

# **purpose in life:** **values, meaning, goals & challenges**

*Those who dream by night in the dusty recesses of their minds wake in the day to find it was vanity, but the dreamers of the day are dangerous men for they may act their dream with open eyes to make it possible.*

T. E. Lawrence

*This handout appeared as a couple of blog posts complete with internet links on 17 & 18.07.12*

I have already written a couple of blog posts recently on purpose in life – "*Purpose in life: reduces dementia risk, increases life expectancy, treats depression and builds wellbeing*" and "*Purpose in life: how do you score on the questionnaire & why does it matter?*" (they are combined into a companion handout to this one). In today's post I want to talk about how we can help ourselves and others clarify and connect more strongly to a sense of purpose in our lives.

I think many people often do have fairly strong areas of purpose and clear values, but they may not have taken the time to realise that this is the case. I typically talk to people (psychotherapy clients, friends, relatives) about their values before I ask about their goals. I feel that values underpin goals. So, in the post "*The bus driver metaphor*", I wrote: **1. The importance of values:** It's hugely important for our health and wellbeing that we mostly focus on driving the bus (of our life) in the right direction. The "*right direction*" is determined by our values, by what truly matters to us. Our values are the compass bearing which we need to steer by. Values are things like "*I want to live with courage and kindness*", or "*I want to look after my health*", or "*I want to prioritise those I love*", or "*I want to develop my interests and talents as far as I can*". As the Hasidic rabbi, Susya said "*When I get to heaven, God will not ask 'Why were you not Moses?' He will ask 'Why were you not Susya? Why did you not become what only you could become?'*"

**2. Distinguishing values and goals:** It's often helpful to distinguish values and goals. Values are likely to be compass bearings we use to steer by for many decades. We don't typically prioritise those we love for a while, or look after our health for a while, and then get to a place where we've arrived and can stop doing it. Our current goals however we may well reach. So we might want to arrange a surprise birthday party for our partner or train to run a marathon or target other goals that are an expression of our values. Hopefully we'll achieve these goals and then we'll want to make fresh ones. It's like driving on a particular compass bearing (values) and seeing that some way ahead in this direction is a landmark (goal) – maybe a tree or a hill – that we can steer towards for a while. The landmark is the goal we head for as we follow our values compass. When we reach it, we look ahead on our compass bearing for the next landmark to steer towards. Values are the way that we walk, the direction. Goals are checkpoints on the journey. **3. Values are not about the future, they're about now, today:** This way of distinguishing ongoing values from checkpoint goals, leads to another realization. We live or don't live our values right now, today. Values (unlike goals) are not some destination that we're travelling towards. Values are the way that we are travelling, the way we make our journey. If my key values are to live with determination and courage, or with love and kindness – this is the direction, the way I want to travel. It's like saying "*I've decided to travel North-West. This is the compass bearing I'm going to follow.*" I can start to follow the compass of my values right now. If I'm heading North-West right now, then I'm doing it. It's not something I have to wait for or work towards. It's now. As the Christian mystic Angelus Silesius put it (possibly rather over-bluntly) "*In good time we shall see God and his light' you say. Fool, you shall never see what you not see today!*" While the founder of Soto Zen, Dogen, said "*If you cannot find the truth right where you are, where else do you expect to find it?*" and the poet T. S. Eliot wrote "*And the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.*"

So how can we clarify what our key values are? It may be we simply know already, or become clear very quickly once we start to think about it. A fun, helpful exercise I often use **[Cont.]**

here is "*The respected figures*" exercise. Do try it if you haven't already come across it ... or even if you have, it can be well worth repeating occasionally. The exercise is pretty self-explanatory. I often get participants to do this exercise on the "*Life skills*" courses that I run and, while they're doing it, I often do it myself. This means I've completed this "*Respected figures*" exercise many times. I guess there's probably a collection of maybe ten to fifteen people from whom a variable group of five or so emerge as I jot names down onto the sheet. These include relatives, friends and "famous" people. What's interesting and reassuring is, whichever of these ten to fifteen names I write down, the values ... the key qualities I respect in the people ... stay pretty much the same year after year. Courage to live our lives as truly & authentically as we can, clarity/intelligence/questioning/exploring, and compassion/kind-heartedness/love. Warrior, Explorer, Healer. Same strands year by year. Fascinatingly, simply taking one of your top personal values and writing (or speaking) about it can nourish your resilience & wellbeing. What does the value you've chosen mean to you? Why is this value so personally important to you? Can you describe an episode or a time in your life that illustrates how precious this value is for you? Crocker & colleagues, in a paper published this year – "*Two types of value-affirmation: Implications for self-control following social exclusion*" – have shown that just writing for about 8 minutes in this way can have measurable effects on us. To make a difference that can last more fully, see the three blog posts (& handout) starting with "*Therapeutic writing (& speaking): inspiration from values*".

The companion handout "*Purpose in life really matters for health and wellbeing: how well do you score?*" underlines the importance of this issue. In this handout so far, we've looked particularly at values. I would now like to explore life goals and how we can help ourselves and others clarify and connect more strongly with them. A good way of doing this that I frequently use for clients (and for myself) is the "*Funeral speeches*" exercise. I particularly like the way the format of this exercise encourages us to think broadly about goals across the variety of our important life roles. It can be reframed as an "*80th birthday party*" exercise for those who feel squeamish about imagining their own funeral, although – as Vail & colleagues have pointed out in their recent paper "*When death is good for life*" – awareness of our limited time on this earth can help us focus on what's really important for us. So I say something like "*Please would you consider the main roles that you play in your life. It's likely to be helpful to choose up to 7 or 8 roles. Possible examples include son/daughter, father/mother, husband/wife (or partner in a couple), friend, relative, worker (this may then subdivide into more than one role e.g. for me it subdivides into both clinician and teacher/lecturer/writer), household administration, self-care (again this might break down into more than one role e.g. for me it subdivides into emotions/spirit & mental/physical). There isn't a right or wrong way to subdivide your life into roles (and what roles you choose to use will probably evolve over time). It's what's useful for you that matters. It would be good if pretty much every waking minute fits under at least one of your roles. Jot down the names of the roles you have chosen in the left hand column of the "Funeral speeches" (or "80th birthday party") sheet. When you've done this, imagine that at some stage in the future you have died and you're miraculously able to eavesdrop at your own funeral (or you're at your 80th birthday party). A series of people stand up to speak. Each one gives a eulogy about how you lived out your different life roles. So, for example, imagine one of your friends standing up and speaking about what a really tremendous and deeply valued friend you were. Similarly someone who knew you in your work would give a eulogy about how very much they appreciated you in your work role. You're allowed time travel, so a parent who died long before your imagined funeral could still appear to praise how you were as their son or daughter. If there are areas where there's nobody who actually knows in any detail how you performed (for example, possibly in home administration or in personal health care), then just simply introduce imaginary speech givers at your funeral who miraculously did know precisely how you managed these roles."* I usually get people, at least on their first attempts at the various role speeches, to limit how long they spend to maybe only a couple of minutes on each speech. I ask them to really let go and write speeches that they would most want to hear ... how if everything went very, very well over the rest of their lives & they acted as they would most want to ... what would they hope **[Cont.]**

the speech giver would be able to say? This exercise isn't about modesty. It isn't about how things are now. It's about how we would deeply like things to be if they worked very well indeed.

And there are some important additional points to make. We need to believe that we can make genuine, worthwhile progress towards achieving the deep hopes that have been described in these speeches. And we can do this. Human beings are able to make extraordinary changes in their lives. Sometimes the format of the goals may need to change. The psychologist Larry LeShan used to tell a story about a young man in his 20's who he worked with. My memory of the story is that the man was suffering from Hodgkin's lymphoma in the days before treatment for this condition was as effective as it is now. When Larry asked him about his life, it turned out that he had been in charge of the weapons for a New York street gang. His job was to make sure that the guns had the right calibre ammunition, the knives were sharp enough, and so on. Larry asked how he'd liked this job and the young man said it had been great. When asked why, he commented that it was so good to spend most of his time, back then, hanging out with friends, playing pool, having a few beers, enjoying themselves. Every now and again, he said, another gang would invade their territory and then all hell would break loose. It was full-on fighting, with mates looking out for your back and you for their's. Total adrenaline rush. Then back to the bar or cafe. Hanging out, talking, spending time with friends. Larry asked him what had happened next. The young man said that they'd got older, some had been drafted to Vietnam, some had got married/had kids, some had died or gone to jail. The gang broke up. The young man developed Hodgkin's disease. Larry was a great believer that if you had things you were passionate about in your life, it would help the immune system & boost the body's ability to fight the lymphoma. He wangled things to get the young man a job in the New York fire department. This involved hanging out with mates, drinking coffee, chatting, doing this & that. Then the emergency call would come in. It was full-on adrenaline with axes, hoses, oxygen masks, looking out for each other, doing their best to rescue the situation they found. Then back to the fire station, hanging out, chatting, maybe playing pool. Larry said the young man's Hodgkin's got better. The point of the story that I'm trying to make is that in our very complex society, our dreams - what we're passionate about - can often be realised in a variety of different ways. If we ask ourselves what would be so special about achieving particular life goals, we often find we can be flexible & creative about different methods of achieving these precious outcomes.

Completing the *"Funeral speeches exercise"* can be a really helpful step in becoming clearer about the spread of our goals across the roles of our lives. The New York street gang & fire department story underlines how we can be creative in successfully expressing our goals. We probably need to be a little careful that we don't clarify our dreams only to put them back in the cupboard to be looked at again at some indefinite point in the future. These are goals, not just fantasies. The difference and danger is spelt out in the research paper *"The motivating function of thinking about the future: Expectations versus fantasies"* and underlined more recently in *"Positive fantasies about idealized futures sap energy"* with its abstract reading *"Positive fantasies allow people to mentally indulge in a desired future. Whereas previous research found that spontaneously generated positive fantasies about the future predict poor achievement, we examined the effect of experimentally induced positive fantasies about the future. The present four experiments identify low energy, measured by physiological and behavioral indicators, as a mechanism by which positive fantasies translate into poor achievement. Induced positive fantasies resulted in less energy than fantasies that questioned the desired future (Study 1), negative fantasies (Study 2), or neutral fantasies (Study 3) ... Results indicate that one reason positive fantasies predict poor achievement is because they do not generate energy to pursue the desired future."* Remember Thomas Edison's remark *"Opportunity is missed by most people because it is dressed in overalls and looks like work."* It's crucial that we frame our goals in ways that will stretch us, but that we believe with hard work & dedication we can achieve them ... this transforms self-indulgent fantasies into visions that can guide & energise us. Mental contrasting has such potential here to transform this goal clarification into a tremendously helpful exercise. See the blog post & handout *"Mental contrasting: a way of boosting our commitment to goals we care about"*. For more on this, see Oettingen et al's *"Self-regulation of goal setting: Turning [Cont.]*

*free fantasies about the future into binding goals" and their more recent "Mental contrasting and goal commitment: The mediating role of energization." So having completed the "Funeral speeches" or "80th birthday party" exercise, now we look at what challenges face us on the road to realising these goals. It can be very helpful to fill in "Goals for roles: visions, challenges, responses". Now we start to get real as we clarify the obstacles on the road to our visions and begin to plan how we will respond and overcome them. See too the sheet "Goals for roles: 5 year, 1 year & 3 month goals". Increasing our energy and commitment is a key benefit of taking this kind of "mental contrasting" approach.*

And the importance of clarity & commitment to our goals goes beyond just our individual wellbeing. There are a whole series of research studies showing the value of goal clarity & support in couples too - see, for example *"A secure base: Responsive support of goal strivings and exploration in adult intimate relationships"*, *"Pursuing goals for us: Relationally autonomous reasons in long-term goal pursuit"*, *"Relationship influences on exploration in adulthood: The characteristics and function of a secure base"* and *"The 'I know you' and the 'you know me' of mutual goal knowledge in partnerships: Differential associations with partnership satisfaction and sense of closeness over time."* To illustrate a central message of this kind of couples' research, the abstract of the fourth of these papers reads *"Personal goals, that is, ideas of what one wants to maintain, attain, or avoid in the future, are pursued within social contexts and may influence the social systems a person belongs to. Focusing on romantic partnerships as one of the most important social contexts in adulthood, this longitudinal study investigated the role of partners' mutual goal knowledge for partnership development (T1: N=69 couples; T2: N=47). Partners described their own personal goals and the goals they assumed their partners to have. Trained coders rated the overlap between the self-reported and the ascribed goals. Actor-partner interdependence models showed that knowing one's partner's goals was associated with a higher level of partnership satisfaction after about 16 months, controlling for initial partnership satisfaction. Having a partner who knows one's goals, by contrast, predicted greater feelings of closeness to that partner after the same period of time, controlling for initial levels of closeness; and this association could not be attributed to a greater similarity between both partners' goals. Overall, this research shows that both the 'I know you' and the 'You know me' components contribute to positive partnership development, and that their specific implications vary for different facets of partnership quality."* And these findings extend still further to groups & organizations – see the blog post *"The effects of leaders on organizations: a 'transformational', inspirational-caring style looks particularly effective"* with it's endorsement of the value of *"transformational leadership"* with a clearly stated, deeply engaging organizational vision that integrates with the personal goals of group members. A related Wikipedia article underlines the importance of *"Inspirational Motivation - the degree to which the leader articulates a vision that is appealing and inspiring to followers. Leaders with inspirational motivation challenge followers with high standards, communicate optimism about future goals, and provide meaning for the task at hand ... Purpose and meaning provide the energy that drives a group forward. The visionary aspects of leadership are supported by communication skills that make the vision understandable, precise, powerful and engaging."*

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