

# What is Life's Meaning?

## The Story - Fred and George

Fred and George are so glad this day has finally arrived. They have spent months planning this long weekend and finally have the opportunity to take the backpacking trip they have talked about for years. The drive to the mountains takes 6 hours but seems like one as they talk and laugh and let the worries of normal life slip behind them along with each mile that passes into the rearview mirror. There is something authentic about getting away from ordinary life with all its schedules and deadlines and emails and demands. As Fred and George approach the trailhead they feel like weights are lifting from their shoulders. Conversation is flowing like water. They find themselves discussing topics they rarely talk about in the city, but somehow seem appropriate and safe here in the mountains.

“Fred, tell me, are you really happy in your job”? Fred looked at George’s expression and realized that George was

quite serious. Fred pounded the last tent stake into the ground and paused. He sat down by the fire pit and said, “To be honest, I have mixed emotions about my job. Don’t get me wrong, I am glad to have it and to be able to pay the bills and take care of the family, but if I didn’t need the money I would probably do something else”. George barely misses a beat before responding. “I feel that way too. In fact, it seems like almost everyone feels that way. Look at us, we couldn’t wait to get away from our jobs and come up here. Do you think if we made better choices we would be happier people and have less need to get away to enjoy life?” Fred and George continue talking about their jobs and life at home as they eat dinner, clean up afterwards, and sit watching the flames of their campfire dance in front of them, feeling the warmth of the fire push back the cold of the oncoming night. The talk of home life starts to melt and transform into expressions of dreams and hope and plans for the future. Time slows down as the two friends talk into the night in front of the crackling fire and beneath the overhead stripe of the Milky Way. “Fred, I really want more. I am already 35 years old. Time is moving faster and faster. I had all these dreams for where I would be at this point. I want my life to matter more than it does and I want to be happier than I am”. George goes on to talk about his dreams of teaching kids, spending more time with friends, and living a slower paced life in the country. Fred tries to encourage his good friend. “George, you are still fairly young. Think of all that you have and what you have accomplished. Be thankful for those things. None of us gets it all.” George pauses, puts another log on the fire, and looks up from the flames into Fred’s face, which is bathed in the yellow firelight.

“I hear you, Fred, I should be grateful for what I have. But I want more. Do you think that is wrong?”

### Reflections

What is your reaction to George and Fred's conversation?

Can you relate to George's desire of wanting his life to matter more than he thinks it does?

What gives your life ~~its~~ meaning and purpose?

How is your life different than what you dreamed it would be?

What are your greatest hopes for the future?

## What Constitutes Meaning in Life?

### Meaning is a Common Human Concern

Meaning is a common concern of humanity. In fact, almost every novel ever written, every film ever made, or every song ever sung has an expression of human meaning at its core. Think of the last movie you watched. There was a tension introduced early in the story. There was something to be overcome, or some dream to be realized, or some injustice to be set right. The movie was a journey that not only sparked your interest, but also created a longing for resolution, or a hope for victory, or the desire of seeing a loss overcome, or of seeing a wrong made right. The movie took you on the journey and you found yourself caring about it in some way. It was more than simple entertainment or interesting or informative. Somehow, in some way, the journey on the screen connected with your journey. It was not only a window to a story but a mirror of your story. And this is not only true of the great

movies. Even the most inane eye candy summer film is built around a story involving some aspect of human meaning that is possible to connect with to some degree.

*Not life, but good life, is to be chiefly valued —Socrates*

### Meaning Drives and Measures Us

To a large degree, we measure the quality of our on the scale of meaning and purpose. When we are asked “How was your day?”, we immediately have a sense of the answer. We generally consider pain or stress to create a “bad” day. Similarly, comfort and pleasure are excellent ingredients for a “good” day. But... it is more complex than that. I remember an episode of the old TV show, the Twilight Zone. In the story, a thug is killed and finds himself in the afterlife. Everything is to his liking. The women are beautiful and dote on his every desire. Every time he gambles he wins. The finest foods surround him. His every desire is satisfied. Pleasure and comfort fill his days. But, do you see what is coming? He becomes more and more dull to these pleasures. Eventually, he becomes bored and then positively miserable. Out of his misery, he finally complains loudly to his host: “This is not what I thought heaven would be like”. After a dramatic pause, his host retorts with a wry smile: “What makes you think you are in heaven?” The story makes a statement about the “good” life –it is more than pleasure, comfort, and the absence of pain. We can think of many examples that illustrate this. The joy and meaning that accompanies a painful sacrifice made for a loved one. Or the satisfaction one feels when saving money for the future and delaying instant gratification. Or the pride of serving your country as a soldier, even though it places your

life at risk. Or the joy of childbirth despite the intense pain involved. Our days are filled with numerous acts of meaning that go beyond the physical well-being of the moment.

*Life comes from physical survival; but the good life comes from what we care about. Rollo May*

### **People Define Meaning in Many different Ways**

Let's do some additional thinking about the meaning of life. Yes, meaning is vitally important to all human beings and significantly motivates our actions. But, it is not simply a matter of feeling good at the moment, maximizing pleasure, and eliminating pain. In fact, we may experience great meaning in the presence of suffering as well as a profound lack of meaning in the midst of comfort and pleasure. So, what is meaning? How do we get our arms around this? If we ask one another what makes life meaningful, what kind of answers do we find? Here is a short list of possible answers: accomplishment, pleasure, love, sacrifice, honor, service, friendship, faith, character, legacy, mercy, justice, peace, connection, intimacy, knowledge, patriotism, honesty, integrity, courage, uniqueness, control, simplicity... Think about your life and add your own answers. Ask your friends and family. The list will keep growing. But there are some answers we see repeatedly. Occasionally you will see one that seems very odd or foreign, but that is rare. There is a significant amount of commonality in the words that people use to describe and define meaning.

### **Three Fundamental Components of Meaning**

I would like to put forward what I believe are three foundational components of meaning. These three components

are foundational in that the ideas we each have regarding meaning generally fall within one of the three and sometimes more than one. People may differ on the specific items within a component, but they will generally agree that these three are important and even critical. It will also usually be conceded that a major deficiency in one of the three components of meaning will create a significant gap in having a meaningful and fulfilling life. These fundamental components of meaning are Significance, Transcendence, and Community. Let's define these terms and see how they form a framework for a meaningful, significant, and good life.

### Significance

The first foundational component of meaning is significance. For our lives to have meaning and purpose everyone agrees that what we do and what we are must be significant. To be significant is to be worthy of note, or to be important, or to be worthy of attention. In our story, Fred talks about wanting more meaning and happiness in his life. He connects this with his dreams of teaching kids, spending more time with friends, and living a slower paced life in the country. These things are significant to Fred. Significant things connect us to what is truly important. The very word significant includes the word sign. To experience significance is to have who we are and what we do point to something or refer to something important, much like a sign directs our attention not to the sign itself but to what the sign is referring to.

*The aim of art is to represent not the outward appearance of things, but their inward significance. Aristotle*