

## Why are you here? Lessons about the meaning of life by Aljoscha Dreisorner

Over the last couple of days, I conducted a little social experiment. I asked different people a very important question, perhaps the most important question of all: Why are you here?

I wanted to know what other people think about the meaning of life and what we can learn from it. I asked my friends, I talked to my parents and I called my grandparents. I've asked strangers on the streets, children from friends and random people in the subway.

It is absolutely incredible how willing people are to open up when you sincerely ask for their opinion on something important. And the experiences while gathering the stories are something else as well. I got kicked out of a school, had a discussion about butter popcorn with my neighbors and almost injured my stomach from laughing way too hard with a wonderful woman in a wheelchair.

This is a longer read, so if you think it is worthy of your time, take a seat, get a cup of tea and don't rush to finish it. A little hint... the road is more important than the destination.

I have learned a lot from these responses. Some answers deviated greatly from one other so, clearly, the meaning of life is different from person to person. This should come as no surprise for anyone. But what's most important (and reassuring) to me is that there seems to be a lot of common ground as well. Many people identify similar sources of meaning for their lives.

„I'm trying very hard not to be a dick. If that is the only thing I accomplish in life, not having been a dick, I probably did okay.”

- Sarah

### 1. Love confetti or the Matthew effect

The most common response I heard was directly related to love. Many mentioned that they find meaning by being with their family or partners. Through loving and caring for others their lives becomes meaningful.

„I sort of live in a bubble. My family is everything to me. I just want everyone around me to be happy.”

- Anonymous (from a woman, I didn't learn her name)

Love is a wonderful thing. I believe the only way to truly know someone is to love him. Through accepting and caring love, one sees the person with all its strengths and weaknesses, and most importantly, its potential. Loving friends, partners or parents can see someone's potential and will encourage it by cheering the person into becoming what he or she ought to be.

"Whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them."

- Matthew

Okay, you got me, I didn't actually meet and ask the evangelist Matthew about the meaning of life, but his famous quote from the bible still fits. In order to receive love, we must give love first. Have you ever noticed that the happiest people who experience a lot of „luck“ are those who give a lot to others? They're the first to help and the first to speak a kind word. Life rewards them with opportunities. Or showers them with gifts.

Call me crazy but I think that love is physically visible on these kinds of people's faces. You may not see it all the time but to me people who are generally giving and loving show this with their eyes, their brows and their smile. You can't really help but liking them back for their loving and kind nature.

I believe that because of this love should be like confetti. It's not something that should be saved for important people or rare events but rather be spread all around to those who surround you.

„We are all just walking each other home. I think if we could make the sometimes unbearably hard path easier for each other, our life becomes meaningful.“

- Anna

2. I am here for a purpose!

The second most common response I heard was related to achieving something. Clearly one of man's greatest abilities is to dream. We are able to envision a world that is different, we can see and imagine it in front of our eyes. And even better, we sometimes realize that we are the ones who can actually do something about it.

The next response is from a seven-year old. I find it quite wise.

„When I grow up, all I want to do is modern dance. We don't have a bar like they do in ballet. We just move through the room. Last year, we danced a show about pirates. It was wonderful!“

- Anonymous

And who's to say that life can't be about becoming a dancer? The lesson here is that life is not only about being but also about becoming. And the only one who should be allowed to decide what to become is you. Write a best-selling novel? Cure cancer? Or become the world's leading expert on making instruments out of ice? Knock yourself out. It's your choice and yours alone.

Many people told me about their work and their hopes to create something that people will remember. They want to grow. This is definitely true for me as well. I hope that my writing will have an impact on people, that it touches them on a deep level and makes them consider important questions.

"Working with children and being the best version of myself so I can uplift others."

- Chris

"I work at the university. Most classes here are taught by someone who stands in front of the class and talks for 90 minutes. I try to encourage my students to develop their own ideas. I want them to engage with the content rather than just absorb it. They work on real cases and have to find solutions. Their response tells me that I am making an impact. And I also learn from them."

- Thomas

It's funny. There were quite a few people who mentioned work as their source of meaning but not one of them talked about money, prestige or power. All of them talked about helping others. In a similar manner, people can find meaning by following some cause like fighting for human rights or researching vaccines for rare diseases. Meaning, in this sense, is always transcendent. It's about more than us. There is a bigger theme or goal to be reached and our contribution is part on the way to this end. People that have volunteered at some point in their life will know the feeling it can create.

"The meaning of life is to make that life count. To make sure that the world is a little better after I'm gone."

- Anonymous

The deep underlying motive here is to have an impact. We want our lives to matter and hope that we can achieve something that lasts after we're gone.

3. There can be meaning in suffering, if we carefully choose our attitude towards it!

"I take life as god has handed it to me. It's not easy to explain. But god will know why it has to be so. Life is not easy for me. But I still have the gift to include all my loved ones in

my prayers. And I love them very much.”

– Anonymous

This was told to me by an elderly woman who had had many trials in her life. As a child, she had to travel nearly one thousand kilometers on an ox cart to seek refuge from the war. Her family lost everything. Much later, one of her own children became clinically depressed. There was so much pain in her words. But even in the pain there was light and gratitude.

Humans have another incredible ability. We are the only species who can choose their attitude towards involuntary suffering. Viktor Frankl talks about this at length in his book *Man's Search of Meaning*. Humans can find meaning even in the darkest of times. We observe brave people who have transformed great trials into personal achievement and growth. We hear about deep humanity in the midst of suffering. A terminal cancer patient finds beauty in nature or reconnects with a distant relative. Someone gets fired from her job and after a period of frustration, she starts a new life, happier and more determined than before.

It's important to say that by no means is suffering necessary to find meaning. Above we saw that love and work are important sources of meaning. But our interpretation of trials and pain can make life meaningful as well. We can see a chance where others only see an obstacle. We can see the positive in the negative.

„Last year, I was in a major car accident. I was on the brink of death. I know it sounds weird but looking back it has been one of the best things that could have happened to me. Without the accident I would have continued living a life that made me very unhappy. It was like a second birthday.”

– Anonymous

This response is so incredible. My friend has found purpose in one of the most painful and unfair situations imaginable. Someone else made a mistake and she nearly died. And yet she used it as a trigger to reevaluate her life about what's important and what isn't. She gave meaning to her own life by choosing how to react to unavoidable suffering and so can we.

4. Life is meaningless! But would that be so bad?

„I don't think there is meaning to life. Four years ago, I was diagnosed with cancer. Lying in my bed I got very desperate at trying to find meaning. I thought my illness forced me to create a magical purpose for my life. This pressure made me unhappy. Now, I try to accept that life is just what it is.”

– Anonymous

In the grand scheme of things our individual lives matter very little. Most of us will never become leading politicians, world-class athletes or famous painters. It is highly unlikely

that our lives are the source of a major change in the world. Our existence will not be noted in the history books. This thought can be a little worrying. If our lives matter so little, why bother?

„I am 23 years old. If I'm completely honest I don't know the meaning of life. It's like the hardest question of all. Sometimes I think that it's all meaningless. While I'm here, I want to gather experiences. See colors. Feel emotions. And express myself as a human.”

- Jurek

From an even grander perspective almost nothing that humans do contributes much to the shape of the universe. In the timeline of billions of years, humanity is but a hiccup of activity. Even if we stopped existing, the universe would not really care. Many great stories have illustrated this conflict of our finite time on earth versus the concept of infinity. Someone lies on the beach and looks at the stars. For a moment, he realizes the vastness of everything around him and then notes how really small he is.

There are two ways to think about the realization. One is to fall in despair because our sense of self-importance is threatened. The other is to acknowledge our smallness. If we really have no major influence on the universe then we might as well enjoy life to the fullest while we're here. It also creates a major sense of humility because a lack of control can finally be accepted. We can choose to just go with the flow of life.

„Why are we here? Because it's wonderful! :-)”

- Clemens

I believe the realization of smallness is the solution to the conflict between a search for meaning and the knowledge of cosmic insignificance. It frees us to enjoy the moment, to find love and to witness the miracles of nature. Perhaps then, living becomes meaningful through experiencing the little things. Dancing. Listening to music. The first rays of sunshine after a long winter. A sip of dark hot chocolate in your favorite café.

You can choose to see meaning in every experience life provides.

5. Four sources of meaning for beautiful and unfinished art projects!

Let's return one final time to what Victor Frankl theorized. He said:

“We can discover this meaning of life in three (four) different ways: (1) by creating a work or doing a deed; (2) by experiencing something or (3) encountering someone; and (4) by the attitude we take toward unavoidable suffering.”

- Victor Frankl (Man's Search for Meaning, pp. 111-115)

And there you have them, four sources of meaning: Work, experiences, love, and our stance toward unavoidable suffering. Every story I collected somewhat resonates with

them. For those of us who have found meaning in life, it is often a combination of those four sources.

And for those who haven't found it, there is hope, because as humans we are art projects, beautiful and unfinished.

Man's search for meaning is perhaps the most fundamental search on the road of self-discovery. And in the end, every last of us has to find his own answer.