

PERSONAL

TRANSFORMATION

MASTERY



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GUIDE 7:

HOW TO CREATE A MEANINGFUL LIFE

What makes life meaningful?

It's a trick question of course. Everyone will have a different answer and there is no one way to live your life. Any answer would be just as valid and it's up to you how you choose to make your way in the world.

But there are certainly some things that *don't* make life meaningful. And there are certainly some things you can do to help you find your *own* meaning. In this guide, we're going to look at how you can discover meaning in your life and why that is such a powerful and important thing.

IS YOUR LIFE MEANINGFUL?

Perhaps a good place to start is by looking at the state of our lives right now. Where do you get the meaning from right now?

There's a good chance that you will give some of the following answers:

- Career
- Family
- Friends
- Partner
- Children

- Travel

Very few of us will answer that the thing that gives life meaning is 'food' or 'computer games'. Somehow, our relationships and our careers take on greater importance and the same is true of our travel.

This roughly adheres to Maslow's theory of the 'Hierarchy of Needs'. Maslow was a psychologist and according to his theories, our needs can be plotted in a kind of pyramid with the most important at the top and the most urgent down the bottom.

Our urgent, basal needs include our physiological needs such as food, oxygen and perhaps sex, while things become a little more abstract and inspiring as we move nearer the top.

His pyramid looks something like the following, from bottom to top:

- Physiological needs – food, oxygen, water, sex
- Safety – shelter, health, avoidance of predators/aggressors
- Love/belonging – community, friends, family, partner
- Esteem – self acceptance, self-worth, confidence
- Self actualization

So the first thing we might note as being surprising from this list, is that love and belonging are *not* near the top – in fact they are

around the middle. It is as though Maslow is telling us that love is not what gives life meaning.

Poets and song-writers might disagree but this is in fact accurate. At the end of the day, you can't rely purely on other people for your sense of happiness, meaning and accomplishment.

For starters, this is a recipe for disaster in your relationships. If *all* your meaning comes from another person and you need them for your sense of self-worth, you might well become possessive, jealous, clingy or otherwise toxic in that relationship.

Likewise, this leaves you incredibly vulnerable. If your meaning comes from another person and they should leave, your whole world will come crashing down.

You get people who have amazing, perfect, happy families and yet they don't have a sense of purpose or direction. They're stuck in a rut and they're unhappy because they don't have a sense of purpose.

In fact, this is incredibly common and it's something that a lot of us have to deal with. This is pretty much where the mid-life-crisis comes from!

Higher on the ladder we have esteem. That is to say that in order to be happy and fulfilled, in order for life to have meaning, you

need to discover how to live with yourself and how to like yourself. Otherwise, you will be unhappy in everything you do and you won't have the tools necessary to take your life to the next step.

But that's still not number one. So just what is self-actualization?

THE MONOMYTH

We can get a clue as to what might be meant by self-actualization by looking to the monomyth. The monomyth is also sometimes referred to as the 'hero's journey' and essentially, this is a common story that is told time and time again throughout history and throughout culture. We have many stories that we tell through movies, through books and through comics... but all of them ultimately tell us the same thing. It is the same hero, experiencing the same journey.

What is this journey precisely? It begins with the hero in their 'ordinary world'. Here we see them interacting with their family and friends as usual and we explore their surroundings. Then there is a call to action. Often, this comes from the hero's own need to explore, to journey out. It can also be prompted by an inciting incident though (the princess is stolen) or the death of a parent.

The hero then begins the journey by venturing into unknown lands. This is known as 'crossing the threshold'. The hero will encounter new allies, new opponents and new dangers. Eventually, they will reach the belly of the beast – the most dangerous part of the new land known as the 'inmost cave'.

Then comes the ordeal. The hero faces an ultimate challenge against an insurmountable foe and usually, they are defeated.

Then apotheosis. This is the most important part of the tale, where the hero goes through some form of transformation and becomes 'divine' in many cases. They may return from the dead, or they may ascend and become *a super saiyan*. Either way, the hero is no longer what they were and they are now bigger and stronger than before.

They take on the enemy and defeat them and they journey home with their love/the elixir/peace.

This tale is told over and over again. Sometimes the story is fairly literal, such as in films like *Lord of the Rings* or *Star Wars*. Other times, the story is much more metaphorical or psychological. In a rom com, the hero is dissatisfied usually with their lack of love, crossing the threshold often involves deciding to pursue a woman/making a friend/trying to be 'just casual' and the apotheosis is usually an *epiphany* at which point the hero

recognizes what they've been doing wrong/that their love was right in front of them all along.

Either way though, the single most important part of this story and therefore of *all stories* is the apotheosis, the transformation, the resurrection. This is the character arc and this is what gives *meaning* to the whole journey.

The journey was merely training to develop the individual.

And why do we respond to this so well? Simple: because it is *our* story. Because we are all that hero. We all set off from the relative shelter of our parents' homes in order to start a new career or attend college. Through doing this, we learn and grow and adapt. This helps us to find the job we really want and to get married and to have children. End of story. The most important part was our growth and our challenge – and moving *forward* toward that goal.

This is a hangover from our evolution too. In the wild, we would have begun life as part of a community and then would have ventured out in order to try and find more resources, shelter, food and so that we could start our own tribe. Along the way we would face challenges (snakes!) but we would have become stronger and smarter as a result.

This story is about growth, adventure, challenge – and these are the things that keep us moving forward as individuals and as the human race. If we stay comfortable, we never succeed.

THE EVOLUTIONARY SHADOW

Now it's time for the scary part.

If it is so deeply ingrained into us that we must go after the things we want in life, keep taking on new challenges and move out of our comfort zone to become something new... then why is it that so many of us eventually end up in dead-end jobs and feeling rather unfulfilled as a result?

This may come down to something called the evolutionary shadow.

Remember how evolution works? It is all about survival. The person who survives passes on their traits – which presumably are positive traits seeing as they helped them survive. Thus, all our DNA is made up of previous 'winners' and our psychology is optimized to help us live and thrive.

Problem is though, evolution doesn't care about us past 30... maybe past 35.

Why? Because once you reach that age, you've already *had* your children most likely (or you're in a situation where you are ready to). You've passed on your surviving genes and you've fulfilled your role. Therefore, it doesn't matter what happens to you after.

And this is seen reflected in the way we live our lives. Once we find a stable career and raise our kids, all the journey, discovery, newness and adventure is gone from our lives. We get into a rut and we start to move backward instead of forward.

The movies reflect this too: it's why there are so few stories about married couples. So few stories about princes that have already *become* kings and now must deal with the day-to-day administration.

And this is why our lives can often feel like they lack meaning. It's because they lack direction.

Actualization *is* apotheosis. Actualization is *growth*. It is becoming the best that we can be.

The quote often used to describe actualization is:

“What a man can be, he must be.”

If you are not fulfilling your potential, or moving towards a better version of you... then you are moving backward.

The brain literally comes to life when it has a goal, when we learn new things and when we give it challenge. It becomes more youthful and plastic as it produces more dopamine, more norepinephrine and more BDNF (brain derived neurotrophic factor). Our memories improve, our attention improves and we become more energetic and positive.

As soon as you stop doing that though, you greatly increase your risk of starting to develop Alzheimer's and other forms of cognitive decline. Your body is always changing and your only choice is whether it moves forward or backward.

HOW TO GIVE YOUR LIFE MEANING

So how do you take all of this theory and turning it into useful practice? What do you actually have to do to give life meaning?

The answer is first that you have to recognize that having a happy family and a good job is not enough. That is important for your happiness yes: but it does not provide growth and it does not provide challenge.

In order to give life meaning, you need to become the hero again. You need to go on that journey and take on new challenges.

This can mean that you set out to make something amazing of your career – by becoming a rock musician, a top lawyer, or a business owner.

Or it could mean that you pursue a meaningful hobby. Maybe you write a book, maybe you learn to program and build an app. Maybe you take up philosophy and try to answer some of life's deepest questions.

And it can be *about* family or charity too. You might decide to give back to your community or you might choose to have another child.

Maybe your meaning comes from your faith and that's something you want to explore. Maybe you want to see the world and save to travel.

But whatever the case, it needs to be a journey and a challenge. It needs to force you to grow and it needs to give you an end destination – even if that destination seems impossible. You must be striving, learning, growing and you must have something that you are truly passionate about completing.

Because when your life has direction, it has meaning.

It can be tempting to indulge in those lower layers of Maslow's hierarchy: to pig out on great food and to keep yourself warm,

cosy and lazy. But while that might satisfy your body, it won't satisfy your soul. You'll slowly start to rot and decay and life will lose its color and meaning.

You will feel most alive when you are tested, tired, challenged and beaten... but you choose to keep on going. You will feel most alive when you conquer mountains. Leave your comfortable armchair, head into that inmost cave and come out more powerful than every before.