The Power of MEANING

FINDING FULFILLMENT IN A WORLD OBSESSED WITH HAPPINESS

Emily Esfahani Smith

"WARM AND WISE . . . READING THIS BOOK IS A LIFE-TRANSFORMING EXPERIENCE." —SUSAN CAIN, AUTHOR OF *QUIET*

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What is the meaning of life? That was all—a simple question; one that tended to close in on one with years. The great revelation had never come. The great revelation perhaps never did come. Instead there were little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark; here was one.

—VIRGINIA WOOLF

Introduction

On Thursday and Sunday evenings, a group of seekers gathered in a large room of my family's home in downtown Montreal, where my parents ran a Sufi meetinghouse. Sufism is the school of mysticism associated with Islam, and my family belonged to the Nimatullahi Sufi Order, which originated in Iran in the fourteenth century and today has meetinghouses all over the world. Twice a week, darvishes—or members of the order—would sit on the floor and meditate for several hours. With their eyes closed and their chins to their chests, they silently repeated a name or attribute of God as traditional Iranian Sufi music played.

Living in the Sufi meetinghouse as a child was enchanting. The walls of our home were decorated with sculptures of Arabic script that my father carved from wood. Tea was brewing constantly, perfuming the air with the fragrance of bergamot. After meditating, the Sufis drank the tea, which my mother served along with dates or Iranian sweets made with rosewater, saffron, cardamom, and honey. Sometimes, I served the tea, carefully balancing a tray full of glasses, saucers, and sugar cubes as I knelt down before each darvish.

The darvishes loved dipping a sugar cube in their tea, putting it in their mouths, and drinking their tea through the sugar. They loved singing the poetry of medieval Sufi sages and saints. There was Rumi: "Ever since I was sliced away from my home of reeds, each note I whisper would

make most any heart weep." And there was Attar: "Since love," he writes of the seeker, "has spoken in your soul, reject The Self, that whirlpool where our lives are wrecked." They loved, too, sitting in silence, being together, and remembering God through quiet contemplation.

Darvishes call Sufism "the path of love." Those on the path are on a journey toward God, the Beloved, which calls them to renounce the self and to constantly remember and love God at every turn. To Sufis, loving and adoring God means loving and adoring all of creation and every human being that is a part of it. *Mohabbat,* or loving-kindness, is central to their practice. When we first moved into our new home in Montreal, Sufis from all over North America came and stayed for days to help my parents convert the brownstone, formerly a legal office, into a space fit for *majlis,* the name of the bi-weekly gathering for meditation. When a homeless man knocked on our door one evening looking for a meal and a place to sleep, he was welcomed in. And when my father complimented a darvish on a scarf he was wearing, the darvish gave it with pleasure as a gift to my dad. (After that, my family had a general understanding that you only complimented another darvish's possessions with great caution.)

On special occasions, like the visit of a sheikh or the initiation of a new darvish into the order, Sufis from Canada and the United States would stay at the meetinghouse for a few days, sleeping on thin cushions in the meditation room and library—really, anywhere there was space. There was a lot of snoring at night and lines for the bathroom during the day, but that didn't seem to bother anyone. The darvishes were full of joy and warmth. Though they spent many hours meditating during these weekends, they also passed the time by playing classical Sufi music on Persian instruments, like a frame drum called a *daf* and the stringed *tar,* always singing Sufi

poetry to the music. I sat on a tattered Persian carpet and listened, dipping my sugar cubes in my tea, just like they did—and trying to meditate, just like they did, too.

Formal rituals also governed Sufi life. When the darvishes greeted each other, they said *Ya Haqq,* "The Truth," and performed a special handshake by putting their hands together like a heart and kissing that heart. When they entered or left the meditation room, they "kissed" the ground by touching their fingers to the floor and then to their lips. When my mom and other Sufis prepared Iranian dinners, the darvishes sat around a tablecloth spread on the floor. I helped arrange the place settings and then waited with my parents for the other darvishes to sit down before finding a spot. The Sufis ate in silence. Generally, nobody spoke unless the sheikh spoke first—and it was understood that everybody should finish their food before the sheikh did so that he was not kept waiting. (Though, often, the sheikh ate slowly so that no straggler would feel uncomfortable.) These humbling rituals were important to the Sufis, helping them break down the self, which Sufi teaching considers a barrier to love.

Such a way of life appealed to the darvishes, many of whom had left Iran and other repressive societies to live in Canada and the United States. Some Muslims consider Sufis to be mystic heretics, and they are severely persecuted in the Middle East today. But even though many of the Sufis I knew had led difficult lives, they were always looking forward. Their demanding spiritual practice—with its emphasis on self-denial, service, and compassion over personal gain, comfort, and pleasure—elevated them. It made their lives feel more meaningful.

The Sufis who meditated in our home were part of a long tradition of spiritual seekers. For as long as human beings have existed, they have yearned to know what makes life worth living. The first great work of human literature, the

four-thousand-year-old *The Epic of Gilgamesh,* is about a hero's quest to figure out how he should live knowing that he will die. And in the centuries since Gilgamesh's tale was first told, the urgency of that quest has not faded. The rise of philosophy, religion, natural science, literature, and even art can be at least partly explained as a response to two questions: "What is the meaning of existence?" And, "How can I lead a meaningful life?"

The first question addresses big issues. How did the universe come to be? What is the point and purpose of life? Is there anything transcendent—a divine being or holy spirit—that gives our lives significance?

The second question is about finding meaning within life. What values should I live by? What projects, relationships, and activities will bring me fulfillment? What path should I choose?

Historically, religious and spiritual systems laid out the answers to both questions. In most of these traditions, the meaning of life lies in God or some ultimate reality with which the seeker yearns to be united. Following a moral code and engaging in practices like meditation, fasting, and acts of charity help the seeker grow closer to God or to that reality, endowing day-to-day life with importance.

Billions of people, of course, still derive meaning from religion. But in the developed world, religion no longer commands the authority it once did. Though most people in the United States continue to believe in God and many consider themselves spiritual, fewer people go to church, pray regularly, or have a religious affiliation, and the number of people who believe religion is an important component of their lives has declined. If religion was once the default path to meaning, today it is one path among many, a cultural transformation that has left many people adrift. For millions both with and without faith, the search for meaning here on earth has become incredibly urgent—yet ever more elusive.

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My family eventually moved out of the Sufi meetinghouse. We came to the United States, where the busyness of everyday life trumped the rituals of meditation, singing, and tea. But I never stopped searching for meaning. When I was a teenager, that search led me to philosophy. The question of how to live a meaningful life was once a central driving force of that discipline, with thinkers from Aristotle to Nietzsche all offering their own visions of what a good life requires. But after arriving at college, I soon learned that academic philosophy had largely abandoned that quest. Instead, the issues it addressed were esoteric or technical, like the nature of consciousness or the philosophy of computers.

Meanwhile, I found myself immersed in a campus culture that had little patience for the questions that had drawn me to philosophy. Many of my peers were driven by a desire for career success. They had grown up in a world of intense competition for the merit badges that would get them to an impressive college, then to an elite graduate or professional school or a job on Wall Street. When they picked their classes and activities, they did so with those goals in mind. By the time they graduated, these razor-sharp minds had already acquired specialized knowledge in fields that were even more specific than their particular majors. I met people who could share their insights on how to improve public health in third-world countries, how to use statistical modeling to predict election outcomes, and how to "deconstruct" a literary text. But they had little to no sense of what makes life meaningful, or of what greater purpose they might have beyond making money or landing a prestigious job. Outside of an occasional conversation with friends, they had no forum in which to discuss or deeply engage with these questions.

They were not alone. As tuition skyrockets and a college

degree is seen as the ticket to economic stability, many people today consider education to be instrumental—a step toward a job rather than an opportunity for moral and intellectual growth. The American Freshman survey has tracked the values of college students since the mid-1960s. In the late sixties, the top priority of college freshmen was "developing a meaningful life philosophy." Nearly all of them—86 percent—said this was an "essential" or "very important" life goal. By the 2000s, their top priority became "being very well off financially" while just 40 percent said meaning was their chief goal. Of course, most students still have a strong yearning for meaning. But that search no longer drives their educations.

Educating students about how to live was once central to the mission of colleges and universities in the United States. In the first part of our nation's history, college students received a rigorous education in classics and theology. They followed a prescribed curriculum that was designed to teach them what matters in life, and their shared beliefs in God and Christian principles served as a common foundation in that endeavor. But by the 1800s, the religious faith that grounded their studies was gradually eroding. The question naturally arose, writes Yale law professor and social critic Anthony Kronman, of whether it "is possible to explore the meaning of life in a deliberate and organized way even after its religious foundations have been called into doubt."

Many professors not only thought it was possible but that they had an obligation to lead students forward in this quest. Religion, it was true, no longer offered all students definitive answers to life's ultimate question, but some educators believed the humanities could step in. Rather than leaving students to search for meaning on their own, these professors attempted to situate them in a large and enduring tradition of arts and letters. And so in the mid- to late nineteenth century, many undergraduates followed a

college curriculum that stressed the masterpieces of literature and philosophy—like Homer's *Iliad,* Plato's dialogues, *The Divine Comedy,* and the works of Cervantes, Shakespeare, Montaigne, Goethe, and others.

By reading these texts, students listened and ultimately contributed to a "great conversation" that had been going on for thousands of years. As they encountered competing visions of the good life, students were able to come to their own conclusions about how to live. Is Homer's glory-driven Achilles a better model than the pilgrim in Dante's poem? What can we learn about the purpose of our lives from Aristotle's writings on ethics? What does Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* reveal about love and romance? How about Jane Austen's *Emma*? There was no one right answer. But by drawing on these shared cultural touchstones, students developed a common language with which they could discuss and debate life's meaning with peers, professors, and the members of their community.

By the early twentieth century, however, the situation had again shifted. After the Civil War, the first research universities appeared on the American educational landscape. These institutions, modeled after German universities, prioritized the production of scholarship. To facilitate such scholarship, separate fields of study arose, each with its own rigorous, systematic, and objective "methods." Professors pursued highly specialized areas of research within those fields, and students, too, chose an area of concentration—a major—to help prepare them for a career after college. Eventually, the humanities-oriented curriculum disintegrated, leaving students essentially free to pick and choose their classes from a menu of options—which, of course, continues to be the case today at most schools.

The research ideal dealt a blow to the idea that living meaningfully could be taught or learned in an academic setting. Its emphasis on specialization meant that most

professors considered the question of meaning beyond their purview: they did not believe they had the authority or knowledge to lead students forward in this quest. Others found the topic illegitimate, naïve, or even embarrassing. The question of how to live, after all, requires a discussion of abstract, personal, and moral values. It does not belong, these professors argued, in colleges and universities devoted to the accumulation of objective knowledge. "An increasing consensus in the academy," as one professor wrote several years ago, "is that faculty members should not help students discern a meaningful philosophy of life or develop character, but should instead help them master the content and methodology of a given discipline and learn critical thinking."

But something interesting has happened in recent years. Meaning has regained a foothold in our universities, and especially in an unexpected place—the sciences. Over the past few decades, a group of social scientists has begun investigating the question of how to lead a good life.

Many of them are working in a field called positive psychology—a discipline that, like the social sciences generally, is a child of the research university and grounds its findings in empirical studies, but that also draws on the rich tradition of the humanities. Positive psychology was founded by the University of Pennsylvania's Martin Seligman, who, after decades of working as a research psychologist, had come to believe that his field was in crisis. He and his colleagues could cure depression, helplessness, and anxiety, but, he realized, helping people overcome their demons is not the same thing as helping them live well. Though psychologists were charged with caring for and studying the human psyche, they knew very little about human flourishing. And so, in 1998, Seligman called upon his colleagues to investigate what makes life fulfilling and worth living.

Social scientists heeded his call, but many of them zeroed in on a topic that was both obvious and seemed easy to measure: happiness. Some researchers studied the benefits of happiness. Others studied its causes. Still others investigated how we can increase it in our day-to-day lives. Though positive psychology was founded to study the good life more generally, it was the empirical research on happiness that blossomed and became the public face of the field. In the late eighties and early nineties, there were several hundred studies about happiness published each year; by 2014, there were over 10,000 per year.

It was an exciting shift for psychology, one that the public immediately responded to. Major media outlets clamored to cover the new research. Soon, entrepreneurs began monetizing it, founding start-ups and programming apps to help ordinary people implement the field's findings. They were followed by a deluge of celebrities, personal coaches, and motivational speakers, all eager to share the gospel of happiness. According to *Psychology Today,* in 2000, the number of books published about happiness was a modest fifty. In 2008, that number had skyrocketed to 4,000. Of course, people have always been interested in the pursuit of happiness, but all that attention has made an impact: since the mid-2000s, the interest in happiness, as measured by Google searches, has tripled. "The shortcut to anything you want in your life," writes author Rhonda Byrne in her bestselling 2006 book *The Secret,* "is to BE and FEEL happy now!"

And yet, there is a major problem with the happiness frenzy: it has failed to deliver on its promise. Though the happiness industry continues to grow, as a society, we're more miserable than ever. Indeed, social scientists have uncovered a sad irony—chasing happiness actually makes people unhappy.

That fact would come as no surprise to students of the

humanistic tradition. Philosophers have long questioned the value of happiness alone. "It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied," wrote the nineteenth-century philosopher John Stuart Mill. To that, the twentieth-century Harvard philosopher Robert Nozick added: "And although it might be best of all to be Socrates satisfied, having both happiness and depth, we would give up some happiness in order to gain the depth."

Nozick was a happiness skeptic. He devised a thought experiment to emphasize his point. Imagine, Nozick said, that you could live in a tank that would "give you any experience you desired." It sounds like something out of *The Matrix*: "Superduper neuropsychologists could stimulate your brain so that you would think and feel you were writing a great novel, or making a friend, or reading an interesting book. All the time you would be floating in a tank, with electrodes attached to your brain." He then asks, "Should you plug into this machine for life, preprogramming your life's experiences?"

If happiness is truly life's end goal, most people would choose to feel happy in the tank. It would be an easy life, where trauma, sadness, and loss are switched off—forever. You could always feel good, maybe even important. Every now and then, you could exit the tank and decide which new experiences you wanted programmed into your head. If you are torn or distressed over the decision to plug in, you shouldn't be. "What's a few moments of distress," Nozick asks, "compared to a lifetime of bliss (if that's what you choose), and why feel any distress at all if your decision *is* the best one?"

If you choose to live in the tank and feel happy moment to moment, for all the moments of your life, are you living a good life? Is that the life that you would choose for yourself—for your children? If we report that happiness is our main value in life, as a majority of us do, then wouldn't

life in the tank satisfy all of our desires?

It should. Yet most people would say no to a life of feeling good in the tank. The question is, why? The reason we recoil from the idea of life in the tank, according to Nozick, is that the happiness we find there is empty and unearned. You may feel happy in the tank, but you have no real reason to be happy. You may feel good, but your life isn't actually good. A person "floating in the tank," as Nozick puts it, is "an indeterminate blob." He has no identity, no projects and goals to give his life value. "We care about more than just how things feel to us from the inside," Nozick concludes. "There is more to life than feeling happy."

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Before his death in 2002, Nozick had worked with Martin Seligman and others to shape the goals and vision of positive psychology. Early on, they recognized that the happiness-focused research would be alluring and media-friendly, and they wanted to consciously avoid letting the field become what Seligman called "happiology." Instead, their mission was to shed the light of science on how people can lead deep and fulfilling lives. And over the last few years, that's precisely what more and more researchers have been doing. They have been looking beyond happiness in their search for what makes life worth living. One of their chief findings has been that there is a distinction between a happy life and a meaningful life.

This distinction has a long history in philosophy, which for thousands of years has recognized two paths to the good life. The first is *hedonia,* or what we today call happiness, following in the footsteps of Sigmund Freud. Human beings, he wrote, "strive after happiness; they want to become happy and to remain so"—and this "pleasure principle," as he called it, is what "decides the

purpose of life" for most people. The ancient Greek philosopher Aristippus, a student of Socrates, considered the pursuit of *hedonia* the key to living well. "The art of life," Aristippus wrote, "lies in taking pleasures as they pass, and the keenest pleasures are not intellectual, nor are they always moral.' ' Several decades later, Epicurus popularized a somewhat similar idea, arguing that the good life is found in pleasure, which he defined as the absence of bodily and mental pain, such as anxiety. This idea waned through the Middle Ages, but it saw a resurgence in popularity during the eighteenth century with Jeremy Bentham, the founder of utilitarianism. Bentham believed the pursuit of pleasure was our central driving force. "Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, *pain* and *pleasure,*" he famously wrote: "It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do."

In line with this tradition, many psychologists today define happiness as a positive mental and emotional state. One tool commonly used in social science research to help assess happiness, for example, asks an individual to reflect on how often he feels positive emotions like pride, enthusiasm, and attentiveness versus how often he feels negative ones like fear, nervousness, and shame. The higher your ratio of positive to negative emotions, the happier you are.

But our feelings, of course, are fleeting. And as Nozick's thought experiment revealed, they're not everything. We may delight in reading the tabloids and feel stressed while taking care of a sick relative, but most of us would agree that the latter activity is more significant. It might not feel good in the moment, but if we skipped out on it, we'd later regret that decision. In other words, it's worth doing because it's meaningful.

Meaning is the other path to the good life, and it's best understood by turning to the Greek philosopher Aristotle

and his concept of *eudaimonia,* the ancient Greek word for "human flourishing." *Eudaimonia* often gets translated as "happiness," and so Aristotle is often credited with saying that happiness is the highest good and chief goal of our lives. But Aristotle actually had pretty harsh words for those who pursued pleasure and "the life of enjoyment." He called them "slavish" and "vulgar," arguing that the feel-good route to the good life that he believed "most men" pursue is more "suitable to beasts" than to human beings.

To Aristotle, *eudaimonia* is not a fleeting positive emotion. Rather, it is something you do. Leading a *eudaimonic* life, Aristotle argued, requires cultivating the best qualities within you both morally and intellectually and living up to your potential. It is an active life, a life in which you do your job and contribute to society, a life in which you are involved in your community, a life, above all, in which you realize your potential, rather than squander your talents.

Psychologists have picked up on Aristotle's distinction. If *hedonia* is defined as "feeling good," they argue, then *eudaimonia* is defined as "being and doing good"—and as "seeking to use and develop the best in oneself" in a way that fits with "one's deeper principles." It is a life of good character. And it pays dividends. As three scholars put it, "The more directly one aims to maximize pleasure and avoid pain, the more likely one is to produce instead a life bereft of depth, meaning, and community." But those who choose to pursue meaning ultimately live fuller—and happier—lives.

It's difficult, of course, to measure a concept like meaning in the lab, but, according to psychologists, when people say that their lives have meaning, it's because three conditions have been satisfied: they evaluate their lives as significant and worthwhile—as part of something bigger; they believe their lives make sense; and they feel their lives

are driven by a sense of purpose. Still, some social scientists are skeptical that happiness and meaning are distinct from each other at all. Yet research suggests that the meaningful life and the happy life can't be conflated so easily. The differences between the two were revealed in a study from 2013, in which a team of psychologists led by Florida State University's Roy Baumeister asked nearly 400 Americans aged 18 to 78 whether they were happy and whether they thought their lives were meaningful. The social scientists examined their responses alongside other variables, like their stress levels and spending patterns, and whether or not they had children. What they discovered is that while the meaningful life and the happy life overlap in certain ways and "feed off each other," they "have some substantially different roots."

Baumeister and his team found that the happy life is an easy life, one in which we feel good much of the time and experience little stress or worry. It was also associated with good physical health and the ability to buy the things that we need and want. So far, so expected. What was surprising, however, was that the pursuit of happiness was linked to selfish behavior—being a "taker" rather than a "giver."

"Happiness without meaning," the researchers wrote, "characterizes a relatively shallow, self-absorbed or even selfish life, in which things go well, needs and desires are easily satisfied, and difficult or taxing entanglements are avoided."

Leading a meaningful life, by contrast, corresponded with being a "giver," and its defining feature was connecting and contributing to something beyond the self. Having more meaning in life was correlated with activities like buying presents for others, taking care of children, and even arguing, which researchers said was an indication of having convictions and ideals you are willing to fight for. Because these activities require investing in something

bigger, the meaningful life was linked to higher levels of worrying, stress, and anxiety than the happy life. Having children, for instance, was a hallmark of the meaningful life, but it has been famously associated with lower levels of happiness, a finding that held true for the parents in this study.

Meaning and happiness, in other words, can be at odds. Yet research has shown that meaningful endeavors can also give rise to a deeper form of well-being down the road. That was the conclusion of a 2010 study by Veronika Huta of the University of Ottawa and Richard Ryan of the University of Rochester. Huta and Ryan instructed a group of college students to pursue either meaning or happiness over a ten-day period by doing at least one thing each day to increase *eudaimonia* or *hedonia,* respectively. At the end of each day, the study participants reported back to the researchers about the activities they'd chosen to undertake. Some of the most popular ones reported by students in the meaning condition included forgiving a friend, studying, thinking about one's values, and helping or cheering up another person. Those in the happiness condition, by contrast, listed activities like sleeping in, playing games, going shopping, and eating sweets.

After the study's completion, the researchers checked in with the participants to see how it had affected their well-being. What they found was that students in the happiness condition experienced more positive feelings, and fewer negative ones, immediately after the study. But three months later, the mood boost had faded. The second group of students—those who focused on meaning—did not feel as happy right after the experiment, though they did rate their lives as more meaningful. Yet three months later, the picture was different. The students who had pursued meaning said they felt more "enriched," "inspired," and "part of something greater than myself." They also reported fewer negative moods. Over the long term, it

seemed, pursuing meaning actually boosted psychological health.

The philosopher John Stuart Mill wouldn't have been surprised. "Those only are happy," he wrote, "who have their minds fixed on some object other than their own happiness; on the happiness of others, on the improvement of mankind, even on some art or pursuit, followed not as a means, but as itself an ideal end. Aiming thus at something else, they find happiness by the way."

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Psychologists like Baumeister and Huta are part of a growing new movement, one that is fundamentally reshaping our understanding of the good life. Their work shows that the search for meaning is far more fulfilling than the pursuit of personal happiness, and it reveals how people can go about finding meaning in their lives. Through their studies, they're seeking to answer big questions: Does each person have to find meaning on his or her own, or are there certain universal sources of meaning that we can all lean on? Why are people in some cultures and communities more likely to consider their lives meaningful than those in others? How does living a meaningful life affect our health? How do we—and indeed can we—find meaning in the face of death?

Their research reflects a broader shift in our culture. Across the country—and across the world—educators, business leaders, doctors, politicians, and ordinary people are beginning to turn away from the gospel of happiness and focus on meaning. As I dug deeper into the psychological research, I began to seek these people out. In the pages ahead, I will introduce you to some of these remarkable individuals. We will meet a group of medieval enthusiasts who find fulfillment in their idiosyncratic community. We will hear from a zookeeper about what

gives her life purpose. We will learn how a paraplegic used a traumatic experience to redefine his identity. We will even follow a former astronaut into space, where he found his true calling.

Some of their stories are ordinary. Others are extraordinary. But as I followed these seekers on their journeys, I found that their lives all had some important qualities in common, offering an insight that the research is now confirming: there are sources of meaning all around us, and by tapping into them, we can all lead richer and more satisfying lives—and help others do the same. This book will reveal what those sources of meaning are and how we can harness them to give our lives depth. Along the way, we'll learn about the benefits of living meaningfully—for ourselves, and for our schools, workplaces, and society at large.

As I interviewed researchers and chased stories of people searching for and finding meaning, I was reminded at every turn of the Sufis who first set me on this journey. More often than not, these paragons of meaning were living humble lives. Many of them had struggled in their pursuit of meaning. Yet their primary goal was making the world better for others. A great Sufi once said that if a darvish takes only the first step on the path of loving-kindness and goes no farther, then he has contributed to humanity by devoting himself to others—and it's the same with those focused on living meaningful lives. They transform the world, in big and small ways, through their pursuit of noble goals and ideals.

Indeed, just as new scientific findings have brought us back to the wisdom of the humanities, writing this book has affirmed the lessons I learned as a child living in the Sufi meetinghouse. Though the darvishes led seemingly normal lives as lawyers, construction workers, engineers, and parents, they adopted a meaning mindset that imbued everything they did with significance—whether it was

helping to clean up a dinner spread or singing the poetry of Rumi and Attar and living by its wisdom. For the darvishes, the pursuit of personal happiness was completely beside the point. Rather, they focused constantly on how they could make themselves useful to others, how they could help other people feel happier and more whole, and how they could connect to something larger. They crafted lives that mattered—which leaves just one question for the rest of us: How can we do the same?

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Psychologists have picked up on Aristotle's distinction. If *hedonia* is defined as "feeling good," they argue, then *eudaimonia* is defined as "being and doing good"—and as "seeking to use and develop the best in oneself" in a way that fits with "one's deeper principles." It is a life of good character. And it pays dividends. As three scholars put it, "The more directly one aims to maximize pleasure and avoid pain, the more likely one is to produce instead a life bereft of depth, meaning, and community." But those who choose to pursue meaning ultimately live fuller—and happier—lives.

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a world—a world that cannot be seen or touched—is naïve at best and superstitious at worst. In doing so, they have led to widespread disenchantment.

In his letter, he explains why the loss of those traditional sources of meaning is so tragic. "Astronomers have told us that human affairs constitute but a moment in the trajectory of a star," Durant writes; "geologists have told us that civilization is but a precarious interlude between ice ages; biologists have told us that all life is war, a struggle for existence among individuals, groups, nations, alliances, and species; historians have told us that 'progress' is delusion, whose glory ends in inevitable decay; psychologists have told us that the will and the self are the helpless instruments of heredity and environment, and that the once incorruptible soul is but a transient incandescence of the brain." Philosophers, meanwhile, with their emphasis on reasoning their way to the truth, have reasoned their way to the truth that life is meaningless: "Life has become, in that total perspective which is philosophy, a fitful pullulation of human insects on the earth, a planetary eczema that may soon be cured."

In his book, Durant relates the old story of a police officer who attempted to stop a suicidal man from jumping off a bridge. The two talked. Then they both jumped off the ledge. "This is the pass to which science and philosophy have brought us," Durant says. Writing to these great minds, he sought a response to the nihilism of his time—a response to the despondent stranger who had left him speechless. Durant begged them for an answer to what makes life worth living—what drives them forward, what gives them inspiration and energy, hope and consolation.

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Durant's questions matter today more than ever. Hopelessness and misery are not simply on the rise; they

have become epidemic. In the United States, the rate of people suffering from depression has risen dramatically since 1960, and between 1988 and 2008 the use of antidepressants rose 400 percent. These figures can't just be attributed to the increasing availability of mental health care. According to the World Health Organization, global suicide rates have spiked 60 percent since World War II. Some populations have been particularly vulnerable. In the United States, the incidence of suicide among 15- to 24-year-olds tripled in the last half of the twentieth century. In 2016, the suicide rate reached its highest point in nearly thirty years in the general population, and for middle-aged adults, it has increased by over 40 percent since 1999. Each year, forty thousand Americans take their lives, and worldwide that number is closer to a million.

What is going on?

A 2014 study by Shigehiro Oishi of the University of Virginia and Ed Diener of Gallup offers an answer to this question. Though the study was enormous, involving nearly 140,000 people across 132 countries, it was also straightforward. A few years earlier, researchers from Gallup had asked respondents whether they were satisfied with their lives, and whether they felt their lives had an important purpose or meaning. Oishi and Diener analyzed that data by country, correlating the levels of happiness and meaning with variables like wealth, rates of suicides, and other social factors.

Their findings were surprising. People in wealthier regions, like Scandinavia, reported being happier than those in poorer ones, like sub-Saharan Africa. But when it came to meaning, it was a different story. Wealthy places like France and Hong Kong had some of the lowest levels of meaning, while the poor nations of Togo and Niger had among the highest, even though people living there were some of the unhappiest in the study. One of the most disturbing findings involved suicide rates. Wealthier

nations, it turns out, had significantly higher suicide rates than poorer ones. For example, the suicide rate of Japan, where per-capita GDP was $34,000, was more than twice as high as that of Sierra Leone, where per-capita GDP was $400. This trend, on its face, didn't seem to make sense. People in wealthier countries tend to be happier, and their living conditions are practically heavenly compared with places like Sierra Leone, which is racked by endemic disease, dire poverty, and the legacy of a devastating civil war. So what reason would they have to kill themselves?

The strange relationship between happiness and suicide has been confirmed in other research, too. Happy countries like Denmark and Finland also have some high rates of suicide. Some social scientists believe that this is because it is particularly distressing to be unhappy in a country where so many others are happy—while others suggest that the happiness levels of these countries are being inflated because the unhappiest people are taking themselves out of the population.

But Oishi and Diener's study suggests another explanation. When they crunched the numbers, they discovered a striking trend: happiness and unhappiness did not predict suicide. The variable that did, they found, was meaning—or, more precisely, the lack of it. The countries with the lowest rates of meaning, like Japan, also had some of the highest suicide rates.

The problem many of these people face is the same one the suicidal man struggled with over eighty years ago when he asked Durant for a reason to go on. Though the conditions of his life were generally good, he nonetheless believed life was not worth living. Today, there are millions of people who join him in that belief. Four in ten Americans have not discovered a satisfying life purpose. And nearly a quarter of Americans—about one hundred million people—do not have a strong sense of what makes their lives meaningful.

The solution to this problem, obviously, is not for the United States to become more like Sierra Leone. Modernity, though it can sap life of meaning, has its benefits. But how can people living in modern societies find fulfillment? If we do not bridge the chasm between living a meaningful life and living a modern life, our drift will continue to come at a major cost. "Everyone at times," wrote the religious scholar Huston Smith, "finds himself or herself asking whether life is worthwhile, which amounts to asking whether, when the going gets rough, it makes sense to continue to live. Those who conclude that it does not make sense give up, if not once and for all by suicide, then piecemeal, by surrendering daily to the encroaching desolation of the years"—by surrendering, in other words, to depression, weariness, and despair.

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Such was the case with the famous Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy. In the 1870s, around the time he turned fifty, Tolstoy fell into an existential depression so severe and debilitating that he was seized by the constant desire to kill himself. His life, he had concluded, was utterly meaningless, and this thought filled him with horror.

To an outsider, the novelist's depression might have seemed peculiar. Tolstoy, an aristocrat, had everything: he was wealthy; he was famous; he was married with several children; and his two masterpieces, *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina,* had been published to great acclaim in 1869 and 1878, respectively. Internationally recognized as one of the greatest novelists of his time, Tolstoy had little doubt that his works would be canonized as classics of world literature.

Most people would settle for far less. But at the height of his fame, Tolstoy concluded that these accomplishments were merely the trappings of a meaningless life—which is

to say that they were nothing at all to him.

In 1879, a despairing Tolstoy started writing *A Confession,* an autobiographical account of his spiritual crisis. He begins *A Confession* by chronicling how, as a university student and later a soldier, he had lived a debauched life. "Lying, stealing, promiscuity of every kind, drunkenness, violence, murder—there was not a crime I did not commit," he writes, perhaps with some exaggeration, "yet in spite of it all I was praised, and my colleagues considered me and still do consider me a relatively moral man." It was during this period of his life that Tolstoy began writing, motivated, he claims, by "vanity, self-interest, and pride"—the desire to acquire fame and money.

He soon fell in with the literary and intellectual circles of Russia and Europe, which had built a secular church around the idea of progress. Tolstoy became one of its adherents. But then two dramatic experiences revealed to him the hollowness of believing in the perfectibility of man and society. The first was witnessing the execution by guillotine of a man in Paris in 1857. "When I saw how the head was severed from the body and heard the thud of each part as it fell into the box," he writes, "I understood, not with my intellect but with my whole being, that no theories of rationality of existence or of progress could justify such an act." The second was the senseless death of his brother, Nikolai, from tuberculosis. "He suffered for over a year," Tolstoy writes, "and died an agonizing death without ever understanding why he lived and understanding even less why he was dying."

These events shook Tolstoy, but they did not shatter him. In 1862, he got married, and family life distracted him from his doubts. So did writing *War and Peace,* which he started working on soon after his wedding.

Tolstoy had always been interested in the question of what gives life meaning, a theme that runs through his

that the belief in such a world—a world that cannot be seen or touched—is naïve at best and superstitious at worst. In doing so, they have led to widespread disenchantment.

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devotion to others, especially the poor.

Completing *A Confession* did not mark the end of Tolstoy's search for meaning. He continued his quest in the final decades of his life. He adopted a simple lifestyle, giving up alcohol and meat, rejecting his aristocratic titles of "Sir" and "Count," and learning the craft of shoemaking, believing that manual labor was virtuous. He devoted much of his time to improving the plight of the peasants in his community, and even tried to give all of his property to the poor (a plan his wife bitterly rejected). He also advocated progressive ideas like the abolition of private property, pacifism, and the doctrine of nonresistance to evil. With these beliefs, Tolstoy attracted a group of disciples who followed his teachings as they would a guru's.

At the same time, his final years were not easy. His attempt to live meaningfully upended his life. The Russian government denounced him as a radical; the Russian Orthodox church excommunicated him; and his marriage was left in ruins. Weary of constantly fighting with his wife, and yearning for an even more spiritual life, he fled their estate in October 1910, journeying by train to the Caucasus. He hoped to live the remaining years of his life in religious solitude. It was not to be: he died of pneumonia during the journey. His ideas, though, continued to make their mark on the world—and not just through his novels. His doctrine of nonresistance to evil inspired Gandhi's political campaign in India—which, in turn, helped spark Martin Luther King Jr.'s civil rights movement.

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For Tolstoy, the meaning of life was found in faith. But many people do not believe in God or are unmoved by religious teachings. Others have faith, but are still

searching for answers about how to live meaningfully here on earth. These people may not be satisfied by religion alone. Is it possible to find meaning in life without relying on faith in something infinite that gives our finite existence meaning, to paraphrase Tolstoy? For many people today, this is the question.

Tolstoy, it seems, would have answered no. But maybe there are other routes to meaning that either complement those offered by faith or, for nonbelievers, help to replace them. Maybe we can live meaningful lives even if everything for which we labor, everything and everyone we love, and everything we are and hope to be—our legacy—will one day perish and be forgotten. This is what the French novelist and intellectual Albert Camus set out to prove in his essay "The Myth of Sisyphus."

It is not surprising that Camus, who wrote that essay in his late twenties, would have been drawn to the problem of meaning. Unlike Tolstoy, Camus was not born into a wealthy family. His father, Lucien Camus, was a farmworker. His mother, a partially deaf and illiterate woman named Catherine, worked in a factory during World War I and later as a house cleaner. They married in 1910, the same year Tolstoy died. Three years later, Catherine gave birth to Albert in a small coastal town in Algeria called Mondovi (today Dréan). After World War I broke out, Lucien was drafted into the French army. He did not fight for long: one month later, he was wounded in the carnage of the Battle of the Marne, and soon succumbed to his injuries. Albert Camus had been alive for less than a year when his father was killed in the war.

Some sixteen years later, Camus's life was once again interrupted. In 1930, he was diagnosed with tuberculosis, which in his poor Algiers neighborhood often meant death. Still a teenager, Camus was forced to grapple with his mortality and with the fragile, arbitrary hold each of us has on life. From bed, he read the Stoic philosopher Epictetus,

who meditated frequently on the subject—"For it is not death or pain that is to be feared," Epictetus wrote, "but the fear of pain or death"—and, as he recovered, tried to find some significance in what he was enduring. The upside of his illness, he concluded, was that it was preparing him for the inevitable end that awaited him, that awaits us all.

By the time he returned to school, Camus had decided that life had no meaning, a position he expressed in an autobiographical story published in a literary journal called *Sud*: "I haven't got anything anymore, I don't believe in anything, and it's impossible to live like this, having killed morality inside me. I have no more purpose, no more reason to live, and I will die." After he enrolled at the University of Algiers, his writing improved, and he continued exploring the question of meaning by studying philosophy. He graduated in 1936. That spring, he wrote a note in his journal expressing interest in writing a "philosophical work" on "absurdity."

Camus began writing "The Myth of Sisyphus" as another world war was overtaking Europe. He was living in Paris when Nazi planes showered down bombs on the city at the beginning of June in 1940. By the middle of the month, German forces marched into the capital, casting the shadow of totalitarian occupation over France for four years. Camus fled just a few days before they arrived. He worked on the essay during the bitterly cold winter of 1940 from a heatless apartment in Lyon—handwriting parts of it with "blistered and stiffened fingers," as one biographer has put it—and completed it in 1941.

Though Camus's interest in meaning is part of a long tradition of philosophy and literature, the times in which he lived made his search for it particularly urgent. In the chaos of France's collapse, in the cowardice of the Vichy government, and in the early triumphs of fascism across Europe, the world appeared meaningless and absurd. "The

Myth of Sisyphus" is about how to live in such a world. "There is but one truly serious philosophical problem," Camus famously begins the essay, "and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy." No one, he quips, has ever died for the ontological argument, a proof of the existence of God. But many people die for meaning: some kill themselves because they judge their lives to be worthless, while others sacrifice their lives for their ideals. Whether life has meaning is the only life-or-death question that philosophy has ever asked and attempted to answer. It is, therefore, the most important question of all.

As Camus writes, we long for rational explanations of the world and seek order and unity, but the world is chaotic, disordered, and senseless—it has no "rational and reasonable principle." We wonder why we exist, how we came into being and for what purpose, but the world responds with silence. We can try to satisfy our yearning by making a leap to God, religion, or some other transcendent source of meaning that we take on faith. But if we accept as true only what we absolutely know, then there are "truths," as Camus puts it, but no single Truth.

To Camus, the fact that humans search ceaselessly for meaning but do not find it anywhere in the world renders life absurd; everything—from grand historical events to the great effort we all put into living our lives—seems pointless. The realization that there is no external source of meaning, no greater point or purpose to anything we do, inundates us with "nausea," to use the word of Camus's onetime friend, the existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre.

Of course, you don't have to be a French existentialist—or, for that matter, a Russian novelist—to feel the weight of the absurd descend on you. On the Conan O'Brien show in 2013, the comedian Louis C.K. described coming into

contact with something like Sartre's nausea, Camus's absurd, and Tolstoy's horror. Like all great comedians, C.K. is a philosopher masquerading as a funny man: "Underneath everything in your life," he told O'Brien, "there is that thing, that empty—forever empty. That knowledge that it's all for nothing and that you're alone. It's down there. And sometimes when things clear away, you're not watching anything, you're in your car, and you start going, 'Oh no, here it comes. That I'm alone.' It starts to visit on you. Just this sadness. Life is tremendously sad, just by being in it."

When an inconsolable Tolstoy arrived at this point in his reasoning, he concluded that suicide was the only reasonable escape from the absurdity of life. Tolstoy, of course, eventually took another path. He found meaning in faith. But Camus rejects both faith and suicide as solutions to the problem of life's meaninglessness. For Camus, it's impossible to know whether God exists or whether any of the beliefs we take on faith are true. Given that, we must learn to live significant lives "without appeal" to God or faith. Yet to commit suicide would be to yield to the blind forces of a meaningless world. It would be to give in to the absurd and, in doing so, to compound it.

This might sound pretty grim, but the absurdity of life, Camus argues, does not inevitably lead to despair. Rather, it opens up new opportunities. "Even within the limits of nihilism," Camus writes, "it is possible to find the means to proceed beyond nihilism." With meaning no longer imposed on us from an outside source, we have the freedom to create it for ourselves. As Sartre wrote, "Life has no meaning a priori....[I]t's up to you to give it a meaning, and value is nothing but the meaning that you choose."

Camus illustrates this point by ending his essay with an ode to the ancient Greek hero Sisyphus, who was condemned by the gods to carry a boulder up to the peak

to something larger or even "infinite" that lies beyond the self. "No matter what answers a given faith might provide for us," he writes, "every answer of faith gives infinite meaning to the finite existence of man, meaning that is not destroyed by suffering, deprivation, and death." Though Tolstoy did not believe in the miracles or sacraments of the church, he found meaning in living "a life as it was meant by God to be led," as one of his biographers puts it—which, to Tolstoy, meant a Christ-like devotion to others, especially the poor.

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Camus illustrates this point by ending his essay with an ode to the ancient Greek hero Sisyphus, who was condemned by the gods to carry a boulder up to the peak of a mountain only to have it come tumbling down right before he reaches the summit. He performs this futile task for all of eternity. It's difficult to imagine a more meaningless existence than the one that Sisyphus ekes out. But Camus wants us to see that Sisyphus's life is extremely valuable. In fact, it serves as a model for us all.

To Camus, living a meaningful life requires adopting an attitude of defiance toward the absurd, which is precisely what Sisyphus does. Sisyphus, who is being punished for deceiving the gods and attempting to escape death, does not lament his fate or hope for a better life. Rather, in contempt of the gods who want to torment him, he embodies the three qualities that define a worthwhile life: revolt, passion, and freedom.

Each time he returns to the base of the mountain, he faces a choice: to give up or to labor on. Sisyphus chooses the struggle. He accepts his task and throws himself into the grueling work of carrying the boulder up the mountain. Having scorned the gods, he becomes the master of his own fate. "His rock is his thing," as Camus puts it—it's what gives his life meaning and purpose. Though his labors may seem pointless, they are endowed with meaning through the triumphant attitude with

which he approaches his task. "The struggle itself toward the heights," Camus writes, "is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy."

The struggle *itself.* When Camus tells us to imagine Sisyphus happy, he does not mean a feel-good kind of happiness. He is talking about the sense of accomplishment and contentment that results from devoting yourself to a difficult but worthwhile task. Camus wants us to see that like Sisyphus, we can live our lives to the fullest by embracing the struggle with dignity—by embracing, as he puts it in his notebooks, the "misery and greatness of the world."

Camus obeyed this imperative in his own life. As he was working on "The Myth of Sisyphus" in Paris in 1940, he wrote a letter to a friend expressing his state of mind: "Happy? Let's not talk about it. . . . But even if my life is complicated, I haven't stopped loving. At this time there is no distance between my life and my work. I'm doing both at the same time, and with the same passion." If Tolstoy found meaning in the infinite, Camus finds it in the finite, in the daily task of living. The epigraph to "The Myth of Sisyphus" is a verse from Pindar, the ancient Greek poet: "Oh my soul, do not aspire to immortal life, but exhaust the limits of the possible."

Rather than give up on the world, we can confront it directly and with passion, and create for ourselves a meaning out of the pain, loss, and struggles that we endure. "To the question of how to live without God," Camus's biographer Olivier Todd writes, "Camus had three answers: live, act, and write."

Just as Sisyphus's rock was the "thing" that gave his life meaning, Camus's "thing" was his writing. Everyone, Camus believed, needs some "thing," some project or goal, to which he chooses to dedicate his life, whether it's a large boulder—or

a small rose. Consider the beloved children's story *The Little Prince*, which is a wonderful expression of this wisdom. The prince lives on a tiny planet where he spends his time tending the plants and flowers in his garden. "It's very tedious work," he says, "but very easy." One day, he notices a rose that is growing on its surface—a flower unlike any he's seen on his planet before. The prince falls in love with the mysterious rose, whom he devotedly waters and shields from the wind. But she is a vain and needy flower, and the prince eventually grows weary of her, deciding to leave his planet and explore the broader universe.

He is on a quest for knowledge and understanding, and sees many strange sights during his travels. After visiting a few other planets, the prince finds his way to Earth, where he comes across a rose garden. Though the prince left his rose behind, he still cares for her, and seeing these other roses makes him disconsolate; he thought that *his* rose was the only flower of its kind in the universe, but now he sees that there are hundreds of others like her.

Just as he has reached the bottom of his despair, a wise fox calls out to him. The fox teaches the prince many lessons, but the most important one concerns the rose the prince left behind. The rose is not just another rose out of many, he tells the prince; it is special because of what the prince gave to the flower: "It's the time you spent on your rose that makes your rose so important . . . You become responsible forever for what you've tamed. You're responsible for your rose."

When the prince returns to the field of roses, he takes the fox's wisdom with him and addresses them: "You're lovely, but you're empty," he tells them. "One couldn't die for you. Of course, an ordinary passerby would think my rose looked just like you. But my rose, all on her own, is more important than

he synthesized his responses into a single statement that concludes *On the Meaning of Life*.

To Durant, meaning arises from transcending the self. "If, as we said at the outset," he writes, "a thing has significance only through its relation as part to a larger whole, then, though we cannot give a metaphysical and universal meaning to all life in general, we can say of any life in particular that its meaning lies in relation to something larger than itself." The more you connect with and contribute to that something, Durant believed, the more meaningful your life is. For Durant specifically, that "something" was work and family.

Some of the people who wrote to Durant were almost certainly out of work as a result of the Great Depression. They were not the only ones down on their luck. Joblessness rates skyrocketed during the Great Depression and peaked at 25 percent in 1933. At the same time, the suicide rate in the United States reached an all-time high. Researchers have found that across history, suicide rates tend to rise with unemployment—and it's easy to understand why: Work is a major source of identity, value, and purpose for people. It gives them something to do with their time, a sense of worth, and an opportunity to contribute to society and to support their families. When people lose their jobs, they are losing not only their livelihood, but a powerful source of meaning.

Durant counseled those who did not believe their lives were meaningful to find some sort of work, even if it was helping out on a farm in exchange for food and a bed until something better came along. To be productive and in the service of another person was a first step toward reengaging with life. "Voltaire once remarked," he writes, "that he might occasionally have killed himself, had he not had so much work on his hands."