ON PURPOSE

HOW WE CREATE THE MEANING OF LIFE

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purpose

> Life is said to be intolerable unless some reason for existing is involved, some purpose justifying life's trials.
>
> *Emile Durkheim*[1]

What is your purpose in life?

It's not an easy question to answer. And I won't attempt to answer it for you. The purpose of this book is to investigate how other people create the meaning of their lives.

In his bestselling *The Purpose Driven Life*, Rick Warren promises to take you on a "*40-day spiritual journey* that will enable you to discover the answer to life's most important question: What on earth am I here for?" This is certainly an important question. Leo Tolstoy said it was the *only* important question and spent his lifetime trying to answer it. Desperate to realize his true calling at age 82, Tolstoy fled his family to live as a wandering pilgrim but died soon afterward. Warren comforts us by asserting that we, unlike Tolstoy, can find our true purpose in a mere 40 days.

Nearly 3 out of 5 Americans say they are currently trying to "find themselves."[2] In fact, purpose is so valued that it has a multifaceted industry dedicated to providing it. From Oprah Winfrey to late-night infomercials, purpose fascinates and engages a broad range of television viewers. And the publishing industry has made a fortune off the American quest for purpose, from Warren's evangelical self-help book to Stephen Covey's *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*; Arianna Huffington's *Thrive: The*

Third Metric to Redefining Success and Creating a Life of Well-Being, Wisdom, and Wonder; and Eckhart Tolle's *A New Earth: Awakening to Your Life's Purpose*, a Western introduction to Eastern enlightenment.

Why are Americans so passionate about purpose? The first and most simple answer is that the quest for life's meaning is as old as the first philosophy. But it turns out that we have other, more practical reasons to be interested in purpose: a sense of purpose provides direction, moral assurance, self-confidence, and better health and well-being. So it's no wonder that people search for purpose, nor that there are a multitude of people willing to sell you a life purpose at the right price. Warren says you can have a purpose-driven life in just 40 days for the low price of $14.99 (in paperback). Who would turn down such a deal? Could it possibly be that easy?

what is purpose?

"The experience of boredom is prone to the presence of routinized activities lacking intrinsic meaning." You can say that again. This finding comes from a medical study of 646 Flemish mental health patients. Ghent University researchers found that "emphasis on task completion functions as a mechanism to create meaning."[3] In other words, boredom, apathy, and lack of enthusiasm are the results of purposeless routine.

But why would someone get bored in the first place? We are always inundated with new sensory and cognitive stimuli. As William Barrett noted, "A universe . . . where no moment is ever the stale replica of another would be a supremely interesting universe."[4] In our universe, no moment is ever the same, so life *should* be supremely interesting.

Consider a Georgia O'Keeffe painting of a flower. It shows how a single blossom can reveal the intricate marvels of the universe. O'Keeffe wrote, "Nobody sees a flower, really—it is so small—we haven't the time, and to see takes time."[5] You are supposed to stop and smell the roses for good reason. If you look and touch and smell the flowers, you will notice a symphony of colors and patterns, not to mention a rich palette of aromas and textures. Flowers can be endlessly fascinating.

But they aren't, usually. Why? Because our experience of a single flower has little to no purpose. O'Keeffe looked at flowers with a larger

purpose: artistic, aesthetic, and spiritual. She took the time to see, because she found it meaningful. Her artistry captures our attention and can inspire us to look for and see what is fascinating about flowers. The act of looking becomes interesting only when it is purposeful; we must have a reason to look, and O'Keefe's art provides an enthralling one.

Purpose is the personal meaning we give to any experience.

The meaning of many experiences is simple and direct. We watch television to relax; we play basketball because it is fun. Enjoyable experiences are meaningful because they fulfill an obvious desire to feel immediate pleasure and achievement. It is no mystery why we seek out these experiences again and again. What is mysterious is why we willingly subject ourselves repeatedly to experiences that are *not* fun but arduous, exhausting, and bothersome. Kids find this tendency in adults quite strange; they ask why we have to go to work and why they have to go to school. Adults have answers to these questions—we *must* do these things because they serve a long-term or higher purpose. From this adult perspective, an arduous or unappealing task is transformed into a purposeful step toward moral goodness and future well-being.

Education specialist William Damon says that children must feel there is a purpose to their schoolwork in order to flourish in class and beyond.[6] He finds that "where no larger purpose exists, short-term goals and motives usually lead nowhere and soon extinguish themselves in directionless activity."[7] Consequently, a crucial aspect of our early development is the sense that schoolwork, housework, politeness, and hygiene are meaningful, for both moral and self-interested reasons.

Our ability to find things like schoolwork meaningful is highly beneficial not only to ourselves but also to others. Many of our day-to-day trials are justified because they eventually yield positive individual and collective outcomes. Psychologist Martin Seligman asserts that our physical and psychological well-being is dependent upon having a "Meaningful Life," which "consists in belonging to and serving something that you believe is bigger than the self, and humanity creates all the positive institutions to allow this: religion, political party, being green, the Boy Scouts, or the family."[8] Seligman stresses that a healthy life's purpose must extend beyond pure self-interest to focus on something that is *bigger than the self.*

Social life provides a host of objects that are bigger than the self: family, friends, profession, community, politics, art, nation, and God. We

attach our lives to one or more of these objects and their accompanying narratives to create a purpose-driven life. If we have the freedom and the resources, the number of possible purposes is nearly infinite. As philosopher Charles Taylor notes, we now have the freedom to believe in one, none, or many philosophies of life.[9] The question becomes: which one will you choose?

some choices

Around 70 percent of Americans indicate that they "know" their "purpose in life," which suggests that they could articulate the meaning of their life if asked.[10] While this statistic does not reveal what each respondent means by a "purpose in life," it is good place to begin. In the United States, people tend to want to assert that they are leading purposeful lives; in fact, the concept of purpose is something of an American cultural meme. Countless books, self-help strategies, management and coaching approaches, infomercials, talk shows, psychological assessments, and nuggets of spiritual guidance emphasize the need for a purpose. There is a strong sense that we should get busy and find our purpose quickly—it seems downright un-American to be directionless.

Still, over half of Americans are actively trying to "discover" themselves, and around 40 percent say that they are still searching for "purpose in life."[11] Clearly, the meaning of life is confusing, because people will simultaneously say that they know their purpose in life and that they are still searching for it. This reflects the popular notion that finding a purpose in life is an ongoing process, a belief that helps keep the self-help industry vibrant and lucrative.

The kinds of people who are more likely to *know* their purpose in life is telling. Religious people are the most likely to say they have a clear purpose in life and that this calling is "part of a larger plan" (see Figure 1.1).[12] This is also true of people who say that they are "spiritual."

It makes sense that religious and spiritual people are confident about their life's purpose. Religions provide clear and all-encompassing systems of meaning. Religions also speak directly to the hardest questions in life. Confucius, the Buddha, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad were no strangers to the extremes of human suffering. As Victor Frankl noted of his time

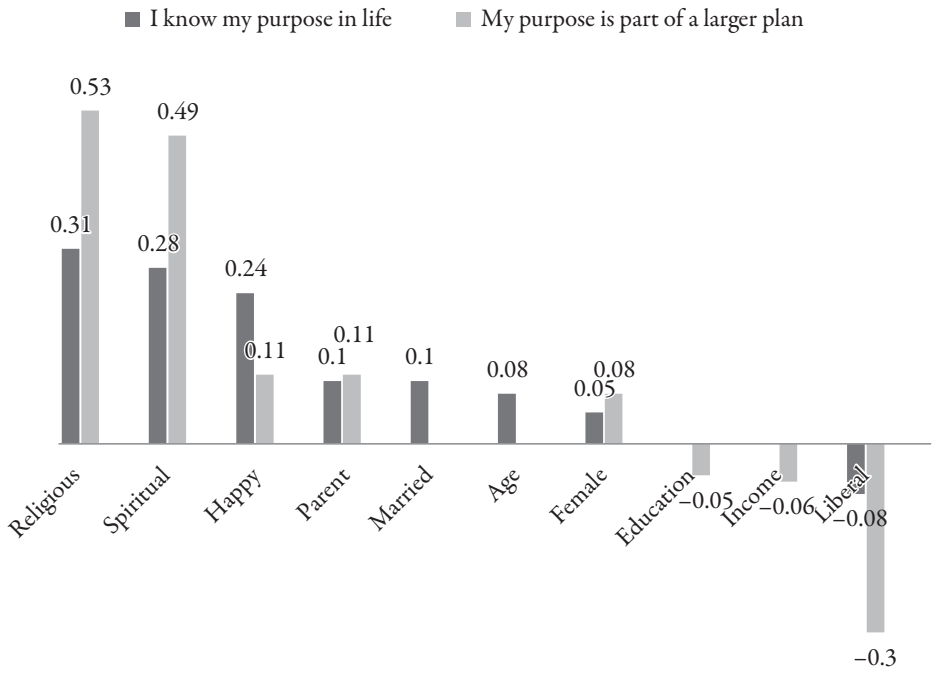

Figure 1.1 | Who knows their purpose in life?

Data: Numbers indicate correlation coefficients. Positive numbers show the likelihood that the 2 responses are related; for instance, religious people are *more* likely to say their purpose is part of a larger plan. Negative numbers indicate the inverse; for instance, liberal people are *less* likely to know their purpose in life.

Source: Baylor Religion Survey, Wave 4. N = 1572

in Auschwitz, our need for higher meaning is greatest when life is most harsh.[13] Indeed, the world's grand religious traditions were all born out of deep turmoil. Religions thus offer meaning to both the breadth and the depth of human experience.

Consider the tradition of Islam. It begins with a grand narrative told through some of the world's greatest poetry; it prescribes a daily routine of worship and contemplation; and it provides a detailed picture of the moral universe to guide believers through life's tough decisions. But that is not the entirety of Islam. There is also the art, symbolism, and sensuality of the tradition. Alain de Botton explains that "Muslim artisans covered walls of houses and mosques with repeating sequences of delicate and complicated geometries, through which the infinite wisdom of God might be intimated."[14] In this way, even Islamic architecture contributes to a believer's sense of purpose because the meaning of

life is communicated everywhere, in walls and designs as well as rituals and doctrine. Religions are amazing attempts to satisfy our deep need for a meaningful existence. They blend stories, values, art, ceremony, and community to render a holistic sense of purpose. That's why science and technology do not undermine religious meaning in general as much as challenge specific religious doctrines. Science leaves the sensual, existential, communal, and imaginative elements of spirituality untouched.[15]

For instance, the United States is the most technologically and economically advanced country in the world, yet religious confidence remains high. Approximately 60 million Americans believe the Bible "should be taken literally, word-for-word, on all subjects."[16] An additional 100 million Americans believe that while the Bible must be interpreted, it is "perfectly true" if interpreted properly. In other words, most Americans are pretty certain about the meaning of life—it has been written down and if you want to know it, you can just pick up a Bible.

But if biblical literalism is not your bag, countless other spiritual options are available. There are Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, folk, and New Age religions—you get the picture. In turn, we subdivide these traditions by schools of thought or denominations. In the Christian world, there are Catholicism and Protestantism, which can be further broken down into Methodists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Baptists, Congregationalists, Lutherans, Anglicans, Anabaptists, Pentecostals, Charismatics, and so on.

But even with all these holistic systems of meaning on offer, not everyone finds their purpose in faith. Indeed, secular philosophies and values are gaining popularity. For instance, Americans with higher incomes and more education are *as* likely to find life meaningful but are much *less* likely to think of their life as part of some larger plan (see Figure 1.1). Perhaps access to more resources and a broader knowledge of diverse systems of meaning make us less inclined to see our life as part of some universal design for humanity. This more secular and multicultural perspective reflects a move away from conservative, traditional religion but a continued embrace of meaningful personal philosophies.[17]

As a whole, secular purposes are pretty upbeat. They tend not to get weighed down by discussions of evil or damnation but rather posit a world composed of clear values, achievable goals, and astonishing progress. While religions tie the purpose of life back to God or some other

supernatural force, secular purposes tend to explain the moral significance of specific pursuits on their own terms. Activities like business, art, science, and sports take on meanings bigger than the self.

Take football, for instance. *Friday Night Lights* was a television series about Texas high-school football. Before each game, players on the fictional Dillon Panthers team would, to great effect, chant, "Clear eyes, full hearts, can't lose." This simple six-word mantra nicely sums up thousands of hours of self-help recordings. The Dillon Panthers' chant communicates the basic elements of a clearly articulated purpose to living. It tells the players how to behave—directly and honesty ("clear eyes"). It tells them how to feel—enthusiastic and passionate ("full hearts"). And it tells them what to strive for and expect—victory ("can't lose"). While there is no reference to God or the supernatural, this simple dictum forms the basis of a life philosophy bigger than football.

Is it true that the Dillon Panthers can't lose? We certainly expect players who share a common goal to be more closely tied to one another, to work harder, and to cooperate more. Winning coaches know this and do much more than teach athletic skills or strategize plays; they have the ability to instill in their players a sense of meaning and morality that extends beyond the field. Basketball legend Phil Jackson explains that his personal faith, which ranges from "Christian mysticism to Zen Buddhism to Native American ritual," is the creative source of his coaching philosophy.[18] For Jackson and many others, sport can embody a life's purpose.

Business is another activity in which many people find meaning. Roy M. Spence, author of *It's Not What You Sell, It's What You Stand For*, argues that corporate America needs more than just the profit motive. It needs meaning: "An effective purpose reflects the importance people attach to the company's work—it taps their idealistic motivations—and gets at the deeper reason for an organization's existence beyond just making money."[19]

The creative life is another popular articulation of secular purpose. Artists, musicians, writers, and thinkers dedicate their lives to the creative process, which for many defies any formulaic or commercial goal. It is what psychologist Otto Rank called the "creative urge," and it leads individuals to pursue artistic beauty and inspiration as their highest goals. In fact, the inspiration felt by highly creative people is often described as emerging from some higher reality. They are in touch with

something transcendent that they often don't understand, cannot verbalize, and cannot control.

Saxophonist great John Coltrane felt this way, explaining, "My music is the spiritual expression of what I am—my faith, my knowledge, my being." Through music alone, Coltrane sought to speak directly to the "souls" of his listeners. Many listened and some were transformed. The Saint John Coltrane African Orthodox Church of San Francisco was established in 1971 and exists to this day, testifying to the fact that artists can inspire new ways to create a purpose-driven life.

The scientific project also offers an imaginative and selfless meaning to life—one guided by a devotion to knowledge. Albert Einstein described the wonders of such a life:

> Only those who realize the immense efforts and, above all, the devotion without which pioneering work in theoretical science cannot be achieved are able to grasp the strength of the emotion out of which alone such work, remote as it is from the immediate realities of life, can issue . . . The scientist's religious feeling takes the form of a rapturous amazement at the harmony of natural law.[20]

The scientist is similar to the creative artist and business entrepreneur; each seeks to build something for humanity—something bigger than the self. While these meanings are essentially secular, they can, and often do, overlap easily with religious concepts.

Social change is another popular life purpose. Activists find meaning working for social movements and political causes that will benefit generations to come. American Revolutionary Nathan Hale reportedly proclaimed, "I only regret that I have but one life to give for my country," before he was executed by British soldiers for spying. While gallantly theatrical and probably fictional, Hale's sentiment is demonstrably shared by protesters and soldiers around the globe who are willing to die for a political or national cause.

Interestingly, political liberals in the United States are *less* likely than conservatives to know their life's purpose (see Figure 1.1). Differences between American conservatives and liberals go far beyond policy preferences. These ostensibly political identities now define a whole host of

cultural and lifestyle preferences, including stark differences in how a person imagines the purpose of life. In general, conservatives are much more secure in their sense of purpose and are more likely to believe in a singular and ultimate Truth.

The modern world gives us a multitude of purposes from which to choose. For many, traditional religions and political Truths become deeply embedded in how they experience life. Some doggedly follow professional pursuits, which provide a moral narrative of service and devotion. Still others feel that nothing strikes a chord; they remain skeptical of the suggested metaphors, narratives, or ideologies that guide other lives. In all cases, social context determines which path is ultimately chosen.

If there's anything that unites all these purposes, it's other people. Love and friendship are at the very center of each life purpose, because the kinds of love and friends we have establish not only the kinds of goals we pursue but also the reasons to pursue them. In this way, our most intimate relations are critical in determining whether we will be captivated by an O'Keeffe flower, will tenaciously serve Allah, will be quietly spiritual, will feel politically inspired, or will be cynical about everything.

Being less sure of life's meaning or the existence of a larger plan doesn't necessarily mean a person doesn't find life meaningful.[21] We cannot simply separate people into two camps, those with purpose and those without. Rather, it makes more sense to think about why certain people accept core assumptions about life and express popular articulations of its purpose while others do not.

some assumptions

Popular discourse about purpose tends to be vague and overgeneralized, perhaps out of necessity. Individual lives are too idiosyncratic for any one-size-fits-all meaning of life to satisfy everyone. Still, publishers offer a bounty of books that claim to give us the tools to find our own purpose. These purveyors of purpose offer us a guiding narrative. In fact, the "success story" is the primary mode by which the purpose of life is articulated. Oprah Winfrey is beloved by millions for her spiritual lessons about the meaning of life; she regularly shares stories about herself and others who have overcome tragedy to find a higher purpose.[22] Like

Oprah, many famous and influential Americans share their personal narratives to motivate the masses so that we too can find success, happiness, and inner peace.

Exemplars of "successful" living are assumed to be of help to the rest of us. These popular stories share a common motif—namely, that life is given great and joyous meaning by committing to a passion, a love, or a faith. "Faith" tends to refer to some ambiguous religious or spiritual belief system, the specifics of which are to be worked out by one's denomination of choice. "Love" tends to refer to romantic partnering, the specifics of which are to be worked out by one's matching-making site of choice. Finally, "passion" tends to refer to career, the specifics of which are to be worked out by one's interest of choice.

Instead of specifics, popular purpose discourse is built on three basic assumptions:

Assumption 1. Life's purpose is within you.

In *The Purpose Driven Life*, Rick Warren promises that by the end of his book "you will know God's purpose for your life and will understand the big picture—how all the pieces of your life fit together."[23] This is quite a bold promise, but Warren's idea that self-reflection yields purpose is commonly accepted. While they differ on specifics, Christian, New Age, and self-help books point to a similar source of your *True* purpose—the self. We are asked to *look inward*, over and over again. The assumption is that our inner vision will render a better understanding of ultimate reality and our place within it.

Warren encourages readers, "Don't just *read* this book. *Interact with it*. Underline it. Write your own thoughts in the margins. Make it *your* book. Personalize it!"[24] Warren is part of a popular evangelical movement that has swept the United States in the last few decades and is characterized by the message that we can all have a deeply *personal* relationship with God.[25] Following this ethic, Warren stresses the role of the self in the cosmic order, making him sound more like a self-help guru than an old-timey fire and brimstone preacher. The message is that God isn't in some cold distant realm, he resides *within* us.

Tony Robbins has become a leader in the self-help industry by promising that "simple secrets" can "turn your dreams into reality."[26]

Robbins, like Warren, stresses a deeper self, writing that "we're all here to contribute something unique, that deep within each of us lies a special gift . . . Each of us has a talent, a gift, our own bit of genius waiting to be tapped."[27] Whether helping us to see a universal Truth or realize a source of personal power, Robbins emphasizes the need to do it in your own special way. He maintains that the secret to releasing your potential is not a doctrine, but rather a Power that is already *within* you.

Assumption 2. Life's purpose is transformative.

Warren, Robbins, and countless other purpose luminaries assert that their techniques will enable us to focus on new goals, establish new habits, become better people, and completely change our lives. Religious proselytizers work under the belief that if someone is willing to learn sacred Truths, she can expect to experience spiritual rebirth. Dedicated meditators describe a process of enlightenment where being in the moment expands into a blissful eternity. Life coaches offer tips on how to tap into our hidden and limitless powers. All of these strategies suggest that your ultimate purpose in life will transform you—if you work at it.

A good example of this assumption can be found in, of all places, Woody Allen's *Hannah and Her Sisters*. Allen's character thinks he has a terminal disease and sets out to find the meaning of life by experimenting with a host of philosophies, from Catholicism to Krishna consciousness. His search eventually leads to a form of Marxism (Groucho, not Karl); his is a spiritual quest that perfectly aligns with a popular conception of how we discover our purpose—we begin with a dire need to find the meaning of life and, after testing various doctrines and faiths, we experience a life-altering epiphany.

In *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen R. Covey turns this narrative into a plan of action. He lays outs a series of life lessons that will transform the reader from depressed slug to satisfied success, provided the reader has the proper doggedness. Covey warns that " 'lift off' takes a tremendous effort, but once we break out of the gravity pull [of old habits], our freedom takes on a whole new dimension."[28]

The religious convert, the failure turned success, and the wallflower turned beauty queen all illustrate the ability of individuals to transform

themselves. They find a new calling, a new self, and a new meaning to life. Books and movies are filled with such stories. Our heroine is depressed, aimless, and morally lost. She looks within. She discovers her life's meaning and becomes balanced, goal-oriented, and virtuous. She finds her purpose and it transforms her.

Assumption 3. Life's purpose feels good.

Psychological research confirms that individuals who express a strong sense of purpose are better able to cope with life's difficulties and more likely to be happy, self-confident, optimistic, and healthy (both mentally and physically).[29] In turn, a lack of purpose is correlated with self-destructive behaviors.[30] Being without purpose is often an indicator of clinical depression and even reduces a person's ability to stave off disease.[31] Simply put, having a purpose in life feels great. It can help us physically, psychologically, and spiritually. It also makes us feel good about what we have and what we are doing.

For instance, a CEO is driven by making money, but is this how she would describe the purpose of her life? Probably not. She would likely expound on her grander significance as a creator of jobs or products that enrich the lives of others. Similarly, a rising pop star will set his sights on greater fame, but is this how he will describe his goals? He will likely express a deeper wish to bring joy to his throngs of fans. In this way, pragmatic pursuits of wealth and status are often reframed as callings. A moral purpose helps us to feel good about our experience of life—whatever that may be.

Purveyors of purpose promise to make us feel *good* about life. They assert that our purpose is the means to that end. It is not just about self-improvement, it is about improving one's sense of self. And the best way to feel good about yourself is to feel *moral*. For that reason, purveyors of purpose deal, more than anything else, in virtue. They assert that we can find our personal significance and it will be morally satisfying.

Are these core assumptions warranted? Perhaps, but they are most definitely incomplete. You *might* have a morally satisfying and transformative purpose deep within you, but you might not. It all depends on your environment.

communities of purpose

We cannot simply ask whether a self-help guru, like Tony Robbins, or a religious proselytizer, like Rick Warren, or a spiritual celebrity, like Oprah Winfrey, is correct. Their wisdom and strategies *will* make sense to certain individuals—their popularity proves it. Still, how helpful they are depends entirely on the extent to which people around them share their systems of meaning. Outside these systems, their advice is meaningless.

For instance, biblical literalism is *felt* within certain communities. Few, if any, literalists would argue that the Bible will help you if you don't believe in it. We cannot simply read the words to feel their effect; we have to *believe* in them. The feeling requires something other than the text—it requires a community in which the Bible is understood to be True. Faiths are not things we can turn on by reading a passage, they become instilled in us through our history, our culture, our community—everything that forms our identity. These factors determine which articulations of a purpose-driven life make sense and what Truths will be found within ourselves.

This is the core finding of this book. The way we imagine and talk about life's purpose depends on social situations, locations, and eras.

This book also questions some popular assumptions about the meaning of life.

Question 1: Life's purpose is discovered within you, but how did it get there?

Steven Pavlina, a successful self-help author and popular blogger on personal development, provides his readers with simple strategies to improve their lives by finding their "true purpose." Here is one of Pavlina's exercises:

1. Take out a blank sheet of paper or open up a word processor where you can type (I prefer the latter because it's faster).
2. Write at the top, "What is my true purpose in life?"
3. Write an answer (any answer) that pops into your head. It doesn't have to be a complete sentence. A short phrase is fine.
4. Repeat step 3 until you write the answer that makes you cry. This is your purpose.[32]

I had 25 people of different backgrounds take this "test."[33] Full disclosure: no one actually cried. Still, the findings are instructive and reflect some larger trends. As one might expect, many (11) wrote unambiguously religious answers. For instance:

> My purpose today and every day is to glorify God in all that I do and to live like Christ.

> My purpose is to love. God created me in His image, out of love, in order to love Him. That is my first, and should be, foremost purpose in life.

> My purpose is to strive for complete happiness, which can only be achieved by following Jesus and attempting to be more Christ-like.

All of these respondents felt their purposes deeply. Still, what is felt within must be conceptualized in order to be communicated. People who think God is within them first need to understand the concept of God. Georg Simmel states it simply: "We believe in God because we feel Him, although we really cannot feel Him until we have accepted His existence."[34]

There is a lot happening within us—churning emotions, competing concepts, confusing signals, and deep anxieties. What does it all mean? Religious traditions provide the language to make sense of it all. They give words to these feelings. Thus, Hindus *feel* that they have been reincarnated. Devout Catholics *feel* the holiness of the pope. And Muslims *feel* the presence of Allah. All of these feelings are real and profound, yet descriptions of these feelings follow predictable cultural and community patterns. Meaning is socially ordered.

Some of my respondents (10) described a desire to help others, not out of some religious ethic but through a professional calling. For instance, one woman wrote:

> I aspire to be a family and marriage therapist. I see the brokenness around me and the challenges that come from divorce and unstable homes. I want to be part of the restoration process.

A few (3) focused on the importance of nurturing their relationships. Another woman indicated:

> I strive to keep my marriage strong, and raise my kids to be the best people I could hope for. I also try hard to help care for my parents.

These values are agnostic, spanning both religious and secular perspectives. Like explicitly religious purposes, they draw on culturally popular articulations about what a true purpose entails—the value of serving one's family and community.

Purveyors of modern purposes rely heavily on these core cultural values. They don't provide revelations of meaning so much as articulate basic beliefs that many communities already embrace. Dedicated viewers of Winfrey or the followers of Robbins are not so much converts as people who happen upon a spokesperson saying the things they already wanted to hear.

Similarly, Rick Warren's *Purpose Driven Life* undeniably inspires millions. But people who find Warren's book motivational are most likely embedded in a community, church, or family that already seeks such advice.[35] Christ must *feel* real to a person for Warren's sentiments to have meaning. For those who don't already feel Christ, Warren's text will remain mere sounds and inscriptions.

Novelist David Mitchell has written, "Who and what run deeper than why." This perfectly encapsulates how life's meaning is at once within us but also socially determined.[36] We ask ourselves about life's meaning with questions of *why*—"why am I here?"; "why did God do that?"; "why is there suffering?"; "why should I care?" In the end, our answers, which appear to come from deep within us, are largely a reflection of *who* we trust and *what* they tell us. Our family, friends, authority figures, culture, and history are the *whos* and *whats* that determine which answers feel true. So, life's purpose is discovered within you, BUT it was planted there by society.

And finally, if you were doing the math, you will have noted that I have forgotten one of my respondents. His true purpose was not religious or humanitarian or filial. Contemplating Pavlina's question, he simply wrote "I don't know" over and over again.

Does this gentleman lack a culture or community to provide him with the concepts that will give his inner feelings direction and significance? Can he not express *why* he is significant because there is no *who* or *what* to guide him? No, he—like everyone else—is guided by a vocabulary that is part of his culture. In fact, his response is an especially interesting one because it, more than the others, is distinctly modern. Feeling a lack of purpose is a growing trend in human history. The man who doesn't know his purpose may be the most modern. He has internalized the concept of purposelessness to the point that when he looks *within* he *expects* to find nothing.

Throughout the book I investigate how modernity has changed the way we think about the problem of life's meaning. Most importantly, modernity has made the idea of purpose a *choice*. Only then could meaninglessness become a possibility.

Question 2: Life's purpose is transformative, but how?

More than anything else, popular discussions assert that purpose is physically, emotionally, and spiritually transformative. It all comes down to your commitment to a suggested practice or strategy.

But studies of conversions and dramatic life changes tell a slightly different story. John Lofland and Rodney Stark studied how the Unification Church (more popularly known as the Moonies) gained members.[37] Converts to the Church undeniably discovered a higher purpose; they become convinced that Reverend Sun Myung Moon was a divine prophet and committed their lives to the service of his vision. Did these converts pore over Moon's writings and ideas and look deeply inward to finally discover their true purpose? Not really, most joined the group without knowing what the Moonies were about.

Lofland and Stark found that conversion has little to do with people seeking a life's purpose and a lot to do with people finding themselves in a new social situation. Their landmark study demonstrated that individuals only embraced the doctrines of Reverend Sun Myung Moon *after* they had already joined his group. This, at first glance, appears counterintuitive. Why would someone join a religious cult if he didn't believe in their teachings? Lofland and Stark's argument is that faith requires social

support; therefore, changes in faith require dramatic changes in social circumstances to occur *first*.

Most of the Moonie converts went looking for friends and companionship and ultimately found faith. They were not full-time spiritual seekers but rather lonely individuals who happened upon a group of welcoming companions who turned out to be members of a cult. Once inside the cult, the newcomers learned the group's systems of meaning and then became devotees of Reverend Moon.

This model of conversion reverses the popular narrative—people don't search for answers and find a new purpose; they tend to find themselves in a network of people who envelop them in a new system of meaning. Over time and with a little TLC, the newbie internalizes the reality of the group. Simply put, meaning follows practice, not the other way around.

Lofland and Stark's study reveals the extent to which our immediate social circle defines how we understand our *self*. In fact, they found that most converts narrate a story of their own conversion that doesn't match the facts. They speak about singular epiphanies—those moments when Truth is felt deeply within—even though the actual conversion process was gradual. It was only when a person felt himself to be a valued member of the group that he internalized its purpose.

The self-help industry promises epiphanies. Purveyors of purpose assert that we can uncover a lifelong positive self-image. But the strategies they prescribe to elicit your *enchanted self* are dependent on social context. The best strategies in the world can't help us if we have no social support. Purpose is certainly transformative, but finding one's enchanted self is mainly a result of luck. You have to be in the right networks at the right time.

Question 3: Life's purpose feels good, but is it good?

Amanda Lindhout is a social activist and author from Canada who was kidnapped by Somali Islamists and held for 15 months during which she was constantly subjected to torture and rape. She describes her horrific ordeal in the book *A House in the Sky*. What makes her story so incredible and inspiring is that she developed a profound empathy for her abusers and now testifies to the healing power of forgiveness.

To survive the physical and psychological torture of her captivity, Lindhout writes:

> In my mind, I built stairways. At the end of stairways, I imagined rooms. These were high, airy places with big windows and a cool breeze moving through. I imagined one room opening brightly onto another room until I'd built a house . . . I built many houses, one after another, and those gave rise to a city—a calm, sparkling city near the ocean, a place like Vancouver. I put myself there, and that's where I lived, in the wide-open sky of my mind.[38]

Lindhout looked deep within herself and found an expansive vision of beauty and serenity. This imaginative world gave her a reason to keep living through unspeakable horrors. But most amazing of all, it gave her a means by which to see her assailants in a different light; from inside her "house in the sky" she was able to humanize them.

Amanda Lindhout shows us what is good about having a higher purpose. It can save us from hopeless despair and redeem humanity even when it is at its worst. Looking inward, Lindhout found her true purpose—her ability to forgive.

By humanizing her abusers, Lindhout recognized that their fears and pains resembled hers. We should also note that they, like Lindhout, were driven by a clear purpose. As Islamist rebels they believed themselves to be serving Allah and working toward a grander vision of the "good society." They envisioned their own house in the sky—a nation guided by Shariah law and deep piety. But the rest of us, including most Muslims throughout the world, see their purpose as evil.

A life's purpose can be evil. Certain purposes are unhealthy and intentionally destructive. Still, individuals who have what most of us might deem nefarious purposes are fully convinced of their goodness. These individuals live within tight-knit communities that establish Truth. Faith in a higher purpose can lead to self-sacrifice, but it can also justify great atrocities.

Religious and ideological enclaves instill strong beliefs about what is True purpose. Belief in Truth can inspire the most vicious intolerance as well as the most altruistic love. Either way, the social mechanisms are the same. The morality of life's purpose is socially determined.

Still, most purveyors of purpose ignore the idea of evil purposes and describe deviant pursuits as *lacking* in purpose. They assume that life's meaning is necessarily positive. Business ethicists often stress this point. Nikos Mourkogiannis, a corporate strategist and author of *Purpose: The Starting Point of Great Companies*, explains Enron's collapse as the result of an absence of purpose. He writes, "Enron had strategy—indeed, it had many strategies. But strategies are about means; they cannot be an end in themselves. An end is a reason. Enron lacked a reason—it lacked Purpose."[39]

For Mourkogiannis, purpose is "part of your moral DNA." It is within you. And business ventures that lack it, he argues, will fail. For him, Enron didn't implode because it had the wrong ethic; it failed because it didn't have *any* ethic. But even though Enron might have lacked an ethic, it did not lack a purpose, as Mourkogiannis states. Rather, Enron embodied the purpose of profit—at any cost. It was a nefarious purpose.

Mourkogiannis's advice is most meaningful to an American audience, which values entrepreneurship and capitalism.[40] America's moral culture celebrates fierce competition and swift achievement. Filled with Mourkogiannis's ethic of fair play, the "good" businessman is also one step ahead of his competitor, cutting the deal, creating the product, and pleasing the consumer in record time. This creates a frenetic tempo and renders the workforce perpetually afraid of falling behind. Keeping pace becomes the modern professional's primary purpose in life. This state of affairs unintentionally infuses a purpose-driven life with a feeling of being constantly overwhelmed.

For career-driven professionals, urgency is felt everywhere—the morning alarm, the calendar marking hourly commitments, the rapid rhythms of weekly interactions, and the overall tempo of society. Modern life produces workaholics, some of whom have the resources to never work again yet still work themselves to death. They are victims of the rapid tempo of our capitalist culture. Other cultural tempos create perpetual boredom, and individuals never realize a purpose in life. How we experience time dominates our consciousness and in turn determines whether life feels frantic, worthless, or satisfying.

How we understand moral Truth and experience time vary across communities and cultures. Purveyors of purpose understand their own purpose to be *good*, but only within particular perceptions of Truth and

time. They preach to a choir within their own system of meaning. So, life's purpose feels good to them, but whether it is good for us depends on our circumstances.

my purpose

Throughout this book, I argue that history, norms of self, communities of Truth, cultural tempos, and power dynamics determine how each of us understands the meaning of life. I paint a picture of society that may sometimes seem like a totalitarian force that determines everything, even our most intimate thoughts. Indeed, I initially thought I would find that people had little say in defining their own purposes.

But while social forces do have tremendous power to guide our understanding of life, I actually found that people have the agency to bend the meaning of their lives in highly imaginative ways. Imagination enables all of us to create purposes that society never taught us. Imagination allows us to choose from competing options, empathize with others, weave stories, and fantasize entire worlds. Imagination is what makes each individual purpose unique. It creates ideals that make collective action possible but can also subvert shared values and make conflict inevitable.

This book is intended to engage the imagination of readers. I weave data and ideas from national and international surveys, interviews, observations, literature, and previous research to discuss the social sources of life's meaning. But unlike the offerings from other books on purpose, I have no clever life strategies, grand revelations, or divine inspiration to recommend. As Max Weber deftly put it, "the ultimate possible attitudes to life are irreconcilable."[41] I cannot pretend to have found the universal key to living a satisfying life or achieving some long-desired goal. Rather, I hope to demonstrate that how we create life's meaning shifts with changing times and locations.

The following is an attempt to think more deeply about how we collectively create different purposes.

8

the moral

> Salvation is a matter of social planning.
>
> *Will Self*[1]

Now that you have reached the end (of this book, not your life), you probably want something to tie it all together.[2] I still can't tell you the meaning of life, but I can tell you about the meaning of this book.

Stated simply, your purpose is whatever you believe it to be. Every person has the power to imagine a unique life purpose. The possibilities are limitless—in theory. But, in practice, we are limited by material realities. We don't enjoy the same opportunities. Our economic inequalities lead to inequalities of purpose—the more money you have, the more options you have. We are also dependent on our friends and family; they tell us who we should be and what we should do. That tension—between seemingly unlimited internal possibilities and carefully constrained external realities—is at the heart of the way people find their purpose in life, and thus at the heart of this book.

For some, that tension evaporates and the result is wondrous; they easily imagine a purpose-filled life because they are embedded within a community and culture that makes them feel significant. Others are not so fortunate; they find themselves in situations where they are unable to feel significant, and their existence begins to seem directionless and meaningless.

In *The Quantity Theory of Insanity*, Will Self describes a fictional psychologist who discovers that "salvation is a matter of social planning."

The doctor realizes that mental disturbance is a finite quantity distributed across populations. As such, mental health becomes a function of geographically balancing the ratios of healthy to disturbed people. To stabilize low levels of psychic distress, the health department needs only to keep the proper ratios in each location—it is a matter of social planning.

This may sound absurd, but it rings morally true to me. Salvation *is* a matter of social planning. Salvation, in general, is finding one's moral significance and avoiding the abyss of meaninglessness; the specifics depend on your social context. Whether our moral imaginations can achieve salvation is inextricably tied to our place in history, our position in a community, our cultural tempo, and the cruel and calculated assessments others ascribe to our sense of self.[3]

Because we can never fully control these social forces, we cannot plan our own salvation. Instead, salvation appears to be the product of social planning or—if no hidden hand or omnipotent health department is guiding us—salvation is simply a matter of luck. You find yourself in a social context that saves you from meaninglessness and despair—your existential fortune is determined by a roll of the dice.

Fate smiles upon some, offering an abundance of self-esteem and achievable goals. It sneers at others, yielding only heartbreak and disappointment. While social forces can crush the strongest of spirits, they never fully define us. We always retain the ability to create meaning in the world—even when the fates are at their cruelest.

Maya Angelou grew up in a time and a place where to be an African American female was to be considered less than human. She suffered sexual abuse. Eventually, she stopped speaking—muteness seemed an appropriate response to the cruelty she was forced to endure. But she ventured back into dialogue with others and discovered a grander purpose to her life in literature and art. The title of her autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, comes from a poem by Paul Laurence Dunbar, which reads in part:

I know why the caged bird sings, ah me,

When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore,—

When he beats his bars and he would be free;

It is not a carol of joy or glee,

But a prayer that he sends from his heart's deep core,

But a plea, that upward to Heaven he flings—

I know why the caged bird sings![4]

Deep in our heart's core is the ability to create something—a vision, a prayer, a song. Maya Angelou was a caged bird who created a meaningful life by speaking, writing, and singing; she found a purpose that helped her to transcend her many trials.

While we don't all have Angelou's genius, we do have the ability to create meaning amid the trials of life. It is in our nature to attribute meaning to our every experience in the world. We imbue mundane, everyday situations with a momentary purpose and routinely invest considerable time and effort in pursuit of long-term purposes. Most remarkably, we create meaning out of abstractions, like love, Truth, beauty, God, and life. To do so is uniquely human.

Life is a big concept; to grasp it, you must imagine the scope of your existence, posit your death, and weave your many selves into a single moral narrative. A seahorse can't do that. Consequently, the seahorse does not perceive her life as meaningful. Perhaps the singing bird does, because she creates a pattern of communication—the very essence of meaning. But humans directly articulate the meaning of life *itself*, in rich and diverse ways that reveal an imaginative genius dwelling within each of us. Think of the creative virtuosity we require to not only give life meaning, but also give purpose to the seahorse, the bird, the ocean, even the universe. And it all comes quite naturally to us.

We envision a meaningful universe as naturally as the flower blooms. And like a seed, our imagination blossoms or wilts depending on the ground in which it grows. History, culture, community, and language provide the soil from which our minds cultivate meaning. This book explores these soils and their various properties. I hope I have demonstrated how society is like a plot of soil in which we try to grow meaningful lives; it nourishes some and deprives others. Luckily, even in the most desolate grounds, our imagination retains its ability to create meaning, allowing the human spirit to flourish.

This, I imagine, is the moral of this story.