

Missing Meaning? Try Making It!

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WANT MORE MEANING in your life? Try *making* it!

There are times—obviously not the “best of times” —in our lives when life just doesn’t seem to have much “meaning”. In fact, there are times when we’re not even sure what “meaning” means!

There are some tough things we have to acknowledge about the human condition, such as:

- *The mystery of it all.* One inescapable truth is that life, in general, is a mystery. Human life is even more of a mystery! What are we doing on this planet floating in space? How did we get here? Why?
- *The indifferent universe.* The entire universe really doesn’t much care whether you or I hang around or not. It goes about doing whatever it does, not really paying much attention to what we want or don’t want. And if we get in its way, violate its rules, it lets us know quickly.
- *We’re renting space.* Our deal here is a lease, not a purchase. And the lease is not renewable. There are theories about our future destiny, but no proofs.

So, where does that leave us with finding “meaning” in what we do with our limited time on this planet?

A HUMAN’S TASK IS TO MAKE MEANING. A classic book is “Man’s Search for Meaning” by psychiatrist Viktor E. Frankl (Beacon Press, 2006). His ideas were forged while undergoing immense suffering and deprivation as a prisoner in a concentration camp during World War II. After amazingly surviving these ordeals, Dr. Frankl developed his approach to psychotherapy which he named “logotherapy”. The term has its roots in the Greek word “logos”, denoting meaning.

Dr. Frankl’s core idea is that the essence of human existence is to create a productive and satisfying life by bestowing meaning upon things and events, which—in and by themselves—have no intrinsic meaning. We are surrounded by, immersed in, examples every moment of our daily existence. Where do we live? Who do we choose as friends and lovers? What do we do for work? What do we possess?

VALUES ARE THE TOOL FOR MEANING. So how do we assign meaning? By applying our values. Now, the term “values” seems pretty abstract. And it gets tossed around a lot by politicians and preachers. But what, really, is a “value”? Well, to put it simply, a value is a *catalyst for choice*. In other words, it’s what you and I refer to for

help in making the hundreds of choices we make every day, as we face a constant stream of questions in our heads:

- Will I work out or sleep in this morning?
- What will I eat today?
- What will I wear today?
- What will I do after work?

. . . And so on. The daily mental chorus is almost constant, until we finally fall asleep, getting rested to start another day of questions and choices.

The basic idea of a value as a "*catalyst for choice*" is that it enables us to answer the question: "Would I rather do *this* or *that*?" And how does it help us decide? It tells us which option is *more important to me, right now!*

- "Is it more important to me *today, given my state of mind and body*, that I work on my fitness or get more rest?"
- "Is it better for me *today, given my life situation right now*, to go visit my folks after work or go to a movie?"

A key point is that this *catalyst for choice* is very dynamic and situational. *It flexes and flows with how you see yourself in the world at any point in time.* But don't let this fact give you to believe that a value is arbitrary, squishy, or wishy-washy. Your values are generally pretty rugged and well established. It's just that they *can* change or evolve as your thinking evolves—or they *can* be forced upon you by a sudden change in your life situation by an external event.

SO, WHAT DOES THAT MEAN TO YOU ON A DAILY BASIS? Basically, it means getting in touch with those values which are already an important part of you. They constitute your character—what makes you the person you are. And it's not that hard to get in touch with your values. They just need to be made conscious, rather than be left lurking in the background of your choice-making, driving the outcomes in directions you're not totally aware of, and maybe not even totally comfortable with.

All you have to do is examine your thought processes by asking yourself a few simple questions, like:

- Why do I want to do that?
- Why is that so important to me?
- Is that my best choice in this situation, at this time?

"Sharpening up" your understanding of your values system—yes, even writing down a list of them and rank-ordering them—can do wonders for helping you make the right choices.

And what, exactly, is a "right" choice? To start with, at minimum, a right choice is a decision to do something which does no harm to other people or yourself.

However, a really good right choice is to do something that enhances and enriches you as a person. It's something that adds to one of your skills or strengths. It's choosing to do something that makes you more complete, well-rounded, and fulfilled as a human being.

Such a choice probably also enhances you as a member of the human family, and enriches the lives of those around you, or the community, or the environment.

Right choices make days, even moments, richer, more satisfying--more meaning-full.

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