

Mental Health and Purpose

In 2002 Rev. Rick Warren released a book entitled “The Purpose Driven Life.” It was on the New York Times best seller list for 90 weeks and sold 30 million copies by 2007. Why?

For much of our life, we do not ask the question, “What is the meaning of life?” As infants, we seek relief of hunger and discomfort. Later we seek interaction and fun. As we start school we either try to do well or we pursue other interests. Eventually we may follow a career path that we hope will lead to a good income. We may seek to have a family. We may pursue recreation for the health benefits, for entertainment, social interactions or respect by our peers.

But all these choices are perceived by us with the unspoken assumption that if we do everything right, we will have a meaningful life. Or even that these things ARE the meaning to life.

But what about having a purpose? How does that fit in? For many, making money is a purpose. But interestingly, many very wealthy people decide to take on a task. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation seeks to eliminate malaria, which kills 600,000 people each year across the world.

Sometimes a purpose can help a person to face overwhelming circumstances. In my pediatric practice, one mother of a severely disabled child directed her frustration into forming support and advocacy organizations to bring help to others with similar challenges.

In the past, many dedicated their lives to ending slavery. Some find purpose in preventing the extinction of an obscure endangered species. Both of these are purposes and may give the ones who take them on a reason to get up in the morning. But is the only dimension to consider the subjective value to the purpose holder? Is there any reason to consider service to people of more value than service to snail darters?

The consideration of the meaning of life often comes after a catastrophe. The dream job is lost, illness or injury disrupts well laid plans or financial reverses destroy economic security. “Why am I here? What is the meaning of life? What is the meaning of MY life?” These all sound like the cries of a depressed person, although they are basic questions that ought to be addressed by everyone capable of thinking.

How to address the issue? The first step is to ask, “What is a human being?” In the materialistic scientific view, we are simply a collection of atoms, organized by random forces with no intrinsic meaning, purpose or destiny. A person saturated with that opinion will be hungry for any hope of purpose and might decide to make one for themselves. But, that same world view leads only to determinism – molecules bouncing around, altered by external input but no molecule able to make itself go another way.

Is there another option? This is what Rick Warren pointed to and obviously found a welcome reception: that human beings are creations of a loving God. Well, if that is the case, why is the world such a mess? The message of the Bible is that God created us perfect but gave us free will. Our first ancestors rebelled (and we would not have done any better) and everything changed. In spite of this, rather than wiping out the world and starting over, God made it possible for us to be forgiven and reconciled to Him through what Jesus Christ did on the cross and by rising from the dead. Again, God will not violate our free will and we may accept or reject His offer.

One who has accepted this forgiveness has an instant purpose – to please the One who made it all possible. We try to love others as we have been loved. Even if a tragedy strikes, it makes a difference to know that God is still in control and can make something good happen as a result, even if we cannot see it.

Could there not be a middle way? Spirituality without Deity? If so, I may be the highest authority! And is that good news or bad news?

If we do have an intrinsic purpose, it would be important to investigate. If we don't, it doesn't matter. In fact, in that case, nothing matters.