

The Benefits of Finding Meaning in Life

**Presented via Zoom by Dr. Kent M. Keith
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[Note: The text is based on the PowerPoint slides used in the presentation]

Thank you for the opportunity to share some ideas with you about the benefits of finding meaning in life. I will present some ideas, and then we will take a break for questions and comments, and then I will complete the presentation.

Deep happiness

There are many benefits to finding meaning in life and at work. One benefit is the opportunity to be deeply happy. Each of us has values, hopes, dreams, wants, needs, abilities, interests, and relationships. Each of us will make choices that affect our futures. Each of us is unique. But whatever we do, each of us can be, and *should* be, deeply happy.

What do I mean by “deep happiness?” I mean the kind of happiness that touches the spirit and connects with the soul. Some people describe it as joy, or self-actualization, or self-fulfillment, or being centered. Others describe it as living their passion or following their bliss. For people of faith it may be finding the divine will for their lives and then living that will. However it is defined, we know from experience, research, and wisdom teachings that finding meaning in life is a key to being deeply happy— to finding true joy in life.

Richard Layard wrote a book titled *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science*. He said that “people who achieve a sense of meaning in their lives are happier than those who live from one pleasure to another.” Dennis Prager, in his book, *Happiness Is A Serious Problem*, said that “happiness can be attained under virtually any circumstances providing you believe that your life has meaning and purpose.” Tal Ben-Shahar, a popular lecturer at Harvard, wrote a book titled *Happier*. He said:

“...happiness is the overall experience of pleasure and meaning...A happy person enjoys positive emotions while perceiving her life as purposeful. The definition does not pertain to a single moment but to a generalized aggregate

of one's experiences: a person can endure emotional pain at times and still be happy overall.”

Daniel M. Haybron, a professor at Saint Louis University, studied happiness. In his book, *Happiness*, he said:

Another crucial part of living well has to do with meaning: very roughly, connecting with people and things that matter... to pass our lives in meaningful, worthwhile pursuits. We've seen that such activities can make us happier... seeing your life as meaningful... involves *appreciative engagement with what you see as having merit or worth*.

Other benefits of finding meaning

Kenneth W. Thomas and his colleagues studied motivation and work. In his book, *Intrinsic Motivation at Work*, he reported:

“There is a great deal of evidence that people are hardwired to care about purposes. We seem to need to see ourselves as going somewhere— as being on a journey in pursuit of a significant purpose... There is also much evidence that people suffer when they lack purpose. Clinical studies show that people deteriorate in various ways without purpose.”

Research has shown that having purpose and meaning in life increases overall well-being and life satisfaction, improves mental and physical health, enhances resiliency, enhances self-esteem, and decreases the chances of depression. Research also suggests that finding meaning is a life-or-death issue. It has an impact on the will to live, and can affect longevity.

Viktor Frankl lived from 1905 to 1997. He was a Jewish psychiatrist in Vienna when World War II broke out. The Nazis sent him to their labor camps, very brutal places where people were worked to death. Frankl observed that those who survived the labor camps were those who had a reason to live— who still had meaning in their lives. He concluded that the primary motivational force for human beings is the drive for meaning.

Frankl broke with Freud and Jung, and established logotherapy to focus his clients on meaning. He wrote *Man's Search for Meaning* about his experience in the Nazi camps. Ten million copies have been sold in 24 languages. A 1991 survey

by the Library of Congress found it to be one of ten most influential books in the United States.

We have more recent evidence of the impact of meaning on mortality. Boyle, Barnes, Buchman, and Bennett published a study in 2009 titled “Purpose in Life Is Associated With Mortality Among Community-Dwelling Older Persons.” They interviewed 1,238 older persons without dementia and categorized them into a group with low meaning in their lives and a group with high meaning in their lives. The study controlled for depression, disability, neurotic personality traits, chronic medical conditions, and income.

They followed the two groups for five years. They discovered that those in the low meaning group had a higher risk of mortality. A much larger percentage of them died—in fact, twice as many as the high meaning group. The study suggests that meaning is a life-or-death issue even in environments far more positive than Frankl found in the Nazi labor camps.

Your sources of meaning

Here is an important question: Where do you find the most meaning in *your* life? If you have not done so yet, please fill out the Self-Survey on sources of meaning in your life. When you fill out the self-survey, rate each potential source of meaning. Then review your answers to identify the six sources of meaning that you rated the highest. Reflect on how you can get closer to those sources of meaning in your daily life.

[Surveys are tallied]

Okay, here are your survey results. What strikes you regarding the results of the group tally regarding sources of meaning in life? Any surprises? Are there a lot of similarities or a lot of differences? Or both?

I have been interested in the question of meaning in life since I was a teenager. In the 1990s, I started asking people to fill out surveys like the one you took, rating potential sources of meaning in their lives. I collected the surveys of the first 30 groups in order to tally their answers. Later, I asked people to fill out the surveys for their own reflection.

Keep in mind that there are no “right” or “wrong” answers to the surveys—

just each person's individual answer. Also, the most important sources of meaning in your life can change as you go to school, take a job, have a family, and so on. However, I have found that there are some sources of meaning that are usually important to people, no matter what their age or background.

In non-random surveys of 3,500 people that I conducted in the United States, the highest ratings were for: family, giving and receiving love, intimate relationships, living my values, doing my personal best, and a sense of accomplishment. In the same surveys, the *lowest*-rated sources of meaning were wealth, power, winning, and fame. My understanding is that people are not against these symbols of success— they just don't rate them high as sources of meaning.

I have been asked if I can narrow it down to just a few important sources of meaning. I think that there are four sources of meaning that are universal— they cut across countries, cultures, and centuries. Here they are: (1) love people, (2) help people, (3) live ethically, and (4) don't be too attached to material things.

If I had to get it down to just two core sources of meaning, I would say focus on others, and become part of something larger than yourself— something that will have a bigger impact than you can have alone: your family, group, organization, church, community, country, or movement.

Of course, I have been asked to get it down to just *one* source of meaning. For me, that would be love, in all its dimensions and relationships. But if somebody came to me and said their life had little meaning, I would give them this simple source of meaning: Go help somebody. Get out of yourself, help somebody else, and the meaning will come.

Anything you do to help someone else can make a difference. Don't worry about how big a difference you will make. It doesn't have to be a *big* difference to be a *meaningful* difference.

I like the story of the starfish on the beach. According to the story, many starfish washed ashore on a beach. They began to dry and die in the sun. A boy started picking up the starfish and tossing them back into the water. A passerby came over to him and said, "Why bother? There are too many of them to make a difference." "I made a difference in the life of *that* one," the boy said, as he put another starfish back in the water. Sometimes we can't solve an entire problem, but we can still make a meaningful difference.

Management consultant Stephen Covey encouraged people to be “trim tabs.” A trim tab is a small rudder attached to a bigger rudder on a boat or airplane. A smaller amount of energy applied to the trim tab makes it easier to turn the rudder. You can be a “trim tab” who leverages energy to bring about positive change.

Meaning at work

Research shows that it is important for people to find meaning at work. Meaning is an intrinsic motivator, and people who are intrinsically motivated perform at higher levels. They are more productive and persistent than people who do not find meaning in their work and are *not* intrinsically motivated.

Catherine Bailey and Adrian Madden published an article in the *MIT Sloan Management Review* in 2016 titled “What Makes Work Meaningful—Or Meaningless.” They said: “Researchers have shown meaningfulness to be more important to employees than any other aspect of work, including pay and rewards, opportunities for promotion, or working conditions... Meaningful work can be highly motivational, leading to improved performance, commitment, and satisfaction.”

The Paradoxical Commandments

One of the best things about meaning is that we can always find it, no matter what is happening in the world around us. That is the message of the Paradoxical Commandments. Here is the story.

Back in the 1960s, I had an insight about meaning. I was walking into the awards assembly my junior year at Roosevelt High School in Honolulu, Hawaii. As I walked in, I realized that I didn’t need any awards. I had already been rewarded with the meaning and satisfaction that came from doing what I had done. I felt liberated, completely at peace. I knew that if I had the meaning, I didn’t have to have the glory.

I was a college student at Harvard during the late 1960s. It was a time of conflict and confrontation, but also a time of hope and idealism. I was working with high school student leaders during those years. I urged them to work together with their fellow students and the school administration to better serve the students in their schools. In 1968, when I was 19 years old, a college sophomore, I published a leadership manual for high school student leaders. It was titled *The Silent Revolution: Dynamic Leadership in the Student Council*. I told students that

they needed to love people and focus on the meaning they would receive when they achieved positive change. I wrote the Paradoxical Commandments to emphasize the need to stay focused on meaning. Here they are:

1. People are illogical, unreasonable, and self-centered. *Love them anyway.*
2. If you do good, people will accuse you of selfish ulterior motives. *Do good anyway.*
3. If you are successful, you will win false friends and true enemies. *Succeed anyway.*
4. The good you do today will be forgotten tomorrow. *Do good anyway.*
5. Honesty and frankness make you vulnerable. *Be honest and frank anyway.*
6. The biggest men and women with the biggest ideas can be shot down by the smallest men and women with the smallest minds. *Think big anyway.*
7. People favor underdogs but follow only top dogs. *Fight for a few underdogs anyway.*
8. What you spend years building may be destroyed overnight. *Build anyway.*
9. People really need help but may attack you if you do help them. *Help people anyway.*
10. Give the world the best you have and you'll get kicked in the teeth. *Give the world the best you have anyway.*

The Paradoxical Commandments are guidelines for finding personal meaning in the face of adversity. Each starts with a statement about adversity, but is followed by a positive commandment. The commandments are not meant to be negative. They are just a “what if?” followed by a “do it anyway” response.

Some people call the commandments a “personal declaration of independence.” Others call them a “no excuses” policy. Yes, there are things in life we can’t control. What we *can* control is our inner lives— our spiritual lives. No

matter what the world does to us, we get to decide how to *respond*. And we can always respond in a way that is meaningful to us. We can always find meaning and happiness by facing the worst in the world with the best in ourselves.

Big ideas

The world needs big ideas that can solve problems and seize new opportunities. But people with small minds can only see their own power, comfort, or convenience, and may oppose big ideas; they don't like change, even if it is for the better. All of us ultimately benefit when a good new big idea solves problems, breaks deadlocks, invents new products, and develops new and better ways of living. The sixth Paradoxical Commandment is: The biggest men and women with the biggest ideas can be shot down by the smallest men and women with the smallest minds. *Think big anyway.*

Here's an example of thinking big anyway— Will Hartzell of Safe Water Systems. Will knew that millions of people die each year because of contaminated drinking water. He wanted to do something about that. Everyone told him that his big idea wouldn't work. They said he wouldn't be able to find the investors he needed, he didn't have the necessary business training and experience, and he wouldn't be able to sell his products internationally. But Will and his colleagues thought big anyway. They developed a solar water pasteurizer that was a simple, low-cost solution.

One of his early installations was at a hospital in Tanzania that did not have clean water. After his equipment was installed, the mother of one of the patients filled her water bottle with clean water, and then stopped, looked at Will, and thanked him for giving her child the chance to live. That was when he knew he had to keep going. Will started in 1996; by 2012, he and his colleagues had installed 4,000 solar water pasteurizers and other water purification systems in 53 countries. The result was that 400,000 people no longer risked illness or death due to contaminated water.

Meaning and appreciation

People may not notice the good you do, and even if they do, they may not remember to applaud, or want to applaud, your good work. We like to be appreciated, but fortunately, meaning doesn't depend on applause. If we find meaning in our life and work, that meaning is ours no matter what, and that meaning can sustain us as we go forward.

Sometimes, people will attack you when you are trying to help them. Of course, you should make sure you are giving appropriate help, in the right way. But those being helped may deny that they need help, or resent that they are dependent on others, or are simply upset that life isn't what they want it to be, or what it used to be— and they react by criticizing the people who are helping them.

Let me tell you about Dr. Daniel Frost Comstock, who lived from 1883 to 1970. When I was in college, I worked part-time as his chauffeur. He was in his eighties at the time. His mind was alive but his body was no longer working well. He found it difficult to walk, and could no longer climb stairs. His esophagus was not working, which made it hard for him to swallow and keep his food down; sometimes he would throw up while eating dinner. It was hard for him to shave or shower, and he always looked unkempt; sometimes there was an unpleasant odor about him.

I drove the car and helped him go to the park or to a restaurant, avoiding curbs and stairs, and wiping up his food when he had an accident. We became friends. He shared some of his experiences with me. It turned out that he was a physicist and engineer who had studied at MIT, Berlin, Zurich, Basel, and the University of Cambridge, and later taught at MIT. He was the co-founder of the company Kalmus, Comstock & Westcott and of Technicolor Motion Picture Corporation. He played a key leadership role in developing Technicolor, the most widely used color motion picture process in Hollywood from 1922 to 1952.

We became friends, but it seemed that he was always unhappy with me. I wasn't helping him the right way to get him out of the car, the restaurant table was too close to a cold window, and so on. Week after week, I was always doing everything wrong, at least in his eyes. Sometimes I had flashes of anger, because he was always criticizing me, but I kept quiet.

Then one day I tried to imagine what it was like to be him— to have a productive career, and then no longer be able to do things for oneself. It occurred to me that he wasn't upset with me, he was upset with *life*; he was irritated because of his disabilities. That's when his grumbling stopped bothering me. And that's the story behind the ninth Paradoxical Commandment: *People really need help but may attack you if you do help them. Help people anyway!*

The commandments spread around the world

We sold between 25,000 and 30,000 copies of the student leadership booklet in the United States between 1968 and 1972. Unknown to me, people were lifting the commandments out of that booklet, and sharing them with friends. The commandments spread all over the world. Millions of people have used them. They have been used by people in more than 100 countries. They have been published in hundreds of books, shared in commencement speeches, blogs, and websites.

People have asked me, why did the commandments spread around the world? Here are some possible reasons: (1) People are hungry for meaning in their lives, and the commandments remind them of where they can find it; (2) the commandments are about fundamental human values that cut across ideologies, theologies, and philosophies; (3) they are short and easy to share; and (4) they are commandments, not suggestions. They say *do it*— no excuses— do it anyway!

A surprise that changed my life occurred at my Rotary Club meeting in Honolulu in September 1997. My fellow Rotarian said that Mother Teresa had died, and he wanted to read a poem she had written. What he read was eight of the original ten Paradoxical Commandments. I went up after the Rotary meeting and asked where the piece came from. He said it was in a book about Mother Teresa. I found it on the last page of a book titled *Mother Teresa: A Simple Path*. It was titled “Anyway.” It didn’t say Mother Teresa wrote it. It said: “A sign on the wall at Shishu Bhavan, the children’s home in Calcutta.” That’s when I learned that Mother Teresa thought that the commandments were important enough to put up on the wall of her children’s home in Calcutta to look at while ministering to the children.

Because of my respect for Mother Teresa and her work, I was deeply moved by this discovery. I started writing and speaking about the Paradoxical Commandments again after 30 years had passed. Since then I have given hundreds of speeches and published four different books on the commandments. *Anyway: The Paradoxical Commandments*, which was published in 2002, became a national bestseller in the United States and was translated into 17 languages. *Do It Anyway* was published in 2003, *Jesus Did It Anyway* was published in 2005, and *Have Faith Anyway* was published in 2008.

As a result of the four books I have written, I hear from people from all over the world. Some have written to me to tell me how they have used the

commandments to raise their children, or get through a difficult time at work. Others tell me that they have carried a copy of the commandments around in their wallets and purses for years, to look at as they begin each day. The *paradoxicalcommandments.com* website has had more than 1 million visitors since 2002. If you do an internet search and type in the first Paradoxical Commandment, you will get anywhere between 75,000 and 150,000 results, depending on the search engine.

My daughter set up a Facebook group, “Live the Paradoxical Commandments Anyway,” which has 1500 members. The FaceBook group includes taped interviews regarding the background and message of the Commandments. The tapes can also be found on YouTube, including the “Kent Keith” channel and “The Story of the Paradoxical Commandments” channel.

I set out to inspire people, and now they are inspiring me. I feel part of a growing network of kindred spirits. The fact that people all over the world have used the Paradoxical Commandments gives me hope— it shows that we have a lot in common. If are willing to try, we can understand each other and work together toward a common future.

The Paradox of Personal Meaning

The Paradoxical Commandments are guidelines for finding meaning in the face of adversity. It can also be a challenge to find meaning in the face of success. Symbols of success like power, wealth, and fame can distract us from more important sources of meaning. That’s why I have written a new book, *The Paradox of Personal Meaning*, published in 2021. I am making the book available free as a PDF. The book discusses the importance of meaning, reviews the Paradoxical Commandments, and then describes “Symbols of Success” and “Meaning Maximizers.”

“Symbols of success” like power, wealth, and fame are often used to measure how well we are doing in life and our careers. However, for every symbol of success, I believe that there are sources of meaning that are more important. I call them “Meaning Maximizers.” Here they are:

Success” < Meaning Maximizer

Cynicism < Values

Infatuation < Love

Individualism < Community
Fame < Intimacy
Wealth < Richness of Life
Power < Service
Winning < Personal best
Appearance < Health
Job < Mission
Artificial < Natural
Information < Wisdom

Symbols of success like power, wealth, and fame are not necessarily bad— they’re just *not enough* when it comes to finding meaning. The symbols of success are most meaningful when you use them as tools to help others, making a positive difference in *other* people’s lives.

The book is available at no charge as a “liquid” PDF that adjusts to screen size. It can be downloaded from two websites:

www.paradoxicalcommandments.com
www.carlsonkeith.com, Book Room, Dr. Keith’s Library

Thank you!