

CHAPTER 43

My Purpose in Life

Sometimes you must have asked yourself, "What is the purpose of my life? Why am I here?" The philosopher Aristotle noticed that everything changes or grows so as to achieve some goal. For example, acorns always grow into oak trees and never into anything else. (Unless they are eaten by squirrels, in which case they won't grow at all!) Similarly, children grow into adults. Everything has a purpose, an inner aim that guides its development. For example, a guitar is designed and made to produce beautiful music. When the guitar fulfills the purpose for which it was created, the guitar maker is happy and so, one might imagine, is the guitar. If, however, the guitar were used for knocking posts into the ground, it would be damaged and no longer would be able to fulfill its intended purpose. The maker would probably feel hurt and disappointed, and maybe angry.

How about people? Ultimately we can be happy only if we fulfill our true purpose in life, the purpose that is embedded in our human nature. If we try to set for ourselves a different purpose, even if we fulfill it we will not be happy. We will damage ourselves in some way. This is why some people go through identity crises. They are not sure about who they are or what they should become.

Money, power, knowledge or love?

What is the purpose of life? Let's think about what motivates people. As we saw in the chapter on happiness, everyone wants to be happy. But how do people go about seeking for it? Some people think that they will be happy if they become rich, so they make it their life's ambition and goal to make as much money as possible.

But will money alone make us happy? There are many rich people who are very unhappy. They are never quite sure whether people like them for themselves or because of their money. Others think

knowledge is most important, so they bury their head in books. Such people can become eccentric and

isolated and lose the ability to form close relationships. Still others think power is the way to happiness. They try to dominate others as a way of life. Such people are often deeply insecure and paranoid.

Some people long to be famous. But many famous people say they find life empty and meaningless; that they lost their way in life once they became famous.



If we look at the question more deeply, we may conclude that the most precious thing is love. No matter how wealthy, knowledgeable, powerful or famous you may be, unless you have someone with whom you can share your joy, your sorrow, your opinions, and your ideals, you are in truth poor.

But what or whom do we want to love? It is possible to love a stone, polish it, put it on display and admire it every day. But a stone does not respond. It is the same, day after day, whether you look at it or not. How about a plant? It is possible to have a deeper relationship with a plant because it is alive and resembles us more than a stone does. Plants respond, and it clearly matters to the plant that it is cared for. However, plants generally don't distinguish between people. They don't seem to care who waters them. Their level of response is definitely lower than that of an animal, with which one can have a deeper relationship. A well-trained dog is loyal and obedient and will even defend its master from attack. It is pleasant to take one's dog for walks, but can it appreciate the sunset? Does it understand your poetry?

Ultimately, each of us seeks a person with whom we can share our heart. Someone whom we can love and care for. Someone we can trust and to whom we can tell anything. Someone with whom we can be ourselves and who will never betray us. Someone who can understand us and to whom we may be able to entrust our life. Someone we want to be with all the time and whom we miss when we are away. Someone who is like us but about whom we are always discovering new things. Someone who can be a friend. And one day we will want someone whom we can

marry and with whom we can have a family. Such love is the source of the deepest joy and happiness. Love should be primary, because love is the source of life itself.

Along with love and life, we also want to have an ideal, something beyond ourselves for which to live, strive, and maybe even give our lives. When we have love, life and an ideal, everything seems possible and worthwhile. Without them life is empty and meaningless. Then people begin to look for other ways to fill the void, such as through drinking, sex, money, power or knowledge.



What is it that we want?

What do you really want in life? What do you want to achieve and accomplish? What kind of person do you want to become? We have asked these questions several times in this book, so perhaps now is the time to draw a few conclusions. In summary, we can say that each person wants to:

- ✗ grow up and become a person of mature character;
- ✗ marry and have a loving family;
- ✗ make a positive contribution to the society in which he lives through a chosen profession and career.

These are all creative acts. We usually think of creativity in terms of art, science, literature, and technology. These are important areas of creative activity, of course,

and they bring us tremendous fulfillment. Still, as important as they are, the greatest creative process, and the most subtle one, lies in the formation of your own self, your relations with others and your contribution to the society around you.

It is an astonishing fact that we create our own character. Our first goal is to fulfill our potential and become a person of mature character. Sadly, many people, for one reason or another, fail to do this. They give up when faced by challenges they think they cannot overcome or are not motivated to overcome. Instead of putting love and values at the center of their life, they allow negative emotions like greed, resentment or revenge to guide their decisions and actions.

Although we have the ability to create our own self, we cannot do this alone. In the chapter on relationships we talked about the two complementary purposes that everything and everyone has. Complete fulfillment cannot be attained in isolation. We are all born into a family. It is there that we are meant to discover our identity and develop our character. It is in the family that we learn how to form relationships, first with our parents, and then with brothers and sisters, grandparents, cousins, aunts and uncles. It is there that we learn to love and be loved, to forgive and be forgiven, to disagree and be reconciled, to give and receive. We learn how to behave and have good manners. In family life we learn how to make relationships and friendships. So, our second goal is to create good relationships in our family and with others. If in our relationships we are honest and unselfish, we will have many friends and be a good influence on those around us. On the other hand, if we are dishonest and selfish, we will have few friends and will corrupt those we meet.

Our third goal in life is to find a profession and career through which we express our creativity, support our family and contribute something of value to our community and society. We love to experience the beauty of nature. We also seek to utilize the material resources of our world to create and play musical instruments, to sculpt, to paint, to design, and to build things. Creating gives us joy, because it gives expression to our character and dreams. We also hope that what we create will please others. Nearly every artist looks forward to the day when he can hold an exhibition of his work and have it appreciated by others. People want to find fulfillment through their work, be it as a teacher, factory worker, farmer or businessman. They want to experience creating something that is good and is valued by others. In the end all of this is an expression of love.

Those who do not have love at the center of their life, but rather resentment, envy or hatred, enjoy destroying things rather than creating — committing acts of vandalism, for example. Because they do not love and respect the natural world, they pollute it and senselessly damage it. Such people, if they are in business, tend to be motivated solely by the desire for profit rather than the desire to produce high-quality goods.

These three fundamental life goals encompass the entire realm of human experience. They present us with a standard and model of moral excellence that we should all strive to fulfill. Attaining them involves practicing the principles of unselfishness and true love in all aspects of our life — within ourselves, in our relationships and with respect to our environment. Let us now explore further how we can achieve each of these life goals.

The first purpose of life — developing my character

Our first concern in life should be the development of our character. The key to this is achieving unity between our mind and body so that we can become a person whose words and deeds are one. As we grow, we must learn self-control. We should learn to control our appetites. We eat to live instead of living to eat. We also need to control our desire for sleep. In our teenage years controlling our sexual desires be-



comes a priority. If we do not learn to master our body's desires, they will corrupt our character. If we become people who are in the habit of following our body's desires, then we come to see every situation and every relationship from the point of view of what is good for me. At the same time, we become insensitive to the needs and interests of others. We end up using and exploiting others to gratify our own selfish desires.

In all great civilizations, education for character and the transmission of cultural virtues from one generation to the next always have been chief concerns. You can examine yourself and check which virtues and vices you have been developing until now. If you don't like what you see, it is not too late to change. You have the ability to create your own character and personality. According to the decisions you make, you are determining the kind of person you will become.

So, what kind of person *do* you want to become? By now we hope that you would want to become a person who is mature. Maturity is measured not by the ability to gain knowledge, power, or money, but by the quality of our heart and conscience. In other words, our ability to love others, arising out of our heart, and to do what is right, guided by our conscience, are the factors that fundamentally determine the level of our maturity.

What is a mature person like? Such a person accepts responsibility for his life and expresses this by earning his way in the world. In his heart he knows that he ought to contribute more to the world than he takes from it. This attitude leads to self-respect and happiness.

Self-respect leads to respect for others. A mature person does not feel humiliated when someone is rude to him or tries to embarrass him, because he knows and respects himself. His sense of dignity and integrity allow him to not respond to rude people on their level. If he is mistreated at work, he will not take it out on his family. If his boss is unfair to him, he will not take it out on those under him. In other words, the way he behaves is not determined by the way he is treated. Rather, he is consistently loving, respectful and conscientious.

The second purpose of life — building loving relationships in my family

All of us were born into a family, and it is the family that largely determines what we will become. Throughout this book we have spoken about the importance of our relationships. The most fundamental relationship in our life, especially in our early years, is the one we have with our parents. The nature of that relationship impacts us in many ways.

Furthermore, our family relationships become the models for all our other relationships. A person who does not have a good relationship with his father probably

will have difficulties with other people in positions of authority later in life. Someone who hates his mother probably will find it difficult to have close relationships with women. A person who is jealous of a brother or sister probably will feel that way toward his peers.

Growing up in a happy and stable family remains a source of joy and security throughout life. An unhappy family environment is a source of pain and insecurity. A happy family background provides a hopeful context for fashioning our own dreams of future family happiness, while unhappy family experiences discourage us from believing that we can find real happiness in our own future family.

It may seem premature to think about marriage at this stage of your life, but if you can see the relatedness between the first and second life goals, you will appreciate the importance of discussing this topic even now. Your present stage of life is already a time of training to prepare you for marriage. Think about it. If you want to become a doctor, you will have to study for many years before you will be allowed to practice. If you want to drive a car, you will need to study the rules, practice driving and then pass a test before you earn a license. In every area of human endeavor it is the same. In order to have certain privileges, you first must demonstrate competence in that activity.

The same is true for marriage and family life. Yet often it happens that people marry and have children with very little preparation. Many people give more thought to their wedding ceremony than to how they will live together in the years that follow. Just like a profession, marriage and parenthood require special skills, knowledge and training. Learning to communicate, create harmony, balance priorities, and relate with in-laws are all important to the success of a marriage and family.

Sadly, many people enter into family life ignorant about love and relationships. Without such knowledge, these people live in hatred, fear, guilt, loneliness, and pain — thereby hurting their marriage partner. Some people go from one marriage to another because they never learn the requirements for a truly loving, committed and long-lasting relationship.

You can see that becoming a person of maturity who is capable of loving has everything to do with your future marital and family success.

A man and woman joining their lives together are like two universes merging into one. A new creation is formed — a marriage. Only when people come to possess unselfish love can they love another person completely. Husbands and wives first must have a sense of their own value in order to affirm and appreciate each other's unique value.

People possessing mature love anchor their marriage in loyalty, trust, commitment, and mutual fulfillment.

They don't need to look elsewhere for love, because they completely give of themselves for their spouse's total happiness. Would there be divorces in such marriages? Why would anyone want to divorce himself from such perfect happiness?

The love between husband and wife is the greatest gift any parents can give their child. A child created and born from true love and raised in an environment of unconditional love is loved for who he is — not because he is smart, beautiful or



talented but because of his own unique value. When a person feels his value, he is able to value and love others.

The joy and love that we experience in our own family would naturally be extended to other families in our community and ultimately to the whole human family. In such a world all people would feel connected in heart, transcending nationality, race and language. In such a world can you imagine war, starvation, and crime?

The third purpose of life – taking care of and contributing to my world

From the earliest age we are taught to care for the things around us, to not break them, and to not touch things that don't belong to us without first getting permission. We learn to look after our toys and possessions and learn how to keep them neat and tidy.

We also develop our creativity, playing with clay, painting, drawing and building things with bricks. Sometimes we give up in frustration when our creations don't look the way we want them to look. But as we practice, our skills develop and eventually we master the art. What we create is in many ways an expression of our character. That is why we can learn much about a person by looking at his paintings or reading his poetry. So while it is important to develop our skills, it is not something separate from our character development

Do you have a sense of wonder about the world in which we live? Are you curious about how it works and from where it came? Do you appreciate the extraordinary beauty of nature? We study science at school so as to understand the world more deeply. By using our reason and creativity, we can relate to the entire universe. With microscopes we observe tiny one-celled organisms, while with telescopes we observe galactic systems. Through our knowledge and skills we help to create and shape our environment.

Unfortunately, because of human immaturity and selfishness, the beautiful world that we inhabit often has been abused and polluted. And not just by industry. How often have we ourselves thrown something on the ground carelessly; how often have we broken bottles, damaged trees or vandalized something in some way?

Some people judge others, and themselves, by what they possess. Their value and their happiness depend on what they own. However, it may be more accurate to say that they are owned by their possessions! Many people flaunt their wealth to boost their own lack of self-esteem. They may think that a large book collection means that

they know a lot, or at least that it gives others that impression. They may even end up valuing things more than people, crowding their homes with things until there is no room left for people.

While it is important to respect things, people should dominate them and not vice versa. Healthy dominion over things is based on love and truth. Proper love and respect for the natural world is based on understanding, which is why scientists are often filled with a deep sense of wonder as a result of their studies.



When each person realizes his potential — spiritually, intellectually, emotionally, socially, and physically — it will be possible to create a rich culture and a comfortable living environment for all people. Through our chosen profession and career, motivated by our heart and conscience, we should use our knowledge and skills to enhance our society and the environment, improving the quality of life for all.

Conclusion

Deep down everyone has a strong desire to find fulfillment through these three life goals. This is because we were designed this way. Without ever being instructed about these things by our parents or teachers, we already have these desires within us. We intuitively sense that attaining these goals is necessary for us to experience true and complete happiness.

Life's purpose is to experience joy through true love in every relationship: within ourselves, with others, and with our environment. By discovering our own integrity as individuals, we can have harmonious relations with others. We can create happy families and make a positive contribution to our society and environment.

For Your Journal



Reflect on and write in your journal the ways in which you are seeking to fulfill the 3 purposes of life as described in this lesson. How have you been doing so far? How do you foresee yourself fulfilling these purposes in the future? Are you strong in some of these and weak in others? Where do you feel you need to make more effort?