

Meaning for Dummies

by [Larry McCloskey](#) (October 2023)



Four Sunsets (detail), Saul Steinberg, 1971

The purpose of life is to find purpose in life. –Victor Frankl

Well, there it is. I thought I'd read everything of insight Victor Frankl has ever written, but I missed the secret of human existence. It is, in its elegant balance between philosophical intention and actionable response to said intention, rather perfect.

So, why is our age characterized by—among many other disturbing trends—a mind numbing, inexplicable, rock bottom

crisis of meaning? Why now? In this time of greatest freedom (though that is waning) affluence and safety—surely the pinnacle of civilization—why are we wringing our collective hands about, well, everything?

And oddly for hand wringers, why do we pretend to have all the answers? We even condescend to correct past generations, just in case they fail to see their supposed wisdom and sacrifice for what it is—oppression. All of it. Maybe we know less than we think, the proof being that we think we know much. They, of the past, knew much for knowing how little they knew. It's a humility thing that does not resonate with modernity. In a world of uncertainty we try to uphold certainty with the certainty of our progressive beliefs. What an absurdity, but hardly original.

When Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) wrote "God is dead," he was not declaring victory of atheism over religious faith, rather he was acknowledging the ascendancy of scientific materialism over universal belief in God that had followed upon the Enlightenment. In short, the concept of conducting our lives according to divine laws and the promise of a transcendent life, was dead. Nietzsche regarded this epoch of change with ambiguity. True, he thought atheism offers the possibility of finding meaning in non-religious pursuits, and yet his writing is far more convincing when warning about the danger of repudiating God, of taking down the scaffolding of Christianity and civilization. "God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we comfort ourselves, the murders of all murders? Is not the greatest of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become Gods simply to appear worthy of it?"

It is this last concept that is most interesting, succinctly anticipating modernity with eerie accuracy. Without belief in God—and its attendant outward gaze towards family, community and country—we must necessarily turn inward. To become the Gods we cannot believe in, we must now fashion ultimate belief

in self. And in substituting belief in self for the outward gaze towards universal truth and prescriptive living inherent in Christianity, Nietzsche—atheist and nihilist—predicted that astonishing and pernicious elements would fall in its wake and fill the unholy vacuum. Without God or Christianity to provide meaning, Nietzsche foresaw the negative vacuum of the 20th century and beyond. Nihilism, Eugenics, Fascism, Communism, Maoism, together leading to a 20th century body count over 100 million, are an awful testament to the power of an idea untethered to morality. [*]

Nietzsche from *The Will to Power*: “What I relate is the history of the next two centuries. I describe what is coming, what can no longer come differently: the advent of nihilism ... For some time now our whole European culture has been moving as toward a catastrophe.” Nietzsche did not predict so much as articulate the inevitable.

This deep human need to fill the vacuum left by the death of the idea of God pervades all our present day machinations and convulsions around identity and meaning. No amount of money, pleasure, social media success, body alterations, social causes, validation, safety, AI, can ever replace the meaning and context of something much bigger than self, which amounts to a spiritual life. If you doubt this statement, check with your own waking nightmares—the archetypal claustrophobic version of self—of 3 a.m.

It was not always so. Back to our misinformed forebears. Where and whenever people have had the necessity of putting long exhausting hours into real work, especially if those hard worn hours are in the service of others, they seem miraculously spared the indulgence of endless existential angst. And in losing oneself, in serving others, even without a deliberate thought in the world and even without the ability to articulate what one has found, one finds or stumbles upon meaning. It is the unwitting formula. Call it, Meaning for

Dummies.

I know, I know, too simple, doesn't allow for the brilliance and originality of academic discourse, personal truths that negate objective truth, isn't interested in the many grievances that rock the world and justify living the meaningless life. In short, what fun is there in finding purpose when one can disparage its fundamental lacking?

And yet the progressive utopian pursuit doesn't work—the 20th century sample size is large enough for us to make this bold assertion. I know this, but like our forefathers, I don't know much. Maybe two things.

1. The purpose of life is not to deflect from the purpose of life in the pursuit of any or all flavour of the month progressive causes of the present era (characterized by people making everyone aware of their caring and devotion to their cause celeb). Sure take up the need for change, and then rather than talk about it, do something—however modestly—but do it quietly. One celebrity said about his colleagues and causes: “They should just write a check and shut the f... up.”
2. I don't think our self-importance extends to figuring it out. Not all of it, not necessarily much of it, and quite possibly none of it. Shortly before his death, Christopher Hitchens (who I mostly admired, but didn't much agree with) wrote a full-on disparagement hit-piece called *The Missionary Position: Mother Teresa in Theory and Practice*. The title itself suggests the prevalence of attitude. The book thesis is encompassed by this quote: “Mother Teresa was less interested in helping the poor than in using them as an indefatigable source of her fundamental wretchedness on which to fuel the expansion of her fundamental Roman Catholic beliefs.”

Hitchens disparages Mother Teresa's lack of faith—as shown in the difference between her public persona and her private letters—which Hitchens characterizes as evidence of hypocrisy. In 1979, Mother Teresa wrote Rev. Michael van der Pijl: “Jesus has a very special love for you. As for me, the silence and the emptiness is so great that I look and do not see, listen and do not hear.”

Which strikes me as honest rather than hypocritical. (To witness deep hypocrisy worth writing about, Hitchens would have had to be around the present political scene). One wonders if Hitchens considers why Mother Teresa would make public her struggle with faith? Making all our thoughts and desires public is an odd modern phenomenon that serves no purpose. How would Mother Teresa have helped the people she worked with by divulging her darkest fear that God may not exist? Why would she deprive the most hopeless people of the world the possibility of hope? A lifetime in the bowels of pain and deprivation does not seem to be a formula for having and holding faith, so why do we expect Mother Teresa to have unquestioning faith? Who among us does not have dark moments? Who has not been visited upon by despair? Why does atheist Hitchens pounce on Mother Teresa for revealing thoughts very likely close to his own? How does one inoculate oneself against despair if immersed in wretchedness and hopelessness for most of life? How many times had she prayed for people whose life was forfeited despite her prayers? Even Jesus on the cross says, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Given a lifetime surrounded by painful death, it would stretch credulity to believe that Mother Teresa didn't at least struggle with faith. My takeaway is that difficulties or even despair about faith made this iconic saint (Pope Francis canonized her September 4, 2016) into a relatable human being. Parenthetically, it is obvious Mother Teresa was depressed.

Her life of service could not have been attached to some vague

idea of reward in heaven. Quid quo pro doesn't add up. No, her's was a life anchored in tangible pain and suffering, but not only. For all the sufferings—and it is important not to be condescending on this point—the experience of extremity also has the possibility of love, camaraderie, poignant moments, and belonging. Victor Frankl, among many credible others, can attest to that reality. Dr. Frankl even developed a therapeutic model based on seeking and building upon whatever positive attributes can be extracted from the extremity of suffering. Logotherapy's premise is that no matter how difficult one's circumstances, no matter how extreme one's suffering, it remains possible to find something positive, redemptive, something upon which to build another, if transformed, life.

The exercise is not to know all things and appropriate meaning on the basis on our superior knowing and self-importance. Nor is meaning likely a thunderbolt revelation visited upon the truly blessed or for those special enough to have exclusive insight. (A man spends years searching for number one guru high in the mountains, finally discovering the guru's lair on the highest peak. Whereupon he breathlessly asks, what is the meaning of life? Number one guru says, "keep breathing.") And given the crushing entropy towards oblivion that life amounts to (at least that is what scientific materialism adds up to), the guru might have been agreeing with Frankl's assessment that the purpose of life is to find purpose in life. With both profound prescriptions for living echoing one Albert Einstein, "Life is like riding a bicycle. To keep your balance, you must keep moving."

Whatever Mother Teresa believed, whatever she conveyed about what she believed to the many thousands of impoverished people she worked with, it mattered far less than what she actually did. Sating hunger and thirst has more meaning than hearing about someone's treatise on faith when one is hungry and thirsty. And quite possibly Mother Teresa's altruism had a

selfish component. Maybe doing for others tempered her own despair, that simmering despair one cannot help thinking about when one doubts the certainty of eternal life—which includes many to most of us, most of the time. This perhaps selfish application of altruism—call it selfish or altruistic, it really doesn't matter— may be a formula for living, for dealing with depression and anxiety, enacting purpose and finding or stumbling upon, meaning. Turns out, the serendipitous accident of stumbling, the act of doing without knowing, can lead one to a good place. Or at least keep us from ruminating into a lonely, dark state of inertia. Overthinking killed the cat and enslaved the man. I'll end full circle with Victor Frankl, "Life is never made unbearable by circumstances, but only by lack of meaning and purpose."

[*] Clearly, the World Economic Forum whose socialist/globalist motto is, "You will own nothing and be happy," and whose goal is ideological conformity leading to political influence (their's and not the you who will own nothing) are ignorant or have chosen to ignore the lessons of the 20th century that were so clear to Nietzsche. Too bad, because in anticipating 20th century horrors in all their gory, Nietzsche also foresaw their logical evolution towards the next big materialist answer to all life's problems. If only.

[Table of Contents](#)

Larry McCloskey has had eight books published, six young adult as well as two recent non-fiction books. *Lament for Spilt Porter* and *Inarticulate Speech of the Heart* (2018 & 2020 respectively) won national Word Guild awards. *Inarticulate* won best Canadian manuscript in 2020 and recently won a second Word Guild Award as a published work. He recently retired as

Director of the Paul Menton Centre for Students with Disabilities, Carleton University. Since then, he has written a satirical novel entitled *The University of Lost Causes*, and has qualified as a Social Work Psychotherapist. He lives in Canada with his three daughters, two dogs, and last, but far from least, one wife.

Follow NER on Twitter [@NERIconoclast](https://twitter.com/NERIconoclast)