virtuous things. But remember, you can't earn love. What that means is that strivers tend to have a *lot* of friendships of utility and, because they are admirable, friendships of pleasure as well. But they often are totally bereft of the virtuous friendships. They have a lot of *deal friends* but no *real friends*. The common feelings of emptiness come from this.

If this is an issue in your life, here's an exercise to help you build greater significance through relationships in which you can answer the question of why your life matters. It starts with an inventory of the people with whom you have the most contact and then involves setting some resolutions.

1. Make a list of the ten people with whom you spend the most hours each week—colleagues, family members, acquaintances. This includes in person or virtually. Put them in order of time spent with each.
2. After each name, write "utility," "pleasure," or "virtue." Of course, some are more than just one. Write the highest level, not the lowest. But be honest with yourself. If your partner only likes you because you are physically beautiful, this is not a virtuous friendship.

3. Now make some resolutions. Which friendships would you like to upgrade? What is your plan to do so? What can you do in your life to cultivate more nonwork friendships that might develop into friendships of virtue?

Before we leave this last big *why* question, consider one other angle on why your life matters. I have a diagnostic test I give students to see whether they have a significance deficit in their lives. It involves responding to just two questions. The way to pass the test is to have real responses that you believe in your heart, even if the words sound weird to others. The way to fail it is to say "I don't know."

- Why are you alive? Maybe you approach this in terms of who created you or in terms of your personal mission—or both.
- For what or whom would you readily give your life at this moment? If you have children, I know your immediate answer. But what else? Dig deeper and see what you come up with.

These two questions are very complex, so don't worry if you can't articulate answers clearly. But they get to the very root of significance. When I see young people grapple with these questions, it can be like watching a flower open in the spring. To understand why you are alive and for what your life is worth giving is to possess the deepest sense of your life's significance.

Go Away and Think

Before we leave these big questions, let me give you a time-honored way to ponder them. There is a practice in Tibetan Buddhism called analytical meditation. It is how His Holiness the Dalai Lama (about whom I will be talking in greater depth in chapter 6) says he starts each morning for two hours. This is a fully focused and conscious process in which he thinks of a big philosophical question or a few words of Tibetan scripture, around

which he seeks a deep understanding that transcends an easy answer or explanation. For example, he might say, "*Om mani padme hum*," which in Tibetan means, "Praise to the jewel in the lotus."[29] With thought but without further verbalization, this starts a complex process in the right hemisphere of his brain of meaningful associations and concepts, not limited by his vocabulary and language.[30]

You might sit in silence with this short question or take it on a walk in the forest, repeating the questions in this chapter in your head and allowing your mind to roam. Remember to stop looking for precise answers. The purpose of analytical meditation is not to generate a clean explanation of who you are, nor to formulate a precise linguistic argument for why it is so. That would be to go in the wrong direction, taking you further away from the underlying truth. Any neat, tied-up answers would belittle the truth behind these complex questions. The goal is to gain an *understanding*. Sometimes this means you reframe your questions, and sometimes it means you have to sit with the puzzle. Sometimes it is intensely uncomfortable, especially when you are dealing with painful truths and contradictions in your life. Your right hemisphere is now at work.

But the questions are only the beginning. The Dalai Lama would be the first to remind us that meditating is great, but your life's meaning is active in the world, not passive. Thus, the next step is to plan your forward motion in the journey, starting with what you are willing to give away.

Questions for Reflection and Self-Assessment

1. Have I ever spent a period of time in my life in deep reflection about who I am as a person? Am I prepared to make the time to do so?

2. Do I define myself more by my actions (what I do), my approach (how I do it), or my motivation (why I do it)?

3. When I reflect on my beliefs about why things happen (my efforts, others' choices, luck or fate, the will of a higher power), which factor do I believe plays the biggest role in my story?

4. Are my decisions and actions consistent with my beliefs about why things happen as they do?

5. What do I genuinely want to achieve or experience in my life over the next five years, and why do these goals matter to me?

6. Are the day-to-day actions and decisions I make aligned with my deeper sense of purpose, or are they driven by outside pressures or expectations?

7. Have I ever felt empty even when "successful" on the outside? What does that tell me about the kind of fulfillment I really seek?

8. Who are the people I spend the most time with each week? Do these relationships bring me closer to my values and long-term vision, or do they pull me away?

9. What kind of relationships—those based on utility, pleasure, or virtue—dominate my life? Which ones do I most want to nurture right now?

SKIP NOTES

*ἀπορία.

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CHAPTER 5

Give Your Heart Away



In the summer of 1988, I was a man possessed.

Or so it seemed to me. A month after my twenty-fourth birthday, I was on a concert tour with my brass quintet in the Burgundy region of France. That's when the foreign spirit entered me. It wasn't a demon or some sort of poltergeist. It was the soul of a woman who didn't speak a single word of English, which joined my own soul, revealing to me a little bit of divinity.

Here's how it happened: During a concert that I was playing while hopelessly jet-lagged, I spied from the stage a beautiful woman about my age, with dark hair and eyes. She was smiling at me. I was immediately intrigued and after the concert made a beeline to introduce myself—but quickly learned that we didn't have any common language. She was Catalan, I discovered with no small effort—a Spaniard from Barcelona, the capital city of Catalonia—and was in France that summer to study music. Through an interpreter, I asked her out, which led to a dinner that was a comedy act of confusion, gesticulation, and a lot of laughing.

I returned to New York City, where I was living at the time, unable to dislodge the Spanish soul beguiling mine. I was a modern Don Quixote, the off-kilter hero of Miguel de Cervantes' 1605 Spanish classic, madly in love

with fair Dulcinea, and ready to tilt at windmills if that's what it would take to win her heart forever. I felt as though, despite the language barrier—maybe because of it (I couldn't say anything stupid, after all)—we had a mystical connection. Apparently, she felt it, too: she started studying English, and a few months later, she showed up in New York, having sold her few possessions to buy an airline ticket. Our ability to communicate was still rudimentary at best, but that first week back together cemented the notion that we were *meant* for each other.

How could it be? We were both as poor as church mice and had zero prospects to work or live in each other's countries. But then, within a month and out of the blue, a musician friend called and asked whether I might by any chance be interested in a job with a symphony orchestra based in *Barcelona*. The stars were aligned: without hesitation, I accepted—sold my stuff, packed up, and moved to Spain. Once there, I worked on my Spanish and my Catalan, and before long, I was able to propose to her. She accepted.

It's not like our communication was fluent, mind you. We couldn't understand each other beyond a few rudimentary phrases. Even after a year, nuanced language was off the table. I remember that early on, she tried reading me love poetry in Spanish by the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda. She might as well have been reading it to a golden retriever. But we understood each other at a level that transcended language—one that felt mystical. Thirty-four years later, we are the parents of three adult children and have four grandchildren (so far). Our verbal communication—a custom hybrid of English, Spanish, and Catalan that evolved as we grew up together—is perfectly fluent. But our true communication is at the level of our intertwined souls, which together form an antenna to life's meaning.

You might be thinking right now that despite my behavioral science background, I am at heart just a sentimentalist. That isn't true, though. I'm not very sentimental at all, in fact. Show me a picture from my childhood and I will just shrug. I have moved more than twenty times in the last forty years, without ever being in the Witness Protection Program. What I described above is totally different from trite sentimentality. What happened

to me in 1988 is that, in the liminal space of a foreign country, far from home, surrounded by strangers speaking words I could not understand, I left the numinous right hemisphere of my brain unguarded. Her soul wandered right in.

Without her I am, in the words of the Zen Buddhist koan introduced in the last chapter, no more than the sound of one hand clapping. She completes me. She is my second hand clapping. There is a secret sound that only we can hear.

If what I am describing sounds mysterious and impossible today, you are not alone. Millions of people—not coincidentally, the young strivers gripped by the meaning crisis in particular—believe that how to find true love (especially romantic love) is an unanswerable question and an unsolvable problem. And they are right, because love, a true human complexity, does not work like the questions and problems they are trained on.

But if you can suspend your old ways of thinking, you can swing open the door to the complex spaces in your own heart and mind as well—and some soul might just wander in. It might not be as dramatic as what happened to me. But giving your heart away, even when it doesn't turn into lifelong love and instead results in disappointment, can ignite the process of finding life's meaning.

The Ladder of Love

Right off the bat, I have to acknowledge that English is a *terrible* language for love. You can "love" your spouse, your dog, your job, the Red Sox, and Chicago deep-dish pizza. If *love* means the same thing to you in all those cases, you need help beyond anything this book can provide. (Spanish is marginally better: there are two verbs, *querer* and *amar,* that mean *love*. Only the latter of which denotes passionate, romantic love.) The ancient Greeks, in contrast, had a whole love vocabulary, dividing it into at least seven types. *Eros* meant romantic, passionate love. *Philia*, brotherly love,

was used for deep friendship, and *agape* meant unconditional, selfless love—including love by and for the divine. Then there was *storge* (between family members), *ludus* (playful love or flirtation), *pragma* (practical love and companionship), and *philautia* (self-love). These are not mutually exclusive: my marriage is composed of literally all seven of these types of love, although it has taken more than three decades to build this whole repertoire.

Understanding this Greek love taxonomy can sort out confusion.[1] Did you ever find yourself, heartbreakingly, in the dreaded friend zone with someone you were secretly in love with? An ancient Greek would say that your *eros* was met with your beloved's *philia*. This mismatch was the reason for the heartbreak.

Of the different types of love, the Greeks thought that mutual *eros* had the special property of igniting a mysterious process. In Plato's *Symposium*, Socrates (Plato's teacher) tells a story of having been taught in his youth by a prophetess named Diotima of Mantinea about the "philosophy of love."[2] She explained to him that romantic love draws a person into an understanding of the essence of life's deepest meaning. This was the Ladder of Love, the first rung of which was a physical attraction to a single beautiful person. When successful, this leads to an appreciation for physical beauty in general; then to love of beautiful souls; then to love of good things in society. This leads to a love of ideas, which leads finally to a love of what is most beautiful and meaningful in life.

Meaning can feel impossible to understand and acquire, precisely because it is so complex. You need a way to get started—an entry point to begin the journey. That is what romantic love does. If you let it, that love will become fuller and more expansive over the years, encompassing bigger and bigger parts of your life. It will carry you from the earthly to the sublime. Over a lifetime, a romance lifts you and your partner from the realm of physical attraction to a transcendent understanding of the essence of life itself. That's exactly how I feel about my marriage. At the beginning, when I thought about Ester, it was white-hot passion. Today, we walk together toward our lives' meaning.

Brains Built for Love

Plato didn't talk about neuroscience, but there is also a biological story behind the Ladder of Love. This shouldn't lower its mystery in your mind at all, however. On the contrary, it shows that we are *built* for the mystical—an idea I will explore more in the next chapter.

Romantic love ignites with the feeling of attraction, which involves the sex hormones testosterone and estrogen.[3] When attraction between two people is initiated and they are in contact, the neurotransmitters norepinephrine and dopamine become involved, giving each person a sense of anticipation about seeing the other, and euphoria when that occurs. Next, after parting, comes a drop in serotonin, which leads to rumination about the beloved. This can lead to ridiculous behaviors such as obsessing over a text message or leaving twenty voicemails in an hour, but as irrational as such actions seem, they represent a frantic effort to bond with the other person. At this stage, you feel "addicted" to the other person. Neuroscientists have compared images of the brains of people in love and those addicted to drugs, and found similar activity in the pleasure and pain regions.[4] These include the ventral tegmental area, nucleus accumbens, caudate nucleus, insula, dorsal anterior cingulate cortex, and dorsolateral prefrontal cortex.[5]

If the relationship survives this neurological hurricane, over time, the hormones oxytocin and vasopressin bind a couple together as adopted kin. Ideally, this establishes a lifelong pair-bond that feels deeply metaphysical and even spiritual. According to a 2011 poll, nearly three-quarters of Americans (74 percent of men and 71 percent of women) answered affirmatively to the question "Do you believe in the idea of soul mates, that is two people who are destined to be together?"[6] This is the "two hearts beating as one" phenomenon. Actually, it should be called "two brains thinking as one": lovers' brains tend to synchronize—in the right hemisphere, of course.[7]

Reflecting the mystical sense of romantic love, the world's religions treat it as a supernatural phenomenon. One of Hinduism's core texts, the

Bhagavata Purana, elegizes the earthly loves of the deity Krishna as a symbol of divine love. In the Judeo-Christian Bible, Adam sees Eve and says, “This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh,” describing not just the physical facts of her creation in the Genesis story but their divine union in God’s divinely ordered universe. In many faith traditions, deeply religious couples see their marriage as a connection to the heavens, through which God transmits love to one through the other. In this spiritual understanding, to deny love to one’s spouse is thus to deny them God’s love. Given the sway of such beliefs, regular religious service—as found by one study of female nurses—is associated with 50 percent lower divorce rates than that population’s average.[8] Romantic love is, for the devout, a manifestation of heavenly love.

Romantic love, when successful beyond the initial stages, is the ultimate right hemisphere experience—you know when you feel it, but it’s impossible to solve for it like you would a physics problem. The greatest scientific minds in history have fallen under love’s spell, have made reckless, impulsive decisions when enamored, and have had their hearts broken without really understanding why. But when successful, this love opened a door for the lovers through which they could walk, hand in hand, toward the meaning of their lives.

A Love Depression

Unfortunately, for millions of people—especially young adults for whom life otherwise seems so promising—the door to the right hemisphere seems stuck closed. True romantic love is harder for many people to find than ever before. No survey researchers go around asking people if they are in love or not, but we can deduce the answer pretty easily. To begin with, the rate of marriage is cratering in the United States, as well as in other industrialized countries. Way back in 1949, nearly four-fifths (79 percent) of households contained a married couple.[9] By 2022, that proportion was less than half (47 percent).[10]

Of course, this can be explained in ways other than an absence of romantic love. The numbers may be missing a whole class of young adults who live together as a couple but are not legally married. But even allowing for nonmarital cohabitation, singledom—not being part of any type of couple—is still increasing in absolute terms: In 1990, men and women aged twenty-five through fifty-four were equally likely to be unpartnered, at 29 percent; by 2019, that had risen among men by a third and among women by a quarter.[11]

People are even having less sex than they used to. Despite all the fretting we hear about hookup culture, according to the Institute for Family Studies at the University of Virginia, the percentage of Americans having sex at least once a week fell from almost 50 percent in 1988 to 33 percent in 2021.[12] This has led some commentators to refer to a "sex recession."[13] I disagree. I think we are in a *love depression*.

Unfortunately, this isn't like an economic depression, which can be treated with complicated policies. Love isn't a complicated problem that can be "solved." No amount of knowledge, and no technology, can reliably predict whether two people will fall and stay in love. Think of how you feel when you are experiencing new love: you hope it works out—maybe you hope it's *the one*—but you can't ever know, right? That's a complex problem: it is easy to understand what success looks like, but success is impossible to solve predictably. That's why technology can't by itself cure the love depression.

Dating apps have overtaken all other ways to meet a romantic partner, however. Dating sites first emerged in the 1990s and by 2010 were the most common way to meet a mate (which used to be through friends).[14] By 2020, more than half of couples had formed by meeting through a dating app or site, and this trend has showed no sign of slowing down.

The sheer scale of the phenomenon suggests that, for many couples, the method leads to success—and for some, it does. But people looking for true love find that many of the apps are plagued by problems. For example, most women feel overwhelmed by the volume of overtures from men, while the majority of men are frustrated by the lack of response they get from

women.[15] This outcome has an evolutionary origin: Human biology and mating behavior being what they are, women tend to be choosier about a potential mate than men, because women bear a much larger burden in childbearing and child-rearing. Much of this asymmetry is offset by our traditional social systems, in which people get to know one another in person or through trusted loved ones and friends, thus creating a better balance in the dating market. The asocial anonymity of apps tends to work the other way, intensifying the disequilibrium.

A related problem is that many complicated computer algorithms are not as good for creating a great match as are complex processes (such as those in your head when you meet someone in person, or when someone who knows you both sets you up). What's the big difference? The apps generally rely on the profile and desires that you, the person seeking a match, self-report. Offline matches don't rely on what you think you want in a mate—and that's a good thing. Here's why: You tend to curate your choices according to ideas about *compatibility*. So you think you want to meet someone who likes the same things as you, votes as you do, and so on. But romantic love requires *complementarity*—meaning differences, not just similarities.

A sociologist named Robert Francis Winch advanced this idea back in the 1950s by interviewing couples and assessing the personality traits of those couples that were successful and those that weren't.[16] He found that the happiest couples tended to round out each other's personalities—an extrovert and an introvert, for example. The idea of opposites attracting might even be biological, as Swiss scientists suggested in 1995 in a famous T-shirt–sniffing experiment.[17] The researchers knew that people who are genetically dissimilar tend to produce children who have a stronger immune system than those who are similar, and they hypothesized that women would be able to sense this through smell. They set up an experiment in which men wore T-shirts for two days, women smelled the shirts (not knowing or even seeing the men), and then the women ranked the men in terms of attractiveness just based on the smell. Sure enough, women found most attractive the smell of men most genetically dissimilar to them.

I doubt they will introduce a T-shirt–sniffing widget, but I am optimistic that app makers will be able to solve these problems and inject much more of an in-person element into the process of meeting, raising the complex elements of mating. In my own work I am seeing that some companies are making very promising progress to do so.

In the meantime, in your own life, strive not to lose the complexity of dating.[18] In addition to meeting people online, ask your family and friends to set you up. Or go to the places in your community where young, single people who share your interests or values tend to hang out—a house of worship or a running club, for example. Unlike you, who are likely to curate an app profile to seek compatibility, these types of matching lead to the type of complementarity that Winch found more promising for romantic relationships.[19] Furthermore, real-life matchmaking makes antisocial, even unsafe, behavior in dating less likely. For example, the unkindness of "ghosting" is far less likely when your date is a friend of a friend.

Next, no matter how you meet, choose as much real-time, real-life interaction as possible, especially early on in the process of dating. The human brain produces oxytocin—mentioned above and sometimes called the "love molecule" by neuroscientists—in response to the bonding experience of eye contact and physical touch. We can't live happily without this hormone, which is not exclusively associated with romance but is also why you feel a sense of warmth when you're reunited with a family member or dear friend. It is even healing for the brain: stroke patients who have sustained right-hemisphere brain damage that has impaired their capacity for empathy and their emotional functioning improve when their oxytocin levels are raised.[20]

Simulating Love

If trying to *solve* for love is difficult, it is a tiny annoyance compared with the mistake of trying to *simulate* it. Some people today propose that AI will create romantic partners, a suggestion I reject as perhaps the most

dystopian, depressing thing I have ever heard—and one that will assuredly exacerbate every negative trend in mental health that we are seeing today.

One dangerous simulation is already here, however: pornography, which has spread with ruthless efficiency in the digital age. Today, more than 80 percent of young men view pornographic content at least once a week, as well as almost 30 percent of young women.[21] Pornography decomposes the human craving for love—which is a craving for meaning—by unnaturally isolating the natural sexual component. Thus, it pushes meaning further out of reach while increasing emotional problems.

As we discussed earlier, happiness consists of not just meaning but also enjoyment and satisfaction. Enjoyment is distinct from pleasure, because it also depends on the involvement of other people and memory; in other words, an enjoyable experience is generally one that is social in character, and that you can manage and make permanent in your memories. Pleasures taken in the absence of other people and without involving positive memories are what leads to the *wanting-liking* pattern of addiction. Pornography mimics just what drugs do in the addict's brain: the *wanting* that leads to consumption does not lead to the expected *liking*, which results in escalation in use.[22] Viewing online pornography—typically an isolated, nonsocial activity—is *extremely* addictive. It also stimulates the same pleasure and pain regions of the brain that are associated with cravings for alcohol and cocaine.

The solitary nature of pornography consumption is strongly associated with depression and loneliness.[23] In fact, pornography, depression, and loneliness appear to reinforce one another in a cyclical fashion: using pornography makes a person depressed and lonely, which are states of mind and mood that lead to more use. This mutually reinforcing dynamic creates a "dual diagnosis," a condition that is inherently harder to treat than either problem alone.[24]

Setting aside any moral considerations, the fact is simply this: using pornography is a disaster for meaning. It eliminates the complexity, mystery, and transcendence of human love. It doesn't just keep you from

reaching the first rung of the Ladder of Love; it chops up the ladder and burns it.

Risk and Rejection

If you haven't tried to give your heart away for a long time, or ever, it might be because you are afraid of failing and being personally rejected. I have students who are utterly fearless about starting companies with millions of dollars at risk. But they are deathly afraid of approaching a potential romantic partner. This is because business risk lends itself to technical solutions—it's mostly a complicated problem—whereas romantic risk is totally complex and can't be solved. So once again, the modern culture of complication is making young brains less and less capable of dealing with this important challenge. Let's discuss that fear and what you can actually do if and when you are rejected.

The pain of emotional rejection is very much like physical pain, which is why we try so hard to avoid it.[25] But avoiding pain can lead to bigger problems. If you injure your back and avoid movement for fear of pain, your back becomes weaker and more prone to discomfort. Soon, you're in a downward spiral of greater, more constant pain with less and less relief.[26]

Mental pain works in much the same way. People affected by depression, for example, do well to treat their symptoms, but if they strive to eliminate them entirely, that may actually make them worse.[27] And if a person holds the belief that their happiness depends upon an absence of pain, that conviction itself tends to undermine their happiness.[28] Unfortunately, all too often, such mistaken views are reinforced by professionals who automatically treat any type of mental or emotional suffering as an illness.

Where romantic love fits into this is that you have to remain open to it. That means accepting the risk of rejection, taking some chances, and offering someone your heart. If you succeed, great—you win. If you don't

succeed, that's hard and painful. But through the adversity, you learn and grow stronger—so you win again.

And rest assured: even if you are rejected after a relationship has begun—you get dumped—the pain of heartbreak does diminish. If you want the specifics (hey, this is what we social scientists spend our time calculating), when a romantic relationship dissolves, the average person rates their mental pain at slightly more than three on a one-to-seven scale of severity.[29] Each week, that number falls by, on average, about 0.07. That sounds like nothing, but think of it this way: if your grief is a solid 3.5 after a breakup, you can expect to feel a little better each week to the point where, after six months, you feel only about half as bad. That might be a longer time than you perhaps want, but it's not a permanent state of affairs.

Especially after a long relationship, a breakup can make you feel as though you'll never find love again. But you most likely will, and maybe sooner than you think: months, not years, on average.[30] Whether that rebound relationship is a good one is something you will have to decide, but you will be able to open your heart again.

Knowing that your emotional wounds will heal with time doesn't necessarily make living with the pain any easier in the immediate aftermath of an ugly split. But you can do a few things to hasten the healing, according to research on breakups.

First, consider what a jerk your ex is. No, really: In one of the most novel experiments I've seen in recent years, researchers at the University of Missouri recruited people who were upset about a breakup to try different techniques to rein in their longing for their ex and reduce their misery.[31] The study measured the effectiveness of each approach by showing the participants photos of their former partner while observing their brain activity, measured by an electroencephalogram, and asking them how they felt. When participants were instructed to think about what they truly disliked about their ex—for example, through a prompt to focus on an annoying habit of theirs—the participants' feelings of love temporarily fell by a whopping 18 percent.

Second, go have fun, which was another strategy tested in the same study. The participants were told to think about positive things in their lives, such as a favorite food. This also proved effective, in a different way: although love feelings for the ex did not go down, the subject's mood improved by 8 percent on average. So if your principal problem after a breakup is fixating on how much you love your ex, try ruminating on how messy they were. But if your main issue is feeling depressed, then do something enjoyable to occupy your mind.

Third, play a sad song. You may need no encouragement to do this, I realize. Maybe this seems to contradict the "fun distraction" advice above, but sad music really can soothe a broken heart. People seek out sad music to help themselves understand and find meaning in their emotions.[32] Breakup songs can help you feel less alone in your suffering and less unique in your misfortune.

Those are the breakup dos. But be aware of the big breakup don't: keeping tabs on your ex via social media. As tempting as such tracking might be (and it is strikingly common: more than half of people confess to surveilling an ex's posts for photos of a new partner),[33] it is a huge mistake for happiness, meaning, and healing. It will hold back personal growth after a split and only increase unnecessary distress, sadness, and unrequited desire. Following your ex is a near-perfect way to block your recovery.

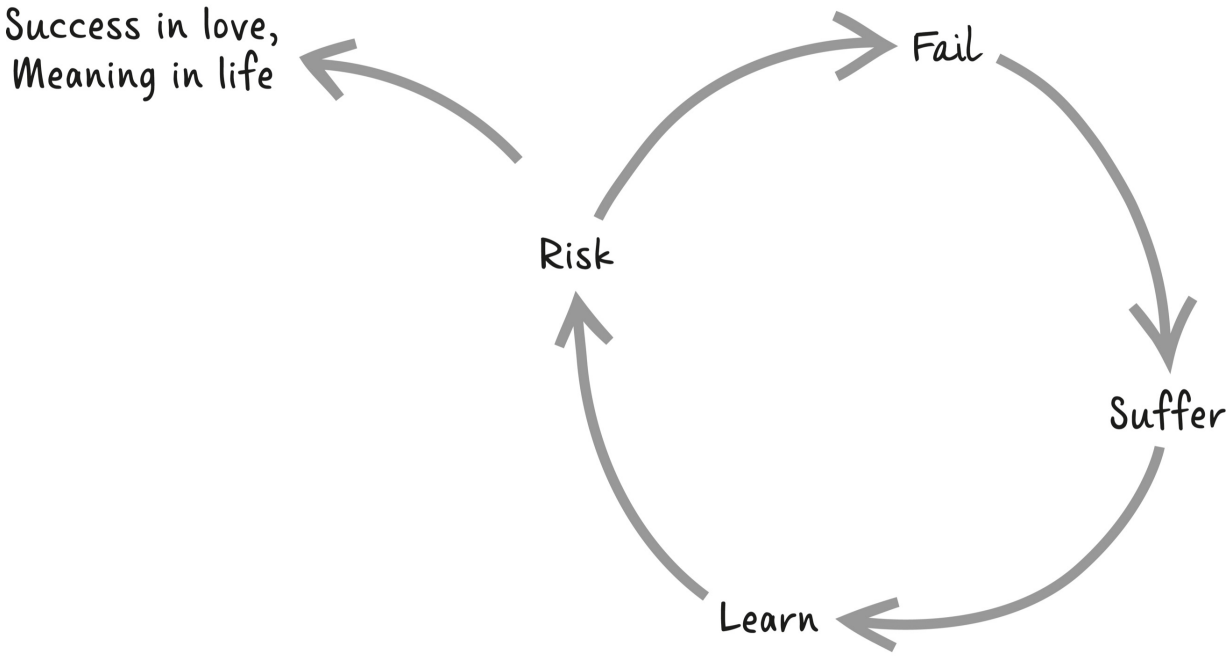


Figure 3. The meaning-discovery loop of romantic love

No one wants a breakup. But if your heart stays open, as it should, then the risk of pain is always there. The point is that, should that occur, you can still use the experience to find more meaning in your life. In fact, failure itself is part of a meaning "discovery loop": risk in love leads often to failure, which leads to suffering, and then learning. Ultimately, that leads to success in love and meaning in life.

There Be Dragons

I am asking you to face your fears of rejection and embrace the complexity of romance as a conduit to finding meaning. But there is a danger I would be remiss if I did not mention—one that I have studied a lot as a behavioral scientist. When you unguard the door to your heart, one type of character might try to wander in that won't help you climb the Ladder of Love: the *Dark Triad*.

This term, drawn from psychology, describes people with three specific traits: narcissism, Machiavellianism, and an above-average degree of psychopathy. A Dark Triad person will confuse as well as hurt you because they act in a way that doesn't seem to make sense. As one researcher puts it, these are "social predators who charm, manipulate and ruthlessly plow their way through life, leaving a broad trail of broken hearts, shattered expectations, and empty wallets."[34]

But at least such toxic personalities are rare, right? Wrong. About one in fourteen people is a Dark Triad, and romantic relationships pose a higher risk of encountering one—not least because the course of romance makes a natural path for a narcissistic, Machiavellian psychopath. For the sake of your happiness, health, and purse, you need to understand the Dark Triad, learn how to identify them, and steer clear of them when you can.

Narcissism is egotistical self-admiration or self-obsession. Machiavellianism involves duplicitous behavior and disregard for morality. Bad enough, but add in a psychopathic lack of empathy and remorse, and you have a really nasty trifecta: *It's all about me, I am willing to hurt you for my gain, and I don't care how you feel.* The psychologist Scott Barry Kaufman has studied the phenomenon for years, and he notes that everyone is on a continuum, with some degree of Dark Triadism.[35] But he has arrived at the figure of one in fourteen of the population based on what he assesses as a threshold that makes the syndrome dominant in a personality.

The Dark Triad is a particularly hard problem to solve, because almost by construction, these people don't care about such a diagnosis and thus don't want to change. Indeed, if you are concerned about yourself while reading this, it almost certainly means you are *not* a Dark Triad.

Confident and outgoing, Dark Triads can be very appealing, even seductive, especially to women.[36] They prey on vulnerable people who are willing to give their hearts away, so be on the lookout for the characteristics above—especially in early dating situations. Another tell: they have a strong preference for short-term relationships; if they do get into a committed situation, they tend to be unfaithful.[37] And, known for their

penchant for “cost escalation” through emotional coercion and manipulative anger, they make a breakup very ugly.

The classic technique that Dark Triads use to manipulate their victims is described by the acronym DARVO: deny, attack, reverse victim and offender.[38] They start by denying or minimizing culpability (“You’re making a big deal out of nothing”), accusing the victim of creating the problem (“You regret what happened, and now you are blaming me”), and then reversing the roles of victim and offender (“You really should be the one apologizing”). DARVO behavior in popular speech is often known as “gaslighting,” in which someone does something intended to harm or offend you, and when you call out that behavior, the perpetrator accuses you of misperceiving their words or actions and thus plays the victim.

An upside of knowing about Dark Triads is that you can actively look for their opposite, which Kaufman has dubbed the Light Triad. This personality type displays faith in humanity, belief in human dignity, and respect for others. More good news is that Kaufman reckons fully half the population qualify as Light Triads; on his continuum, the average person has more light than dark.

In your love life, be on the lookout for Dark Triads. Thus informed, you will start to spot them. One test for whether a potential partner is on the light end of the spectrum is simply to ask yourself how you feel around them: do they inspire you to be a better, more loving person yourself? This is called moral elevation—more on that later—whereby mere proximity to moral beauty moves and uplifts you.[39]

The Friend Zone

Romantic love does not come to everyone, of course. And many times it does not last, despite the best intentions and efforts. Some people opt out, if, say, they have a religious vocation that commands celibacy; others simply never meet “the one.”

But all is not lost in love, because research shows that very close friendships can also start you up the ladder of meaning. This is one of the main conclusions from a study conducted at my university called the Harvard Study of Adult Development. This long-running survey, now in its ninth decade, has followed the same group of people over their entire lives to understand how their habitual behaviors correlate with health and well-being.[40] Many of its findings are what you'd expect: the happiest, healthiest people in old age didn't smoke, didn't take recreational drugs and drank moderately (if at all), exercised regularly, and stayed mentally engaged by reading a lot. But the one big, less obvious conclusion is the importance of stable relationships. In the study, this has usually involved a long-term intimate partnership.

But not always: where that doesn't apply, happiness and meaning came from very close platonic friendships. If romantic love eludes you, this is what to focus on in your life.

"The glory of friendship is not the outstretched hand, nor the kindly smile, nor the joy of companionship," wrote Ralph Waldo Emerson, whom we met in chapter 3.[41] "It is the spiritual inspiration that comes to one when you discover that someone else believes in you and is willing to trust you." Emerson was a clergyman as well as a philosopher, so his use of the word *spiritual* is literal, involving the spirit or eternal soul. He isn't the only religious person to see friendship in this way. Saint Teresa of Avila, the sixteenth-century Spanish mystic, taught that close human relationships were essential to attaining metaphysical experiences.[42]

But you don't need to take a minister's or a mystic's word for it that dear friends help you find meaning, because scientists have shown this, too. In one adolescent study, middle school students were asked to take photographs that depicted what most helped them find meaning in their school activities.[43] By far the most common images were of the participants' friends. Which may explain why some people have lifelong happy associations with friends they made at school.

Unfortunately for many, close friendships recede after adolescence and college. I often hear from young people struggling with unhappiness and a

lack of meaning that they don't have the kind of friends they used to—the "real friends" I referred to in the last chapter. Nearly 70 percent of Gen Zers today say that no one truly knows them.[44] If their parents were forced to tell the truth, I am sure many of them would say the same thing. Many people my age—especially the strivers—are deeply lonely people. They have a lot of transactional "deal friends" and maybe virtual friends, people they know through social media who seem to have high utility. There's nothing wrong with these friendships, but they don't give us what we truly need. They are insufficient.

A final point about romance versus friendship: forget the *versus*; these are not in opposition. The ultimate goal of a lasting romantic partnership is, in fact, what psychologists call "companionate love." That is a love based less on passionate highs and lows and more on stable affection, understanding, and commitment.[45] The most meaningful marriages are those in which the spouses are also best friends.[46]

Do you have real friendships? If you are in need of the love that only real friends deliver, it is not too late to cultivate these relationships. Think back to the people in your life who have been real friends—perhaps from college, or even earlier. Reconnect with them, for no other reason than seeing what's happening in their lives. Start a line of communication, and don't let it die on your end. If your old friend is receptive, start scheduling time each week to talk, and remind yourself to ask about things your friend mentioned from their life. Send a text like "So, how was your son's Little League tournament?" It won't be very useful to you in any worldly way. That's the point.

Love Is Transcendent

I told you about my mystical marriage in the opening to this chapter, and indeed, that is how it feels. But *mystical* isn't the same as *perfect*. Our marriage has its ups and downs. We quarrel a *lot*. (Spaniards are quarrelsome people; Americans are defensive. Rough mix.) In fact, to have

any kind of love relationship that is successful means acknowledging tough days but possessing a commitment to practice love on both good days and bad. It means working on the relationship every day, every year, every decade.

"Working on your relationship" sounds like I am referring to the need to find a specific success formula, doesn't it? And that is, in fact, what a lot of marriage counselors advise—to crack the code of a marriage with a set of rules. By now, you should be rejecting that idea out of hand as a complicated solution to a complex problem. There are plenty of rules to follow in a relationship, but to keep *love* alive, you need a complex approach, not a complicated one.

In fact, as a couple, we are involved in a Spanish marriage movement that is the most mysterious, complex phenomenon I have ever experienced—and that has brought us closer than we have ever been in thirty-four years. Called Proyecto Amor Conyugal (Marital Love Project), it is a couples retreat, study program, and daily reflection that is taking Spanish-speaking countries by storm and is now entering the United States. Couples are called to understand their marriage as a link to the divine. It is very much like Socrates's Ladder of Love, in fact: together with your beloved, you climb a ladder that opens up all that is good and true in this life.

The program involves praying together—something so intimate and that even many lifelong religious couples find it difficult. There is also a great deal of direct eye contact that lasts so long that it begins to hurt, like someone is looking directly into your soul. There is no small talk or practical discussions of household issues. Every conversation digs deep into the nature of love, of meaning, and of God. You feel as if your consciousness melds with that of your beloved, as you *transcend your very self*.

This self-transcendence goes beyond romance, however—and even friendship and family. In fact, it is an idea we all must understand in every part of life to find meaning. So transcendence is where we go next.

Questions for Reflection and Self-Assessment

1. If I am in a romantic relationship or marriage, do I see my partner as a true, real friend? How can I nurture our relationship around “companionate love” based on stability, affection, and commitment?

2. Do I find myself searching for a “formula” to make relationships succeed, or am I willing to embrace complexity and work lovingly through ups and downs?

3. Am I open to the idea that transcending myself—putting my ego aside—may be crucial to deepening love, not only in romance but in all intimate relationships?

4. Do I gravitate toward people or platforms that simulate love or connection (such as online apps or pornography)? Why am I doing this?

5. After setbacks or rejection in love, do I allow myself to learn and grow from the experience, or do I retreat from risk and complexity?

6. How have my friendships helped me find meaning, especially in times when romantic love hasn’t been present in my life?

7. How do I approach “working on a relationship”? Am I practicing daily commitment to a process of loving and learning?

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CHAPTER 6

Transcend Yourself



I set out to meet Tenzin Gyatso, better known as His Holiness the Dalai Lama, in April of 2013. At the time, as the head of a think tank aiming to improve public policy, I was increasingly alarmed by people's inability to talk to one another across ideological divides. Planning to write a book on bridging such differences (which appeared a few years later, titled *Love Your Enemies*), I wanted to meet the Dalai Lama, one of the most respected leaders in the world committed to peace, to help me understand how to tackle this challenge.

That was my official goal. Unofficially, I wanted to meet the world's most admired religious leader. I am completely committed to my Catholic faith, but am interested in others' faiths as well. Far from shaking my convictions, I find that understanding religions other than my own gives me useful insights into my beliefs. The Dalai Lama is seen in the West as a quasi-political figure. At his core, however, he is a scholar and monk, a deep believer in the supernatural, and the greatest living expert on Tibetan Buddhism. I have a lot to learn from him.

Getting to Dharamshala India—where the Dalai Lama established his monastery after being exiled from Tibet by the Chinese communist

government in 1959—wasn't easy. At the time, you couldn't fly there, so I went by car—a long trip through many villages, dodging animals and people all the way. Even more hair-raisingly, Indian driving culture involves heading straight for oncoming traffic before swerving at the last possible moment. "If we survive this," one of my travel companions remarked through gritted teeth, "we will have earned plenty of inner peace."

We arrived safely, we checked into our modest hotel, and I prepared to meet His Holiness. I rehearsed what I would say to him: *I'll tell him a little about myself before asking his advice*, I thought as I gazed at the view of the towering, snowcapped Himalayan peaks above Dharamshala. I was nervous, as if I were about to meet a monarch or head of state. I wanted to make a good impression.

I needn't have worried. Together with my companions, I was led into a small living area decorated in Tibetan Buddhist gold and maroon and adorned with statues and portraits of the Buddha. I was shown to a seat next to His Holiness's chair for our conversation. Minutes later, the Dalai Lama entered with several monks. He walked straight up to me with a smile and looked into my eyes as if regarding a long-lost comrade. Instantly, I was completely at ease and felt no need to tell him about myself. I felt he already knew what mattered most at a deep, intuitive level. Our conversation was relaxed and happy, as though we really were two old friends.

The current Dalai Lama—a title meaning "Ocean of Wisdom" in Tibetan—is the fourteenth monk to hold this title, a line of descent that goes all the way back to about 1400. All the Dalai Lamas have been considered by Buddhists to be living bodhisattvas, those whom they believe have achieved enlightenment and could thus escape the endless cycle of suffering of birth and rebirth, samsara, and reach nirvana. Bodhisattvas, however, choose *not* to leave the cycle, in order to help other beings make progress toward enlightenment and to alleviate their suffering. This Dalai Lama's followers believe him to be a bodhisattva named Chenrezig, one who embodies particular compassion in helping others on their way.

In a sense, this was exactly what I hoped to do, too—in my more earthbound, limited quest to bring people together despite their political differences. I definitely got the advice I was seeking that day, as I have many times since, in a friendship that has only deepened over the years through our meetings and work together on various projects. The wisdom the Dalai Lama has imparted to me over these years has gone far beyond my original question, however. He has helped me to see reality and avoid delusion, and thus find meaning.

How? Go meditate for fifty years to quiet the distracting chatter of my left brain? No: the central insight His Holiness has given me is that the chatter can't be suppressed as much as transcended: I must get *above* the noise. And since the noise is coming from inside myself, it means I must transcend *myself*. Does this sound hopelessly abstract? If so, I understand: a lot of Eastern mysticism sounds utterly impenetrable to Westerners. But His Holiness is not an esoteric teacher; he is extremely concrete. He teaches that there are two ways to get above the noise of your life:

1. Lift your attention to the divine and develop your spiritual nature.
2. Look outward and serve others with compassion.

This is the essence of transcendence, where I find the truth of who I am and who I am meant to be.

Divine Transcendence

While some of my spiritual pilgrimages are to see the Dalai Lama, most others focus on my own faith. In the summer of 2025, one of these Catholic journeys took me to Siena, Italy, to the home of Caterina di Jacopo di Benincasa—known to Catholics today as Saint Catherine of Siena—who died on April 29, 1380, at the age of thirty-three. There, I venerated her finger.

I'll explain more about that finger in a minute. But first, there are a few things to know about Catherine. She was a Dominican tertiary, meaning she lived with the vows of a nun, but at home with her family. She was a mystic, experiencing divine visions and practicing extreme asceticism, and wrote a famous book called *The Dialogue*, which is a conversation between God and the soul, as well as many letters that are still preserved today. Catherine's visions and wisdom were so profound that in her day, she was sought out even by the pope for advice. Millions of people today read her work and follow her teachings.

Here is one of her most famous quotes, from a letter to a close confidant named Stefano Maconi in which she gave him advice about finding the meaning of life: "If you are what you ought to be, you will set fire to all [of] Italy, and not only yonder."[1] In other words, conform yourself to the divine will, and you can do anything. This is exactly what Leo Tolstoy suggested when he wrote, "The meaning of life is to serve the force that sent you into the world."[2]

If you are not a religious person, you might well be thinking that since you don't believe in God as others do, or aren't sure, that there is no lesson here for you. You might be tempted to skip this section. Please don't. I am not going to try to convert you to my religion—indeed, the Dalai Lama never tried to convert me to Buddhism. No matter what your beliefs or lack thereof, you will benefit from opening your mind to the idea that there just might be a metaphysical dimension to your life that, when developed and nurtured, can give you an understanding of your life's meaning. Conversely, blocking off or ignoring this channel will make meaning harder to find.[3]

Again, this does not necessarily mean full-blown conversion to a religion—it means being open-minded to the possibility of realms unseen. And in fact, you may have found yourself opening up in this way as you age, and found it perplexing. The nineteenth-century Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard explained how this works. According to Kierkegaard, we are naturally occupied early in adult life with earthly delights. He calls this the "aesthetic stage," although it could equally be called the "sex, drugs, and rock and roll" stage. But even if you aren't someone who's into a

libertine lifestyle, the aesthetic stage might encompass a more innocent sort of experience—a hobby such as sports or travel. This is fine for a while. For many, though, this approach to living eventually comes to seem trivial—and, ultimately, boring. *Is this all there is?* you ask yourself. You yearn for something more meaningful in life.

This is the point at which you are ready for the "ethical stage" of life, which is more meaningful than the aesthetic stage. Kierkegaard noted that for most people this means marriage, a condition of life in which you no longer simply encounter a variety of people romantically but create a joint existence with just one person. In this way, a big part of your experience is now determined by your own actions and ethical commitments. For many, this ethical stage is where they spend the rest of their lives.

The ethical mode is deeper and better than the aesthetic—and brings a huge amount of meaning, as I showed you in the last chapter. But some people will once again ask themselves if some deeper level of meaning can be found. For example, you might consider where your need for commitment actually comes from. You have a bond of love with your spouse, but what underpins that bond? At this point, you may feel a renewed pull to jump into a still deeper phase, from doing good to looking for the source of good itself. Kierkegaard calls this the "religious stage," in which you associate your life with a transcendent cause or purpose. This requires a leap from what you can see to what you cannot and, in fact, is where the popular expression "leap of faith" comes from.

In a traditional religion such as Christianity or Islam, the religious stage might mean arriving at an understanding of your marriage as an earthly manifestation of God's love for humankind—a way to feel His presence and model it—and seeking to deepen your childhood faith. But Kierkegaard believed that this form of religious transcendence has special power to illuminate all parts of your life, not just your marriage. That's because it reveals what your life actually means. "Spiritually speaking," he wrote, "everything is possible"—even an understanding of the most mystical truths.

People have always possessed an understanding of Kierkegaard's assertion. Indeed, humans appear to have an innate belief that spirituality uncovers the hidden mysteries of life. There are no organized societies bereft of religiosity, leading some scholars even to argue that we have a "religious gene."[4] You can find evidence for this innate religious tendency even among the most modern people who have officially sworn off religion. Just look at many movements of social activism. They tend to include esoteric language, rituals, a concept of sin, and the offer of something bigger than oneself. Whether the causes are just or not—you decide that—much of the attraction is undoubtedly an innate religious tendency.

While modern neuroscience is insufficient to explain the depth of religious experience, it supports the ancient teachings. For example, Lisa Miller of Columbia University has shown with her colleagues that recalling spiritual experiences lowers activity in the medial thalamus and caudate nucleus (brain regions controlling sensory and emotional processing), thus allowing us to transcend our ordinary concerns and focus on life's deeper questions—deeper than, say, "I wonder how many people liked my social media post?"[5]

People who had religious experiences early in life, even if they stop practicing their faith, are often affected by them in a deep, right-hemispheric way. Two years ago, I was spending some off time relaxing in a small Spanish village. This ancient place was founded by the Romans two millennia ago to cultivate olive oil, but today it is an entirely modern community. This modernity includes, as is common across Western Europe, attitudes about religion. Among the people I met, I came across zero observance of Catholicism, which in earlier times was practiced by virtually everyone. The local church on Sunday, once well attended, was nearly empty. If I asked residents about religion, most dismissed it as a relic of a bygone era, an anachronism in a world ruled by science and reason.

But before I left, I experienced something very strange. The village's oldest annual tradition, extending back eight hundred years and uninterrupted even in times of war and plague, was a community staging of the Passion, a play about Jesus's last days in Jerusalem leading up to his

crucifixion. All the parts were played by local citizens, and the town theater, which seated 1,500, was overflowing. Before the lights went out, everyone was laughing and talking, but during the production, which lasted for several hours, the audience was rapt and silent as they experienced the play they all had seen every single year since childhood.

At the moment of Jesus's death on the cross, two hours in, I finally heard the first sounds from the audience. I didn't recognize it at first. But then I realized: all around me, people were *weeping*. The ancient story of their ancestral faith had transported them from their complicated modern world to a complex, mystical one that triggered deep, primordial feelings.

I never explained why I was venerating Catherine of Siena's finger. Catholics have a long tradition of paying homage to the relics of saints, which is why it was on display in the church next to her home in Siena. I am not a believer that a preserved body part has some magical power. But what it does have is a reminder that 650 years ago, Catherine of Siena was in the same physical place, having the same metaphysical experience as me. It made my search for transcendence visceral and connected me to the long line of believers before me.

Does that seem odd to you, given my background in science? It shouldn't. My practice of faith has grown over the years alongside my knowledge and appreciation of science. Indeed, the majesty of the world that research reveals to me increases my hunger to know the creator, just as a love for the works of Michelangelo would naturally make me hungry to learn about the artist himself. This practice includes daily Mass attendance with Ester and praying the rosary (an ancient form of Catholic meditation) together at night. Together, these make for a daily admixture of worship with our romantic love. I can't explain the result precisely; it is ineffable because it resides in my right hemisphere. But in those moments I feel I am who I am meant to be, just as Saint Catherine predicted. I may or may not set Italy on fire, but my faith has helped me find my purpose.

How do you plan to find yours?

How to Explore a Faith

When I lecture on religious transcendence, people with strong religious faith are nodding along, like people hearing a song they've known since childhood. Those without religion or spirituality, however, are baffled. Even if they are sympathetic, they don't have a clue how to get started. "I don't think I have the religion gene," one student told me, confessing to not having consistent feelings of faith.

This reminds me of the argument that some make when leaving a marriage: "I just don't feel it anymore." The advice any good marriage counselor—assuming there isn't something else going on, like abuse or infidelity—would give: act like you feel it; commit intellectually to the importance of your marriage; then you will start to feel it again. Finding a religious faith works the same way.

Any faith has three components to it: feeling, belief, and practice. *Feeling* is part of religious and spiritual experiences.[6] Some religions emphasize trancelike states of ecstasy, such as the samadhi in Hinduism and Buddhism, which involves complete meditative absorption. Most faiths emphasize a role for emotional adoration of the divine, as in the prophet Muhammad's instruction to "love Allah with all of your hearts."[7] But feeling is not sufficient for faith because it fluctuates and can be volatile. The sixteenth-century founder of the Jesuit order of Catholic priests, Saint Ignatius of Loyola, observed that the believer may be very close to God at times but may also feel that God is absent. That is normal and not evidence that anything is amiss.

Belief involves a set of truths—such as God's laws for the Jewish people or the Eightfold Path to enlightenment for Buddhists—that you have intellectually chosen to accept, no matter how you feel. These truths are not testable scientific propositions; in Thomas Aquinas's definition, they are "midway between science and opinion."[8] These beliefs are what you learn from reading and listening to other believers, but choosing to accept them doesn't mean they can never be revised. Religious people with high intelligence are generally open to reflection on belief questions and are

willing to update their views.[9] But belief is based on arguments weighed by your intellect, not on pure feeling, so they tend to be more stable.

Religious *practice* is the set of actions and rituals you adhere to as your observance of faith with others. Practice takes your faith beyond abstract belief and makes it part of daily life: You can *believe* in the ideas of Zen or the divine inspiration of the Bible, but until you *practice* Zen meditation or attendance at a house of worship, belief without participation doesn't mean much.

The biggest mistake people make about religious faith is to assume that to *practice* a faith, you have to possess *belief*. To possess belief, you have to have *feeling*. But this is actually backward. Think of the example of a political cause. You might think that a person would go to a political demonstration only if they already believed in the cause and had a strong feeling for it. In fact, however, those who attend a protest typically find it stimulates their feelings and fosters their beliefs. This is called "commitment bias," a common phenomenon in which people modify their views to conform to their own actions.

Similarly, religious faith best starts with practice; then it develops into belief; and finally—sometimes—there is authentic feeling. Even for me as a lifelong Christian, this is the order of operations. The foundation is my practice, not my feelings. I start each morning by going to Mass. Many days, frankly, I don't feel very passionate about it—maybe not even very religious. Maybe I slept poorly (that's a lot of nights, unfortunately), or something is on my mind. I don't *feel* like going. But I learned long ago that my feelings are liars. If I followed them, at this point I probably would be fired, friendless, and utterly alone. Instead, I have a commitment to put myself daily into a position where, deviceless and silent, my right hemisphere is open to what I might encounter that day. This cultivates my beliefs. And from time to time, my feelings come along for the ride.

When people ask me how to get started on a religion but don't feel it or possess belief, I tell them not to worry about that at all. Just go to your house of worship or wherever the faith is practiced. Leave your phone in

the car. Sit in silence, in the back. Listen with an open mind and heart. And then, little by little, let your soul do what it is there to do.

But I Can't *See* Anything!

It might strike you as unscientific to believe in the unseen, just as the Russian cosmonaut Gherman Titov argued at the Seattle World's Fair in 1962.

But the truth is the opposite: a good deal of the way today's scientists understand the world exists at a completely unseen level. Take modern physics: For many decades, particle physicists have studied the building blocks of matter—the atoms that make up molecules; the protons and neutrons inside atoms; the quarks that make up protons and neutrons. Quarks are so small that they cannot be observed at any visual scale; they are thought to be point-like entities that have zero dimensionality. And yet no physicist believes quarks don't exist, because the theoretical and indirect empirical evidence that they do is overwhelming.

Although some components of the material world are too small to see, the existence of such facets of reality beyond human capacity to visualize enjoys widespread and uncontroversial belief. Multivariate calculus, for example, is a rudimentary mathematical tool learned by both high school and college students that can solve real-life problems such as how to optimize the schedules of, say, five people at once. Yet when it involves more than three variables, calculus is operating in a dimensionality that cannot be depicted graphically in any conventional way. This makes scientific sense, too, because neuroscientists have shown that we can think in higher dimensions than we can actually see.[10] That itself constitutes a belief in an unseen—indeed, unseeable—reality.

Beyond the abstract realms of mathematics and physics, the natural sciences (such as zoology and biology) offer similar proofs. We know for a fact that senses beyond the five that humans possess exist in other species. Sharks have specialized sensory organs called the ampullae of Lorenzini,

which give these fish electroreception, the ability to detect electrical fields generated by the muscular and neural activity of other living organisms.[11] Jewel beetles have infrared organs that register the radiation emitted by fires.[12] Many snakes have a sense, akin to infrared vision, that enables them to perceive a thermal image of potential prey.[13]

Humans lack these senses, but to assume they don't exist would be silly, even dangerous. We have no reason to believe either that the world of science has exhausted the fields of material reality that are beyond our sensory perception. On the contrary, the most logical and rational assumption we can make is that we are surrounded by forces and entities of which we are completely unaware and that are as yet undiscovered.

All of this scientific knowledge would have been dismissed in the past as crazy fiction, primitive superstition, possibly even a sign of demonic possession. This fact should instill in us some humility about ideas outside current scientific understanding concerning things we can't see but others perceive as real and claim indirect evidence for in their lives.

Take, for example, this definition of faith in the existence of God from the Bible: "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."[14] This is a belief held not only by the unschooled but by many of history's most esteemed scholars and thinkers. In his *Metaphysics*, Aristotle made the case for the existence of God as the unseen "first mover," the necessarily uncaused prior cause of all other things.[15]

This can't simply be dismissed as premodern thinking. In a 2009 survey, the Pew Research Center found that among scientists who belonged to the prestigious American Association for the Advancement of Science, just over half (51 percent) believed in God, a universal spirit, or a higher power.[16] Defying the general trend that young adults are becoming less religious than their elders, scientists under thirty-five, who have grown up amid the latest discoveries, were the *most* religious in the survey: 66 percent subscribed to a faith belief, compared with 46 percent of scientists sixty-five and older who did so.

We cannot expect ever to settle the argument over the existence of God. Just as we should continue to question theories, hypotheses, and

assumptions in every field of science, we should interrogate religious and philosophical beliefs in our search for life's meaning. By the same token, however, we should also exercise skepticism about our *un*beliefs based on what we cannot perceive directly. To dismiss something for the fact of its invisibility is a mistake. Instead, intellectual integrity should make us open to indirect evidence that comes from beyond the realm of ordinary observation.

I learned that viewpoint, in fact, from someone only a couple of miles from the Seattle World's Fair, where Gherman Titov made his case for atheism: my father. A brilliant mathematician and statistician as well as a lifelong but not uncritical Christian believer, he pondered the vexing questions of evil and randomness his whole life. He embodied for me an example of someone whose intellectual openness also involved religious activity in the form of daily prayer, contemplation, service, and worship. He died many years ago, so I can't check this, but I have a memory of his weighing in on Titov's argument about not finding God in space: "It's like saying Picasso doesn't exist because he can't be found inside Picasso's paintings."

Amen.

More I-Self, Less Me-Self

The first form of transcendence to open up the right hemisphere and find more meaning is to seek the metaphysical—to look upward, you might say. The second is to look outward, toward other people.

One of the books that had the greatest impact on me as a young man—and on many millions of others—is Dale Carnegie's 1936 classic *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. From its title you would think that it is a cynical guide to bending people to your will, but in reality it is a handbook to ethical, generous living. One of the claims that Carnegie makes in the book that really stood out to me when I first read it is that when not occupied in a specific task, people spend 95 percent of their time focused

on themselves. I don’t know if he got that number from scientific research or from casual observation, but it rings true to me. Day and night, I am thinking about myself—from trivial things like *my* breakfast to bigger things like *my* family. Even at night, I am the star in all my dreams.

I hate it. It is *so tedious*. I know why Mother Nature gave me this inclination: in order to survive and pass on my genes. But it is terrible for happiness. What I need—and we all need—is to gain peace and perspective on life by being much freer from this self-focus.

William James, the American philosopher who is also considered to be the father of modern psychology, diagnosed this problem as an imbalance between the *I-self* and the *me-self*. In his 1890 masterwork, *The Principles of Psychology*, James argued that you are two people: one who observes the outside world and one who observes yourself.[17] These two selves live side by side and are both necessary to get through the day. For example, if you are driving to work, you pay attention to other drivers so you can react to them—that’s the I-self. But you pay attention to yourself as well so you don’t get lost or cause an accident—the me-self. You pay attention to what your spouse is saying to you (I-self) but also think about how it makes you feel and what you plan to say in response (me-self).

Here’s the problem, according to James: meaning in life comes while we are in the I-self, but we spend almost all our time in the me-self. There are lots of examples of this every day. During a Zoom call, you find yourself staring at your own image on the screen instead of the person who is talking, which worsens your comprehension of the meaning of what the other person is saying. A contentious conversation with your partner is made worse when you aren’t listening to understand their meaning but instead you are planning how you want to defend yourself.

Sometimes you are jerked out of the me-self by something you see and hear, and it provides an undistorted moment of meaning. Think of the last time you gazed at a beautiful sunset or heard a gorgeous melody. The sense of awe at its majesty should have given you a feeling that the world had some coherence, purpose, and significance—even if you couldn’t quite articulate what they were. But that moment didn’t last; soon it was ripped

away when thoughts of yourself intruded. Maybe you thought, *I'll take a picture of this and share it on social media, and people will see what a beautiful day I am having*. The meaning came from your outwardly attentive I-self; it was snuffed out by the self-focused me-self.

And so it goes, all day every day. It's not that the me-self needs to be eradicated; that would be impossible for anyone (other than, perhaps, a living bodhisattva). But throughout history, life's meaning has been understood when people have been able to stay in the I-self for longer periods of time through their habits and practices. This requires being freer from the forces that make self-transcendence impossible—the everyday distractions such as your phone. We discussed in chapter 3 how to do this. But removing the negative influences is just the beginning—we also need to add positive practices to quiet the me-self and invite the I-self. And the very best way to do that is by serving others.

Give More to Transcend Yourself

Early in my academic career, I did a lot of research on charitable-giving behavior: who gives, who doesn't, who *thinks* they give but doesn't, and exactly *why* people choose to give their time and money to others. The topic fascinated me because it mixes economics with philosophy, religion, and evolutionary biology.

During this period, I came across evidence that when people give to charities, they tend to get more confident and less depressed and anxious. About 25 years ago, a psychologist friend of mine explained why: his research indicated that the act of giving changes the giver's mindset from "person with problems" to "problem solver," which improves their well-being and personal effectiveness. You may have experienced this yourself when you did something kind for a friend or your child and felt *strong* as a result. Selfless action is a form of self-transcendence, which yields personal benefits.

My psychologist friend said something else that proved revolutionary for my thinking—and, in fact, my whole life: to give a great deal to one person is even more empowering than to give a little to a lot of people. In other words, making a big, tangible difference to one person's life has a much greater meaning-creating self-transcendent effect than writing checks to a bunch of charities (as worthwhile as that is). This is an ancient idea; it is written in the Mishnah Sanhedrin section of the Jewish Talmud, for example, that "he who saves a single soul saves a whole world."[18]

After my friend told me that, I couldn't get this idea out of my head. And I mentioned it to Ester—that I wanted to test it in my research. She told me that coincidentally, she had been having a recurring dream about a little girl who'd been abandoned in a park. She challenged me to make the research *real*. "Let's adopt a baby who needs a family," she said.

"Uh, it's only a research idea," I remember mumbling. Hey, I'm no humanitarian. And we already had kids—two boys who were more than a handful. But she was right, and adopt a baby we did. After an eighteen-month process involving the Chinese government, we were matched with a little girl living in an orphanage in the city of Jinjiang. She had been abandoned at less than a day old—*in a park*. I traveled by myself to collect her, because someone had to take care of our boys and Ester had visa complications at the time. On the big day, I was handed this diminutive, disoriented toddler. She looked up at me and grabbed my shirt in her little hands. When they tried to take her back while I signed some papers, she screamed bloody murder and held me tighter. *She* had adopted *me*, not vice versa.

Besides marrying Ester, no single act in my life has ever been more transformative. Today, our daughter is twenty-three years old, a college graduate—she studied psychology, a chip off the old block—and a second lieutenant in the U.S. Marine Corps. She loves her adoptive country, and she loves the family she chose as well. After all these years, I am reminded of that first day when she looks at me; that makes me feel strong and reliable, the person I want to be. I transcend my trivial, self-focused concerns, and it gives me a sense of my life's meaning.

For good, ethical reasons, there are no social science experiments on orphan adoption—because the methodology would entail leaving a control group of babies in the orphanages. Most of the research in the field simply examines how people feel and act after giving some time or money to a worthy cause. Even so, we see measurable effects on happiness and meaning. Virtually all of the many experiments show that prosocial behavior raises well-being.[19] This holds true for even very young children, suggesting that the human capacity for self-transcendence through serving others is innate. There are experiments where kids under the age of two are given a pile of goldfish crackers and then asked to give some of their treat to a puppet who enthusiastically eats the treat.[20] The researchers analyze the children's facial expressions—the best way to measure emotions in children because they can't yet fake their feelings—and find that their happiness is highest when they give their treats away.

What element of happiness is activated by giving generously to others without seeking a reward? You guessed it: meaning; specifically through the sense of purpose.[21] Giving to others provides evidence to yourself that your purpose is to love other people in the pure way love is defined by the medieval philosopher Thomas Aquinas: to will the good of another.[22] That kind of love is the core of self-transcendence. This effect is especially strong when giving is anonymous, so there is no spotlight on you at all for your virtuous acts. One novel study showing this involved anonymous kidney donors to unknown strangers. The 114 donors were, on average, significantly happier than the general population after the donation.[23]

Give more of yourself—time, money, affection, attention, energy, maybe even a kidney—with no expectation of return. Make this a constant facet of who you are. Write checks, sure, but also just do something nice for another person, pay them attention, listen, bring them a coffee. Make giving central to your personality, and the transcendent complexity of the I-self awaits you.

Let Yourself Be Loved, Too

As a younger man, I had an elderly family member who was, on the face of it, extremely kind and generous. Whenever she visited, she brought a thoughtful gift; she was always eager to have you over for your favorite meal; if you were sick, she would be at your bedside with chicken soup. But she had the strange habit of never accepting favors from others. This was a source of pride, in fact. “I give but don’t take,” she said. “Not even a glass of water.” It was true: I never saw her accept a single favor, ever.

This is a pattern I have sometimes seen with other people who pride themselves on their generosity: all give, no take. They think it adds to their virtuousness, but they’re wrong. An unwillingness or inability to accept kindness from others is a form of selfishness; it makes giving a one-sided affair instead of what it should be—a happiness-producing act of mutual caring. Learning how to *accept gratefully* from others is just as important as learning to *give generously* to experience self-transcendence and find meaning.

It’s not just about favors from loved ones. People tend to be reluctant to ask a stranger for help—such as asking to borrow their phone to make a call—because they assume this will inconvenience and annoy the person.[24] But researchers find that people are more willing to help than people expect, do not feel inconvenienced, and have a more positive mood as a result of the ask. When you ask someone for something, they become a problem solver, which gives the person a sense of meaning.

Make it a practice to accept generosity and even look for ways to ask for small favors. It makes people feel great and even want to help you more. As Benjamin Franklin liked to say, “He that has once done you a kindness will be more ready to do you another, than he whom you yourself have obliged.”[25] If a potential employer asks if you want a cup of coffee, the right answer is “I’d love one!” regardless of whether you drink coffee.

But beware the tipping point at which warmth turns to perceived exploitation.[26] Once, someone I liked but barely knew called and asked for “a small favor”: could his whole family come and live in my house for two

weeks? Know the difference between a small favor and a big one: ask for too much, or too often, and your reputation will go straight from Friend-town to Taker-ville. Nor should you ever *demand* something: to do so is a mark of selfishness, which scholars have found among those who feel entitled or are convinced they've been wronged.[27]

Be conscious, in other words, of how accepting kindness should promote warmth between you and others. If this is hard for you, as it was for my elderly relative, a good place to start is to be alert to offers and choose to accept them whenever possible. Obviously, this requires being able to distinguish between a true kindness and an attempt at coercion. You don't have to agree to have dinner with a creep who has suspect intentions, but the offer "Can I grab you something from Starbucks?" is generally a good opportunity to say yes. Then turn this small favor into a healthy social pattern by reciprocating. A culture of generosity is like the circulation of blood; to stay healthy, it mustn't stop in one location. And if you always accept kindnesses but never offer them in return, the goodwill will dry up. Tomorrow, you be the one who runs to the coffee shop.

You can start the cycle with others by asking for something that most people love to give. Years ago, when I was running the nonprofit in Washington, a longtime professional in my industry astutely noted that I was surrounded by wildly successful financial donors but never asked them for business advice, which I could very much have used. Prompted by this observation, I adopted the practice of asking for advice from donors; this improved my management, my friendships, *and* my fundraising. The lesson? People loved giving advice: it made them feel purposeful and significant and, as researchers have shown, also probably made me appear more competent to them.[28] Whenever you're puzzled by a personal dilemma in life, love, or work, think of someone who might have a helpful perspective, and ask for it. (Note that just because you seek advice, or gratefully accept it if offered unbidden, doesn't mean you have to take it.)

Once, when I was explaining the asking-as-giving principle to a class, a student stumped me by inquiring about how it applies when someone appears to have truly nothing to give. What about a homeless person, say,

who asks you for support or food? Is the dignity of giving simply unavailable to them? I took this question home with me and rolled it around in my head, because I didn't have a ready answer. Eventually, what of true value a homeless person could give me did occur to me, though. At the next opportunity, I tried it out: after aiding a man on the street, I asked, "Will you please pray for me and my family?" He looked shocked initially to be asked but gladly said he would.

I happen to believe, as my Christian religion teaches (and as do many other faiths) that God hears the cries of the poor—so I judge that I got a lot more than I gave that day. But you don't have to subscribe to the metaphysics to transcend yourself by asking for a blessing when you give to someone who seems to have nothing.

One of Eight Billion

On one of my trips to see the Dalai Lama at his home in Dharamshala he made an offhand remark that had a big impact on my thinking. He told me that one of the most striking things he ever saw was a photo taken by an American astronaut on Christmas Eve of 1968, taken from a space capsule orbiting the moon. Often called "Earthrise," the image of the earth as a distant blue globe is familiar to all of us. When the Dalai Lama saw that, he said, he was reminded—to his great comfort—of the true proportion of things and the relative importance of himself. In effect, it forced him into the I-self by making him understand his smallness.

This comforting feeling is similar to what researchers find when they present young adults with the fact that, if the history of the universe were a single year, our lives would represent a tiny fraction of a second. It doesn't make them feel meaningless at all—on the contrary: it gives them a sense of peace and perspective on life.[29] I see this at my university when students take a general astronomy class. They go in thinking it will be boring but invariably love it. It's not just because it is fascinating. As one student told me, "Every day I am reminded that I am a speck on a speck on a speck."

Think about how small you are compared with the earth, the solar system, the galaxy, the universe. Then try to feel aggrieved that your last social media post didn't get enough likes!

But now take this littleness of the I-self and make it sublime by marrying it to the love you have for others. His Holiness does this by reminding me—and everyone—of a fundamental truth: "I am one of eight billion people." As human beings, we are radically equal in human dignity, all worthy of love, and each person counts as the face of the whole world. I say this to myself every day. Sometimes I will still feel aggrieved and self-focused. But when I do, I *notice* it—and this act of noticing is part of my own process of self-transcendence. And then I remember that to transcend myself for the sake of just one other person—my wife, my colleague, a stranger—is also to show my love for the 7,999,999,999 humans who are *not me*.

That reflection on the good of others is an important first step in self-transcendence, and charitable acts turn it into action. But you can go even further by building your daily work around this idea. That means using your work as a way to achieve meaning by making it a sacred calling—a vocation of service. That is our next topic.

Questions for Self-Assessment and Goal Setting

1. Do I spend most of my time in the me-self, or do I actively seek the I-self by paying attention to others and my surroundings?

2. In what ways do I practice self-transcendence in my everyday life? What are some memories of focusing on others that provided deeper meaning?

3. Am I able to give generously—of my time, money, affection, attention, and energy—without expecting anything in return?

4. Do I allow myself to be cared for by others, accepting kindness and favors with gratitude without becoming a "taker"? Or do I resist help, thinking that doing so

makes me virtuous?

5. Where am I on Kierkegaard's stages of meaning (aesthetic, ethical, religious)? Do I yearn for deeper purpose than what I am experiencing at this point in life?

6. What role does spirituality or religious practice play in my daily search for meaning, regardless of my feelings in the moment or official beliefs?

7. How often do I intentionally create moments for reflection or spiritual practice in my life? How does this impact my perspective and sense of meaning?

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CHAPTER 7

Look for Your Calling



There is a famous Zen Buddhist story of an *unsui* (novice monk) who, on his first day at the monastery, stands before the *jikijitsu* (head monk) to receive his work assignment. “Before you reach enlightenment,” says the master, “you will chop wood and carry water.”

Dutifully, the young monk does as he is told: day after day, month after month, year after year, he chops wood and carries water. It is backbreaking work, and many times he dreams about how his life will be different after enlightenment. What will his job be then? Perhaps he will be a teacher himself, sitting indoors without chafed hands and an aching back. Maybe he will be a pure contemplative, spending his time in prayer and meditation.

After two decades, through arduous study and work, the monk—now not so young—is finally judged to have attained the desired level of knowledge and has risen to the level of Zen master himself. Standing before the head monk, he asks, “I have faithfully carried out my job all these years, chopping wood and carrying water, as I worked to become a master. What will my job be now?”

The *jikijitsu* smiles. “Chop wood, carry water,” he replies.

The meaning of this story is that the junior monk's work was itself part of his journey to mastery. His true job was to find deep meaning in these arduous and seemingly menial tasks and bring that meaning to his practice as a monk—and so to the world. He was mistaken in envisioning a promotion from this work to something more elevated as a reward, because meaning could be found in whatever he might dedicate himself to doing in a spirit of love and humility.

I doubt that you literally chop wood or carry water for a living. Maybe you manage investments, drive for Uber, study at a university, or take care of your kids full time. You may love your job and can't get enough of it; or maybe you tolerate it and do it just to earn your way. No matter what, your productive activities to support yourself and others take up at least half your waking hours. This must be part of your search for life's meaning.

The Hierarchy of Work

I have done a lot of different jobs in my six decades on the planet. Some (like making pizzas) were a necessary evil—I needed money but would not have done the job otherwise. Playing the French horn in an orchestra was more of a skilled craft, done to make a living, of course, but more in pursuit of excellence per se. Running a large nonprofit felt like an act of service to others—my employees, but also my country. I am grateful for all those jobs; found them interesting and sometimes fun; and got a huge amount of valuable experience from them (even making pizzas). But only one job I've had—writing, teaching, and speaking about happiness, which is what I do now—feels like a transcendent *calling*: an answer to the questions in the last chapter, and what I am "meant to do" with my productive hours.

The way I have described my various jobs might remind you of the famous "Hierarchy of Needs" offered in 1943 by the great American psychologist Abraham Maslow.[1] He believed that people pursue their goals based on their needs, which exist in a hierarchy. At the bottom of the hierarchy are physiological needs, such as food and shelter. The "bottom"

doesn’t mean they are unimportant, but rather that they are *foundational*: Without having them met, you won’t care about much else. When they are met, you can move up to the next level, which (in Maslow’s estimation) involves safety. After that come love and belonging. So once you can feed your family and keep them safe, you will be interested in having community and friends. After that comes self-esteem; and finally self-actualization. In other words, when all the basic needs are met, people start to think about who they are and how they can personally improve.

Much later, Maslow added another, highest-order goal: self-transcendence, by which he meant spiritual needs.[2] This reflected his realization that we must transcend ourselves to find the meaning of our lives. I obviously agree—it is the whole point of the last chapter!—but would object to self-transcendence at the top, as if it were not fundamental to life until all other needs are met. Indeed, many people living in poverty and insecurity have figured out that transcendence is possible in any circumstances.

The motives for work exist in a hierarchy kind of like Maslow’s. Based on the writing of philosophers who have written about work, from Aristotle to Karl Marx to Viktor Frankl, when it comes to finding meaning through work, the goal is to attain the job and career that take you to the highest level in figure 4.

The lowest level of work motivation is “necessary evil.” Finding meaning in work that you hate is difficult. In fact, if you hate your job, it can *inhibit* a sense of your life’s meaning. Above this is work as a duty, such as that which you do to be a productive citizen and to support those you love. Fulfilling a duty is, of course, meaningful. My family is meaningful to me, and thus, so is supporting them. However, ideally you can do better than just that, by seeing your work as a means to practice excellence and virtue—that is, honing your craft. Even higher in meaning is service to others, beyond just economic support.



Figure 4. The hierarchy of meaning in work

But at the highest level we find the complex idea of work as a *calling*. Generally, this encompasses the lower motives but also something higher—for some, even something religious. In the Bible—before all the unpleasantness with the snake and the apple—tending the Garden of Eden is how Adam and Eve act in God's image. Similarly, in Hinduism, the Bhagavad Gita says: "By performing one's natural occupation, one worships the Creator from whom all living entities have come into being, and by whom the whole universe is pervaded. By such performance of work, a person easily attains perfection."[3]

But finding life's meaning in work is not necessarily religious. Secular career counselors are trained to lead clients in exactly this direction as well. As one 2009 guide for counselors instructed (less poetically than the

Bhagavad Gita): “Counselors are encouraged to explore the extent to which clients feel a transcendent summons to a particular career, the extent to which clients’ careers bring meaning to their lives, and the extent to which clients’ careers serve society.”[4]

Researchers have shown that when people agree with the statement “I have a good understanding of my calling as it applies to my career,” they tend to have a high sense of their life’s meaning.[5] In this chapter, you will see why some people say this, and how you can, too.

A Call Within a Call

Saint Teresa of Calcutta (known to most people still today as Mother Teresa) was a diminutive Albanian nun who, at the age of thirty-six, had a vision that she must dedicate her life to serving the poorest of the poor in the slums of Calcutta. She founded the Missionaries of Charity and did just that—first in complete anonymity and later under a worldwide spotlight after being “discovered” by the journalist Malcolm Muggeridge and then later winning the Nobel Peace Price in 1979. Asked why she gave up her quiet life in the convent in favor of Calcutta’s chaotic street life, she said that she had had “a call within a call.”[6] Her first calling was to religious life; her second calling was to live in complete poverty among the world’s most miserable and forgotten.

To have a calling doesn’t necessarily mean you have to have a divine vision and live in poverty. It means you have a purpose—clear goals and direction. This is the gist of John F. Kennedy’s famous 1962 speech about taking on great challenges, such as going to the moon, “not because they are easy, but because they are hard,”[7] or of mountaineer George Mallory’s 1924 explanation for climbing Everest—“Because it’s there.”[8] Kennedy knew that space travel was a daunting prospect. Mallory knew he could easily lose his life attempting Everest. Their answers were just different ways of saying, “The world has called us to do this thing—it is our purpose.”

It is intimidating to think that the only way to find meaning in work is to be like Mother Teresa, JFK, or George Mallory. Your job might be a little more earthbound, and it seems a little silly, like imagining yourself telling someone, *I knew my calling at work when one day I fell into a trance, and a voice boomed out from heaven telling me, "God wants you to be an insurance claims adjuster!"* But in fact, a calling does not have to involve anything so dramatic as walking on the moon or conquering earth's highest peak. People feel a calling for all sorts of work, including work they don't consider glamorous, fascinating, or even consistently enjoyable. I don't think I've ever spoken with a CEO who said, "My job is so fun!" I was a chief executive myself for more than ten years; in my first year, I confided in a close friend who'd successfully run one of the largest companies in the world that I was struggling and unhappy. He said, "Eighty percent of being a CEO is taking out the trash. But even that is important to do with excellence." To run a big company is generally one headache after another, but what great executives have in common is an ineffable sense that *they are supposed to be doing this job*, even when it is about as fun as taking out the trash—or chopping wood and carrying water.

Psychologists have studied this mysterious sense of calling in depth and often say that it requires having a "subjective career," as opposed to an "objective career."[9] The difference between the two is how success is defined. Objective careers focus on money, power, and prestige. Subjective careers are more focused on *earned success* and *service to others*.

Earned success is the opposite of an old idea in psychology called "learned helplessness," which is what occurs when people feel like no matter what they do, their rewards or punishments aren't affected.[10] For example, you are paid and promoted the same as everyone else, regardless of how you perform. Alternatively, you are not rewarded or are treated poorly even when you excel in your work. This leads to feelings of resignation, futility and, often, depression about life in general.

I have a friend who at one time had what seemed like the perfect job: decent pay, low stress, normal hours. But one day, he abruptly quit. I asked him why, and here's what he told me. "Last week, my boss came into my

office and told me I was doing a good job, which felt good. Ten seconds later, I heard him saying the exact same thing to the guy in the next cubicle. That guy is an incompetent idiot, and everyone knows it. It made me feel like I was wasting my life to know that he valued us the same, so I quit." He quit because he didn't want learned helplessness.

In contrast, earned success is what gives people a sense that they are in charge of their own destiny. If you know your boss will notice and acknowledge hard work and excellence, it gives you energy to be engaged, even when the work is difficult and not fun. Earned success means being recognized and rewarded for merit and personal responsibility. I work a lot with companies seeking to bring more meaning and happiness to the workplace, and one of the things I stress the most is this idea of earned success through honest, clear, merit-based systems. This is hard for weak leaders, who don't like holding people accountable or acknowledging that aptitude and work effort differ between people and some are more excellent than others. To avoid conflict, these leaders prefer tenure- or loyalty-based systems, which strip work of meaning and drive away good people.

The second reward from a subjective career is serving others. By this I do not mean that you can't have a calling unless you are Mother Teresa. What I am saying is that you need to feel needed by others in whatever you do. There is almost nothing in life more disempowering than feeling superfluous to the world. It directly destroys life's meaning because it is the opposite of meaning's third dimension: significance. If you are not needed, then your answer to the question "For whom does my life matter?" is "No one."

There are lots of ways to be needed and to serve others in life. The most common and straightforward way is to have children, of course. For new parents, taking care of a helpless baby is extremely taxing and difficult but incredibly meaningful. This is the point at which many young people stop partying: They find deep significance for the first time in life, are truly needed, see their old lives as a waste of time, and want to take care of themselves for the sake of their children.

But another way people serve others is through their work. This is the concept of work as a *vocation*. People commonly use this term in a religious context, as in “a priestly vocation,” but it need not have this sense at all. A vocation is simply an orientation toward others in your productive efforts: what you do to serve, and which other people need.

To understand why vocation in work is so important, consider this thought experiment: Imagine I offer you two sources of income, but you can take only one. For the first option, you will be decently paid for an occupation that is truly vital for people’s lives. An example might be the work of a paramedic: a hard job with tough hours, sometimes a lot of stress, and even danger. You’re never going to get rich, but you go to bed every night feeling needed. In the second scenario, you will make 50 percent more to sit behind an empty desk and do nothing. You’re allowed to read or look at your phone, but you won’t be doing anything productive or creating any value; no one depends on you to get anything done. You’re truly not needed by anyone.

Let’s say that all of your nonwork opportunities and responsibilities are the same in each case. Which scenario gives you more energy? Which one offers you more pride and sense of being socially useful? Which path would you want your kids to see you taking? Which would you be excited to talk to your friends about? I can’t predict the answer for everyone in the world, but I can predict it for you, fellow striver—that’s why you’re reading this book.

There is nothing more empowering than a deep conviction that your work is needed by others. Researchers have found ingenious proofs for this. For example, in studies of people who are sick and on disability leave from work, researchers have found that the biggest motivating factor to return to work is not an attachment to any specific task but whether others depend on them.[11] Near the end of his life, my dad—a math professor whom you met in the introduction—was very ill and in and out of the hospital. He was inevitably extremely anxious to be let out, no matter how bad he felt. “I can’t cancel another class,” he’d say. “My students need me.”

Do What Serves Your Values

“Find your calling” might strike you as a sort of privilege, and for some, out of reach. Many people don’t feel as though they have the luxury of serving a calling in their jobs or careers. For someone struggling to make rent, the option I offered of earning half as much again even though it meant a do-nothing job might seem like not a choice but rather an economic necessity.

When you graduated from high school or college, you probably sat through a ceremony with a speaker you barely remember. You very likely heard one of two themes very typical of graduation speeches: either “Find a job you love, and you’ll never work a day in your life” or “Go save the world.” In other words, the exhortation is *Go have fun* or *Be a saint*. Neither of these is practical: no job is so much fun that it never feels like work; and you are very unlikely to transform the world. Let’s start with more modest versions of the two pieces of advice: the first is to focus on enjoyment, the second on values. Obviously, what these are, specifically, depends on you—your values and what you find enjoyable. Different strokes.

Researchers have studied these two strategies, surveying employees according to their goals and dividing them into enjoyment seekers and values seekers. They compared the two groups on measures of how much passion they had for their work and how often they changed jobs.[12] The researchers found that, on average, enjoyment seeking isn’t related to passion or job turnover. You are just as passionate about your job, and just as likely to leave it, whether it is fun or isn’t. Meanwhile, values seeking markedly increases passion for the work and reduces turnover. You want to love your job and make it your calling? Find something that serves your values as best you can. This is what psychologists call “self-concordance.”[13]

Finding your calling also depends on the way you’re compensated for your work—the subjective versus objective career concept you read about above. Economists divide reward into two categories: *extrinsic* and *intrinsic*. Extrinsic rewards refer to more material benefits such as wage, benefits, and prestige. Intrinsic rewards are the intangibles, such as a belief

that you're doing something the world needs. There's nothing wrong with extrinsic rewards, but calling and vocation come from the intrinsic ones. When people are intrinsically motivated, they like their jobs more, work harder, and stick with them longer.[14]

How can you know if you have intrinsic motivation for your work? Try this test: First imagine that your material needs—food, rent, health care—are all taken care of and don't depend on how much you make. Next, imagine that your pay were cut by, say, 10 percent, or some number you could deal with, even if you don't like it. Would you work less? Then imagine that your pay was increased by 20 percent. Would you work more? If your answers to these questions are no and no, you have high intrinsic motivation for your work: your job unquestionably gives you a strong sense of satisfaction and purpose. If, however, your answers are yes and yes, that suggests you might want to keep looking for your calling.

But as I said before, and as we all know, not everyone has the luxury of making their paid work a soul-satisfying endeavor. Not long ago, I was answering questions from a live television audience about finding meaning at work. A young man said: "To support myself, I have a job that feels pointless. All day, I sit in a cubicle farm, entering data into spreadsheets, just like everyone around me. I don't think it would matter to anyone if this job never got done." He ended with a question: "Can I ever find a sense of calling in my work?"

I could sympathize—like many of us, I've had jobs, especially earlier in life, that were just to earn money and didn't feel meaningful at all. But here's what I suggested: Tomorrow, go to the coffee machine, pour a cup, bring it to the person in the next cubicle, and say, "You can probably use a fresh cup of coffee." See what the look on that person's face gives you. It may change your outlook, make you wish to repeat the kindness. Even if the spreadsheets are still there, you may start to feel differently about the work if you can make a habit of that kind of behavior toward your colleagues.

The point is that you can look for your calling without being a lifesaving paramedic or feeding the hungry. Simply being a great team member, a kind

coworker, a considerate and caring manager, all count. Serving others doesn't have to be heroic to achieve self-transcendence and the sense of meaning you crave. Even if your job is not extrinsically rewarding, you can start generating your own intrinsic rewards.

Are You Following the Right Star?

Let's get more practical about how to find work that serves your intrinsic values.

A Christmas story familiar to almost everyone is "The Gift of the Magi"—about the three Wise Men who came from the East seeking the Baby Jesus in Bethlehem. "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews?" they ask. "For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him."[15] This is a story of unshakable faith in a worldly sign—a star in the sky—which they believed would guide them to the Savior of the world.

This story has inspired Christians for two millennia to believe they can find metaphysical truth and eternal life by following something tangible, such as the physical sacraments or literal words, etched in ink, in the New Testament. But it also teaches a very worldly lesson to anyone, religious or not, who is seeking a meaningful calling in work. A calling, like meaning itself, is easy to understand but hard to pursue directly, because it is in the mysterious realm of the right hemisphere. You need "proxy goals" instead —metaphorical stars in the sky you can see and measure that, you assume, will lead you to the calling you desire.

In general, career goals are incredibly important because they create a sense of direction, without which you cannot make progress. Psychologists have shown in experiments that when people set tangible goals, life feels more manageable, especially for those suffering from depression and anxiety.[16] In fact, goals are protective against adverse life circumstances. For example, if you don't like your current employment, professional goal setting will make your job more bearable.[17]

To find your true calling, however, not all proxy goals are created equal. As we saw in the last section, they must align with your internal values and interests to create a sense of calling. Proxy goals that do so have three basic characteristics.

The first characteristic of a good proxy goal is that it is *non-zero sum*.[18] That is, achieving it does not mean someone else cannot *also* achieve it. For example, a zero-sum goal would be becoming the CEO of your company: if you're the CEO, no one else can be (until you quit or get fired, that is). A non-zero-sum goal would be an honest assessment of how interesting and challenging you find your work, qualities which can be enjoyed by anyone else and not just you. Non-zero-sum goals enhance your sense of meaning, whereas competitive, zero-sum goals lower it. You could be a happy CEO, but holding the corner office per se isn't directly over your true target.

The second characteristic of a good proxy goal is your motive for striving for it: your motive should be *approach*, not *avoidance*.[19] That is, you should seek your proxy goal for positive reasons, not negative ones. For example, say that to improve your quality of life, your proxy goal is to raise your employability through education. This can be a positive, approach goal, such as, "I want to learn a bunch of new and interesting skills." Or it can be a negative, avoidance goal, such as, "I don't want to wind up poor or unemployed."

Finally, the best proxy goals tend to be non-positional, meaning they are not set to create social comparison. A positional goal would be to have a career that impresses others. A non-positional goal would be to have one that uses your gifts, whether others are impressed or not. It's true that people get some temporary satisfaction when others envy them—we are only human, after all. But the more important this comparison is to you, the less meaning you will get from your work.[20] Indeed, learning to eschew social comparisons in your goals is itself a worthy proxy goal for well-being.

If you have struggled to find your calling, it is very likely that your proxy goals were to blame. They were zero sum or avoidance-motivated or

positional, so they didn't lead you to anything like a true calling. If it's time to set some new goals, here are some things to keep in mind.

Focus on people, not things. As I hope you believe by now in this book, meaning and love are right-hemisphere cousins. Love is best defined as "to will the good of another," *as judged by the other*, meaning that it is reserved for living beings. Love is inherently non-zero sum; it is infinite. It is positive. And it is, when sincere, not based on any social comparison. Follow goals like the relationships you make in your career and the way your work serves others, and you will be right over the target of your calling.

It's about you, not about how others see you. We are prone as a species to seek status and rise in social hierarchies.[21] This is an evolved trait, because higher status in times of scarce resources usually means a greater likelihood of survival and finding a mate. But social comparison doesn't lead to happiness at all, especially today in the age of social media.[22] If your proxy goals revolve around how you compare to others or how others see you, you aren't over the target.

Make a meaningful journey your goal, too. One danger in the pursuit of your goals is the assumption that once you hit them, the bliss you attain will last forever. You'll remember that this is called "arrival fallacy." To be sure, following the three criteria for the right career goals helps a great deal in this regard. But you should also take care not to disregard the journey itself—and look for meaning in it as much as you can. Make your work about creating value, learning, and serving, not just about succeeding.

One last point. There are times in life when you need to deviate from your goals, even if they are perfectly thought out. Circumstances change, often in ways you don't like and which are beyond your control. Maybe your relationship ends, your employment disappears, or someone you love dies. In such cases, there is one more lesson to keep in mind.

Stay flexible. Your proxy goals for happiness today may be outstanding, but they might not work for you tomorrow. Always be ready look for new ones without remorse or hesitation. As an example of this, consider once again the Three Wise Men. They followed the star and found the Child

Jesus, as promised. But the way back home was another story.[23] God warned them in a dream that King Herod was waiting for them on the road home to learn the whereabouts of the Messiah and do Him harm. The solution? Simple: they departed for their own country another way.

Quit Your Job to Find Your Calling

The solution I gave the young man in the television audience—to go make his colleagues a cup of coffee, in order to create intrinsic value—is solid but probably not permanent. What he was telling me was that he found his job not just unrewarding but *soul-sucking*. If you are similarly placed—feeling neither calling nor vocation, in a job that's neither fun nor values-driven—you need to find something else, if you can. By the way, you're not alone: in 2024, for example, 28 percent of Americans were actively looking to change jobs.[24] Some people do just need to earn more, but I rarely come across anyone who doesn't say they also want more meaningful work.

In an uncertain economic environment, you may hesitate to take the leap—especially if you feel unsure that a change will make things better. Changing jobs is inherently stressful for many people: it creates about a third as much stress as the death of a spouse, half as much as divorce, and about the same amount as the death of a close friend.[25] No surprise, then, that normal people with steady jobs are reluctant to quit them, even when their work-life experience is not great.

People are averse to such big life changes partly for biological reasons. The brain is more efficient and uses less energy when it does not have to process lots of new information. This resistance to novelty is why some people are reluctant to learn new skills, meet new colleagues, figure out a new boss, and adjust to a new commute.[26] Not surprisingly, people who are the most reluctant to quit a job have more risk-averse personalities.[27]

My father belonged to this resistant category. I remember how once, when he was looking at employment listings, he said, "I would love to apply for one of these jobs." "Why don't you?" I asked. He looked at me as

if I were insane even to suggest such a thing. In fact, however, my dad had another characteristic that explains his reluctance to change jobs even better than risk aversion: high conscientiousness, which is a very positive personality trait. People with this trait are reluctant to be disloyal to their employers and are more likely to make the best of the position they have.[28]

Even if you are risk-averse and highly conscientious, if your work is not a calling and you don't think it will become one, my advice is still this: Quit. Maybe not this afternoon—you probably need to do some research and get your ducks in a row a bit. You might even need to wait out a recession. But strivers almost always do just fine when they are on the market. Don't let your brain fool you into thinking that the risk is greater than the meaning you are missing. And are you worried that a new job will be worse than the old one? You needn't be: Studies show that changing jobs usually leads to a greater sense of purpose and well-being.[29]

And consider what will happen if you find your work meaningless and *don't* quit your job. Chronically low job satisfaction can aggravate mental health problems such as depression and anxiety.[30] Those are precisely the results we see in people who are in long-term employment that feels meaningless.

What About "Work-Life Balance"?

I trained originally as an economist and got a great technical education in the process, giving me the ability to analyze data and conduct experiments. My early research focused on behavioral aspects of economic activity, such as love, marriage, and charitable giving. This ultimately led me to the study of happiness, but back then, a major assumption underlying most economic models always bugged me because it didn't square with my own experience: the "labor-leisure trade-off." This assumed that people divide their time between hours spent working for money and hours spent enjoying

rest and recreation—in other words, leisure is good for well-being and work is bad.

What nonsense. If you can make your work a calling, it can be a hugely positive part of your life—maybe even a game changer in the search for meaning. And why would you ever resign yourself to spending at least forty hours a week, two thousand hours a year, satisfying a necessary evil? Life is a scarce resource, and these are valuable hours—because all of your time could be yielding meaning for you.

But it's not just economists who are confused about this. So is everyone else who talks about "work-life balance." I regard this notion as a mistake precisely because it assumes that work and life are separate, opposed things. Work should be part of your life, and your whole life, including your occupation, should be optimized for meaning if possible.

Work-as-part-of-life does not mean that work should crowd out everything else, however. That is the risk of workaholism, when your job becomes a harmful addiction that makes meaning harder, not easier, to find. Remember from the introduction Maria, the young woman who ground through her job, day after day, in the hope that somehow sheer force would bring her meaning. The reality was that she was self-soothing by staying productive and busy, and this was preventing her from focusing on the difficult, discomforting, but essential questions of life.

Psychologists identified workaholism as a clinical designation back in the 1970s. As the Stanford psychiatrist Anna Lembke told me, workaholism commonly leads to secondary addictions, involving perhaps drugs or alcohol, which people use to self-medicate for the problems caused by the primary addiction. That can set up a vicious cycle with catastrophic personal consequences, which I see every day in my work.

Five years ago, I was interviewing successful professionals on Wall Street for a research project. Among them was a woman about my age who had gotten fabulously rich in finance but confessed to me that her life felt meaningless. I asked her to tell me more. "I got everything I always thought I wanted in terms of money and power," she told me, "but my life is empty." She and her husband were "roommates." Her relationship with her

adult children was “cordial.” Her friendships? All deal, no real. And she knew the reason: a hundred hours a week of work over forty years, with little attention to her relationships. And now she didn’t much care about her career, either. I asked her why she had made those decisions. She thought it over for what felt like a long time, then said, very quietly, “I guess I chose to be special, rather than happy.”

Ah, yes, the drive to be *special* through work. This is the ultimate *me-self* motive. For strivers, it is incredibly common, and it destroys both our love *and* our calling. And I say “our” in that last sentence because I mean me, too. That woman’s comment was like a knife to my heart. When my kids were little, I never worked less than an eighty-hour week. I missed so much of their childhoods—so much love—in search of specialness. And the fourteenth hour in the office *never* felt like a calling.

So why do we do it? Once again, Mother Nature is playing a cruel trick on us. The sense of specialness stimulates dopamine production in the brain, just as drugs and alcohol do, creating addiction.[31] Workaholics typically made success their drug of choice in childhood, when their parents showered them with love and praise for good report cards or extracurricular achievement such as in sports or music. Their developing brains adapted accordingly, and as they grew up, they found their lives ruled by this formula: more work = more success = more praise = more dopamine.

But not more happiness or more meaning in life, of course. On the contrary, these habits crowd out a good marriage, deep friendships, and a search for transcendence. Although workaholics may be admired or envied by others for their outward success, they are often quite desperate people: Their obsessive work habits always promise a sense of being special but never deliver more than a fleeting hit of that gratification.

Make Your Leisure a Calling, Too

We are looking for a balance: passion for work that makes it a calling, but without tipping into workaholism that extinguishes the sense of meaning

and simply fuels an addiction to worldly success. This balance is not easy for strivers to achieve, as I know personally. For years, I thought I was a lost cause on this dimension.

But then I read the work of the German twentieth-century philosopher Josef Pieper. A follower of Plato and Thomas Aquinas, Pieper wrote not about the virtues of work but about those of leisure, which he believed was an inherently meaning-filled, generative part of life. In his 1948 essay "Leisure: The Basis of Culture," he reconceived leisure as an attitude of contemplation, openness to the world, and deep reflection.[32] The opposite of leisure thus defined is not work, according to Pieper's theory, but *acedia*, an ancient word meaning spiritual or mental sloth. Leisure, in other words, is anything but *just chillin'*. It is a serious business in life that, if done right, can save you from workaholism and serve as a calling itself.

Properly understood, leisure is the work you choose to do for yourself without the economic whip driving you. If Pieper were around now, you can bet that he would not include scrolling social media, chuckling at memes, getting drunk, or binge-watching television as useful forms of leisure activity. Rather, leisure should involve philosophical contemplation and artistic experiences, learning new ideas or skills, spending time in nature, and deepening relationships.

Pieper himself laid particular emphasis on the value of practicing a faith, because, he wrote, "culture lives on religion through divine worship."[33] You may never have thought of going to a house of worship as a leisure activity; Pieper would say that's because you never took your leisure seriously enough. I hear you thinking that this approach to leisure doesn't sound like much fun, but if well-being is your ultimate object, social scientists have shown that Pieper knew a thing or two: Relaxing provides only minor, temporary boosts of positive emotion.[34] What gives us a more sustained, meaningful reward are pursuits involving social engagement, personal reflection, and activities in nature—basically, the topics in the second half of this book.[35]

So, much as we want to be excellent at our jobs, we should become excellent at leisure to generate the kind of coherence, purpose, and

significance that work alone cannot offer. Especially if a single-minded pursuit of work excellence has led to meaning-destroying workaholism in your life, as we saw had happened to Maria, excellent leisure can help you heal. You need to take time to contemplate life's big questions without distraction; to learn to appreciate what is beautiful; to transcend your workaday life and consider what is divine. If you are hearing in this an echo of the earlier discussion about getting outside the left-brain preoccupation with complicated problems and allowing right-brain exploration of complex ones, you are exactly right.

To achieve excellence at leisure requires time, effort, and discipline. If, dear striver, you are baffled at how to get started, here are three ways to approach the task.

First, structure your leisure. The Catholic Archbishop Fulton Sheen was a famous mid-century radio and television star, but his lasting legacy was his instruction to set aside a "holy hour" of prayer, Scripture reading, and meditation at the same time every day. Millions still do it to this day and swear it is the most helpful part of their faith. Whether you are religious or not, consider creating your own holy hour. This could be a morning hour that you devote to reading something meaningful, or an hour-long walk every day after lunch without devices, or a period of uninterrupted conversation each evening after dinner with the person you most love. However you choose to observe your holy hour, structure it into your day and give it the same priority you would a very important meeting.

Second, don't waste your leisure time. One of the biggest killers of productive leisure is the inability to get started. If you have an hour off, you might start by checking the news headlines, then answering emails. Before you know it, the time has passed in largely unproductive and forgettable activity. To avoid this syndrome, program your activity in advance of the time, and get right to it. If your chosen leisure activity is to read a certain book for that hour, have the book ready, start promptly, and do nothing else. Put your phone on silent mode and block all distractions. This is crucial, valuable time.

Finally, set specific leisure goals. Humans are inherently goal-oriented creatures; it's how we stay motivated in ways that our survival once depended on.[36] So use this trait in your nature to achieve leisure excellence. For example, if you want to pursue your own Bible study, don't just put aside the time to read it but set a goal of reading the entire book in a year. Or if you've begun a habit of daily meditation, a useful goal might be to work toward a weeklong silent retreat. If listening to music is your designated leisure activity, great—but focus on a particular composer, work through their opus, and devise a goal that's also a kind of reward: For example, if you've been learning about J. S. Bach, look for a Bach festival you can attend as a truly informed listener.

As the title of Pieper's essay proposes, leisure is "the basis of culture." But so many of us default to treating leisure as simply *not work* and expect the temporary release from the economic compulsion of a job to be its own gratification and reward. Instead, we should be using our leisure to create a culture that reflects our values and creates connections with others in bonds of love and meaning.

How to Stop Working Without Losing the Sense of Meaning

Our society's ingrained but unhelpful habit of thinking about work and leisure as opposites has lifelong effects. This misconceived opposition is never more apparent than in the way we're encouraged to think about changes in life that involve spending less time working for pay and more time doing other things. This can happen voluntarily or involuntarily and at any age. Maybe you step away from full-time work to raise kids. Or you have a spell of unemployment. Or you retire.

I know a man who was very successful in the insurance business. By his early forties, he had earned several hundred million dollars, a sum beyond what most of us can even imagine possessing. He was very good at his work but didn't love it. He was neither an enjoyment seeker nor a values seeker, just a smart man who fell into an incredibly lucrative job. As he

neared fifty, he was starting to see three things clearly: He wasn't going to mysteriously start loving his career, he wasn't getting any younger, and he didn't need more money. This, with his family's encouragement, led him to the conclusion that he should quit his full-time job and find something else to do with his time.

But as little as he liked his work, the prospect of quitting filled him with dread. He had seen a number of people in his situation do so, and it never seemed to turn out well. A sense of freedom quickly turned into restless boredom, a rather pointless obsession with golf or tennis, then an affair, a broken marriage, and years of heartache. He didn't want any of that. After reading one of my books, he reached out to me. "How can I retire so that my life gets better, not worse?" he asked.

When full-time work is interrupted, some people find life more meaningful, while others experience the opposite. Which will you be? In the statistics, patterns emerge that can inform a strategy more likely to be life-enhancing and avoid disappointment.

Although people usually picture their retirement positively, even under the best of circumstances they generally encounter both benefits and costs. More freedom but less status; more leisure but less social stimulation.

The first thing studies show is that it depends on whether the cessation of market work is by choice. It usually leads to greater well-being when it is chosen and desired (such as when people step back to raise children), but when forced (such as when people are laid off or forced to retire) the reverse is often true. The 2002 movie *About Schmidt* poignantly captures this predicament. The main character, played by Jack Nicholson, is an actuary pushed into retirement by his company. Despite his wife's attempt to turn this into a fun opportunity by buying an RV to drive around the country, he is filled with dismay and sadness. The RV makes him feel that all he's fit for is tourism. This chimes with many people's experience. When people are compelled to stop working—because they hit a mandatory age or are the victim of downsizing—their sense of purpose generally falls, on average, while depression and sadness rise.[37]

One sure thing: idleness is a disaster. Not engaging in any work after working full time usually results in loneliness.[38] To counteract this liability, a good strategy can be to engage in some sort of “bridge employment”—not for the money but to stay useful and connected to other people (which, as you know, is central to meaning). This particularly applies to strivers, who love to work and derive a large part of their purpose from their job.

We can use all this knowledge to devise a strategy when work temporarily pauses or finishes. If you’re still many years from retirement, so much the better: the sooner you start thinking in this framework, the more likely you will be to have the right approach when the time arrives. Just as a financial adviser will tell you that the earlier you start saving into a pension, the better, I’m here to tell you that the sooner you start thinking about structuring your life for maximum meaning, the better too. (Also, this section will provide you good advice to give your aging parents.)

Here are two things to keep in mind. First, stepping away from a job should be stepping *toward* something new. This combines the ideas that always having an occupation—paid or otherwise—is wise and that you should, when possible, stop working on your own terms. When it comes to retirement, I recommend to everyone who asks me about this that they look upon this as the moment when they simply cannot afford to keep doing their regular job because it’s preventing them from doing the productive things they truly want and need to do. This might include spending more time with children and grandchildren, community service, teaching and mentoring, or charitable work. Conceivably, an existing hobby might fit into this category, but I have never seen a mere pastime fully substitute for work as a way to maintain a sense of meaning over any sustainable period, especially for ambitious people. A little golf goes a very, very long way.

When an uninvited period of unemployment occurs, it is an enormous help to be able to see the time as an opportunity to hit a list of productive activities that were impossible during full-time work. This can include working on your physical health, cultivating a deeper spiritual life, or pursuing an intellectual agenda such as studying something new. This is

similar to what many people did during the COVID-19 epidemic. Personally, I was grounded from my speaking travel for the first time in many years. I used the time to write a book I had been thinking about for a decade, which wound up changing the course of my career when it was published. I recommend to everyone that they keep a running agenda of activities that they find attractive but currently impossible. If a layoff occurs, that becomes a to-do list.

The idea is to start cultivating a competition for your work time long before any cessation of employment. Think of it this way: this is a career change, so, as with any career change, you have to do the preparatory work to make a success of it; that might involve some trial and error. But doing some homework is far better than flailing around after an overambitious hard launch. That is no fun at all.

Second, start working to adjust your exposure to a cessation's costs and benefits. Begin by adjusting your identity away from whatever ready-made label your profession or occupation gave you—be it "professor" or "plumber"—and spending more time in a community where no one particularly cares what your job title is. Then figure out how to use your nonwork hours as productively as possible, so that when this time increases, the value you create does as well. This means getting serious about such things as family and friendships, service to others, religious or spiritual practice—all those other parts of life, so rich in meaning, that you may have pushed to one side earlier in your career.

This is, in fact, the advice I gave the insurance executive. He started teaching a class at his alma mater, a business school, and absolutely loved it. The MBA students lapped up his experience, and it made him feel vital and alive to teach what he knew. Second, he got far more involved in his kids' lives than he had in the past, which—he was surprised to learn—he loved as well, because his relationship with them deepened as a result. Finally, he reconnected with many old friends and started spending time with them on weekends. When he finally "retired," it was because, in his words, he "couldn't afford the time to hold on to his job."

Even as a child, I had a strong belief that I knew my calling: to be a classical musician. My parents saw an early aptitude and strongly encouraged it, with piano and violin lessons from the age of five, followed by starting the French horn at eight. I had real talent for the horn and practiced single-mindedly with the aim of being not just a professional player but the number one French hornist in the world. I did little else, practicing and performing whenever possible, all the way through adolescence. Most boys had posters of sports stars on their wall; I had pictures of the world's greatest horn players. I imagined myself lauded as a soloist for the world's finest orchestras and recording famous albums for Deutsche Grammophon.

I quit college after only a year to pursue my musical career, spending my twenties playing chamber music, performing with the City Orchestra of Barcelona, and working hard to pursue my soloist ambitions. True, like many in the arts, I wasn't making much money, but I was living my dream. If you'd told me then the story of the Zen master and the novice, I would have said, "*Pffft*—chop wood and carry water? Where's the meaning in that?"

But that music career didn't last. In retrospect, my attitude about music featured almost every red flag in this chapter about work for extrinsic, objective ends. Realizing I had to do something else and needed an education to do so, I finally went to college—by correspondence, graduating a month before my thirtieth birthday. I left music at thirty-one to pursue my PhD as a social scientist, which was, in retrospect, a providential move. And over time, I even stopped listening to music, which had been my first love.

As time passed, however, I realized I was missing something important. True, playing music was not my calling, but to shun it was closing off something I needed. Little by little, I found ways to reintroduce music into my life. But instead of feeling regret and resentment, seeing music as a lost source of personal glory (the me-self), I was able to stand in awe and let it

enrich my life with beauty (the I-self). Eventually, music became central to my personal quest for transcendence. Today, I can't imagine pursuing my own search for meaning without the greatest music ever written—I can even be glad and grateful that the French horn part is not mine. As I write these words, I am listening to the music of Johann Sebastian Bach, the high-baroque master who is my favorite composer. I also love the visual arts, poetry, and literature. I enjoy these forms of art—but more than that, they reveal meaning to me in ways I cannot articulate, lighting up the right hemisphere of my brain.

Strange as it seems, to find my professional calling, I had to leave a career of great beauty. But to find deeper meaning, I had to bring that beauty back into my life. And that beauty in art and music—or in nature, or anywhere else—can help you find meaning in your life, too. So that is the subject we turn to next.

Questions for Self-Assessment and Goal Setting

1. Do my current job and career align with my values, or are they primarily a source of income, power, or status?

2. If all my basic material needs were met (food, housing, health care), would I still do this work? If my pay were decreased by 10 percent, would I want to work less? If my pay increased by 20 percent, would I want to work more? What do my answers say about my intrinsic motivation for my work?

3. Am I needed by others in my work? How does this sense of being needed—or not—affect my pride in, and energy for, the job?

4. Think about your career goals. Are they non-zero sum, or does "winning" mean others are losing? Are they positive and based on approach, or negative and based on avoidance? Are they non-positional, or based on social comparison?

5. Can I find opportunities in my current job and career to serve or support others, even if the work itself does not feel meaningful? Can I find significance or purpose in routine tasks (my "chop wood, carry water" tasks)?

6. Is my pursuit of excellence in work enhancing my well-being, or is it tipping into workaholism and crowding out other sources of meaning in my life—like relationships, leisure, or spiritual practice?

7. How do I structure my leisure time? Do I invest it in activities that build meaning, reflection, and relationships, or do I default to passive or unfulfilling distractions?

8. Do I have a plan for finding or maintaining meaning when my work circumstances change, such as during retirement or a period of unemployment?

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CHAPTER 8

Surround Yourself with Beauty



In 1941, Olivier Messiaen did not seem to have a lot to live for, or even a great shot at survival. He was languishing inside Stalag VIII-A, a Nazi prisoner-of-war camp near the town of Görlitz in present-day Poland. Notoriously, some twelve thousand Allied soldiers died there of disease, malnutrition, and harsh working conditions.[1] Recently drafted into the French army, which was routed by the Germans in 1940, Messiaen was quickly captured with thousands of other French soldiers.

Messiaen was hardly a textbook warrior. He was a thirty-three-year-old nearsighted intellectual whose passions were music and birds. The first was his vocation; he had been a stellar student of piano and composition at the Paris Conservatory. The second was his avocation, as an avid amateur ornithologist. He combined the two in his musical compositions, ingeniously mimicking bird calls with the instruments. He believed that both music and his beloved birds were divine gifts, sent to impart life's meaning.

And meaning was what he needed in Stalag VIII-A. As another famous Nazi prison camp inmate, Viktor Frankl, the author of the memoir *Man's Search for Meaning*, argued some years later, those who survived were the

ones who knew the "why" of their lives. In Frankl's words, "Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."[2]

Messiaen, in effect, lived by this maxim—and brought his music and birds to Stalag VIII-A as best he could. At one point, he persuaded a guard to smuggle him some manuscript paper and pencils. The camp contained a few instruments: a broken-down piano, a dilapidated violin and cello, and an old clarinet. For this random ensemble Messiaen wrote his *Quatuor pour la fin du Temps* ("Quartet for the End of Time") based on birdsongs and the following passage of hope and triumph from the Book of Revelation at the end of the Bible.

> And [he] swore by him who lives forever and ever, who created heaven and what is in it, the earth and what is in it, and the sea and what is in it, that there would be no more delay, but that in the days of the trumpet call to be sounded by the seventh angel, the mystery of God would be fulfilled, just as he announced to his servants the prophets.[3]

God only knows how the music sounded on the decrepit instruments, played by malnourished, sick prisoners. But after the war, the piece was taken up by many of the greatest musicians in the world; today it is considered a masterpiece of twentieth-century music and a triumph of the human spirit. Following his liberation, Messiaen worked happily as a music teacher and church organist, blending his religious mysticism with his musical gifts until his death in 1992.

We can hope that none of us will ever face the dire circumstances that Messiaen did, but you do not have to endure the same privations he did to avail yourself of the sense of meaning that he found. His music and birds (and the courage he saw in his fellow prisoners) show the way: become a student of beauty, and it will reveal the meaning of your life.

What kind of beauty? *All of it*: artistic beauty, natural beauty, moral beauty. It's all related. Indeed, one of my favorite psychology studies is poetically titled "9 Beautiful Things." Participants were given the following instructions: "On each evening over the next seven days, please set about fifteen minutes aside before going to bed and think about nine beautiful things that happened during the day. Then, write down three personal beautiful experiences for each of the following categories: (a) three beautiful things in *human behavior* (morally positively valued behavior, good deeds); (b) three beautiful things in *nature and/or the environment*; and (c) three beautiful things *in general*. Please also note why you have experienced this particular thing as beautiful."[4] This intervention into people's lives had a profound positive impact on how they understood their lives, because *beauty illuminates meaning*.

Unfortunately, all three types of beauty come less naturally to us today than they did in the past. In a world of screens, people are less and less likely to spend time in nature. Over the last few decades, popular music has become less rich in both timbre and lyrics.[5] And if you spend any time with traditional or new media, moral beauty seems pretty hard to find in a sea of vitriol and hatred. In this chapter, you will learn how to fix this and get more loveliness—and thus meaning—in your life.

The Mysterious Power of Artistic Beauty

During the years I was with the City Orchestra of Barcelona, we performed every Friday, Saturday, and Sunday in a famous concert hall called the Palau de la Música Catalana (the Palace of Catalan Music), a gorgeous auditorium designed by the modernist architect Lluís Domènech i Montaner and built from 1905 to 1908 in Barcelona's Gothic Quarter. It has an odd design, with features that include audience seats that are perched above the stage area, just over the heads of the performers. People in these seats are basically sitting in the orchestra. The hall was full for every concert—Barcelonans love their classical music—and some people with season

tickets literally came every single week. The people in the stage seats felt to me practically like colleagues. I knew their faces.

I remember one elderly Catalan gentleman who came every single Saturday night, dressed in an elegant suit and tie. I would look at him when I wasn't playing and remember thinking that he was experiencing something in the music that was beyond my grasp. It's not that he was weeping or heaving about in ecstasy like a stoner at a Grateful Dead concert. Rather, he sat motionless during the entire concert, hands folded in his lap, eyes closed, with a small half smile on his face. There was something about his meditative countenance that told me his brain was working in a different way from mine. It took years and a couple of career changes, but now I realize that I was, unknowingly, helping that man understand the meaning of his life.

People who love art and music learn that the deeper they go in experience and knowledge, the higher and more complex the level of benefits they experience. At the lowest level, beauty creates emotional resonance.[6] This is especially true of music: it literally feels good to listen to a song you like, which is why you listen over and over again. I remember as a child, I got a small record player and listened to a single record of children's songs nearly continuously for months, because it made me feel good to hear them. And as you read earlier in this book, sad songs can help soothe your sad feelings, say, after a breakup.

A little knowledge of this effect can lead you to devise well-being strategies using music or art. For example, you can keep a library of songs that are scientifically proven to raise mood. To get you started, one study found—based on characteristics of harmony, structure, and rhythm—that the world's happiest song is the Beach Boys' "Good Vibrations."[7] You can also learn what to avoid: another study found that grunge rock—known for its distorted electric guitar and nihilistic lyrics—raised hostility, sadness, tension, and fatigue for its listening participants and also lowered caring, relaxation, mental clarity, and vigor.[8] The positive effects on mood are even more pronounced when people make art themselves. Researchers have

found, for example, that elderly people experience greater life satisfaction when they are taught to paint.[9]

Some have used art and music as a form of therapy and found it very effective to alleviate even some neurological problems.[10] When the brains of patients with Parkinson's disease are stimulated by hearing a rhythmic piece such as a march, their symptoms may diminish, enabling them to walk more naturally. Alzheimer's patients who may have trouble remembering family members can nonetheless recognize familiar songs. People suffering from epilepsy can experience a dramatic decrease in seizures when listening to certain kinds of classical music—the so-called Mozart effect.[11]

This is something I have personally witnessed. My late mother experienced severe depression throughout her life. She was also a professional painter. Many mornings, she would awaken to a world of deep torment. But every day after breakfast, including on her darkest days, she headed upstairs to her studio, turned on the music she loved (nineteenth-century orchestral works), and got to work. The music and the practice of her art transported her to another neurocognitive dimension, one that was largely free of the demons that plagued her ordinary life. Even as she descended into dementia at an early age, she continued painting. That was her lifeline to meaning.

Artistic beauty can induce a spiritual understanding and fulfillment. This is hard to measure but the obvious reason why such a huge proportion of great art and music around the world involves religious themes and takes place in and around houses of worship. There is something about Michaelangelo's *Pietà* at the Vatican—a marble statue of the Virgin Mary holding her crucified son—that has brought many millions of observers closer to God. Similarly, for thousands of years, Indian classical music has accompanied ecstatic experiences for devoted Hindus.[12] As the American philosopher Peter Kreeft plainly asserts, "God is love, and music is the language of love; therefore, music is the language of God."[13]

At the most transcendent level, art and music illuminate life's meaning in a way that totally eludes words. We see this in every culture and across

millennia. Plato believed that beauty reflected an ultimate reality, which he called the World of Forms, a nonphysical dominion where true meaning resides. This experience cannot be described in clear terms. This unspoken knowledge falls into the mystical realm about which it is written in the Tao Te Ching,

> Those who know it do not speak about it.
> Those who speak about it do not know it.[14]

You probably know the feeling of hearing a beautiful song that stimulates your emotions in a powerful way. But if someone asks you why you love it so much, anything you say, like "The melody is nice," will sound trivial and ridiculous. That's because the experience of beauty is fundamentally a numinous phenomenon, complex and elusive of language.[15]

Even the greatest cynics about the meaning of life have found in artistic beauty a kind of mystery they cannot explain. Consider the nineteenth-century philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, the man who actually coined the term *meaning of life*—before dismissing it as a "farce in which everything that is essential is irrevocably fixed and determined."[16] In writing, Schopenhauer was incorrigibly pessimistic about life, arguing that it is devoid of any meaning and only an exercise in suffering and dissatisfaction.

But one part of Schopenahuer's life makes you see that this cynicism was not genuine: He loved music. He went constantly to concerts in his native city of Frankfurt, as well as playing his flute in his apartment for an hour every day. By the end of his life, he dedicated his attention almost entirely to just one composer, the Italian Gioachino Rossini, who was a contemporary of his (they were born four years apart). When he spoke of Rossini's music, Schopenhauer is said to have gone silent and rolled his eyes up toward heaven.

Schopenhauer developed a theory that music was a secret numinous language. He believed that reality is largely invisible to humans. What we perceive is mostly a set of illusions, while reality—the inner meaning of life

—evades our understanding. Only music, he believed, could pierce the veil of illusion and open up a unique channel of truth.[17]

For centuries, people thought this was a nutty theory, but it isn't at all. You and I know *exactly* what he was trying to say: his huge, complicated, left-hemisphere vocabulary was inadequate for getting at the mysterious meaning of life. But he had access to that meaning, and life was worth living, when he stopped doing his complicated intellectual work, quieted the left hemisphere of his brain, and allowed beauty in the form of great music to illuminate true reality beyond his words. In his books, Schopenhauer was a left-brained, cynical grouch who claimed life had no purpose. With his flute, he saw the truth, and in those moments his life was soaked in meaning.

And this brings me back to the man at my concerts in Barcelona. He experienced the meaning of life through many decades of weekly concerts and, no doubt, the study of music as well. His immobile rapture was not just one of pleasure, or good mood, or relief from disease, or even spiritual fulfillment. That peculiar expression on his face was, I believe, his window of metaphysical understanding.

In your own way, according to your own tastes, you can be more like that man. Find the art and music you love, and dive in. Learn more about it, become an enthusiast, and consume it every day. When you can, go to concerts, museums, or wherever it is presented in live form. People do this in different ways. My friend and fellow happiness specialist Gretchen Rubin lives in New York City and visits the Metropolitan Museum of Art literally every afternoon.[18] Others make beauty themselves, like our friend Schopenhauer with his flute, or by learning to paint, as Winston Churchill did in the twilight of his life. The bottom line is this: The more artistic beauty in your life, the more meaning you will find.

Meaning and Nature

Theodore Roosevelt, the twenty-sixth president of the United States, served from 1901 to 1909. Many people respect Roosevelt the Rough Rider for his strength and courage in the Spanish-American War and his toughness as a person (after an assassination attempt, with a bullet lodged in his chest, he went on to give a campaign speech). Or they like the style—rarely seen in today's in-your-face performative politics—he derived from his favorite aphorism: "Speak softly and carry a big stick." He was a man with a purpose in life.

And where did Roosevelt find that purpose? North Dakota.

Roosevelt was a dandy from a wealthy family. An East Coast aristocrat, he attended fancy schools and hobnobbed with the cream of Manhattan society. Like many young men of his day, Teddy dreamed of manly adventures, such as big-game safaris in Africa and expeditions up the Amazon. In 1883, as a slightly less dangerous and costly way to scratch this itch, because he was already a busy young politician by then, he made a trip out west, to the wilder reaches of North Dakota. He was enchanted by this rugged landscape. The windswept Badlands had "a desolate, grim beauty," he later said, "that has a curious fascination for me."[19]

Soon after Roosevelt's return to New York, his life took a tragic turn. Within hours of each other, on February 14, 1884, both his mother and his wife died (his mother from typhoid fever, his wife in childbirth). That day's entry in his journal, which he kept religiously all throughout his life, read simply: "The light has gone out of my life." In a despair of sorrow, Roosevelt returned to Medora, North Dakota, staying for large parts of the next four years and working as a rancher. He found comfort in the austere natural beauty and hard outdoor life, but more than that, he found a reason to go on living. "It was here that the romance of my life began," he would later write.[20]

In 2024, while writing this book, I went myself to Medora to understand what he meant. There is a sacredness about its beautiful, severe expanse. You feel at once small in its vastness and at peace in its silence. I had no

desire to pull out my phone, even to take pictures; I wanted nothing that would distract me from the sense of meaning welling up within.

As much feeling as Roosevelt invested in its wilderness, Medora is by no means unique in its capacity to inspire. Plenty of research has confirmed how the beauty of nature increases a deep sense of meaning in people.[21] Here is how Henry David Thoreau expressed this primal awe and admiration in 1862: “Here is this vast, savage, howling mother of ours, Nature, lying all around, with such beauty, and such affection for her children, as the leopard.” For Thoreau, modern people were so adrift because they had lost contact with this sublime sense of Nature: “We are so early weaned from her breast to society, to that culture which is exclusively an interaction of man on man.”[22]

The telegraph and the railways were the world-shrinking new technologies of Thoreau’s day. Imagine what he would make of our digital modernity, which features so much less contact with nature than anything he ever saw. The percentage of Americans working outdoors fell from 90 percent in his time to less than 20 percent in the year 2000. Since then, the trend has only intensified. Americans made a billion fewer outdoor recreational trips in 2018 than in 2008.[23] Today, 85 percent of adults say they spent more time outside when they were kids than children do today.

The explanations are straightforward enough. The world’s population has become more urban, so nature is less at hand. In 1800, just 6 percent of the U.S. population lived in a city; in 2000, 79 percent did.[24] And no matter where we live, technology is displacing outdoor activities. A 2017 study noted that screen time is rising rapidly for all age groups, even as hunting, fishing, camping, and children’s outdoor play have declined steeply.[25]

Chances are that you yourself are an urbanite with an indoor job, largely tethered to your devices for both professional and personal reasons. It may have been months, even years, since you last spent uninterrupted time in nature. Research clearly shows that a natureless lifestyle is tied to malaises such as anxiety or depression that are part and parcel with the sense of meaninglessness.[26]

Natural beauty recalibrates your body and mind. Exposure to natural light synchronizes your internal circadian clock to the rising and setting of the sun.[27] And when people are in physical contact with the earth—such "earthing" or "grounding" can be as simple as walking barefoot outdoors—their self-reported health and mood tends to improve.[28] To feel this, just take your shoes off and spend an afternoon outside. This can also help you generate new ideas. Every time I get stuck in my writing, I go outside and get a good dose of natural beauty. Usually, this gets me unstuck.

I tell my students to build more contact with nature's beauty into their daily schedules. During the pandemic shutdowns of 2020, I started walking twice daily, after lunch and dinner, following a pattern I learned about from a characteristic of Blue Zones, those geographic areas of the world, identified by the author Dan Buettner, where people tend to live with good health into old age.[29] I quickly found that these walks calmed me down and helped me focus on what truly matters: my faith, family, and friendships. Although I live in an urban area on the U.S. East Coast, I have devised routes near my home that maximize complete immersion in nature, including parks and even woodland.

Maybe you're simply not an outdoors person. "Humans created buildings for a reason," my father once reminded me when I suggested that we go camping. The weather, the bugs, the lack of bathrooms and comfy beds—I get it. But you might be underestimating the benefits and overestimating the discomforts. People think they will enjoy walking in nature less than they actually do.[30]

A funny thing about natural beauty is that you don't get tired of it—quite the contrary: the more you experience it, the more you want. "The farther one gets into the wilderness," wrote Teddy Roosevelt, "the greater is the attraction of its lonely freedom."[31] This is because you are climbing a staircase of meaning as nature becomes more familiar to you. You start out finding it pleasant; then it makes you happier; then it starts to solve your problems; then you get closer to the divine. And before you know it, in nature you are finding yourself.

Moral Beauty

Raymund Kolbe never set out to be a martyr.[32] Born in 1894, the Polish Catholic sought a life of prayer and contemplation when he joined a Franciscan monastery at the age of thirteen. The ultimate purpose that sought him, however, was at once so harrowing and morally beautiful that his example has since inspired millions of people.

As a monk, Raymund took the religious name Maximilian, and at twenty-four, he was ordained a priest, serving peacefully until Poland came under the control of the Bolsheviks and World War I ravaged the country, including his own family: Kolbe's father was executed as a traitor by the Russians for fighting for Polish independence. Worse was yet to come: the Nazis invaded and occupied most of Poland in 1939 and immediately began discriminating against Jews and Poles.

Under the Nazis, those with German ancestry were put on the Deutsche Volksliste, giving them the rights of German citizens. Despite having a German father, Father Maximilian not only refused to be listed but also took up subversive activities, including hiding thousands of Jews in his monastery and publishing anti-Nazi tracts.[33] The results of this were predictable: the Nazis shut down Kolbe's monastery, and he was arrested by the Gestapo.

In May of 1941, Father Kolbe became prisoner 16670 at the Auschwitz concentration camp. In the camp, he secretly said Mass for his fellow prisoners and dedicated himself to serving and comforting them. In July, three of his fellow prisoners escaped from the camp. In reprisal, the authorities selected ten prisoners to be starved to death, as a warning to any other potential escapees. Before the ten were sent to the underground starvation bunker, Father Maximilian—who had not been selected—offered to take one man's place. By August, seven men had perished. Kolbe and two others hung on; according to witnesses, he led them in constant prayer. To empty the cell, the guards decided to execute the three by lethal injection of carbolic acid. With Christlike calm, Kolbe submitted, offering his arm to the executioner and waiting for death.

The circumstances Kolbe faced were extreme, and his example of solidarity and sacrifice were exceptional. Indeed, he was canonized as a saint in 1982 by Pope John Paul II, bringing his story to people worldwide and inspiring them to see their own life's purpose through Kolbe's acts of courage and moral beauty.

Acts of selflessness are at the center of many ancient teachings, both among Abrahamic religions and in Eastern traditions. Kolbe was no doubt guided by the teaching of his Christian faith that "greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends."[34] Similarly, charity toward others is one of the Five Pillars of Islam; *dharma* in Hinduism refers to the right path of a person's life, which includes honesty, noninjury, and generosity toward others.

Extreme altruism like Kolbe's might appear almost unnatural and contrary to human nature. The reverse is true: evolutionary biologists have noted that self-sacrifice is a trait that developed to ensure the well-being and survival of kinship groups; such behavior is even seen in nonhuman primates.[35] The ultimate version of this kinship-based altruism, the laying down of one's life, occurs because of what scholars call "identity fusion," which in effect rationalizes defending another member of the kin group as a type of self-defense.[36] Self-sacrifice can literally be the meaning of life.

Selfless acts toward kin can certainly be inspiring, but moral beauty is most strongly visible in goodness toward others with whom one has no obvious ties, which clearly involves a sacrifice of self that violates one's individual interests. Examples on an escalating scale of selflessness might be: helping a person for no reason at all; forgiving someone who does not deserve it; or giving up one's life for a stranger. Witnessing this kind of moral beauty elicits "moral elevation," an experience that has both psychological and neurological dimensions.[37]

Moral elevation is not just a vague expression. Psychologists have actually measured and studied it. The psychologist Rhett Diessner has written a great deal about this phenomenon and has even identified how it affects the body of the one observing it: "Pleasant feelings of warmth in the chest, feeling uplifted, moved."[38] Research undertaken at his laboratory at

Lewis-Clark State College in Idaho, he told me, demonstrates that these feelings lead to a desire to be better people ourselves and help others. Such prosocial actions, as the academic parlance describes them, result in higher levels of meaning and well-being, both for the individual concerned and collectively for those who witness a kindness.

Beyond the virtuous cycle of positive feeling, there are meaning-related reasons for serving others. Self-sacrifice increases a sense of significance, that your life has value to yourself and others.[39] In other words, sacrificing yourself is evidence that your life matters for the higher purpose of making the world a better place. This has the greatest benefit when people are suffering from a loss of self-worth, after such circumstances as being rejected in a relationship or losing a job.

How, then, to find more moral beauty in your life and benefit from its influence? I can suggest at least four useful ways. Start by keeping more morally beautiful company. Spend time with people who are generous and dedicated to serving others, and avoid those who are not when possible. This is not as easy as it sounds; our survival as a species has favored individuals who are vigilant and suspicious, resulting in what psychologists call a "negativity bias," according to which things we resent—such as the bad behavior of others—grab our attention more than kindness. We are also susceptible to people whom we recognize as negative in the same ways that we are because it makes us feel bonded to them.[40] Forging a connection through shared cynicism can thus be very tempting—even when this creates a downward spiral of unhappiness through mutually reinforcing negativity. To escape this dynamic, ditch the gossip circle and instead seek out friends who are more positive and generous than your own default. They are the ones who can model the moral beauty you want that will deliver greater happiness in your life.

Second, adopt moral beauty as a leisure activity. I have met many people who have dramatically improved their lives by making service in effect their hobby or pastime. Instead of taking a beach vacation, they might spend their free time doing voluntary work in their communities. What they typically tell me is that when they first volunteer, they're deeply inspired by

the people they meet and want to feel that way more. By serving others as a way of life, they increase their happiness and sense of meaning—just as the research predicts.

Third, practice gratitude. Humans are not naturally grateful creatures—our negativity bias sees to that. You can override this tendency by focusing very consciously on things you're grateful for. If you take some time each day to reflect on what you can be thankful for, you will naturally start to notice more—not just discrete acts of generosity and self-sacrifice but also people who are unusually good and kind. You will discover that moral beauty is all around you, if you only stop to notice it.

Fourth, make a point of celebrating moral beauty in a public way. A number of institutions, both religious and nonreligious, are dedicated to amplifying examples of moral beauty. The Carnegie Hero Fund Commission, for example, is a series of prizes awarded each year to civilians "who risk death or serious physical injury to an extraordinary degree saving or attempting to save the lives of others."[41] Similarly, the Templeton Prize is awarded each year to a scholar who is dedicated to improving the lives of others.

But you don't have to be a big nonprofit to sing the praises of moral beauty when you see it. No doubt you can think of an "unsung hero" in your own life—perhaps a grandparent who devoted herself to giving her family a better life or one who sacrificed his life in his country's service, or perhaps a teacher who made every child feel wanted and worthwhile.

One last point: we are naturally drawn to moral beauty, and it is very good for us to follow that attraction. But part of our negativity bias results, as noted, in a competing urge to focus on moral depravity. From 2018 to 2021, documentary content on streaming services increased by 63 percent, with the largest growth in the genre of true crime.[42] Over a similar period, from 2019 to 2024, the number of true-crime podcast listeners tripled.[43] A disproportionate amount of this growth occurred among women and people under thirty.[44]

So as well as looking for the benefits of moral beauty, be aware of the risks of bringing attention to moral ugliness. Ask yourself how much of

your social media feed, for instance, involves degenerate or obnoxious behavior. I would argue that treating moral ugliness as a form of entertainment is not an innocuous pleasure, when it comes to your character and well-being. It is, in effect, to focus not on the beautiful acts of Maximilian Kolbe but on the sadistic deeds of his captors. If you allow yourself to be seduced by this fascination instead of elevation, expect emptiness to follow, not meaning. But choose beauty, and you will be rewarded.

Beauty and Suffering

There is one common element in the examples in this chapter about beauty that you may have noticed: suffering. Messiaen and Kolbe were in concentration camps; Roosevelt lost his mother and wife. I use a lot of stories and examples in my teaching, and many of them contain a lot of suffering. Noticing this, one of my astute students asked me this: “For meaning, is suffering a feature or a bug?” In other words, do we find life’s meaning in spite of suffering or because of it? What she was hoping I’d say is that suffering is not necessary for meaning, so we can and should work to eliminate it. And this hope is endemic in the culture of so many ambitious young people who have been taught that their pain—especially mental pain—is evidence of pathology and should be purged. If you are sad or anxious, you are broken!

But as you probably already suspect, this was not my answer, because the eliminationist view is dead wrong. The idea that suffering should be eliminated is one of the biggest impediments to finding coherence, purpose, and significance. In fact, your suffering is essential to living a meaningful life, just as it was for Messiaen, Roosevelt, and Kolbe. So suffering—how to manage it, understand it, and put it to use in the search for meaning—is our next topic.

Questions for Self-Assessment and Goal Setting

1. Do I purposely expose myself to art or music? Am I seeking to raise my level of knowledge and sophistication about the kind of art I most appreciate?

2. Am I seeking to climb the ladder of meaning as I experience art and music? Do I interact with people who have a deeper appreciation than I do?

3. When was the last time I spent uninterrupted time in nature? How did it affect my mood, stress, or sense of meaning?

4. Have I built contact with natural beauty into my daily schedule—even by taking walks in a park or finding pockets of green space near my home?

5. Do I intentionally seek out the company of generous, positive people and avoid circles that reinforce negativity?

6. Have I tried to make service to others a regular part of my life?

7. Am I making time to reflect on gratitude, especially focusing on good deeds or morally beautiful things I've witnessed or received?

8. Do I publicly recognize or celebrate acts of moral beauty by others, or can I identify an "unsung hero" in my life whose example inspires me?

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CHAPTER 9

Don’t Waste Your Suffering



“I was such an insecure, warped creature that I needed that laughter to feel good about myself.”

This was the actor Rainn Wilson’s response to my question about why he’d always made jokes as a kid. He explains that when you are in a lot of pain but figure out that you are naturally funny, you start making jokes to distract yourself and others from your misery. It’s a kind of “emotional substitution,” he said.

I didn’t know Wilson when he was a child—although I easily could have: We are about the same age, grew up near each other in Seattle, and were both serious classical musicians. We became friends as adults and have bonded over our shared childhood experiences as well as common interests, values, and beliefs.

To meet Wilson as an adult, you would be hard-pressed to imagine him as an unhappy little kid. Today, he is a famous comedic actor, probably best known for his role as Dwight Schrute in the hit comedy television series *The Office*. His life looks charmed—as do, come to think of it, the lives of the people we met in the introduction. But, of course, looks are deceiving.

Wilson's childhood was completely unstable. The family's economic situation was precarious at best. His mother, a sixties hippie who had a pet goat named Angel of the Morning, abandoned the family when Rainn was two years old; he didn't see her again until he was fourteen. Desperate and despondent, his father quickly entered into a tense, loveless second marriage and converted the family to the Baha'i faith, a religion established in Iran in the nineteenth century that has an estimated 175,000 adherents in the United States. Wilson's upbringing was, in his own words, characterized by "confusion, anxiety, and alienation."

At eighteen, Wilson escaped to college in New York City and studied acting, resolving to be finished forever with his dysfunctional family and their weird religion. He could not outrun his demons, however. Depression, loneliness, and anxiety hunted him relentlessly. He drank heavily and used drugs throughout his twenties and thirties, a form of self-medication that led, inevitably, to addiction.

At forty, his luck seemed to change when he scored a role in *The Office*, which quickly became a popular sensation. Almost overnight, Wilson became internationally famous. As he tells it, he was suddenly recognized, even *adored*, wherever he went. You might think that having people shout "I love you" from passing cars would fix his depression and give him an incentive to kick his habits, right?

Wrong. The admiration from strangers poured gasoline on the fire of his mental anguish. Becoming famous made him a little insane, he believes, and instead of being able to savor his success, he endured one of the unhappiest periods of his life. "I became filled with ever more entitlement, wants, and needs," he told me. "*Why don't I get more and better movie deals? Where are my lucrative commercial campaigns? Why did I never win a @#$% Emmy!?*" He had become, he said, what Buddhists call a "hungry ghost": a pathetic creature animated by insatiable craving.

This swirling torment could have ended very badly. His profession, after all, does not lack for heartbreaking examples of stars addled by addiction and deranged by celebrity. That might have been Rainn's fate, but for two bright spots in his life. The first was the woman he married, Holiday

Reinhorn, who somehow stuck with the sad little boy in the body of an ego-mad, grown-up addict. The second, strangely enough, was the Baha'i faith he thought he had left behind. He found a tender God who took him back. Or perhaps *he* was the one who was found. "I knew My love for thee," he read in the Baha'i holy book *The Hidden Words*, "therefore I created thee, have engraved on thee Mine image and revealed to thee My beauty."[1]

The enduring love of Holiday and the unconditional love of God brought Wilson to life, perhaps for the first time. Through years of spiritual search, prayer, meditation, and a lot of twelve-step recovery, he found a growing sense of peace, joy, and meaning. Today, he is still zany and charmingly eccentric, but he has a deep stillness that is utterly magnetic. I ask him to articulate the meaning of his life: "To love and be loved; to deepen and enrich my spiritual growth and progress; to use my gifts to serve humanity." In other words, he is a case study in the ideas of this book.

But what about all the turmoil over the first five decades of his life? Wouldn't it have been better for Rainn if he could have avoided all that suffering? In a word, no. Although he wouldn't wish such troubles on anyone, he feels that all of the experience has contributed to his life's meaning. "The pachinko-ball chaos of youth settles in hindsight into a life perspective that I feel *had* to unfold the way it did," he told me, in inimitable style. "I'm grateful for every anguish." He wouldn't give up the pain he suffered then—or the pain he still suffers, or even what he will suffer in the future.

Rainn Wilson's difficulties are not yours. Whatever pain afflicts you is all your own. But the wisdom he has acquired lines up with what both modern research and ancient philosophy have to tell us—and that wisdom can apply to you, just as it does to him. Your suffering is sacred and central to your search for meaning. Do not waste it.

Why We Suffer

Life is suffering.

So said the Buddha. This is his First Noble Truth—the foundational thing you need to know on the path to enlightenment. The word in Sanskrit is *dūkkha*, which does not translate precisely as "suffering"; "dissatisfaction" may be more accurate. Buddhism is not alone in viewing life this way. The original Latin version of the Bible referred to our earthly lives as the *valle lacrimarum*, meaning "vale of tears."[2] Stoic philosophers held a very similar conception. Hindu sages described samsara—the endless cycle of birth and rebirth—as a hardship to be endured.

Whether or not you see your life in these terms, the fact that people suffer—some more than others—is undeniable. On average, people spend 15 to 20 percent of their days in a state of predominantly negative emotion and more than 30 percent of their time in a mixed state that includes some unhappiness.[3] The suffering may be minor, such as dealing with a lousy boss or the aggravation of a canceled flight that messes up your vacation. Or it may be an all-consuming misery, such as losing your home or experiencing the death of a loved one. Either way, no one avoids pain entirely, or even for very long.

Philosophers and scientists have often asked why human beings suffer so much of the time. Given all of our ingenuity and progress, why have we not been able to eliminate more unpleasantness and pain from life? A long line of utilitarian optimists and utopians has promised heaven on earth, after all. Why has that dream proved so impossible?

From a theological perspective, why suffering exists is a question that people smarter than me have wrestled with for millennia. This riddle is called *theodicy* and has spawned philosophical explorations from the biblical book of Job all the way to the 1981 bestseller *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. But from a scientific standpoint, there are three evolutionary explanations for the persistence of suffering despite science and progress.

The first explanation involves the function of negative emotions such as fear, anger, disgust, and sadness. We generally regard these as "bad feelings," but that's misleading. Negative emotions are signals from the brain's limbic system that something has been detected as a threat to your

health and well-being and requires your attention. You feel angry or afraid in response to danger; you feel disgusted when presented with a potential pathogen by seeing or smelling something dead or rotten; you feel sad at the prospect of losing someone or something you love. These are all necessary and purposeful adaptations, constitutive of our very nature, but they entail suffering and interrupt happiness.

The second explanation is that Mother Nature fools us into doing things that bring misery. Your genetic inheritance prescribes desires for all sorts of things that help you survive and pass on your genes, but these desires are pretty much guaranteed to make you unhappy. For example, people often have an urge to behave adulterously because they meet someone who is richer or more beautiful than their spouse. But this is where nature is playing a trick: that you want to be happy and also have an urge to do things for pleasure might make you think a connection between the two must exist. In fact, the more you blindly pursue your urges (like cheating on your spouse), the unhappier you will wind up. Mother Nature wins; you lose.

Third, a philosophical argument posited by disciples of the eighteenth-century French thinker Jean-Jacques Rousseau proposes that our modern lives are out of sync with our true, natural temperament. As he wrote, “Man is born free; and everywhere he is in chains.”[4] Karl Marx interpreted this through the lens of political economy and, arguing for revolution, proclaimed that we have “nothing to lose but [our] chains.”[5] According to this thinking, we have built the wrong society for ourselves and have strayed too far from our happy ancestral environment, which was one of peace, harmony, and sharing. We live in cities far from our kin, in competition with millions of strangers. We stare at screens instead of scanning the natural landscape. All of these things make us miserable.

These explanations suggest that suffering is a bug in the software of life—either a side effect from necessary biological processes or a maladaptation to modernity. But there is another way to understand pain—not as a bug but as a feature. Specifically, suffering is one of the ways we access the mysterious hemispheric complexity of life and learn its meaning. To sit in despair makes you stand in wonder, where meaning resides.

This was Rainn Wilson's argument, and a lot of research shows he was right. When people are asked how they learned their life's meaning, they usually refer to painful periods.[6] For example, no one wants to deal with cancer, but cancer survivors often talk about how the experience helped them understand the significance of their lives. Meanwhile, no one who seems normal and well-adjusted would say, "My life's purpose is never getting cancer."

When I teach these findings about the importance of pain to my students, one of them will inevitably ask, "So, Professor, are you saying we need to *go looking* for suffering?" No need, I tell them: Suffering will certainly find *you*. Don't try to avoid it, and when it comes, don't try to eliminate it. Instead, learn to manage it so that it leads to learning and growth. Here's how.

Don't Try to Eliminate Your Pain

In the time of Socrates, there was a minor school of philosophy called Cyrenaicism, founded by a man named Aristippus, who taught two things. First, objective reality is unknowable, so we should pay attention only to our subjective experiences. In other words, all that matters is what you are feeling. Second, that experience should be as pleasant as possible, meaning that we should maximize immediate pleasure and avoid pain as much as possible. Aristippus himself concentrated on the pleasure—usually involving young women and old wine. He was a hedonist.

Aristippus's hedonism still pops up as a significant cultural influence from time to time, as it did during the Roaring Twenties and 1967's Summer of Love in America. Most people today recognize that this isn't a great life strategy: in chapter 3, you saw how dedicating yourself to hitting the pleasure levers in your brain will torque your dopamine levels, leading to addiction, spoiled relationships, and a sense of existential emptiness. That doesn't mean we haven't sworn off the ideas of Aristippus, however. On the contrary, today many people follow the other side of his

philosophical coin and live to avoid pain, which is equally lethal for finding life's meaning.

To understand the dangers of avoiding psychological pain, let's talk first about physical pain. Researchers on the subject have long shown that when people fear it and strive to minimize it, they do so by pulling back from daily activities for fear of making it worse. This is called the "fear-avoidance model."[7] The classic example is a back injury: fearing the pain, you baby your back and load up on ibuprofen, but through disuse, your back actually becomes weaker, leading to further, more constant pain. Many studies have demonstrated this pattern.[8]

This cycle of avoidance and worsening pain has contributed to America's opioid epidemic. Prescriptions for these powerful analgesics increased 104 percent from 2000 to 2010.[9] The overprescription of pain medication led to an explosion of opioid addiction and overdose deaths.[10] Tighter controls lowered the prescription levels, but overdoses continued to rise over the following decade as black-market opioid use grew.

Obviously, treating physical pain is necessary and appropriate, but trying to avoid pain is not therapeutic. Treatment and avoidance are two very different things: pain is an unavoidable part of life; in many cases, the most effective treatment involves learning to manage some degree of pain and live your life anyway. To go back to the example of back pain, treatment commonly involves finding healthy ways to increase mobility and lower discomfort but very likely also includes strategies for living with some discomfort and maintaining it at an acceptable level.

You may be thinking that this is all very well for a bad back, but what about the severe emotional and spiritual distress that Rainn Wilson was in—and maybe you are, too? The answer is the same. People who experience depression do well to treat their symptoms but typically make them worse if they strive to eliminate them altogether. They make things worse by numbing their pain with alcohol and recreational drugs. Not surprisingly, the avoidance of mental suffering is positively correlated with suicide attempts among those who are depressed.[11] To see pain as an enemy to be eradicated is to give yourself a negative purpose in life, as well as setting

yourself up for failure. A belief that happiness requires an absence of suffering undermines happiness itself.[12]

Unfortunately, these mistaken ideas are reinforced by professionals who tell patients experiencing mental distress that their discomfort is a pathology, which inadvertently adds the stigma of disease and disability to their pain. Wiser therapists and clinicians understand that some suffering is inevitable and advise their patients not to run away from reality—and certainly not to self-medicate. This better understanding recognizes that only by facing one's pain can one learn to live fully and that successful treatment involves finding meaning in life in spite of suffering.

For people who are prone to low moods, accepting that fact about themselves may be especially valuable. Several treatments for mental distress explicitly incorporate such acceptance and have proved successful. One is mindfulness-based cognitive therapy, which encourages patients to learn how avoidance can itself be a cause of misery and teaches them to accept their distress as painful but as neither irremediable nor catastrophic.[13] This tracks with the Buddhist concept that *suffering* = *resistance* × *pain*, which implies that nonresistance is the beginning of effective treatment to reduce suffering. The approach is also effective in treating addiction, because it can help an addicted person accept their condition honestly, which fosters better understanding and a greater capacity to stop using.

Another treatment that has achieved good results is known as "acceptance and commitment therapy." Patients are invited to acknowledge and accept their suffering and then to shift their attention toward the most meaningful aspects of their life. This technique aims to reverse our innate tendency to concentrate on what we don't like rather than what we do—that phenomenon called negativity bias. When mental or physical pain is chronic, this evolutionary bias can make us perseverative about what's wrong, leading to avoidance behaviors that make things worse. Instead, we can recognize that pain is real but also learn to focus on what is right in life. For instance, I might wake up feeling very unhappy, but I can shift my

focus from that pain to thoughts about the people who love me and the job I value—the things that are central to my life's meaning.

In either its positive, pleasure-seeking or negative, pain-avoiding forms, Cyrenaicism is a mistaken model for human happiness. Rather than taking the advice of Aristippus, we would do better to follow that of his fellow Greek philosopher, Epictetus the Stoic. In his second-century ethical manual, *Enchiridion*, Epictetus wrote: "Don't demand that things happen as you wish, but wish that they happen as they do happen, and you will go on well."[14] An attitude of acceptance rather than avoidance can empower you to treat your suffering appropriately, manage your expectations about what a good life means, and truly savor your sweetest experiences.

Stop Resisting Change

There is one particular source of suffering I want to talk about, which is the most crucial to finding meaning but which we most often hate and try to avoid: big life changes.

In 1924, a German professor named Eugen Herrigel set out to learn about Zen Buddhism, which at that time was starting to become known in the West. He found a teaching position in Japan, where he hoped to find someone who could instruct him in the philosophy. Rather than the sort of course he had in mind, he was informed that because he lacked proficiency in Japanese, he would be required instead to learn a skill—namely, *kyudo* (the way of the bow)—and this would *indirectly* impart the Zen truths that he sought. To this end, Herrigel took up his archery studies with the master Awa Kenzō, which he later chronicled in his 1948 book *Zen in the Art of Archery*.[15]

Herrigel's archery program was arduous and frustrating. "Drawing the bow caused my hands to start trembling after a few moments, and my breathing became more and more laboured," he wrote. "Nor did this get any better during the weeks that followed." Indeed, the weeks became months, and the months wound up becoming five years. At long last, Herrigel

learned how to loose an arrow and hit his mark. When he finally acquired the skill, he also realized that he now understood the Zen attitude: “The shot will only go smoothly when it takes the archer himself by surprise…[when you] let go of yourself.” In short, Herrigel learned that the secret to archery —and the approach to life he was seeking—is to know how and when to stop *resisting* change and simply let it occur.

This is a lesson for all of us. People naturally dislike change in life because it feels uncomfortable, disequilibrating—a major source of suffering. In fact, you may have picked up this book because you are having a tough, involuntary relationship transition or health issue at this very moment. Or maybe you just graduated from school and have no idea what you are going to do. Change is also the essence of complexity—you understand it, but you can’t predict it. So you try to neutralize it with all sorts of complicated techniques. Don’t want an unexpected change in your health? Take seventy-five untested supplements you read about on social media! Want to ensure that no one breaks your heart? Keep playing the field on the dating apps!

You already know that complicated solutions don’t work for complex problems. But what to do instead? If we understand *why* we resist change so much, we can answer that question.

Scholars have argued that change resistance is natural, and epigenetic—a behavioral pattern that gets reinforced and passed on from one generation to the next, as a way to conserve energy rather than having to learn the same routines over and over.[16] And people almost certainly evolved a resistance to change in the first place because it leads to stability in decision-making, and that makes living in social groups easier. This explains why most people naturally resist change—whether that means continuing a relationship even when it has obviously gone south, remaining in a job that bores you, or staying put in a city you haven’t liked in years.

While big life changes—especially unwelcome and unexpected ones—feel uniquely unfortunate, they aren’t unique at all. Life is one long string of them, in fact. The author Bruce Feiler wrote a book called *Life Is in the Transitions: Mastering Change at Any Age*.[17] After interviewing hundreds

of people about their transitions, he found that a major change in life occurs, on average, every twelve to eighteen months. Huge ones—what Feiler calls “lifequakes”—happen three to five times in each person’s life. Some lifequakes are voluntary and joyful, but most are involuntary and thus entirely unwanted.

The suffering changes bring is real, of course. But even difficult, unwelcome transitions are usually seen differently in retrospect than in real time. Indeed, Feiler found that 90 percent of the time, the people he spoke with ultimately judged their transition to have been a success, insofar as the transition ended and they found themselves once again on solid ground. Even better, we tend to see past events—even unwanted ones—as net positives over time.[18] Though our brains have a tendency to focus on negative emotions in the present, over the years, unpleasant feelings fade more than pleasant feelings do, a phenomenon known as “fading affect bias.” This may sound like a mental error, but it really isn’t. Almost every transition—even the most challenging ones—bears positive fruit; it just may take time to see it and feel its effects.

That positive fruit is *meaning*. Research has shown that periods of change, even when characterized by worry, stress, and anxiety, give life a sense of purpose.[19] The psychologist Roy F. Baumeister has shown that difficult crucibles put the rest of life into perspective so that it makes more sense.[20] For example, my son Carlos joined the Marines when he was nineteen. His boot camp was absolutely brutal, and a day after it finished, he told me that he’d never voluntarily do anything like that again. Later, he suffered even more in the Marines’ notoriously hard infantry training. And then, hardest of all, came the selection for the elite Scout Sniper platoon, which literally has this motto: “Suffer patiently, patiently suffer.” He hated every minute of it. But today he talks about the experience—which earned him the title “U.S. Marine Sniper”—with amusement, relish, and pride. A big part of how he understands himself, and his sense of meaning, comes from knowing he is someone who can get through major challenges.

So there’s a paradox here: we hate negative change and resist it, but we need it to find the meaning in life we crave. This makes you rigid, like

Professor Herrigel locked in place with his arms trembling, not knowing how to take a shot. Such rigidity in the face of change will lower your happiness.

As the years passed, Herrigel finally understood the solution: “effortless effort,” which is how he ceased to focus consciously on trying to hit the target and lost himself in the process of shooting. In other words, he became indifferent to correctly performing each stage, such as the release of the string from his finger or the business of keeping aim; rather, his self dissolved into a state of nonjudgmental absorption in the complete action of drawing the bow and shooting the arrow when the string’s time came to slip his finger.

Herrigel had thus mastered the whole “way of the bow.” From his Zen archery, we can infer three life lessons for tackling a situation in which resistance is natural but is also harming the search for meaning.

First, focus on processes in life, not outcomes. Some advice commonly heard in a business context is “Do things well and let the results come naturally,” but this applies equally well more generally. Take the case of your job: focusing on an involuntary change, such as the possibility of being laid off, will make you fearful and rigid and distract you from what you’re working at from moment to moment. By all means think about that potential problem for a few minutes when it crosses your mind, but then put it aside and refocus on doing a great job today. Be kind and generous to others who may also be worrying about their jobs if you are worrying about yours. Live in what the self-improvement author Dale Carnegie used to call “day-tight compartments.”[21] Resisting an outcome you probably have little control over will make you miserable. So instead, release yourself to work on the process you can control more, and you will feel better.

This is the methodology for the most painful changes people make. When they are withdrawing from alcohol addiction, people don’t say, “I will never have a drink for the rest of my life.” They say, “One day at a time,” so every day is a little victory and builds toward a better future. When Carlos was in boot camp, he told himself, “Chow to chow.” In other

words, just make it to the next meal, and let the big change—becoming a marine—take care of itself.

Second, practice mindful absorption. Now that you are mentally released from obsessing over outcomes, the next step is to practice being completely absorbed in the process that should lead to your desired outcome. This will improve your life right now and reduce the stress you feel. Say, for example, your romantic relationship is in trouble: put aside your fear that your partner might leave you at some future date, and instead be mindful of your role in the relationship today and what you can do to make it better. This might or might not save the relationship ultimately, because it can't make past difficulties disappear. But being fully present and attentive as a partner gives you a better chance of success—if not in this relationship, then in your next one—than trying some shortcut fix or melodramatic gesture.

Finally, release the ego. Herrigel emphasized that, as an archer, he had to learn to focus on the arrow as opposed to himself. In other words, he had to exercise a degree of ego erasure, an exclusion of self-consciousness. We already discussed this shift, from the "me-self" to the "I-self," and how that can produce greater happiness. Let's consider the situation of being confronted by a point of view with which you strongly disagree. Given your resistance to changing your own view, your amygdala (an almond-shaped structure in the limbic system of your brain that stimulates your anger and fear) will tend to make you overreact and see this contrary argument as a threat. Instead, release your ego and tell yourself, *This opinion has nothing to do with me*. Then simply listen with detached curiosity. This way, you can learn something interesting about why this person thinks that way and avoid an unnecessarily negative encounter. And if you do choose to engage further with this interlocutor, you will probably appear more persuasive by having shown yourself to be a listener.[22] Not that it matters to *you*, O enlightened one.

I first read *Zen in the Art of Archery* at the age of twenty—I'll admit, not with the purest of motives. My aim was to become a better French horn player, for the sake of fame and fortune rather than for any Zen in the art of

playing the instrument. Obviously, I was completely missing the real message. I picked up Herrigel's book again at fifty-five, when I was in the necessary process of changing jobs, careers, and cities and was in a state of abject terror. In other words, I had some resistance to overcome. Now the book made sense to me. It helped me stop thinking so much about how I was going to hit the target of my professional shift and helped me instead let myself get mindfully absorbed in the daily work that was the source of meaning. That largely took my ego out of the equation and enabled me to nonjudgmentally allow the shift to occur naturally, without forcing anything. The openness to change that I learned from Herrigel's mastery of archery has made these last seven years among the most fulfilling and meaningful of my life.

How to Benefit More from Your Suffering

In the world of popular happiness advice, I often hear that you should keep a journal of joyful events and past blessings in your life, so that when times are tough and you feel down, you can look at it and have a pleasant memory. I have never done this, and never will. For me, this would only serve to create a greater contrast between lovely times *then* and crummy times *now*. Hey, I just failed, but at least I *used* to not suck. What a relief!

I keep a journal of failure and disappointment instead, and recommend it to my students as well. Hear me out: this is not a form of self-pity or masochism. Rather, done right, it is a way to manage negative emotions, learn from adverse experiences, and find great benefit in suffering. Here's how it works.

Whenever something is really bothering me, I don't just stew on it. I take out my phone or laptop, and I open an encrypted file. On the top line of that file, I write down, in a few words, what is bothering me. I don't do this for everyday things like a canceled flight or a disagreement with my wife. I reserve it for things that I'm genuinely worried and anxious about or that made me sad or angry. For example, I am writing down that I am anxious

about this book because I want it to be very helpful to a wide audience of people. If it doesn't live up to my (or my publisher's) expectations, I will be disappointed—and write that in the journal. Or maybe I have a falling-out with a friend or family member and it's weighing on me—that goes into the journal as well.

This first step is not just a silly "Dear diary" sort of thing. It is an extremely powerful technique called *metacognition*, which means thinking rationally about my own emotions.[23] As you now know, emotions are produced and processed in the brain's limbic system, an ancient set of structures evolved between two million and forty million years ago. They are not just *good feelings* or *bad feelings*. They are important signals that you have perceived something in your environment that is either a threat or an opportunity and thus should be either avoided or approached. The problem is that your emotions, especially the negative ones—sadness, fear, anger, and disgust—need correct interpretation (What does this mean?) as well as a productive conscious response (What should I do?). This requires the involvement of the brain's executive center, called the *prefrontal cortex*, which sits behind your forehead.

Metacognition refers to anything that moves the experience of your emotions from the primal limbic system to the logical prefrontal cortex, where it can be understood and acted upon appropriately. There are lots of metacognitive techniques, from meditation to prayers of petition to journaling. You will find that writing down the source of your anxiety or disappointment will make it very specific and understandable and will stop it from rolling around below your level of consciousness, like a ghost haunting you and stealing your peace.

So there's plenty of benefit just from this first step. But we can do far better. Under what you just wrote, leave two blank lines, and then make a note to yourself to come back to the first one in a month and the second one a month after that. When you come back to the first blank line, the problem will usually seem smaller than it was a month earlier; you might not even have thought about it for days or weeks, in fact. Think about what you learned since writing down the problem originally, and write that down on

the first blank line. For example, you might write, “I thought this was a huge issue, but it wasn’t” or “I was very worried about this, and it never came to pass.” Even if it is still a big problem for you, there will be something to write down that you have learned. This step is important, because it turns a problem into a source of learning and progress for your life.

In another month, come back and write in the second blank line some benefit that accrued from the original problem. To be sure, I am not saying you must find a way to argue that the benefits of the problem are higher than the costs. They might not be, if the issue is very grave and ongoing. But I promise you: there is *something* to be grateful for. Let’s say it’s something dreadful, like the death of a family member. When you write it down, it will probably feel like a complete loss, with nothing to be grateful for. Two months later, however, you might observe that the tragedy brought your family together. Or you might notice that the death has led you to reconsider some of your own life decisions in a beneficial way.

After a few months of entries, when you write down a new problem, you will automatically see the previous ones, as well as the learning and benefit. You will thus see your current conundrum in a different light. I found that when something happens that I dislike very much, I look forward to writing it down so I can get a refresher on how past suffering led to growth; this gives me confidence that this time will be the same.

Every life has a *lot* of suffering, it’s true. You can live your years just getting through it, in which case you will still suffer but you won’t learn and grow. Or you can lean into your whole life, including the uncomfortable parts, and get every ounce of growth that it can provide.

Embrace Your Trouble

Fyodor Dostoyevsky—he and his gambling problem starred in chapter 3—published a short story in 1877 titled “The Dream of a Ridiculous Man,” in which the narrator has a vivid dream of a parallel earth exactly like this one

but without suffering.[24] Like everything else Dostoyevsky wrote, this fiction was really a deep study in human psychology. At first, the suffering-free world is wonderful. But it quickly becomes terrible, as it dawns on the narrator that this other world is utterly meaningless. At this point, he pines for the pain that accompanies love. “I long, I thirst, this very instant, to kiss with tears the earth that I have left,” he says, “and I don’t want, I won’t accept life on any other!”

This is basically what Rainn Wilson was saying at the beginning of this chapter, as have people all throughout history. If you know what your suffering means, and how to use it, it will become a precious source of knowledge about the meaning of your life. Accepting this means fighting your every survival instinct, I know. The reason I have left this for the last stage in the search for meaning is because it might be the last frontier for you—the highest mountain range to get over before meaning is in your grasp.

If you are ready to take this challenge, start tomorrow morning with this little resolution:

> I am grateful today for all the positive and beautiful things I will encounter. I am also grateful for the challenges and problems that come my way, because it is those things that will help me see and understand the deep meaning in my life.

Questions for Self-Assessment and Goal Setting

1. Think of two especially challenging times in your life. Think about your suffering. How did it contribute to your personal growth and understanding of meaning?

2. What is your typical counterproductive response to suffering or adversity—do you try to avoid it, ignore it, or grind through it?

3. Do you keep a journal or record of your failures and disappointments? If so, has this helped you process negative emotions and learn from these experiences?

4. When you face a difficult transition in your life, are you able to focus more on the processes and actions within your control, rather than fixating on outcomes you can't predict?

5. Do you practice "mindful absorption" in your daily activities, being fully present in the moment, especially during times of uncertainty or change?

6. Think of a time in your life when resistance to change held you back from finding new meaning or fulfillment. How would you act differently in retrospect?

7. What is your typical attitude toward negative emotions—do you see them as things to avoid, or as signals and opportunities for growth?

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CONCLUSION

Your New, Old-Fashioned Life



Back in chapter 1, I told you the story of Leo Tolstoy's crisis of meaning at the age of fifty-one. By outward appearances, his life's *what* and *how* were ideal: he had money, fame, and worldly success. But inside, he was dying, unable to answer the *why* questions of his life.

While Tolstoy worked through this predicament in his own life, he was also working through it in the life of a character named Konstantin Levin in *Anna Karenina*, the novel he was working on at the time.[1] Levin was a wealthy landowner who, like Tolstoy himself, had a near-perfect life on paper. He had a family and plenty of money and was respected by all those around him. But none of this satisfied his inability to understand the meaning of his life, which got worse and worse the more he analyzed and agonized about it, to the point that he was "stricken with horror, not so much of death, as of life." Similar to Marc's, Maria's, and Paul's, his frenetic search was fruitless. "He was in the position of a man seeking food in toy shops," writes Tolstoy.

In desperation, Levin finally gave up his frantic, worldly search and, as a last resort, turned simply to living his ordinary life day to day. He focused on his wife and children. He cared for the people who worked for him. He

focused intently on his work. And rather than wrestling with esoteric religious dilemmas, he let all his doubts go free and turned to a simple, transcendent faith in the divine, declaring, “To me individually, to my heart has been revealed a knowledge beyond all doubt, and unattainable by reason.”

And Levin found, to his surprise, that he finally understood the meaning of his life. The very last line of the entire novel is Levin’s realization of this truth: “My life now, my whole life apart from anything that can happen to me, every minute of it is no more meaningless…. [It] has the positive meaning of goodness, which I have the power to put into it.”[2]

There are two lessons from Levin’s life that I want to leave you with as we finish this book.

Ordinary Life Is No Longer Ordinary

The meaning of Levin’s life was, it turned out, the goodness he brought to it through the ordinary love he gave and received by living an ordinary life. If this were the year 1878, you could follow his example and just live a fairly ordinary life to find meaning, too, unless you inhabited the rarefied world of tortured intellectuals, philosophers, and scientists—the few who made their world on the left side of their brains. You, too, would find life’s meaning by just relaxing into the normality of love, work, faith, beauty, and inevitable suffering. That would put you into your right hemisphere a lot of the time.

But this isn’t 1878, and ordinary life is no longer a simple life of love, care for others, work, and faith. “Ordinary life” today is just the opposite: it is a bundle of tech-laden distractions, complicated tasks that crowd out complex challenges, and—especially for strivers—a manic focus on achievement in comparison with the entire world all at once. Ordinary life today is, at best, a simulation of ordinary life in previous times. It leaves you, in Tolstoy’s formulation, starving inside a toy store.

That’s why I have spent the last six chapters telling you about the life experiences that were once taken for granted but no longer are: asking questions that can’t be googled, falling in love, seeking the divine, experiencing a sense of calling, immersing yourself in beauty, and embracing inevitable suffering. In doing these things, it’s not that you will invent your life’s meaning. Rather, you will reside in your brain’s right hemisphere long enough that you can find your life’s meaning.

Am I asking you to turn back the clock to make your life more like the way your grandparents lived? Not in every way, obviously—I’m not suggesting that you shun antibiotics and smoke a pack of cigarettes every day. Nor am I asking you to try to live without technology or devices, which would be basically impossible. But I am saying that the times before the tech simulation we live in today were far healthier when it came to living a harmonious interior life.

It’s not your fault that ordinary life changed. But that doesn’t change the fact that what was once automatic behavior now is something you must adopt consciously. Some new rules must be applied to daily living. Here’s a place to start:

- If any technology substitutes for in-person experiences, it should be used with extreme caution, like a dangerous and addictive drug.
- If something makes you focus on yourself instead of others, shun it immediately. It is poison.
- If you are afraid of love in real life, it means you need to take more risks with your heart.
- If the material world is crowding out your sense of the supernatural, rebalance your time and priorities.
- If your work is not a calling, no matter what it pays, start plotting your exit.
- If beauty is missing from your life, go outside in nature immediately. Without your phone.

- In the morning, as you start your day, say to yourself in the mirror, “The trials I face this day are evidence that I am living my life to the fullest.”

Will you fail? Yes, of course—a lot. And I will, too. But you will be pointed in the right direction for progress toward the ancient ways that led to eternal truths.

This is, in fact, what Marc, Maria, and Paul—the strivers we met in the introduction to this book—are striving to do today. Before the book was published, I sent them the chapters you just read, to see how it might change their thinking. All of them are resolved to change the way they live: to break the modern habits that held them back and to lean into the mystery, beauty, and even suffering that they were inadvertently avoiding. Here are a few of the changes (among many others) they are making in their lives.

Maria realized that she had never trusted her “gut feeling” when it came to meaning, because she always thought that the rational side was the correct one. Now she sees that this gut feeling is, in fact, her right hemisphere beckoning. She now listens and is making room for the complex spaces in her life where meaning resides.

Marc’s biggest epiphany was around suffering. “Avoiding discomfort has always led to self-destruction,” he tells me. He avoided his loneliness and boredom by pulling out his phone, perpetuating the doom loop in his life. He now has digital detox practices in place in his life and spends his new, ample deviceless free time in visits with friends and family.

As Paul read the book and thought back on his initial conversation with me, he saw that he was starving for beauty in his life—especially natural beauty. Like so many others, life behind a computer screen all day and behind a pocket-sized one for much of the rest of his time had left him bereft of fresh air and open spaces. Among other new habits, he now schedules time outside every day.

What changes have you resolved to make after reading these chapters?

Be Still, and Be Found

There is a second point about Levin's story I want to make as we finish. He didn't actually find his meaning. Rather, he ordered his life in such a way that meaning found *him*. And I know exactly how this feels.

In 2019, at the not-so-young age of fifty-five, I had a burning meaning question on my mind for which I couldn't find an answer. I had just resigned from a chief executive job that had totally consumed me for the past eleven years. I was completely burned out and had no idea what the future had in store, but deeply craved something more meaningful in my work than I had ever done before. I was looking for my calling. I knew it existed, but I couldn't name it.

To find an answer, I turned to the Camino de Santiago, which is a very long walking pilgrimage across northern Spain. For more than a thousand years, people have done it when searching for life's meaning and purpose. Ester came with me. Each day on the Camino was like the last: We woke before dawn, walked the marked trail for about twenty miles, thought, and prayed. No devices. When pilgrims met, they greeted each other simply with "*Buen camino*." Which means, more or less: *May you have a fruitful pilgrimage*. Sometimes we walked together with a stranger for a few miles and heard their stories. Inevitably, they, like us, were on a quiet pilgrimage to find life's meaning. At the end of the day, we rested our aching feet and sore muscles and sank into a deep sleep.

Many people say the Camino has mystical properties. They say that if you make the pilgrimage with an intention, you will find what you seek as you finish at the cathedral in the medieval city of Santiago de Compostela. And indeed, as I finished my pilgrimage, I truly felt I had found what I was seeking, and I wrote this mission statement for my remaining productive years—a description of the meaning of my work, residing deep in my right hemisphere:

> *I will lift people up and bring them together in bonds of happiness and love, using science and ideas.*

I accepted a professorship teaching the science of happiness and began to speak and write widely for nonacademic audiences on this topic. In a very real way, this book is one of the fruits of that pilgrimage.

But on reflection over the subsequent months and years, I realized that I had had it backward. I thought I was seeking my life's meaning and found it at the end of the Camino. But in truth, I realized I had been *sought* all along by my life's meaning, and the pilgrimage had simply allowed me to see it by stripping away the barriers of my complicated, distracting, messy life, and living in an old-fashioned way: without technology, in nature, with my soulmate, asking big questions. And yes, suffering plenty of physical pain. Like Levin when he just started living, my meaning *found me* when I was finally in the right place in my life to *be found*.

If you want to find the meaning of your life, you must treat life like the Camino—a pilgrimage that opens your mind and heart. When you start living in this way, your life will take on an openness and a vulnerability. That's when your meaning will find you.

Buen camino.

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