

Kilian Markert

384 Followers


About

Follow



The Ultimate Driver of Human Motivation — On The Quest of Finding Meaning

Reflections on Motivation, Meaning, and Fulfillment

 Kilian Markert · Apr 26, 2018 · 12 min read



[Source](#)

How often do we actually question what we are doing?

Think back to today's morning.

You got up, prepared yourself for the day and got ready to do your thing.

Many things we do happen on autopilot. We act according to our routines and habits, fulfill our duty at work and our roles in family and community.

On some days it's easier to get up and start the day, on others we just want to stay in bed.

Sometimes you work incredibly long hours to finish a project or a task and sometimes you just procrastinate.

What is it that determines that behavior?

Deadlines? Obligations? The fear of losing your job? Expectations? Paying the bills?

Are these the things that make you get out of your bed every morning?

These are certainly powerful drivers, but not really sustainable ones.

They might drive you for a limited period of time.

But sooner or later one question will most likely appear:

Why?

It is the question regarding the *meaning of and in* our lives.

What is the purpose behind all the things that I'm doing?

What meaning does what I'm doing and my life in general have?

These questions actually seem very abstract. It is something that we most likely don't ask ourselves on a daily basis if we ask it at all.

But it is something that is important to us.

There are several studies, that show the importance of having a sense of meaning in life.

In a study from the early 20th century, 7,948 students at 48 different colleges around the world were asked what they considered "very important to them" when considering a career.

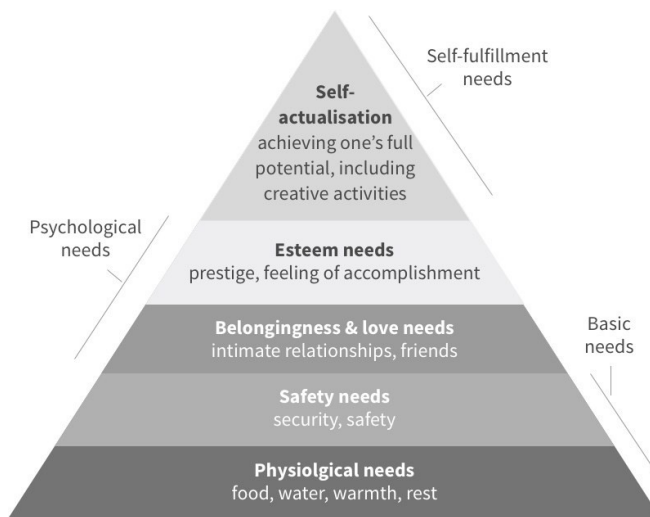
Just 16% of the students indicated that "making a lot of money" was important whereas 78% of respondents said that "finding purpose and meaning in life" was most important to them.

In a similar study from 2001, over 10,000 fresh college graduates, already on their first job, were asked to indicate what was critical for them in a "good" job. Most of them said that "interesting work," a "sense of accomplishment," and "adding something to people's lives" were far more important than "pay" and "job security."

In 2012, psychologists Bryan Dik and Ryan Duffy found that 68% of college students surveyed considered a spiritual calling and sense of higher purpose essential to them when choosing a career.

But when exactly do we ask ourselves about meaning and purpose?

In 1943 psychologist Abraham Maslow came up with a by now famous pyramid model, the so called "Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs".



Source

According to him, the most *basic needs* of humans, like food, shelter, rest, security, and safety, and also the *psychological needs* such as community,

friends, validation and feelings of accomplishment have to be fulfilled first.

Only then are we taking care of our *self-fulfillment needs* which includes self-actualization through personal growth, but also the search for a meaning and purpose in one's life.

This gradual progression often holds true for most of us in the western world.

We have nearly all of our fundamental needs fulfilled. In times of material exuberance, we are more likely to ask ourselves:

"What does it all mean?", "Was that everything?", "Why am I even here?"

It is more likely to at some point stumble upon the search for meaning in our lives.

However, this gradual progression towards the top of the pyramid does not always have to be the case.

There is some fundamental criticism of this model.

There are instances and times when even the most basic human needs are not fulfilled.

To our surprise, *especially then*, the search for meaning can become a burning desire and even essential for survival.

The Story Of The Psychiatrist In The Concentration Camp

During the Second World War, Viktor Frankl, an Austrian neurologist and psychiatrist, was deported by the Nazis into several concentration camps, among them the death camp Auschwitz.

In his classic *"Man's Search for Meaning"*, he describes the horrors and incredible suffering he experienced and witnessed in the camps, where he lost his wife and other members of his family.

In midst of all the suffering and futility, the concept of "meaning", however, was a recurring theme.

As opposed to Maslow, while even the most fundamental needs were not fulfilled, as the prisoners were starving, being tortured, affected by sickness and fearing for their lives, **there was always the search for meaning.**

There was always the question: *"Why?"*

And more importantly: *"What can I make of this? What is the meaning behind all this suffering? Why not just give up?"*

Interestingly, Frankl made the important finding that there were two groups among the prisoners.

Those that found a meaning in the concentration camp and those who gave up on everything because they did not find any meaning.

Frankl observed that the prisoners who gave up and accepted the meaninglessness of their existence in the camp only had a short period of time yet to live.

Giving up mentally meant that these prisoners also gave up physically and could no longer resist the imminent starvation, sickness, and pain.

They would soon die.

Frankl himself survived the three years in the camps.

Even though Frankl's shrewdness, as well as sheer luck, played an important role, he attributed a large part of his survival to the meaning he found in spite of the most inhumane conditions he experienced and witnessed.

Is There A Lack of Meaning in Our Society?

Nowadays, we are far away from such extreme situations. There is no shortage of safety, opportunity and pleasure.

Especially our basic needs are always fulfilled.

But don't we still struggle to find and create meaning from all of this?

Recent statistics show what the consequences could be.

In our society, there is more and more evidence about the correlation between lack of meaning and suicide.

Suicide has become the second biggest killer of men under 50 and the second-leading cause of death among US-teenagers.

Already back in the 1980's, a study from Idaho State University examined 60 students who attempted suicide.

85% of them stated that they were lacking a sense of meaning in life.

Surprisingly, 93% of these students were considered mentally healthy, with stable family relationships, active participation in their community and good performance in university.

In one of his books, Frankl quotes the suicide note of an American college student:

"I am 22 years old. I have a university degree, a nice car, I am financially independent and I have access to more sex and prestige than I can handle. I'm only wondering: What is the meaning behind all of that?"

This phenomenon is what Frankl calls the "existential vacuum", a deep feeling of meaninglessness.

Is this phenomenon still relevant?

Taking the current developments of the digitalization and its impact on our society into account, the answer is most likely yes.

More unemployment, reduction of work hours and a basic income are only some potential scenarios. But it is very like that we will have more free time available in the future.

So what do you do with your time if all your basic needs are fulfilled?

Humans, unlike animals, are not primarily led by instincts that tell them what to do. Also, as opposed to decades and centuries ago, our path is not defined by conventions and traditions anymore.

And very often it seems like we don't even know what we want.

Thus, as a shortcut, there are two popular ways to decide what to do:

- *Conformism*: Wanting to do what others are doing
- *Totalitarianism*: Doing what others want me to do

But at some point, when the existential vacuum grows too big, masses of people will start to ask: *“What do I want? How do I find meaning in all of this?”*

As it was crucial for the inmates of the concentration camps to find a meaning of their existence, the search for meaning remains essential nowadays and will become even more relevant.

Just like thirst points towards the existence of water, an existential vacuum, a deep feeling of meaninglessness points towards the existence of potential meaning.

Meaning is an innate driver of human motivation.

How To Find Meaning

How was it possible to find meaning regardless of the suffering, the horrors and the deprivation in a concentration camp?

And even far away from that extreme situation, how can I personally find meaning in today's materialistic society?

How can I keep that meaning in spite of negative events and blows of fate which at some point will inevitably be part of my life?

Introducing Logotherapy

During his time in the concentration camp, Frankl tried to fulfill his fellow prisoners' and his own desire for meaning by developing a new psychotherapy approach which provided him and his fellow inmates solace during the darkest hours.

This striving for a sense of meaning allowed them to maintain their sanity, sense of identity, and will to live.

Frankl called this approach **“Logotherapy”**.

The Greek word “logos” is used here in the sense of “meaning”, establishing a “meaning-therapy”.

What defines this approach?

Logotherapy positions itself contrary to two other popular Viennese schools of psychotherapy.

1. Freud's *“Psychoanalysis”*, which sees the will to pleasure as the main driver of human motivation and existence.
2. Adler's *“Individual Psychology”*, which sees the will to power as the main driver of human motivation and existence.

In Frankl's *“Logotherapy”*, however, it is **the search for meaning which constitutes the main driver of human motivation and existence.**

As a response to Freud, who thought that the will to meaning is simply a product of what in psychoanalysis is called “sublimation, defense mechanisms and reaction-formations”, Frankl states:

“I would not be willing to live merely for the sake of my defense mechanisms, nor would I be willing to die merely for the sake of my reaction formations.”

Frankl sees the search for meaning as something inherent in every human being. It is the greatest task for everyone to find and create meaning in their lives.

Frankl explains the role of logotherapy in this pursuit of meaning as follows:

The role played by a logotherapist is that of an eye specialist rather than that of a painter. A painter tries to convey to us a picture of the world as he sees it; an ophthalmologist tries to enable us to see the world as it really is. The logotherapist's role consists of widening and broadening the visual field of the patient so that the whole spectrum of potential meaning becomes conscious and visible to him.

The meaning of a life can always change, but it never ceases to exist. And most importantly, meaning can be created and found in any situation.

The Sources of Meaning

There are three main sources from which a person can create meaning in life.

1. Doing something significant (work, good deeds, accomplishments):

Meaning can be found in doing something that we consider important and of value, something that improves the lives of others or of humanity as a whole. For the inmates in the concentration camp it was the outlook towards a goal, something that needs to be completed and is worth surviving, which gave them meaning and the will to live.

2. By experiencing something or encountering someone (love, beauty, nature):

Experiencing nature, beauty, culture etc. can result in a feeling of awe and give meaning to life.

Also love can create meaning, because only through love, one can “grasp another human being in the innermost core of his personality.” Frankl continues to explain:

“By his love he is enabled to see the essential traits and features in the beloved person; and even more, he sees that which is potential in him, which is not yet actualized but yet ought to be actualized. Furthermore, by his love, the loving person enables the beloved person to actualize these potentialities. By making him aware of what he can be and of what he should become, he makes these potentialities come true.”

3. By our attitude in times of adversity (suffering, guilt, death):

Meaning can be found even in spite of the “tragic triad”: I) suffering, II) guilt and III) death, through what Frankl calls “tragic optimism”:

“(I) Turning suffering into a human achievement and accomplishment, because in some way, suffering ceases to be suffering at the moment it finds a meaning, such as the meaning of a sacrifice.

(II) Deriving from guilt the opportunity to change oneself for the better.

(III) Deriving from life's transitoriness an incentive to take responsible action.”

In general, Frankl suggests the following:

“Ultimately, man should not ask what the meaning of his life is, but rather he must recognize that it is he who is asked. In a word, each man is questioned by life; and he can only answer to life by answering for his own life; to life he can

only respond by being responsible. Thus, logotherapy sees in responsibility the very essence of human existence.”

Meaning exists as potential. By taking on responsibility this meaning can and should be actualized.

But most importantly, the three sources of meaning all have one thing in common.

The idea of self-transcendence.

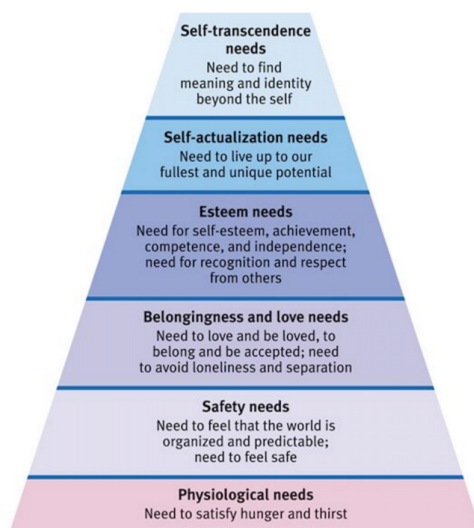
Frankl describes the relationship between self-actualization and self-transcendence as follows:

I have termed this constitutive characteristic “the self-transcendence of human existence.” It denotes the fact that being human always points, and is directed, to something, or someone, other than oneself — be it a meaning to fulfill or another human being to encounter. The more one forgets himself — by giving himself to a cause to serve or another person to love — the more human he is and the more he actualizes himself. What is called self-actualization is not an attainable aim at all, for the simple reason that the more one would strive for it, the more he would miss it. In other words, self-actualization is possible only as a side-effect of self-transcendence.

This has profound consequences for our understanding of the hierarchy of human needs.

The ultimate source of meaning and fulfillment and thus the top of the pyramid is self-transcendence.

Therefore, the earliest and most popular version of Maslow’s hierarchy (based on his earlier work) shows only the first five levels. A later and more accurate version of the hierarchy, which takes into account Frankl’s ideas as well as Maslow’s later work and his private journal entries, shows six levels, with self-transcendence at the top.



Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, Myers, College and Michigan, 2010

In “*Father Reaches of Human Nature*” Maslow explains:

“Transcendence refers to the very highest and most inclusive or holistic levels of human consciousness, behaving and relating, as ends rather than means, to oneself, to significant others, to human beings in general, to other species, to nature, and to the cosmos”

Concerning meaning, Maslow also departs from the necessity of hierarchical fulfillment of the human needs.

In 1966, four years before his death, Maslow writes in the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*:

„I agree entirely with Frankl that man’s primary concern is his will to meaning.“

Meaning Is The Goal, Happiness A Side Effect

What is it that we ultimately aspire with the pursuit of personal-growth, of self-actualization?

We want to be happy.

But is it sustainable to seek happiness directly?

Or can direct happiness only be achieved through instant gratification and short-term pleasures?

Frankl draws a clear line between happiness and meaning by taking the top of the pyramid into consideration.

As self-actualization can only result as a side-effect of self-transcendence, long-term happiness can only ensue as a side effect of the pursuit of meaning.

It is this meaning through self-transcendence which produces a sustainable form of happiness, also known as fulfillment.

What to Make of This?

Whenever we struggle with finding the motivation to do what we have to do, we might take a step back and consider the “**Why?**” behind all of that.

If you don’t have a sense of meaning behind what you are doing, you will have a terrible problem with motivation and procrastination.

Knowing the meaning behind what you are doing is what drives you through times of hardship, self-doubt and failure.

Nietzsche put it as follows:

“He who has a Why to live for can bear almost any How.”

Shifting the focus toward the future, this “Why” stands for a purpose, consisting of meaningful goals.

Call To Action

Ask yourself what you find meaningful. Pursue meaning rather than instant gratification by implementing meaningful goals and take tiny steps towards them on a daily basis.

Embark on the journey towards fulfillment.

Enjoy!

If these ideas resonate with you, please leave some claps, follow my profile, and get in touch with me through a quick comment below. I’m trying to provide